

according to Bhabha, "which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensures that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." (Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory", in *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.37.

- ⁶ *Al-halqa* is a public gathering in the form of a circle around a person or a number of persons (*hlayqi/hlayqia*) in a public space (be it a marketplace, a medina gate, or a newly devised downtown square). It is a space of popular culture that is open to all the people from different walks of life. *Al-halqa* hovers between high culture and low mass culture, sacred and profane, literacy and orality... Its repertoire combines fantastic, mythical, and historical narratives from *Thousand and One Nights* and *Sirat bani hilal*, as well as stories from the holy Quran and the Sunna of the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) along with local witty narrative and performative forms. The medium of the *halqa* also varies from storytelling to acrobatic acting and dancing.
- ⁷ *Jema' el-Fna* is one of the famous sites of popular culture in Morocco. It is a huge and open square in Marrakech wherein story telling and other performance behavior, which belongs to Moroccan popular culture, are practiced as licensed and free oral expression. In brief, the square is a site of popular Orality and ritualistic formulae.
- ⁸ Tayeb Saddiki, *Sidi Abderrahman Al-majdoub* (unpublished script, no date).
- ⁹ Tayeb Saddiki, *Al-fi:l wa-ssara:wi:l*, Kenitra: Editions Boukili, 1997.
- ¹⁰ Hassan El-Mniai, *Al-masrah al-maghrebi mina a-taassisi ila sinaat al-furan* (Moroccan Theater from Construction to the Making of Spectacle) Fes: Faculty of Letters, Dhar el-mehraz Publications, 1994, p. 7.
- ¹¹ El-Meskini *Sghir's bu:jma' l-faru:j* (Bu-Jma' the Rooster), Casablanca: The Center of Third Theater Publications, 2000.
- ¹² Zobeir Ben Bouchta, *Lalla Jmila*, Tanger: Ibn Khaldoun Publications, 2004.
- ¹³ For more details on the Moroccan *halqa*, see Khalid Amine, "Crossing Borders: *Al-halqa* Performance in Morocco from the Open Space to the Theatre Building", TDR (The Drama Review. The Journal of Performance Studies), Summer 2001, T170, pp. 55-69.
- ¹⁴ Mohamed El-kaghat, *al-murtajala al-jadida & murtajalt Fes* (The New Improvised Play & The Improvised of Fes) (Unfinished Theatrical Projects), Casablanca: Sabou Publications, 1991.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Mohamed El-kaghat, *murtajalat Fes*, pp. 83-84.
- ¹⁷ Mohamed El-kaghat, *Chmisa Lalla* (unpublished script).
- ¹⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 15.

PERFORMING SIYAH BAZI / PLAYING THE BLACK Satire and Social Relief in Historical Iran

Farah YEGANEH and Mehrdad RAYANI

There has been an increase of attention in Iranian society towards indigenous folk art and an increase in the number of theatre students and scholars in recent years. Both developments have also led to a growth in the number of *Siyah Bazi*' performances, the emergence of dramatic texts for the black-face shows based on contemporary social issues, and an accompanying scholarly research.

This article will introduce and explore the specific comicality of this very popular type of traditional Iranian performance *Siyah Bazi* - *Siyah* meaning 'black' and *bazi* meaning 'play'. The name *Siyah* applies to the main character, which has blackened his face because supposedly he is a black servant. After a general introduction to the genre, we will explore first the theatrical characteristics of the main figure *Siyah* and the themes of the performances. After that we will trace the discussion about the historical roots of the *Shiyah* plays and offer an outline of the history of the performances, from the Middle Ages up to the 21st century.

Siyah Bazi is a comic performance with a remarkable evolution process. Its fundamental principle is improvisation. It uses dance and singing for flavoring the show; thence, the actors especially *Siyah* should enjoy proper vocal abilities for chanting. The play starts and ends with a dance. A happy ending and a suitable, moral message are essential parts of the performance. Though there is no director to direct the play, there is an elder who has been a member of the troupe since its formation. He answers the players' questions and guides them, yet he avoids to define a philosophy for the performance or fix a direction or form for it. At this point, the reader has certainly perceived obvious similarities between *Siyah Bazi* and the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* and will continue to discover more, as the article expands.

