Marjan Moosavi

Desacralizing Whispers: Counter-Conduct in the Iranian War Theatre

The commemoration of sacrifice and martyrdom in the Iran–Iraq war led to dissemination of the 'sacred defence' culture and its theatre progeny – the *Arzeshi* genre, which is rooted in Shi'i religious values, Persian culture, and Iranian performance traditions. In response to this, Iranian anti-war theatre practitioners have intervened through a counter-conduct theatricality made up of characters, stories, reasoning, embodied emotions, and scenic languages. A thematic and aesthetic analysis of three stagings of the anti-war play *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* by the prominent Iranian playwright/director Alirezā Nāderi shows that there has been a shift over two periods of time regarding 'disguised counter-hegemonic dramaturgy', alternative characterization, and the ethical engagements of artists with the narrative of war. In this study Marjan Moosavi shows that theatre counter-conducts have shifted since 1995 from a realist aesthetic, reflecting a specific event – the Iran–Iraq war – to a universal, abstract aesthetic practice that sees war as a global phenomenon. Marjan Moosavi is an Iranian-Canadian PhD candidate and instructor at the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies. She has published articles on Iranian dramaturgy and diasporic theatre in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, *TDR*, and *Critical Stages*.

Key terms: sacred defence, Alirezā Nāderi, *Arzeshi* theatre, *The Whispers Behind the Front Line*, theatrical counter-conduct, sacred defence theatre, disguised dramaturgy.

ON A FROSTY EVENING in winter 1995 the cast and audience of *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* (*Pech Pecheh hāy-e Posht-e Khat-e Nabard*) at Molavi Theatre in Tehran were shocked to find themselves in the midst of another kind of show. While they were watching the tragic final moments of a group of traumatized ordinary soldiers on an Iranian war front, a horde of angry religious fanatics stormed into the auditorium, interrupted the performance, pushed the actors off the stage, and started saying prayers to cleanse the space of what they believed was a performance disrespectful to veterans and martyrs of the 'sacred defence'.[1]

The Whispers Behind the Front Line, Alirezā Nāderi's highly acclaimed anti-war play, written in 1993 and first staged in 1995, is regarded by many as the most critical and truthful play about the Iran–Iraq war. The play's linear structure and three scenes set on the front line present a realistic depiction of two uneventful nights of six soldiers' lives during a temporary ceasefire in the summer of 1982. Most of the dramatic narrative hinges on a series of heated debates on issues concerning war strategies, politics, and religion.

Four years after that night of rampage, during the Reformist era, *The Whispers* did surprisingly obtain a licence for public performance and returned to Molavi Hall and the City Theatre complex; and box-office sales reportedly sky-rocketed night after night. Since then, the play has been revived four more times, in 2012, 2016, and 2017, this time by two young directors, Mohammad Rezā Sattāri and Ashkān Kheilnejād, who, although belonging to the new generation of artists, seem to understand Nāderi's whispers and also the urgency of reviving them, albeit differently and in accordance with their own vision and ethical commitment.

The interventionist themes and aesthetics dramatized in *The Whispers* can be identified by initially contrasting the play with the state-promoted ethos and narrative of war showcased in *Komeil Canal*. By tracing the shift in the ethical and aesthetic visions of the

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three directors of *The Whispers*, it is possible to demonstrate that their ethical responses have been converted to different aesthetic choices, resulting in different forms of theatrical intervention. I also examine how interventionist theatre is created *politically* in the Iranian socio-political and religious context.

My analysis of interventionist theatre draws on both Euro-American and Iranian scholarship. Interventionist theatrical conduct and ethos is defined as a theatre that is ethically intended to make visible shared tensions and forms and relations of power, challenges the certainty of a dominating discourse, plays with values, and envisages alternatives.

More precisely, Iranian artists, including Nāderi, define interventionist theatre as a theatre that 'dramatizes pain, speaks for those who cannot speak, brings awareness, and seeks truth'.[2] The British theorist Amelia H. Kritzer believes that theatre's role is to give 'dramatic visibility to crucial issues' and 'structures of control' involved 'in unresolved socio-political conflicts'.[3]

An examination of Iranian interventionist theatre of war cannot ignore the mutually constitutive relationship between this theatre and the dominant systems of control, including religion and community norms. This constitutive relationship curtails theatre from pursuing overt revolutionary agendas but at the same time empowers it to counteract and intervene in the process of cultural and ideological formations. In this sense, Foucault's conceptualization of 'counter-conducts' in studying dispersed protests and rhizomatic interventions proves beneficial to the analysis here presented.[4] Anti-war interventionist theatre can be an apt example of theatrical 'counter-conducts' – that is, created in response to the religious-political context of Iran; and, while observing stage regulations, it can intervene through a counter-hegemonic network of stories, characters, reasoning, emotions, and values.

The empirical analysis of three stagings of the anti-war play *The Whispers* shows that there has been a shift over two periods of time in terms of 'disguised counter-hegemonic dramaturgy', alternative theatrical subjectivities, and artists' ethical engagements with the narrative of war. This study reveals that theatre counter-conducts have consistently reflected, responded to, and re-appropriated dominant relations of religiosity and community by variegated, dispersed, and subtle means of transgression.

In this analysis, I give body and emotion an analytical recognition because war, its ideology and practice, has been experienced through bodies and has been enacted on stage also through bodies. Bodies and embodied emotions as dynamic forces of theatrical practice can both disrupt and reinforce stage regulations. They are theatricalized differently depending on the dramatic genre of the play in which they are used. They can be sacralized, spiritualized, and eternalized, or counteractively traumatized, amputated, missing, and killed. Returning to the religious zealots who interrupted *The Whispers* for protecting the values of 'sacred defence', it is necessary to be familiar with these values and the ethos behind them.

