

ROUNDTABLE

Privatization and the Changing Landscape of Iranian Theater

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In the past decade, theater in Tehran has increasingly become what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital.”¹ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance marked the consecutive Iranian years 1394 and 1395 (roughly 2015 and 2016) as “the Year of Theater.”² In 2016, the Valiasr metro station was renamed Tī’atr Shahr (City Theater) for its location by the City Theater of Tehran (Fig. 1). Since 2017, March 27 (World Theater Day) has been officially registered on the nation’s calendar as Ruz-i Milli-i Hunarhay-i Namayashi (the National Day of Performing Arts). In 2018, Khanih-i Tī’atr (the Theater Forum, or House of Theater), which represents the country’s thespians and their guilds, added a three-story building as a new home. After years of neglect, Tī’atr Nasr—one of the oldest Iranian theater halls, with a history that goes back to 1915—is being renovated to become Muzih-i Tī’atr (the Theater Museum).

The neighborhood around the City Theater is now a vibrant theater district with more than thirty halls. Whereas in 2007 and 2012 Tehran saw stagings of ninety and 193 plays, respectively, in 2017 the number of plays produced reached 738.³ In just the summer months of 2019, theatergoers could choose from more than 200 plays.⁴ Many politicians (from both the reformist camp, such as Mohammad Javad Zarif and Mohammad Khatami, and the conservative camp, such as Nasrollah Pejmanfar and Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel) attend plays to support specific productions. Movie and television celebrities, whether they have a background in theater or not, now appear regularly in a variety of popular plays. Fans can attend live performances of such stars as Navid Mohammadzadeh, Shahab Hosseini, Hamed Behdad, Golab Adineh, Mahnaz Afshar, and Niki Karimi.⁵

Privatization and Expansion

While privatization is the most noticeable change, a number of factors over the last decade, from production to distribution and consumption, came together to make the expansion of Tehran’s theater scene possible.⁶ Since the 1990s, the number of theater departments and schools has continued to grow. For example, Shahin Chegini, head of the Anjuman-i Sinfi-i Tamashakhanihay-i Iran (the Iranian Theater

¹Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²The Iranian calendar does not map exactly to the Gregorian calendar. The years noted in this essay roughly map to the actual Iranian year.

³I have tried to scrub the data for this analysis, as the different statistical reports in Iran often do not match one another, and a list may include duplicates. My information comes from a variety of sources. I have culled numbers from statistical reports of the Dramatic Arts Center as well as from the Internet, including the site of the Performing Arts Association of Iran (theater.ir) and the official site of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (theater.farhang.gov.ir). Information also has come from the following books and articles: “Tī’atr Dar Dahih-yi Inqalab,” *Kiyhan-i Farhangi* 9, no. 85 (1992): 60–63; ‘Ali Akbar ‘Abd al-‘Alizadeh and Maryam Fallah, eds., *Chishmandaz-i Tī’atr Iran: Guzarish-i Tahlili-i Tī’atr-i Iran 1384–1388* (Tehran: Namayash, 2009); ‘Ali Izadi and Manuchihr Akbarlu, *Chihil Sal Namayash*, vols. 1 and 2 (Tehran: Namayash, 2019).

⁴The statistics used in this essay may include children’s and youth theater, but exclude street theater, festival performances, amateur shows in schools and cultural centers, performance art, stand-up comics, and variety shows.

⁵Although the participation of celebrities in major theater productions is common elsewhere, such as on Broadway, it is a new phenomenon in Iranian theater and has been the subject of much discussion in the past few years.

⁶Private theaters in Iran go back to before the Islamic Revolution, starting with the time of Constitutional Revolution (1905–11). They were most active after World War II.



Figure 1. City Theater metro station (photo by author).

Guild Association), states that departments of theater in universities and colleges increased from twelve to sixty by the late 2000s.⁷ In her 2007 essay, Farah Yeganeh writes, “The number of university graduates in the field of theatre alone amounts to 900 per year.”⁸ Private workshops and theater classes also have grown. Some workshops take their aspiring actors from concept to production. These actors want an opportunity to perform. But the limited number of public venues means that many wait indefinitely, hoping for an opening. Private theaters have addressed this need.

The ways that plays are distributed and experienced have increased, too. A twenty-four-hour channel dedicated to radio drama, Radio Namayesh, launched in 2011. In 2014, the Beethoven Music Center began making digital versions of theatrical productions. By now, close to one hundred performances are available on DVD and online. The number of books on theater also has risen. In my interviews, a number of booksellers mentioned that the sale of such books has surpassed that of books on cinema.