Comical strategies

Siyah Bazi is deeply influenced by an Oriental fictional narrative-model, which is based on flight: escape from one tale to another.¹ The story is framed and cyclic like *Thousand and One Nights*, with sub-plots interwoven together, defining and

modifying each other. However, the dramatic text is not an important element of this theatrical genre. Movement and encounters are essential, not the literary value of the work. The dramatic structuring of the play does not depend on a pre-written text. Lack of a written text liberates the performance from limitations and restrictions that literature would impose. There is a basic scenario around which actors would develop the details in consultation with each other. Then, each adds other immediate improvisations during the show as well. Therefore, the performance shortens or lengthens according to the enthusiasm and reception of the audience. The play actually never repeats itself exactly the same way it was performed before. This is how the real theatrical event takes place. Actors use their performative skills and talents to theatricalize their show, which can go on up to four hours. *Siyah* and other characters use many comical strategies and techniques to bring out laughter during the performance.

Within the *linguistic category* these strategies include: Socratic irony, pun, verbal incongruity, mugging, overstatement and understatement, mistakes in speech and in identities, inversions, pretension of ignorance, over-reacting and under-reacting, deceit, timidity, humorous repetitions, mocking pomposity and eloquence, solecism including malapropism, paradox, chiasmus, forgetfulness, regional accents, meddling, hypocrisy, verbal irony (but also dramatic, situational and/or structural) and ambiguity.

Behavioral practices include behavioral incongruity as physical mugging, inverted actions, humorous manifestations of grief including crying, loudness, impertunity and pushiness, slapstick and collisions. Bodily characteristics include physical incongruity, physical jokes, abnormalities like excessive tallness, shortness (including dwarfs), fatness, shortness, humorous and/or grotesque make-up.

Performative features on which the comicality of the genre depends are:

- a. jocularity as a power to bring laughter
- b. musicality and rhythm, marking the passage of time and a change of place, creating a happy atmosphere needed to help the imagination of the audience.
- c. improvisation skills in speech, in humor, in developing the characters and in developing the plot
- d. professional acting: actors learn their art through the experience of years. Their acting styles are named after the famous skillful masters. An apprentice works under the auspices of a master for years till he becomes a master himself. The process of teaching and learning is accomplished in the group, and not through individual guidance

- e. As a kind of poor theatre: props and scenery are minimal. Often it is an empty stage with only actors on it, and the audience around on three or four sides. The performative skills of actors and the theatrical imagination of the spectators make the show.

The Art of Cunning

The strong satirical aspects of *Siyah Bazi* made the show into a specimen of the art of cunning within the Iranian community. Locals loved the performances as a social relief because they could share the sharp criticisms of the aristocracy and the rich. The bites were sudden and improvised - sometimes made even sharper inspired by the audiences' warm reception - and occasionally developing into a vulgar give-and-take. Police could not prevent these sharp satirical patches. The performances were loved by vast audiences and banning them would cause more dissatisfaction on the side of people. Moreover -as a clever and sensible point-these patches were improvised on the stage and could not be detected in any pre-written texts. Possibly they could not even be repeated in the same exact manner again. Some scholars believe that the lack of written texts is due to this very same reason of reducing the risk of being caught by censors, though still the police occasionally bothered the troupes. They also assert that one of the main reasons for the emergence of this genre, besides its entertaining aspect, was because it created the opportunity for political satire: thence, an art of cunning. The originators were certainly aware of the power situated in the unpredictability of its improvisational character.² On the whole, the shows were moralistic and satiric in the way they criticized the decadent morality, ridiculed the current normal ethics, and searched for sincerity and honesty.