Sacred Defence, Theatrical Conduct

'Sacred defence' is a term coined by the Iranian state in reference to the eight-year war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988.[5] This concept and its dictates have acutely impacted any cultural product that aims to commemorate, narrate, or theatricalize this war. A glimpse at the theatrical-discursive narratives of the war, or theatre of 'resistance' and 'sacred defence', demonstrates that the meanings elicited from its collective commemorations, as Gregory and Åhäll put it, 'are emotional, but such emotional meanings are also political', and in the case of Iran these meanings are influenced by religion as well as community norms.[6]

The trilateral motivation of emotion, religiosity, and community norms constituted the main force that mobilized Iranians to go to the war fronts or to produce a theatrical representation of their sacrifices. With respect to Iranian experience at the time of international conflict, whether this experience was heroic or traumatic, the intricate

relationship between Shi'i religious values and moral virtues, and their emotional and embodied registers, was pivotal. They included martyrdom (*shahādat*), spiritual perfection (*kamāl-e ma'navi*), absolute trust in God's will (*tavakkol*), and the practice of 'contented self' (*nafs-e motmaenneh*).[7] A direct outcome of this value system was a quintessential figure known as *basiji* (literally, self-mobilized) forces distinguishable by their unshakeable faith in God and the values of the Revolution, and their sincere practice of 'altruism, piety, modesty, fighting the enemies of Islam, and being prepared for sacrifice and martyrdom'.[8] Most *basiji*-type characters in this genre stand as allegorical figures, each symbolizing positive virtues and norms of the community.

During the 1980s, many committed and *basiji* artists who pursued the fulfilment of their 'contented self' and aimed to respect Perso-Islamic community norms and national values began to envisage a 'sublime' (*fākher*) aesthetics for their theatre making under an agenda of 'sacred defence' culture. Aesthetically speaking, they drew inspiration from familiar performance traditions and Persian wisdom found in Naghāli (epic-story telling) and Ta'ziyeh (Iranian commemorative passion plays).[9]

The narrative associated with 'sublime' aesthetics is deeply indebted to war memories, folklore epics of heroism, anagogical and eschatological interpretations of religious texts, and Quranic verses. The result has been the emergence of a distinct school of theatre making called *teātr-e arzeshi* (literally, 'theatre of values') and its three sub-genres: 'theatre of revolution', 'theatre of sacred defence and resistance', and 'religious theatre'.

With the emergence of the *Arzeshi* school of theatre making, the Iranian theatre repertoire that had enjoyed the successful and well-financed legacy of the avant-garde and modernist theatres of the 1960s and 1970s had to accommodate the emergence of this new school and its newly conceived conventions and narratives. It enjoyed better financial and administrative support from a state that was still grappling with the toll of war and the constraints thus imposed.

While the *Arzeshi* school of theatre making used its aesthetic and logistical means to reinforce the three sources of dominant power (Shi'i religiosity, emotional drive, and community norms), the interventionist anti-war theatre and the independent theatre working within the legacy of the successful theatres of the 1960s targeted the same sources of power to give visibility to the existential questions, ethical doubts, and value crises that had become endemic in the post-war society of Iran.

Challenging the Canonized Narrative

A comparative analysis of several front-line plays, including *Kānāl-e Komeil* (*Komeil Canal*) by Hossein Fadāei Hossein (1997), shows that, in contrast to the first wave of war plays, the second interventionist wave challenged the canonized narrative of the war by questioning the appropriateness and accountability of Shi'i religion and morality, and showing the truth and reality of the Iran–Iraq war. This was done by employing various forms of 'disguised counter-hegemonic dramaturgy', including lifelike representation of marginalized characters (ordinary soldiers), intellectual debates in dialogues, the use of ludic and satirical overtones, and affective engagement. *The Whispers*, as directed by the playwright, employed a naturalistic interpretation of the reality of the Iran–Iraq war.

Kānāl-e Komeil (*Komeil Canal*)[10] is one of the most staged plays of the *Arzeshi* theatre repertoire, reviving the memory of one of the deadliest military operations of the war.[11] The dramatic action weaves forwards and backwards in time, providing the flashbacks of a group of soldiers determined to recover the bodies of missing men. As true *basijis*, Komeili soldiers – who are identified by their costumes (Palestinian *keffiyehs* and green headbands) and religious titles – share such characteristics as disregard for material gain and pain, distrust in military technology and material logistics, and an unyielding desire for transcendence and reunion with God.

Religiously speaking, in the perpetual presence of God, *basijis'* blood, which is

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rarely shown on the stage, becomes mixed with the canal soil. The canal becomes purified, and thus religious audiences would regard the canal as the embodiment of the emotions and spirituality of martyrs. In this sense, the canal remains as eternally alive as the martyrs.

The main theme of *Komeil Canal* concerns the idealization of martyrdom, particularly as many of the soldiers in the Komeil operation died of thirst. Death and suffering from thirst have a highly religious and emotional significance for Shi'i believers, who share a collective memory of the Karbalā event in 680 CE.[12] The play's message is that the greatest battle for Komeilis has been defeating their 'evil-inciting self' (*nafs-e ammāreh* – not fighting against Iraqis – and their ultimate gratification stems from their success in reaching the state of 'contented self' (*nafs-e motmaenneh*).

The use of culturally and religiously recognizable signs and references, which articulate war memories that are charged with the mystical views held by the play's characters, helps the audience to experience not only the spiritual but also the emotional dimensions of the Iran–Iraq war. For these reasons, *Komeil Canal* is an apt example of a theatrical genre that succeeds in enshrining memories of martyrs of 'sacred defence'. However, it fails to reveal the universal truth concerning the violence and absurdity of war in a global context.

Is this theatre of sacred values the only theatrical rendition of the truth of the war available to contemporary audiences? What is the interventionist theatre's response to this canonizing presentation of the war? In the post-war era, Iranian political consciousness has experienced a series of ideological schisms and reformist tendencies and this, together with rising socio-economic difficulties resulting from international economic sanctions, led to disenchantment and 'fatigue' with the ideals and values of revolution and 'sacred defence'.[13] The playwright Alirezā Nāderi (b. 1961) wrote *The Whispers* in these circumstances to provide that history.[14]