New social platforms like Telegram and Instagram have had a significant impact on the theater community. In these virtual spaces, fans share their ideas and recommend shows. Online sites also have made it easier for theatergoers to learn about plays and to easily purchase tickets. Tiwall, one of the main sites for purchasing tickets online, is a central location at which theater enthusiasts share their comments and questions about the shows. Tiwall officially started in 2012 and in its first year had more than 20,000 members and 50,000 comments.⁹ In addition to information about plays, it also includes critical ratings, trailers and photos from productions, and audio interviews with theater groups. A group of Tiwall members has even begun attending shows together, discussing the work with the director and cast afterward. In addition, a number of online sites provide theater-related information, such as the free Honaronline.ir, founded in 2011, which features theater news, announcements, reports, reviews, and interviews.

The ideas for privatization in postrevolutionary Iran go back to the Rafsanjani presidency in 1990s. But it was only beginning with the fourth five-year economic development plan (2005–10) during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidential term (2005–13) and the amendment and implementation of article 44 of the Iranian Constitution that there was a significant effort toward privatization. The government began a

⁷“Khususi Saz-yi Ti’atr Niyazmand Harasat Ast,” Islamic Republic News Agency, 19 May 2019, www.irna.ir/news/83319600.

⁸Farah Yeganeh, “Iranian Theatre Festivalised,” in *Festivalising!: Theatrical Events, Politics and Culture*, ed. Temple Hauptfleisch et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 172.

⁹“Ba Tiwall Ashna Shavid,” Islamic Republic News Agency, 21 September 2013, www.isna.ir/news/92063019217. Tiwall is not a completely open platform. For example, comments may be deleted if the site or the producers deem them inappropriate.

shift from public to private services not only to reduce the financial burden on the country's budget but also to increase efficiency and productivity. The result has been a slow move away from socialist or state-owned enterprises, in which, for example, the government funds thespians and their productions, to one closer to a neoliberal model, in which private money and ticket sales fill the primary funding role.

By the late 2000s, facing a limited budget and increasing demand, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance began reducing subsidies and paychecks for theater productions and thespians.¹⁰ For the first time since the Islamic Revolution, the government also allowed the formation of private theaters that could present their own shows and manage the costs. In 2009, a special three-day conference was held on the topic of private theaters.¹¹ The city-owned Iranshahr Theater, which opened in 2009 with two halls, was the first place to focus on generating revenue and payments based on ticket sales.¹² Its success made it a model. On its tenth anniversary in 2019, Majid Rajabi Memar, the head of Iranshahr, stated that the theater's audience had grown from 92,000 in 2013 to 986,000.¹³

In 2010, the AV Theater Group established "the first independent/private dramatic art house."¹⁴ This space in a historic building constructed in 1924 was once part of a public bathhouse that was neglected for years. It later became Khanih-i Namayash Da (Da Theater Hall). Other private theaters, such as Baran (now Hamun) followed, located mostly around the City Theater. Some of these spaces are managed by leading Iranian directors. For example, Ti'atr Mustaqil Tihran (Tehran Independent Theater) is managed by the Koushki brothers. Maktab Tihran and Shanu are managed by Jalal Tehrani and Ghotbeddin Sadeghi, respectively. Having their own spaces allows these directors to produce works and continue a production if it is successful. The guild of private theaters (the Iranian Theater Guild Association) began its work in 2016.

Not including venues for stand-up comedy and variety shows, around twenty private theaters are currently active, some with multiple halls and many with multiple different performances offered on the same night. The largest private theater complex is Shahrzad, with three halls, two with 200 and one with 120 seats. The most successful independent production was the 2018 musical *Les Misérables*, which played in the Royal Hall of the Espinas Palace Hotel, the largest private theater hall, holding 2,500 seats. It set an attendance record, with close to 150,000 spectators.¹⁵ Today, more shows are offered in private halls than in state theaters.

In reality, privatization does not mean that the theaters are truly independent and free of government supervision or that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has ceased to subsidize and oversee theatrical productions. The state continues to support festivals, street theaters, and specific works that promote the Islamic Republic's ideology and values. The private theaters free the budget of the state from having to fund all salaries and productions. All productions must still go through a complicated process of being reviewed, vetted, and approved by the supervisory council of the Dramatic Arts Center. For Iranian theater to be truly independent, censorship is only one issue to be addressed. The state also should not define or control the production. It may be noted, however, that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance under Hassan Rouhani's presidency has adopted a more hands-off approach than it did under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

A Quick Survey

Iran's audience for theater is still small. One survey, for example, found that 88.6 percent of Iranians have never attended live theater.¹⁶ Theatergoers usually comprise university students and educated members of

¹⁰There was an established model that allowed thespians to be paid based on lifetime experiences and records.

¹¹Articles from this proceeding were later published: Mehrdad Rayani Makhsoos (ed.), *Ti'atr-i Khususi Dar Iran, 19–21 January 2009* (Tehran: Namayash, 2009).