Though the performances were very popular, they were banned and limited largely ever since the 16th century as a result of religious restrictions on sexual issues. These restrictions created even a new kind of performativity, i.e. transvestitism, male actors started to play the role of female characters by dressing like them and imitating feminine behavior.

Social and Theatrical Construction

The character of *Siyah* serves as vehicle for revolt, that challenges oppression and stands up against every evil. *Siyah* is alert and quick-minded and never leaves questions unanswered. Besides, he enjoys having a sweet face, sweet speech,

talent, and a flexible body professional performing his unique stylized dance. In past times, Siyah-actors used burnt cork mixed with vaseline. Today they use ordinary theatre make-up to blacken their faces.

A usual name for *Siyah* could be *Mobarak* (Good Omen), *Yaghoot* (Ruby), or *Ghanbar* (an ordinary male name, yet rather coarse and cacophonous). Other characters in the play are defined in concordance with the story. *Haji* is a pseudo-moralistic fifty-year-old merchant with a rosary in his hand. Deepdown, he is greedy and moneyloving. *Haji's wife* is a nag whose complaints – which would lessen or increase as suits the play – can madden *Haji*. *Haji's son* (usually named *Sholy*, meaning limp, saggy and insipid) is insipid and spoiled; and *the maid* who is a kind creature and a parallel to *Siyah*, usually is in love with him and finally marries him. Apart from these fixed characters in the play, others would enter the performance as they fit in, yet all are types. As mentioned before, this group of stereotype characters were usually roughly led by an elder who would narrate the main line of the story, and the actors would improvise the details and develop the whole plot.

With the entrance of *Siyah* into Iranian comic theatre, the physical, mental and linguistic features of his real *social* type were recorded as his *theatrical* characteristics; e.g. his crudeness in talking Persian brought his humorous language and remained there as a convention and a feature of his character. He is humorous, timid, free-willed, helpless and degraded in the society. What comes to his mind, he expresses out of sincerity mixed with fear and/or hope, in a humorous manner. He subjects himself to the offences of his master, and imagines himself as an unwanted, unneeded member of a society of white rich people. He is nagging, demanding, soft-hearted, meddling, sweet-tongued, secret-revealer, naïve yet smart, commanding, quick-talking, digresser, timid when he is needed to be courageous, talkative when he should be quiet, and silent when he must talk.³ He is the main character in the play, giving life to all the performance, and has the most improvisation. Compared to others in the play, he is a more round character. Despite his foolish, humorous appearance, he may offer painful utterances, changing the audience sweet laughter to sarcastic smiles.

He is a clever, yet moron-showing servant satirizing everything and everybody. At the same time that he loves his master, he is also angry with him. The social-class difference between him and others, e.g. the master, compels him unconsciously to be upset. On the other hand, because he is good-hearted, he objects to the master's immoral deeds. He always attempts to end the dispute, but the master would like to keep his distance from the quarrel. This is how the

dramatic conflict takes shape in the whole structure of the play. It transforms *Siyah* into the representative of the masses. His utterances are biting. What people wish to express but cannot, he does. At the same time that the audience laughs at *Siyah*, they sympathize with him. He is a social-political critic, another reason why people love him.

He knows dancing, singing and music well, and makes use of these capacities throughout the show in a double way. Acting wrongly for instance, or singing wrongly or dancing in an incorrect way, he makes others sing and dance, to show him, *Siyah*, the correct way of doing it. Thus, it is discovered that these pseudo-moralistic people act, in fact, different in public and private spheres. And so the main theme of the play, the incongruity of appearance and truth emerges. In the same way is *Siyah* not able to talk distinctly. He articulates words wrongly, thus confusing others and making them translate or pronounce the words correctly. This serves again to remove the mistake or resolve the misunderstanding. During these notorious conversations, many secrets are revealed and false appearances are betrayed.