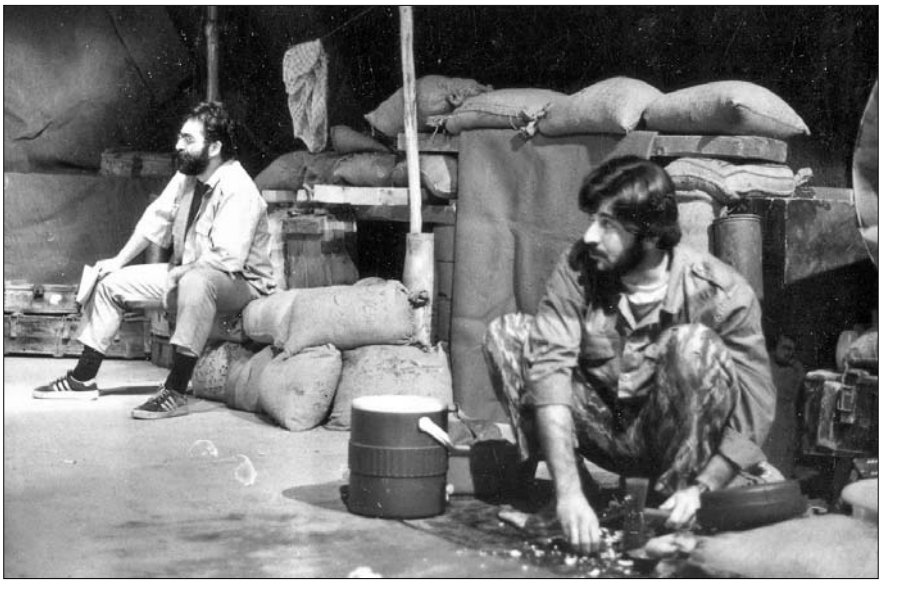
Nāderi describes his playwriting practice as a 'perpetual encounter' (*rooyārooyi-e hamishegi*).[15] As he notes: 'In this play, I'm concerned both with form and structure and also with censorship and writing about war taboos.'[16] His dramatic aesthetic has strong roots in his attempts to dramatize the 'mental conflicts, innermost, internal movements' of his characters and their situations.[17] As a war veteran, Nāderi's chief aim in writing about war was to 'dramatize an alternative history of the war for the future generation', in as truthful and believable a way as possible.[18]

Desacralized Stories and Soldiers

The play begins with a soldier singing a popular song and smoking a cigarette. Five sleeping soldiers, one smoking scout, and the sergeant people the first scene. As the soldiers wake up one by one, they talk about various topics: Iraqi air attacks, the military situation, how one of the soldiers, Doost Ali, is mimicking a French kiss while sleeping, and more importantly, a mysterious case of someone throwing stones at a tank parked nearby.

The first conversations reveal that one or two of the scouts tend to draw back from taking shifts, and that there is a sense of rivalry in obtaining military leave, especially after Iraqis resume air attacks. Through long, passionate, and often argumentative exchanges, the soldiers' mindsets, feelings, and intentions regarding the war are revealed. Nāderi uses a bitter yet humorous tone to show that what prompted these soldiers to come to the front line was neither a desire to achieve the religious virtue of the 'contented self' nor the spiritual value of martyrdom while fighting for the cause of 'sacred defence', but nationalist, patriotic beliefs and a passion for life.

Nāderi's interventionist intention separates his realism from the spiritualized values and religious signs that have charged plays belonging to *Arzeshi* theatre. Originating from an alternative personal history and knowledge, the playwright reinvents different identities and situations. He loads his play with striking references to the societal and cultural life of Iranians and portrays



From *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* directed by Alirezā Nāderi (1995), courtesy of Alirezā Nāderi.

lifelike characters from different walks of life. More precisely, their accents (Mashhadi and Yazdi), and religions (Muslim and Jewish) show the playwright's intention to contrast the multiplicity of attitudes and realities that were involved in the Iran–Iraq war. These character descriptions are offered by Alirezā, the play's protagonist:

> Our Bāqer is a good buddy! He always coughs up bits of unchewed, repeated ideas. . . . But Shahryār is a scientist! Doost Ali is a mystic, Yousef is lovely, Parveez . . . Parveez is a crappy guy! And me, this is what I am, Alirezā! Khoozestan! [*The most war-stricken province.*][19]

In line with dramatizing such multiplicity, Nāderi creates multidimensional characters who undergo emotional and intellectual change. One of the soldiers, Parveez, for instance, is an opportunist, a born dealer for whom the end (getting leave from the war zone) justifies the means. Battle fatigue, personal catastrophe, and interpersonal conflicts are defining traits for these privates – obviously, none of whom share virtues ascribed to *basijis* and their 'contented self', such as epic-like bravery, trust in God, sincerity (*kholus*), and spiritual certainty (*yaqin*). Nāderi's characterization not only destabilizes the moral and religious foundations of the war, but also presents a commentary on the type of volunteer fighters who were on the front lines, those who tried to take advantage of the war for their own material benefit.

Multidimensional characters and their lifelike actions and dialogue are rooted in a credible logic and genuine Iranian mentality. Like many ordinary young people, they yearn for love, education, freedom, and making money – even having a healthy skin. They trim their hair, bicker, play games, smoke, and enjoy gossiping and mimicking each other. They live their quotidian, monotonous army life at the front line and, from time to time, seize the moment to comment on or play around with the 'sacred' values and the moral dispositions towards war propagated by decision-makers and religious fighters.

All these worldly tensions and traits desacralize the image of the front and those fighting on it. In contrast to the allegorical stereotypes showcased in *Arzeshi* theatre (for instance, in *Komeil Canal*), the characters and situations in *The Whispers* are less value-driven and more pitched toward humane rationality and the existential discourses of doubt and disbelief in politicized religion. The result is the unprecedented emergence of new identities and knowledge that are not necessarily purified. As one critic notes,

> War has not purified (*tatheer*) Nāderi's characters to be absolute white characters. They have

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gathered following an unarticulated agreement, an agreement to defeat their enemy, but this is not enough to purify them, nor has it been enough to purify others in society. These complex characters are grey who have desires that are good or evil based on [the] values of our own society.[20]

Additionally, the multidimensional characters, their vernacular language, and casual costumes are aesthetically supported by Nāderi's photographic representation of a war front through realistic stage design and lighting. According to Mas'oud Riāzi, designer of the production,

the main stage props were a trench, an ammunition box, a water tank, a plastic ewer, and a radio. To reinforce the realistic effect, recorded sounds were used minimally; instead, for instance, there was real water purling, while the sound of stone throwing was created by the actual act of throwing stones on to steel objects on the stage.[21]

All these props, particularly the plastic ewer, give a vivid image of the lives of soldiers at war. In an even sharper contrast with the *Arzeshi* theatre, which is replete with white doves, red tulips, and green symbols of spiritual transcendence, here the characters liberally employ animal metaphors: horsefly, fox, tiger, hens and roosters. In sum, Nāderi's ethical commitment compels him to give voice to one of the most marginalized classes engaged with war – that is, common soldiers – and, in so doing, he crystallizes not only his soldiers' multidimensional counter-*basiji* characteristics, but also the multifaceted nature of their feelings and emotional responses to war.