¹²Although all productions are ultimately under the authority and supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the city and the state may support and manage the arts in different ways. By focusing on attracting audiences and revenue, the city-owned Iranshahr Theater presented a different model than the state-owned City Theater.

¹³"Hisrathay-i Bih Dil Mandih," Islamic Republic News Agency, 16 June 2019, www.isna.ir/news/98032611913.

¹⁴See the AV Theater Group website, www.avtheatre.ir/AboutEn.aspx, accessed 1 October 2019.

¹⁵Ashofteh, Reza. "Binavayan' Husiyn Parsayi, Rukudzani [sic] Ya Ghabta-ha Va Hisadat-ha," Honaronline, 21, April 2019, www.honaronline.ir/fa/tiny/news-133462. (There is a typo in the actual title of this article.)

¹⁶"Taqruban Az Har Dah Irani Yek Nafar Bih Ti'atr Miravad," Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA), 12 May 2019, ispa.ir/Default/Details/fa/2046/مى-روى-د-تتاتر-به-تتاتر-مى-روى-د. In contrast, only 30 percent have never gone to movies. See ISPA report from the same day, ispa.ir/Default/Details/fa/2048/ايسپا-نظرسنجى-نمايچ-نظرسنجى.



Figure 2. Sample playbills (photo by author).

the middle class. Unlike in the United States, the young people are the biggest fans. For many spectators, theater, as a cultural event, helps define their identity.

Largely as a result of economic sanctions and the devaluation of the Iranian rial, the cost of tickets has been steadily increasing, which is a concern to some of the audience. Nevertheless, popular shows still sell out. At this time, ticket prices range from 200,000 rials (around 1.70 US dollars) for small and often government-supported productions to close to 2 million rials for large-scale shows, such as musicals. Discounts are sometimes offered for selected nights, loyalty, and multiple ticket purchases. In contrast, movies cost 80,000 to 200,000 rials, whereas concert tickets can fetch up to 3 million rials.¹⁷ Unlike movies, for which the state dictates ticket prices based on the type of hall, theater prices are mainly dependent on the theater managers and producers.

There are more options for seeing plays than movies in Tehran (Fig. 2). Based on quarterly surveys of both private and public theaters by the Dramatic Arts Center, between 134 and 207 plays have been produced each season for the last two years (fall 2017 to fall 2019).¹⁸ Most plays included two to five cast members, followed by plays with six to nine. Although some complained about the number of plays by foreign authors, the number was in fact quite low. About 79 percent of the shows were written by Iranians. Only 14 percent of writers, primarily of the younger generation, were women, a number that fluctuated between 12 and 22 percent. Note that in America, during the 2015–16 season, 21 percent of plays were by women. This US number increased to 26 percent in 2017.¹⁹ More plays were produced in private theaters than in state theaters, but overall, based on the plays in the last few months, there was little difference in the number of women directors or foreign plays in state versus private theaters. The rise in the number of theater halls also meant that there were now revivals and longer runs.

Iranian theater has much in common with theater in many other countries, though the prevalence of the type of shows may vary. There is a lot of variety in the types of performances, including comedies and tragedies, musicals and melodramas, and street, youth, and puppet theater, as well as documentary, environmental, interactive, and avant-garde work. The range of social topics also varies greatly; plays treat problems such as crime, corruption, poverty, immigration, and the generation gap, as well as the struggles of women and youth and issues of identity, ethnicity, and race. Casting choices also can be diverse, including gender nonconformists, minorities, homeless youth, and people with disabilities. For example, since 2016, Gholamreza Arabi has been working with blind casts in three different productions. In 2018 and 2019, two different directors also have worked with youth in juvenile detention centers, producing plays that were presented at the International Children and Youth Theater Festival and the Fadjr International Theater Festival (Fig. 3). Since 2014, an Iranian journal has been dedicated to drama therapy.

¹⁷The minimum base salary for an employee is currently 18 million rials in a month.

¹⁸These data are from recent statistical reports found for each season on the Iranian theater website, accessed 1 November 2019, theater.ir. For example, for summer 1998 see theater.ir/fa/125689.

¹⁹Rob Weinert-Kendt, "The Gender and Period Count: The More Things Change . . .," *American Theater*, 26 September 2017, www.americantheatre.org/2017/09/26/the-gender-period-count-the-more-things-change.



Figure 3. Fajr International Theater Festival 2019 poster (property of author).