Thematics

The subject matter of *Siyah Bazi* has evolved and varied throughout time and can be divided into following categories:

1. Historical-mythological subjects: characters and the story come from history and well-known myths, especially love-stories. Time and place of the stories can be changed, and many idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and props belonging to contemporary times may be used. The character of *Siyah* himself in the play is one of these time-mingling collage innovations. Even serious historical characters can be modified to comic ones enhancing the satirical value of the performance.
2. Contemporary social subjects: a comic theatricalization of real-life situations takes place. Characters are types such as the run-away bride-groom, and *Haji* (literally meaning one who has been a pilgrim to Mecca, actually a pseudo-religious merchant). Contemporary society is portrayed and satirized without being explicitly mentioned. Because the plot is rudimentary - there is a general scenario and no director is involved- the actors are responsible for all that goes on stage. Their performative capital is their every-day contact with social circumstances, situations and people: their theatrical ethical commitment is to uncover and reveal the apparently unusual and unaccepted

issues having become usual or routine, as an not admitted result of repetition. Flaws and deficiencies are also overstated in a humorous manner.

3. Fantastic subjects: although most characters are realistic, the play has an atmosphere of fantasy making use of a demon, jinni or dragon. The satire is poetically delicate and sophisticated, not committed to criticize the dominant materialism of the society. The actors are hyperactive and mobile using a vivid coloring of emotions. Though the objective of the show is the same as the other kinds, these plays are more a vehicle for abstract dramatic artistry, at the same time that the performing group is certain that their art can create the 'flow' in the audience.

A Russian tourist has been quoted to describe a comic performance around 1838 as follows:

"In this kind of performance, many vulgar speeches and actions can be seen. Because the purpose is to make the spectators laugh, the show is bereft of any seriousness. Actors paint their faces with flour, soot or egg yolk. Subject matter can come from rural life as well. Performances are improvised; therefore, there is no record of them. I will try to explain one of them: It is summer. Two gardeners appear in a garden. They have worn costumes made of pieces of lamb's skin, which covers their torsos. The older one, Bagher, is rich and has a beautiful daughter. The younger one, Najaf, is poor but hardworking and clever. The two neighbours engage in talking about the yearly product and fruits. Gradually, the conversation develops into an argument, and they start a quarrel beating each other with fist and spade. This way, they take laughter from the audience. Finally, Bagher, the older one admits that Najaf is right and they make peace and become friends again. They think about having some drinks. Najaf goes to fetch some when Bagher calls on him asking to also bring some kebab. Again when he wants to leave, he is called to bring some sweets as well. Again, as he starts off parting, he is called to bring something else, and on and on, till the exhausted Najaf would not listen to his callings anymore, and this time really sets off to fetch the things – another comic element which brings laughter. Bagher, who is alone now, prepares himself to eat, and does it in a very humorous and mocking manner. His scene ends with the re-entering of Najaf. They eat and drink, and Najaf plays his musical instrument. Finally, Bagher falls asleep, and Najaf picks up his musical instrument and goes toward his beloved, Bagher's daughter".⁴

This quotation is one of the most important documents as far as *Siyah Bazi* is concerned, describing the content and space of a typical rural comic performance in the beginnings of the 19th century, especially because Najaf can be considered as a prototype of *Siyah* who developed other typical characteristics throughout time. However, the basic show still continued to be performed and is still performed in rural areas.

Historical roots

Scholars have expressed various convictions as to the origin of *Siyah Bazi*. The most pervading ideas are that the show may have originated from folk tales, history and myth, popular dances, dumb shows, or has even been created by *Siyah Bazi* players themselves. Actors used various sources as suited the conditions and circumstances of their society. Fools, dancers and players who did different kinds of comic-popular entertainments were attracted to *Siyah Bazi* gradually. The date of the first recorded show having all the formal characteristics of *Siyah Bazi* goes back to 1899 though certainly the evolution to this complete form took a few centuries, since late medieval period.