Counter-Arzeshi Emotionality

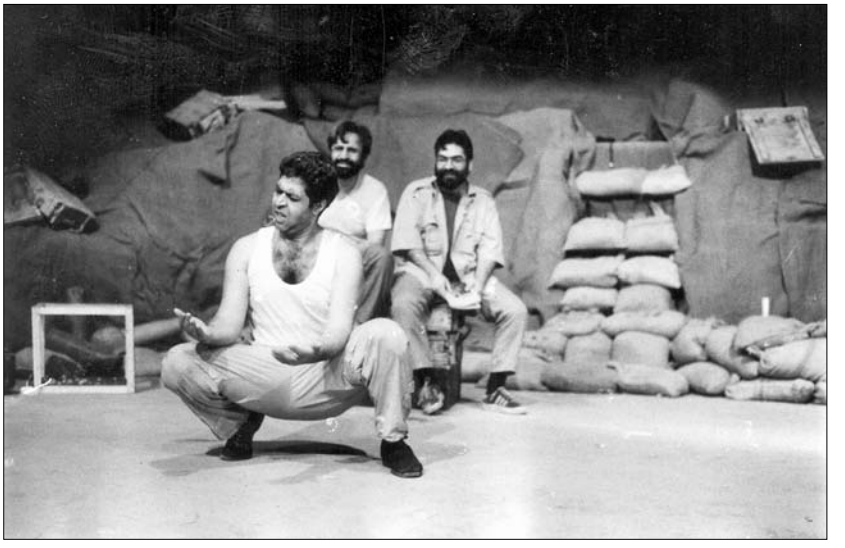
Disillusionment and discontent with the outcome of the war are apparent through the emotional shifts visible in the Iranian theatre of war. Bearing in mind that emotion and reason do not always operate in opposing directions, these shifts can be identified in the move from the nationalistic pride, high morale, and love of God and the afterlife highlighted in the *Arzeshi* theatre to the feelings of fear, pain, and shame in *The Whispers*.[22] Nāderi presents characters with a variety of feelings typical of ordinary, mortal people at a time of trauma: anguish and physical pain detached from mystical or theosophical forces.

For Alirezā the trench situation is 'a hell and death'. He grumbles: 'We soldiers here are either unfortunate or unlucky.' The promise of victory is, to him, a 'castle in the air', and as he says bitterly to Doost Ali, 'We're supposed to play the role of conquerors across the border.' Alirezā evidently lacks certainty, hope, and above all an unyielding desire for transcendence and reunion with God. From the religious point of view, these are the main features of a *basiji,* and lacking these virtues is considered by religious believers to be clear evidence of apostasy; it reveals a profane and evil-incited self. Moreover, being under the constant pressure of war, Alirezā's tone becomes volatile, changing from good humour to darkness, anger, and lyricism before returning to humour.

ALIREZĀ (*agitated and raising his voice*): I live in a fool's paradise [*alaki khosh*], I like to see everybody is laughing, passing the time, forgetting this hell! . . . (*He whispers a poem with a sad voice.*) The singing lad went to the war, he sang a song loud and far, so his pals can't hear the mortar . . .
YOUSEF: Who wrote that poem?
ALIREZĀ: I did! Is it so unlike me? (*Goes on.*) The singing lad went to the war, and shut the sound of mines, with his loud snaps . . .

This extract shows another dimension of Alirezā's character and experience. It illustrates that no matter how humorous a person can be, once touched and threatened by war, they become agitated and vulnerable.

There are also moments of intense emotion in the opening and closing scenes. In the opening scene, while everybody is sleeping, Parveez sings Fereidoon Foroughi's 'The Ankle' (*Qouzak-e Pā*), which is a pre-revolutionary popular hit about the despair and frustration of failure in earthly love. The song's pessimistic and sorrowful tone is in sharp contrast with what we hear at the beginning of *Komeil Canal,* where the echoes of Komeli supplication are played, a revered Shi'i prayer that believers consider to be an



Farhād Aslāni as Alirezā in *The Whispers Behind the Front Line*, directed by Alirezā Nāderi (1995), courtesy of Alirezā Nāderi.

optimistic conversation with God. While the echoes of this supplication have powerful emotional modes and moral resonances in the collective memory of all Shi'i believers, the recitation of a pre-revolutionary popular song can arouse other strong emotions in audiences who are less religious. More importantly, the mournful, frustrated tone of the song hints at the coming tragic action.

The play ends with even more emotional power when, among the harsh sounds of machine guns and the moaning of wounded soldiers, Parveez's voice is heard calling his comrades. Meanwhile, a bright beam of light is projected on to the corner of the stage, where a group photo is hung. Earlier in the scene, all the characters had gathered for this photo, despite all the odds.

Alirezā's doubts and fear of death, in addition to his drug use, indicate clearly how distant his spiritual state is to the state of 'contented self'. In the third scene of the play, the audience encounters Alirezā's loss of co-ordination, doubled with his anxiety and panic attacks as a result of the hashish he smoked the night before the military alert. Under the influence of the drug, Alirezā reveals his internal conflict and intimate thoughts and memories.

Alirezā's doubts and fear of death, in addition to his drug use, place him at the farthest distance possible from the state of 'contented self', and this condition desacralizes his mind and body. The abrupt turn from his daylight playfulness to his hallucinatory state during the night before the men's death presents the strongest commentary on shell-shocked soldiers. Alirezā, the most intelligent and adaptable soldier of the group, undergoes spiritual disintegration, and his indulgence in earthly pleasures shocks his comrades and the audience as well. Such an image of an 'evil-inciting self' in the context of a war that is purportedly 'sacred and spiritual' violates the religious values and moral taboos of many Iranians.

The Dialectical Representation of War

In conclusion, the play's counter-*Arzeshi* emotional charge, manifested in the dramatization of the multiplicity of emotional experiences at the time of war, arouses cathartic moments of intervention. Dani Snyder-Young believes in the transformational role of empathy and catharsis in compelling audiences to feel angry or doubtful about their long-established values.[23] However, the ethical commitment that compels Nāderi to write interventionist moments of encounter is not limited to cathartic experiences of sympathy and mourning among spectators; there is an equally engaging rationality that heightens the play's interventionist function.

Most of what *The Whispers* has to offer, especially in relation to the issues of the Iran–

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Iraq war and Iranian identity, is the technique of dialectical representation, which is presented through a series of reasonable debates conducted by sensible individuals whose emotional and religious faith is curtailed by their rationality. The characters vigorously negotiate political issues such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Communist doctrinal practice, revolutionary ideals, the emergence of the bourgeois class and its dependence on warmongering tendencies, and, most importantly, the distinction between the 'truth' and the 'reality' of religion.

