

History of Persian dance - 1

by Medea Mahdavi

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In this article, I describe dance on public stages in Iran today and its influences from the 60s and 70s including the impact of ballet and influences from the Qajar period (1785 to 1925).



Dance since the Islamic revolution of 1979

Four years ago in Tehran I watched a group of Iranian secondary school students learning a dance theatre performance in ballet style, for the celebrations of the Islamic Revolution, sponsored by the government.

A few days later when I came across one of the organisers of the celebration I said I was looking forward to seeing the dance performance. To my surprise I noticed that there was minimum mention of

dance by the organisers or the media yet the accompanying choir was well credited.

Today there are many ballet companies practicing in Iran, ballet is considered a form of sport by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Sport shops sell ballet shoes and children's tutus.

The presentation of Persian ballet disguised as a sport gives dance a chance to be seen in Iranian public stages for the time being.

There are not currently any opportunities for traditional classical dance in Iranian

public stages, because once the small triple steps, facial movements and the coy feminine gestures and the sensuous music are removed nothing of this dance remains. Persian dance is like Persian miniature paintings in which small details make up the whole composition.

The government sponsors some dance events which are referred to as *Harkat e Mozoon* (harmonized movements) and encourages public events with Persian folk dance styles but strictly avoids admitting that the art of dancing itself exists.

There are discussions amongst the clergy in Iranian whether *sema* dance (turning dances associated with followers of the sufi poet Rumi) can bring people closer to God. Some clergy believe that pious styles of dance would encourage the youth towards being happy with their faith. Others say dance is a sin and does not have a place in the public. The only dance which is not a sin, is a dance of a wife for her husband.

Men have more chances to perform and always have the leading parts. Women are totally excluded from Iranian hip-hop stage. The dance productions are monitored and the slightest thing on stage that is not approved by the government monitors can lead to the whole production being cancelled. Artists on the stage wear more clothes than in real life and dances of women in particular is not fluid and lacks lightness, avoiding sensuality.

Still, with love for dance the rehearsals go on and shows are performed and occasionally toured to some of the neighbouring countries.

Most of today's Iranian ballet dance teachers were trained by dancers who themselves were trained during the Pahlavi era.

Dance in the Pahlavi era - 1925 to 1979

Interestingly, folk and classical Iranian dance were performed by ballet groups in celebrations during the time of Pahlavi regime. Given patronage by Queen Farah Diba and sponsored by government, The Mahalli Dancers (folk style) came to London in 1972 and performed at Sadler's Wells.



Robert de Warren, English artistic director of the group, traveled in Iran compiling an archive of Iranian folk dance and presented the dances accurately on stage.

Medea in her studio in a costume from Ghasmabad. Gilan.

Traditional classical dance

All the mainstream dance productions of this era seem to lack the *gher* (an Iranian hip sway similar to horizontal figure eight in Egyptian dance but much smaller and more subtle) and the basic triple step. Iranian *larzans* (small shoulder shimmies), *beshkans*, (finger snaps) and variety of other delicate and expressive movements were also omitted.

National dance

Eventually a new style of Iranian dance began, half ballet, half Iranian, very similar to dances of areas of (then) Russia adjacent to Iran.

The arrival of the dance in large theatre spaces was one of the reasons that the smaller dance movements were left out. But more importantly, the new dance had to avoid anything that reminded the audience of the dance style performed by non-western-trained artists in cafés and cabarets, which was considered too vulgar.

For the first time in our remembered history, dancers were respected as artists, a form of national dance was being developed and was considered a high art.

During the 70s, Iranian TV broadcast Iranian ballet and also Iranian dance through pop music. Female pop stars sang and performed slick traditional and modern dance movements. Sometimes cabaret performances of belly dance, solo Iranian dance and regional folk dances performed by school children were also shown on TV.

Iranian cinema was another source of dance, mainly sexy comedy versions of traditional solo dance and belly dance. For the first time we had a named solo female dancer on film and then TV – superstar, *Jamileh*, a traditional dancer and belly dancer.

Dances that had their origins in the Qajar era

Ruhozi theatre was still being performed in cafés, streets, private houses and weddings.

The movements of *Ruhozi* dancers were small, fluid with facial gestures, eyebrow and lip shimmies, winks and finger snaps. The artists were family groups wearing plain clothes and little make up, and could dance and play musical instruments and were witty.

In remote rural areas all-male travelling dance groups of cross-dressing dancers were still performing. These groups often performed after wrestling matches and at wedding celebrations.

Up to fifty years ago women performed *Bazyhaye Zemestani*, an entertainment comprising short plays, to pass time during winter nights. These plays, with dance, were performed by female members of household not professional dancers. Originally there were seven of these plays. Now only two remain. The wheat flower dance and dance of a lady with a pot on her head. In the latter, the dancer would draw a face on her stomach so her naval makes the lip for the drawn character.

Women wore *shalite*, a short pleated skirt and loose trousers and when dancing a male character the women wore old suits with tight jackets and felt hats. This may be the origin of the *jaheli* dance in *baba karam* or *shateri* mime dance of the baker, two dances performed by men or women miming a man.

In my next article I will write more about how movements from the Qajar era influence our dance today and about pre-Islamic dance.

Credits: All photos of Medea Mahdavi – Anita Hummel, anitahummel@yahoo.com



*Medea in Qajar era costume designed
and made by Robyn Friend*

Sources:

The Exquisite Art of Persian Classical Dance by Robyn Friend

<http://home.earthlink.net/~rcfriend/>

Musicians of Iran after Islam by Dr Mehdi Foroogh

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Choreophobia: Iranian Solo Improvised Dance, in the Southern California Diaspora by
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Her Life as a Persian Ballerina, FrontLine (Tehran Bureau).

My own dance research and personal experience.

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