It is possible that in the times of the Islamic Empire when merchants started trading in Africa, some slave traders were bringing black slaves to Persian Gulf. In addition, Portuguese did use their black slaves to build fortresses in the south of Iran in the 17th century, when they took over those areas. There are still some people of black origins living in the Gulf area. A famous *Siyah* of the end of 19th century is quoted to have told that he would go to black servants (traded in the south of Iran, through the Persian Gulf) and watch how they talked, made fun, and quarreled. They could not talk Persian well; thus, their speech sounded funny. He would imitate them in their presence, and they liked it. He admits that he learned the art of the *Siyah* in this way. At night, he went to the teahouse and performed his show, and people just laughed.⁵

But the oldest and the most important immigration comes from the nomad gypsy Asians, especially Indians, before and after the Islamicization of Iran (ca. 700 CE) who moved toward Iran and further to the West, in small and big groups in different phases. However, Mahdi Forough, the veteran Iranian scholar, believes that *Siyah* is the development and contemporary form of old-time clowns and fools of rulers and kings.⁶

It is believed that its roots can be traced back to late medieval times when wandering entertainers tried to make shows in different towns and villages by imitating accents and characteristics of the people of various parts of the country – thus creating the feeling of ‘communitas’. They would visualize encounters between people of variable demographics: a short greeting would soon develop into a quarrel – because of their differences –, the dialog would change into an argument, and the argument into a mocking of ‘the other’, his linguistic accent and regional features. The performance would end like in slapstick: physical quarrel, a chase or/and flight. In the beginnings of 18th century (the last years of the Safavid epoch) these troupes found more stable performing sites in teahouses, especially in big cities like Isfahan – the capital – and Shiraz (a major city in south-west of Iran, most famous because of being near Persepolis).

They would also be invited to ordinary people’s homes to do shows for their feasts and celebrations such as weddings, naming days, or circumcision-parties for the boys. Thus, the theatrical event would transform into a super-performance or meta-event. One scholar, Khosro Shahriari, believes that in the settlement of gypsy entertaining dance groups, who were in a constant move from India to the West — lies the origin of *Siyah Bazi*.

Other forms of performances, included in the playing culture of the community; i.e. dance, music and singing, contributed extensively to the evolution of *Siyah Bazi*’s communicative act. One version for its evolution is as follows: four dancers in costumes of different colors (red, blue, yellow and violet) hid in four boxes. They were brought to the stage and popped out of the boxes one by one amidst the excitement of the spectators while music was being played. They danced in a group first, then each of them were taking turns, and finally as a group again. The show went on all through the evening. This popular form acquired the title of *Four Boxes* little by little, but a black-faced figure took the place of one of the performers and brought along satire to the performance. The four players mocked each other’s color of costumes, accents and characteristics, a quarrel followed, and the yellow always won. At the end, there was a peacemaking, dancing and singing. Then they returned to their boxes and were carried away.⁷

Performance history

With the beginning of Qajar era (1792-1925), these troupes turned to the new capital, Tehran, and found performing sites for their professional objectives in the teahouses of this city.⁸ These comic performing entertainments were greatly

nourished in this period – i.e. 18th and 19th centuries – as site-specific shows. Because of the support of the court, they attracted the attention of the entire Iranian community despite the existence of various sub-cultures and sub-communities, and developed their specific rules and conventions as theatrical events.

The staging of the performances took place in close relationship with the cultural context of the society. In teahouses, a few thick wooden boards were laid on the ground to form a stage. In rich homes, a rug would be spread in one corner of a big hall to do the same job. In commoners’ houses, they would cover the pool in the courtyard with a big wooden board to create a raised stage; hence, the existence of other names for *Siyah Bazi* like *Takhte-Hozi* (Board-On-The-Pool) or *Ru-Hozi* (On-The-Pool). It was then, when *Siyah Bazi* went to the common people that the show started to evolve. The evolution process continued until the beginnings of the Constitutional Movement around 1906 in the shift from an autocratic monarchy to a constitutional one. The Movement influenced social-cultural issues to a great extent. The autocracy of the Qajar rulers, and the consequent defiance of it filled the society with political nuancing discussions, decreasing the importance of entertainment. The presence and work of the first famous officially acknowledged Siyahs (the most well-known being Karim Shireyi, meaning Karim the Sweet) in the period of Naseredin Shah (King Naseredin, 1848-1896, a patron of arts) had a great impact in Siyahs’ gaining importance and attention, and their subsequent entrance to the houses of the rich and their patronization.