In the second scene, Yousef uses the metaphor of a 'melting point' to satirize the discourse and practice of radical religiosity. To circumvent censorship, Nāderi has to voice his criticism through the words of his Jewish character. Therefore, as a Jew, Yousef has the licence to comment on Zionism as the radicalized version of Judaism. Further, in the midst of debate, it is Doost Ali who continues the conversation by focusing on zealotry in Christianity and even Sunni Islam, but he does not go on to comment on politicized and radicalized versions of Shi'ism.

Dialectical representation also occurs during conversations about the unknown sources of several cases of stone throwing. The tactic of throwing stones has political and religious resonance in Iranian popular culture, evoking resistance to the Islamic Revolution and also the Palestinian Intifada. While questioning the effectiveness of this tactic of protest, one of the soldiers brings up the topic of anti-Persian sentiments among Arabs:

BĀQER (*while flipping through the pages of the newspaper*): Israel is not the regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Throwing stones doesn't change anything. With each stone that is thrown toward Israelis, one person is pushed inside Israel. Iran also must not tie the Revolution's fate to an issue that is, first and foremost, an Arab issue. . . .

The Arab nations themselves haven't spent so much energy on Palestine during the last four decades as we have in the last four years after the Revolution. But in our war all the Arabs were supporting this jackass Saddam.

In addition to such explicit criticism, Nāderi's dramaturgical choice simply to ignore such canonized narratives and values of 'sacred defence' as martyrdom can be considered to be another instance of theatrical counter-conduct. In the following extract, which reveals how pro-monarchists chastise the *basijis* agenda, Bāqer and Doost Ali articulate their critical opinion while humorously mimicking pro-monarchists and the General:

DOOST ALI (*while mimicking*): Such foolish boys, No wise person goes on the mine! The General says so. . . .
BĀQER (*also mimicking*): War requires tactics. . . . For example, what is this brazier?
DOOST ALI (*laughing*): Khoramshahr . . .[24]
BĀQER (*still mimicking*): Well, they must surround it, ha! It makes no sense to say *Allāho akbar* [God is great] and go ahead just like a flock of sheep. . . . (*Starts coughing.*) Such foolish boys!
DOOST ALI (*sadly*): They call us foolish boys.

This moment is one of a number in *The Whispers* where Nāderi uses a humorous tone as a protection against censorship.

As the Iranian critic Ahmd Tālebinezhād notes, arranging the set and actors in double mises en scène, crowding the stage with multiple props, and employing dovetailing dialogue amplify the potential for loaded debates.[25] Loud interaction between the characters and overlapping speech create transgressive moments that give voice to taboos while avoiding state censorship and audience discontent. These transgressive choices in dramaturgy are deeply invested in the playwright's ethical commitments and are minute but important moments of 'disguised counter-hegemonic dramaturgy'.[26]

The Sacred 'Betwixt' of Ludic Interventions

The playful character of Alirezā and his counter-*basiji* traits feature another case of theatrical counter-conduct. He is the master of trickery, physical agility, role-playing, mimicry, and outwits other characters. He impersonates various personalities: a mullah, his own father, and then his lieutenant. Just like a dextrous entertainer, Alirezā feels he must amuse his comrades, although not at any cost. Sharyār describes him as a person with high 'adaptability' (*khodtatbiqi*) who can

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turn the battlefront into a 'park or school yard'. Yet, among his comrades, he is the most sensitive and the one who is most sensitive about the absurdity and futility of war. He says: 'No war, no peace, it means it's ceasefire. But the unilateral ceasefire means prank [*shookhi*], you ass!'

In such instances, Alirezā's humour and light-hearted mockery resemble the character of Siāh (in black-face) in the traditional comic improvisatory performances known as *Takht-e Howzi*, which is outdoor comedy. For an Iranian audience, Siāh's subtle and charming wit enables him to play around with norms and moral values. As a prototype of the character of Alirezā, Siāh reveals ideas that no one else dares to mention. His ludicrous approach to the limbo state in which they find themselves trapped creates liminal phases of perception for the audience, allowing spectators to experience some 'unreal' things on the stage – those that are impossible to experience in real life off the stage.

The play's setting strengthens this subversive quality. It occurs on a summer night of 1982 during Ramadan – a month of fasting for Muslims, and a holy occasion for coming closer to God and His blessings. But these six soldiers and their human playfulness are in sharp contrast with what audiences are accustomed to seeing in theatre and cinema products of the *Arzeshi* school. They are reminded of the subversive, carnivalesque atmosphere of *Takht-e Howzi*. However, this atmosphere becomes a tragic one when all the soldiers except the opportunist Parveez are killed at the end of the play.

Even until the very last moments Alirezā maintains his sense of humour by telling a long joke. This oscillation between comic, lyrical, and tragic moods recurs throughout the play and has the potential to position the audience's perspectives, moving them from emotion to rational perception, and out of their comfort zone.

Baz Kershaw, British scholar of interventionist theatre, contends that as the most powerful transgressive tactic, 'ludic frames' are able to establish a 'ludic' or 'liminal' relationship between the reality and fiction for their audiences.[27] Drawing on Kershaw's argument, it can be argued that Alirezā's playfulness and shifts of mood present the audience with a 'ludic' and 'liminal' state of mind in which they experience phenomena that are 'both real and not real'.[28] By playing with the moral, societal, and religious values of 'sacred defence', Nāderi indeed places his audience 'betwixt and between' the officially promoted narrative and the one that could possibly be narrated but could never be disclosed or staged.

The Role of Comedy

As Ashkān Kheilnejād, one of the directors of the play in 2017, concludes, 'comedy contains more rationality than tragedy', and Alirezā's wit intertwined with the soldiers' intellectual debates reinforces this defamiliarization[29] – an example of the 'disguised counter-hegemonic dramaturgy' that Nāderi employs to theatricalize the truth of war.[30] As a teacher and artist, however, Nāderi feels ethically responsible to those who sacrificed their lives to defend Iran. The play is dedicated to unknown soldiers who were killed in action as well as to the mothers who never stopped waiting for their missing sons.

What makes Nāderi's dramaturgical and directorial choices counter-conductive is his multivocality in characterization, viewpoints, and emotions, which creates multidimensional characters. By means of this multivocality, he connects his microcosm of the front line to the inner lives of his characters in a dialogical manner, engaging his audience emotionally as well as intellectually through dialogical interactions; also, by using mockery and satire, he brings relevant critical references to historical and political events through dialectical representations. His network of counter-conducts leads him to reinvent new identities (counter-*basiji*) and a counter-*Arzeshi* narrative through whispers that reveal an alternative reality concerning the war in which he, himself, had been involved.

In an interview, Nāderi talked about a friend's reaction after reading *The Whispers*: 'He told me this play was written ten years

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too early!' Everybody was hesitant that the play could obtain a licence for public performance, but Nāderi did not give up. He noted 'truth has no tribune', echoing the familiar saying that truth is the first casualty of war.[31] For him, at least some whispers in this particular point in the history and religious-political context of Iran could do justice to the truth of the Iran–Iraq war.

Revivals of *The Whispers*

Indeed, critical whispers about the Iran–Iraq war never end. They remain in the minds of a new generation of Iranian theatre practitioners, who continue to ask why the war did not end earlier. Ashkān Kheilnejād, in 2012 and 2017, and Mohammad Rezā Sattāri, in 2016 and 2017, addressed this question in their revivals of the play staged in both state-owned (Molavi Hall and Hāfez Hall) and privately owned (Shahrzād Hall and Bārān Hall) venues.

Like the author of this article, both directors belong to the post-war generation of artists, are in their thirties and did not have a direct contact or experience of the Iran–Iraq war. Our childhoods coincided with the aftermath of that war and we have all been exposed to the canonized, mediatized, and memorialized narrative and representation of the 'sacred defence'. Nāderi, Sattāri, and Kheilnejād have also been influenced by the Reformist ambience of the last two decades and its moderate discourses, particularly those around the separation of religion and politics.[32] Both feel the threat of another war with the United States or Israel, and both view the risk of war as a catastrophic global phenomenon.

In terms of observing the religious values and norms of the community, these young directors enjoy more liberty and autonomy compared to Nāderi, although their work is still entangled in the complicated administrative and logistical networks of control and 'conducts'. The growth in theatre privatization as a direct result of the state's failure to provide funding to theatre groups has forced theatre practitioners to take new directions in terms of dramaturgy and even casting when staging an interventionist play. Artists have had to reinvent tactics that increase their chance of success at the box office, such as employing celebrities, dramatizing popular and often 'securely' transgressive themes and styles, enhancing the comic elements, and restaging box-office hits.[33]

In their approach to *The Whispers*, both Sattāri and Kheilnejād have taken the new market demands into consideration. Due to the play's turbulent production history, it has come to be known as both controversial and appealing. Furthermore, the directors have employed movie and TV stars among their young casts, including Navid Mohamadzādeh and Rāmin Parchami. Finally, both directors have enhanced the comedic effects of the text, particularly in regard to Alirezā's identity, actions, and body language, by exaggerating humorous tones and movement and incorporating more physical humour into the action of the whole.

These tactics guaranteed good attendance and hence investment return, which, in turn, have encouraged more revivals or extensions of their runs. Kheilnejād remarked in an interview that about 24,000 people have seen productions of his play.[34] In response to my question whether he has heightened the comedic elements in Alirezā's characterization, Kheilnejād replied:

> Alirezā's playfulness originates from his intention to escape from fear. He is doing his best to kill time and postpone his fear of death. . . . The character's potential and our approach to him allow us to show that, in the most critical moments and places of war, comic elements assist his comrades and spectators to forget the reality of war, although, like Alirezā, we also come to realize that there is no escape from the destructiveness of war.[35]

Indeed, the play contains enough comic elements to lighten the overall mood on some occasions, but, in general, it is Alirezā's mixture of emotions that has its lasting effect on the audience. This intense combination is best metaphorized in the final moments, when he extinguishes the candle that he uses while telling a joke by moistening his fingers with his own tears.

In terms of directorial practice, however, the greatest difference between Nāderi's

From the 2017 production of *The Whispers Behind the Front Line*, directed by Mohammad Rezā Sattāri. Photo: Behnāz Dastjerdi.

choices and those of Sattāri and Kheilnejād lay in their stage design and selection of props. Kheilnejād follows Nāderi's realistic approach, but he limits his props to a few sacks of sand, a bucket, and an ammunition box.[36] What differentiates his stage design from Nāderi's is the emptiness of the dark stage. The quasi-abstract, empty space allows him to give a fresh perspective on the universal truth about the absurdities and evil consequences of war while reminding his audience of the recent trauma that his nation has gone through. Kheilnejād wrote to me:

> Our intention was to depart from extreme realism in our designs. Our group's aesthetic viewpoint with regard to the issue of representation, in fact, informed our stage design in that direction. First, it enabled our spectators to have a straightforward and uninterrupted encounter with the characters. Secondly, it helped the spectators use their imagination in reconstructing their own image of Iran's war. Besides, none of our team members has close familiarity with the war and the atmosphere of the 1980s and this somehow explains our distance from Alirezā Nāderi's production of *The Whispers Behind the Front Line*.[37]

As these words reveal, Kheilnejād's scenic elements create a morbid vision far from the spiritualized, purified, and sanctified glory projected by the *Arzeshi* theatre. On the other hand, they take the play's front-line microcosm one step further away from the specific vision and photographic realism that Nāderi originally used.

Sattāri's directorial practice also makes little attempt at presenting a photographic image of war on the stage. His minimal, emblematic approach to *The Whispers* requires just two significant scenic elements: partly coloured tyres and a red backdrop. Sattāri uses about twenty worn-out heavy truck tyres and a large-scale perforated reddish curtain as the backdrop of the scenes. There is little trace of front-line objects such as ammunition boxes or arms. Instead, the colour combination of black, red, and yellow conveys the director's intention to explore the fatality of war and foreground the urgency of its avoidance.

To Sattāri, the tyres 'signify motion and mobility', while worn-out tyres convey 'immobility and deadness' – the absolute outcome of any war.[38] The fact that these tyres are marked with wide red and yellow lines also enhances this message. The red tyres are placed on the Iraqi side, representing the dead, and the yellow-marked tires signify the premonition of danger on the Iranian side, reminding Iranians that becoming involved in any war would cost them a great deal.[39]

The red of the water tanker and the backdrop serves the same purpose. In contrast to

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the lifelike wall of *Komeil Canal*, which has the spiritual and allegorical function of conveying the idea of sacredness, Sattāri's large-scale, perforated backdrop simply signifies the breach between life and death, and does not offer any celestial pathway to Heaven or the afterlife.