In the beginnings of Pahlavi Era (1925), regulations were established to issue permits for performances. Troupes were forced to write down their scenario’s, which was against the spirit of *Siyah Bazi*, whose basis was creativity in the moment and on stage, and not through pre-written texts. Writers could only write the raw frameworks of the stories and no more, since no one was able to predict or record the delicacies or day-by-day modifications of speech or action. This banning issue brought changes to *Siyah Bazi*: the critical aspect faded, and the moral aspect increased, and consequently, creativity was lost to a great extent. However, the necessity to write down texts was the first step toward the formation of modern theatre in Iran. This move toward modernity, in particular, the import of Western theatre, made *Siyah Bazi* lose its social discourse and become a traditional, museum-fit form.

Notes

- 1 Yari, Manoochehr, "The Original and the Fake in Traditional Theatre", *The Book of 5th Traditional-Ritualistic Festival*. Tehran: Namayesh Publications, 1993. pp. 15-16.
- 2 Nassirian, Ali, 'What Is Takht-e Hozi', *Theatre Quarterly*, no. 13, Namayesh Publications, spring 1991, p. 95.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Beizayi, Bahram. *Theatre in Iran*. Tehran: Kavian Publications, 1965. pp. 169-170.
- 5 Kasbian, Hossein. "Siyah Bazi Is the Heritage of Fools", in a collection of interviews: *The Book of the Sixth Festival of Traditional-Ritualistic Theatre*. Tehrna: Namayesh Publications, Oct. 1994. pp. 54-55.
- 6 Forough, Mahdi. "Theatre in Iran". In *The Book of Iran Shahr*. Tehran: University Publications, 1963, p. 914.
- 7 Beizayi, Bahram. *Theatre in Iran*. Tehran. pp. 169-170. Also see *The Origins of Theatre in Iran* by Abolghasem Jannati Atayi. Tehran: Safalishah Press, 1977.
- 8 Shahriari, Khosro. *The Book of Theatre*, vol. 1. Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 1986. p. 80.

THE GENESIS OF COMEDY AND THE COMIC CONDITIONS IN SUDANESE THEATRE

A short history

Shams EL DIN YOUNIS

The history of modern Arabic theatre shows that there are close connections between theatre-forms in East and West. It is clear that when we look at the comic condition and cultural varieties in Arabic and Western theatre, we study in fact the Arabic comic theatre and the impact of Western theatre on it. Out of this connection a number of questions arise. This paper handles Sudanese comic theatre as a case study because it represents Arabic comic theatre with all its inconsistencies. Does this theatre represent the comic condition? Does it argue with social issues? Does it reflect issues with the help of comical techniques within a cultural, social and political context? All these questions lead us to a confrontation with the crisis in Arabic comic theatre resulting from socio-cultural changes in our countries during the last decades. The Arab dialogue with Western culture in general and theatre in particular, depends on the coercion of theatre in its Western version of all the different theatrical means of expression. This has proven to be the case with leading group of playwrights in Sudan.

For my argument, the paper proposes to investigate the genesis of comedy, the sources of laughing, its purpose, and the general principles that form the comic condition of the play, all leading to diversity and difference between Arabic and Western performance. I will conclude with an historical overview of the development of comic texts and characters in Sudan.

The genesis of comedy

I will not deal with the origin of the word comedy. It seems more adequate to describe the laboratory in which the comic situation is formulated: its verbal expression and acting strategies, the situation that creates misunderstanding and paradox and triggers the chemical process, which produces the laughter. But where does this process begin? Does it start in the mind of the receiver or with the playwright? Does it come out of the actors mind and the body and bursts out into theatrical signs as gestures, facial expressions, sounds etc.? What is