To reinforce the universal qualities of his direction, Sattāri engages with his front line without the constraints of representing a real battlefront, as is shown in Nāderi's *The Whispers*, or those of a spiritualized, symbolic representation, as in *Arzeshi* theatre. The emblematic set design and minimalistic use of props allows Sattāri to create his autonomous version of the battle world.

Because Sattāri, like Kheilnejād, has a less subjective and internalized experience of a particular international conflict, he believes that war does not solely address a particular nation's security and ideology; rather, it is a global phenomenon not confined to specific geography or temporality. As Ulrich Beck notes: 'While each catastrophe is defined locally, temporally, and socially, the anticipation of catastrophe does not know any spatio-temporal or social concretion.'[40]

Such an understanding explains why the new generation of directors of war plays has shaped a global ethical vision moving away from the catastrophe of the Iran–Iraq war and its spatio-temporal and religious-political specificity so as to place the thematic and theatrical elements of their direction of plays within the framework of objective universality, thereby raising global risk awareness. This non-realistic, counter-spiritualist stance offers significant counter-narratives about contemporary threats that the whole world, including the Middle East, is facing.

What distinguishes the new interventionist war theatre from the first generation of the counter-*Arzeshi* school of theatre-making is the young artists' goal of an objective universality that goes far beyond their own local and historical particularities. What joins these generations to fight on a single battle line is continuing to recreate revelatory minute, but important moments of theatrical interventionism. The question is how the practice of theatrical counter-conducts differs between the two generations of anti-war theatre practitioners and how *politically* this act of sharing the truth of war is realized on the Iranian stage.

Creating Theatrical Counter-Conduct

Since the 1979 revolution, the Iranian state has employed a diverse range of actors and institutions to 'conduct' and supervise theatrical practices. To obtain a licence for public showing, both the script and performance must be vetted by the Theatre Supervision Committee, which screens the play's script and aesthetic in accordance with the codes of 'Islamic decency' and community norms. No matter how transgressive or propagandist is their artistic vision or political intention, all theatre practitioners are well aware that to win the favour of both this Committee and audiences they have to be familiar with the accepted values, codes, and, of course, the borderlines beyond which they, desirably, should not go.

In other words, the processes that control and conduct current theatrical practices are variegated and multiple. They involve market rules, financial constraints, administrative policies, state censorship regulations, and community norms, all of which are among the most important forces that exert discipline and 'conduct'. Recently, Iranian theatrical counter-conducts have been operating on a different level and scale of complexity. The aesthetics and tactics of pure realism emanating from Nāderi's personal experience of war give way to the stylistic tactic of minimalism, and the play's lyrical and sorrowful mood in its original performance is supplanted by a more humorous and matter-of-fact mood in new productions.

The two forces of 'conduct' – community norms and religious values – which used to be powerful at the time of the play's first staging have diminished in recent decades, influencing the constitutive relationship between the young practitioners' theatrical counter-conducts with these norms and values. The main reason is that theatre currently relies on private investments, larger audiences, and better availability of private

venues. However, the Theatre Supervision Committee (also known as the censorship board) continues to exert its power through vetting the scripts and performances of every show to be presented publicly.

Of course, this reliance on private theatres, which, ironically, has been widely encouraged by the state authorities, has its drawbacks for artists, too. On the one hand, they are at the mercy of the market, and, on the other, their artistic choices are jeopardized by the constant scrutiny of the Committee. In any case, the directors are reinforcing these forces of conduct, as well as the spectators who conform to the norms propagated by the Committee.

However, these perpetual entanglements should not diminish the fact that the practices of the Supervision Committee undergo constant and inevitable re-appropriation and modification in accordance with the subtle tactics that resist and defy them. For instance, while the desacralization of the values of the Iran–Iraq war was condemned as an invariably transgressive, even criminal act in the 1990s, in 2017, this desacralization is not only permissible, but is also encouraged, to some extent, by the state as a safety valve to appease dissident forces. In such circumstances, the old counter-conducts are constantly renewed and superseded by the new.

To understand better the subtle and complex interplay of theatrical subversion and reappropriation of censorship, another point requires consideration. State regulations and community moral norms are so arbitrary and the borderlines so fluid that they leave theatre artists in a perpetual state of uncertainty, rendering their theatrical counter-conducts contingent. The borderlines become clear only in their transgression – that is, when disguised counter-hegemonic tactics are presented on stage and the audiences are vigilant enough to grasp and interpret them, which is often the case, particularly because of the ambiguous and multi-layered nature of cultural codes and rhetorical meanings.

The result of working in such circumstances is twofold: either counter-conducts as shown in the theatre are so contingent and even digressive that they become susceptible to reinforcing the powers of control; or the theatre artists' state of uncertainty becomes so purposeful that, in fact, they reinvigorate permanent resistance and continual criticism among Iranian theatre practitioners.

As revealed by the testimonies of many theatre critics and experts, Nāderi's sustained criticism and rewriting of history was so phenomenal that *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* influenced the periodization of the Iranian theatre of war, dividing it into two phases: pre-*Whispers* and post-*Whispers*. Many whispers and dialogues continue to emerge after *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* and they are no longer 'behind the front line', but at the centre stage of Tehran's vibrant theatre. The battle lines can also lie in conducting research on such interventions for theatre scholarship. As Nāderi has aptly put it: 'The whispers are endless. The battle line lies somewhere else.'[41]

Notes and References

1. The production was performed at the Tenth Student Theatre Festival. The outrage was so intense that it led to the closure of the festival for two consecutive years.

2. Rouzbeh Hoseini, ed., *It's None of Your Business: Commitment in Theatre* (Tehran: Afraz Publications, 2014), p. 30 and p. 101–2.

3. Amelia H. Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing, 1995–2005* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 168.

4. In his work on resistance, Foucault tried to destabilize the binaries of power and resistance by examining the various, dispersed, and rhizomatic processes of disruption. His notion of 'counter-conducts' has much to offer the study of the way protests and interventions both disrupt and reinforce the status quo. See Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?', in *M. Foucault, The Politics of Truth*, ed. S. Lotringer, trans. L. Hochroth and C. Porter (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 41–81.

5. On 22 September, the Iraq Ba'thist regime invaded Iranian borders without any prior warning. To Iranians, especially the authorities, who were struggling with the turbulent aftermath of the revolution that had happened a year before, the unexpected combat over their borders was an 'imposed war' and the resistance against the enemy was a 'sacred defence'. This war of attrition ended in 1988 by UN Resolution 598. Iranian leaders' underrating their deficiencies in strategy and logistics while overestimating the religious enthusiasm of volunteer fighters (*razmandeh*) led to huge human sacrifices, financial losses, and vast physical destruction. At least 300,000 were martyred, 500,000 injured returned home but 50,000 bodies remain missing. See Pedram

Khosronejad, *Iranian Sacred Defence Cinema: Religion, Martyrdom, and National Identity* (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston, 2012), p. 1.

6. Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, ed., *Emotions, Politics, and War* (Abingdon: Routledge. 2015), p. 2.

7. For the transliteration of Persian words, I have followed the *Iranian Studies* scheme, with the exception of terms, names, and titles that already have established anglicized forms (e.g., Ta'ziyeh). Based on my experience as an instructor of Persian, the distinction between /a/ and long /a/ is very important in pronouncing words with a natural Iranian accent, so long /a/ as in 'father' is transliterated as /ā/ throughout the text. All translations from the Persian sources are mine.

8. Khosronejad, *Iranian Sacred Defence Cinema*, p. 65.

9. As mentioned above, stylistically the first generation of plays of '*Arzeshi* theatre' borrowed aesthetic elements of Ta'ziyeh, including episodic structure, nonlinear narrative, minimalistic set designs, iconic props, colour symbolism, role-playing, repeated plotlines, loud, sad music, and elegy reading (*rowzeh khāni*). They featured superheroes with spiritual, often supernatural grandeur, and characterized those types of characters through predictable actions and heavily sloganized and oratorical dialogues.

10. Hossein Fadāei Hossein, *Komeil Canal*, in *Theatre of Resistance: Collection of Plays 5* (Tehran: Foundation for Preservation and Dissemination of Sacred Defence Works, 1999), p. 145–95. The title 'Canal', also known as *Hanzaleh*, is located in Fakkeh in the southwestern border region and was an Iraqi complex of canals that was captured by the Iranian army in 1982.

11. *Komeil Canal* was first staged in 2004 at Molavi Hall. Kourosh Zārei subsequently directed it twice in 2008 and 2011 in the Thirteenth Resistance Theatre Festival, in the Main Hall of Tehran's City Theatre complex. Its recent revival was in 2016 by Rouhollāh Firouzi in Imam Khomeini House of Culture.

12. Shi'i's third Imam, Imam Hossein (the prophet's grandson), and his followers experienced the same tragic suffering from thirst when their enemies denied them water in the course of the Karbalā battle in Iraq in 680 CE. The culture and, particularly, theatre of 'sacred defence' are deeply indebted to the thematic features of the Karbalā event and its commemorative performances in Ta'ziyeh.

13. Other reasons can be the crisis of values, disillusion, global communications, the influence of independent and anti-Islamic Republic media, mostly active beyond Iranian borders, economic sanctions, the threat of war with the US and Israel, the resurgence of nationalist sentiment, and secular ideologies.

14. Nāderi is a graduate of the Theatre Department at the University of Tehran and is a schoolteacher. He fought in the Iran–Iraq war as a private and his body still carries scars from mortar attacks. He has written dozens of film and play scripts and often directs his own plays.

15. Ali Gholipour, 'As a Whale, Breathing on the Waves and Diving into the Depth: Interview with Alirezā Nāderi', *Drama Quarterly* (*Faslnāmeh-ye Teātre*), Nos. 4 and 5 (2012), p. 134–54.

16. Cited in Gholipour, p. 142.

17. Ibid.

18. Neda Tayyebi, 'Truth Has No Tribune: Interview with Alirezā Nāderi', *Etemad*, No. 1548 (25 November 2007), p. 11.

19. Alirezā Nāderi, *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* (Tehran: Hirmand, 2006). Although the play has been published, I am using the digital version of the play that the playwright emailed to me as a Word file. Hence I do not include page references for quotations from the play.

20. Rezā Āshofteh, 'At the Forefront of the Dramatic Scripts of Sacred Defence: a Glimpse at the Works by Alirezā Nāderi', IBNA, 24 Sept. 2014 <wwwibna.ir>.

21. Mas'oud Riāzi, interview with the author, Toronto, 12 February 2017.

22. This important characteristic distinguishes Iranian 'sacred defence' art and culture from Hollywood, or any other propagandist art, as it is deeply rooted in absolute trust in God and His promised reward of an afterlife.

23. See Dani Snyder-Young, *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

24. Khoramshahr is a city in southwest Iran. It was ravaged by Iraqi forces several times and to such an extent that it became known as *Khoonin Shahr* (Blood City). Iranians recaptured the city on 24 May 1982 and each year, on this day, Iranians celebrate the Liberation of Khoramshahr.

25. Ahmad Tālebinezhād, 'Unmarked Fears', *Seven, Journal of Art and Architecture*, No. 1 (2003), p. 40–1.

26. Marjan Moosavi, 'Dramaturgy in Post-revolution Iran: Problems and Prospects' in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 68–74.

27. Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 24.

28. Ibid.

29. Asal Abbāsiān, 'Hoping for a True Victory Not in War but against War', interview with Ashkān Kheilnejād, *Shargh Daily*, No. 3,000 (31 October 2017), p 11.

30. Moosavi, p. 72.

31. Tayyebi, p. 11.

32. See Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam, and Democracy: the Politics of Managing Change* (London: Chatham House, 2006); Shireen T. Hunter. *Iran Divided: the Historical Roots of Iranian Debates on Identity, Culture, and Governance in the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); and Sanam Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

33. For more details see Marjan Moosavi, 'Defunded and Defiant, Iranian Theatre's Path to Become Independent and/or Private' <TheatreTimes.com>, 8 June 2017.

34. Abbāsiān, p. 11.

35. Ashkān Kheilnejād, email correspondence with the author, 24 October 2017.

36. Trailer of the Kheilnejād's production of *The Whispers Behind the Front Line* <<http://filmnet.ir/film/509/%D9%BE%DA%86%D9%BE%DA%86%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D8%B7-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF>.

37. Kheilnejād, 24 October 2017.

38. Mohammad Rezā Sattāri, interview with the author, Tehran, 8 July 2017.

39. Ibid.

40. Beck Ulrich, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p. 20.

41. Alirezā Nāderi, 'The Endless Whispers', unknown interviewer, in *Seven, Journal of Art and Architecture*, No. 1 (2003), p. 45–6.