Iranian theater also is unique in different ways. The role of censorship in shaping Iranian plays is widely discussed. Performance regulations put great restrictions on shows like musicals. There are even performances exclusively for women to circumvent legal limitations, such as the prohibition against having a sole female singer. But by now Iranian directors have found ways to encode their larger concerns, and the audience is sophisticated enough to decode sexual exchanges or social messages in these works. Furthermore, given theater's live nature and relatively small liberal audience, the government is less concerned with its oversight. Works such as *Bahman* (Avalanche, 2016) by Afroz Foroozand or *Badun-i Tamashagar* (No Audience, 2019), directed by Amir Akhavin and written by Abolfazl Kahani, openly discuss the role and impact of censorship in theater.²⁰ A performance also is never exactly the same every night and cannot be constantly supervised. Shows regularly cross the red line.

Theater of War and Violence

Since the revolution, the “theater of sacred defense” (*difa-i mughaddas ti'atr*), which ordinarily has a prescribed narrative with stereotypical characters, caters to a more conservative and religious audience, and is promoted and subsidized by the state, has been a regular part of Iranian productions, often as part of street theater or in special festivals.²¹ After the Iran–Iraq War, the topics of these plays expanded to include the victims of war (especially those affected by chemical attacks), soldiers missing in action, families of servicemen, refugees, and prisoners of war, as well as other conflicts, such as the fight against Daesh (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), and historical, religious, and mythic heroes. Amir Hossein Shafiei's *Namyar* (The Immortal, 2019), for example, is an extravagant piece of street theater, with a cast of sixty actors, about a girl who in her dreams travels to Syria to find her father who was killed by Daesh.

Meanwhile, starting in the late 1990s, a new generation of writers and directors began retelling war stories, moving away from propaganda and questioning the sacredness of war and the instrumentalization of martyrdom. What was, especially during the Iran–Iraq War, an idealized, poetic rendition of martyrdom and sacrifice, with virtuous, fearless, and modest soldiers, has been replaced by more complex stories

²⁰The dates are based on the last year and latest production. I have focused on the most recent performances.

²¹For example, in 2018 the 16th International Resistance Theater Festival in Tehran hosted twenty-seven productions, including thirteen street plays.

with multidimensional characters from different backgrounds and faiths. Soldiers share and argue about their hopes, beliefs, fears, and disillusionments. War is no longer a means of purifying the soul and attaining spiritual fulfillment but a tragedy that destroys lives. The 1995 performance of Alireza Naderi's *Pich Pich-hay-i Pusht-i Khat-i Nabard* (The Whispers Behind the Front Line), which resulted in a riot and the closing of the Student Theater Festival for two years, is considered a turning point by many critics. Marjan Moosavi writes that "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."²² With the changing times, these transgressive plays by writers like Nadiri, Pejman Abdi, and Hamid-Reza Azarang have now been accepted and even promoted. Their productions are well received by the greater public, resulting in successful revivals with frequently sold-out performances over the past three years.

More recent generations of directors and writers are going even further, challenging the ethos of a state that condones war and corporal punishment while opposing theater that depicts graphic violence or presents a dark picture of Iranian society. Violence—whether in war, community, family, or self-inflicted—has become a common theme in their works. In addition to counter-hegemonic rebellion, other reasons for their staging of so much violence may include the real experience of aggression, hopelessness, and despair in society, which is reinforced by daily reports of assault and the general oppression in the region. Paradoxically, it is easier, under Iranian regulations, to display a violent exchange between a man and a woman than an intimate, erotic one. Unfortunately, not much research has been done on the reason for the prevalence of violence.

To present a more unsparingly violent picture of society, some directors turn to foreign plays, such as Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, Antonin Artaud's *The Cenci*, and Jean Genet's *The Maids* (which were all last performed in 2019). Others may use a Western historical figure or setting, such as Hesam Manzour's *Elizabeth Báthory* (2019) about the Hungarian countess (1560–1614) who was accused of torturing and killing hundreds of young women.

Iranian playwrights also interrogate violence in the society. Sanaz Bayan's *Amidanih, Ashqanih, Qatilanih* (Deliberate, Romantic, Murderous, 2015) is a sympathetic documentary play about women who have committed murder. Ahmad Solgi's environmental theater piece, *Kalandula* (Calendula, 2019), is about child abuse. Many plays deal with violence against women. For example, Kahbod Taraj's *Ghulamriza Labkhandi* (Smiling Gholamreza, 2019) is about a serial killer from 1992 known as the "Night Bat" who raped and murdered nine women. Hadi Ahmadi's *Falsh Kani Dar Chahar-rah Fakhrabad* (False Reading at Fakhr Abad Intersection, 2019) deals with an acid attack. Suicide is another common theme, whether in Iranian productions of Western plays like Marsha Norman's *Goodnight Mother* and Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* or in Iranian plays such as Amir Norouzi's *B5-6* (2019), 'Ali Shams' *Vahti Khurus Ghalat Mikhanad* (When the Rooster Sings False, 2019), and Mojgan Khaleghi's *Amshab Inja* (Here Tonight, 2019).

Experimentation and Adaptation

Iranian theater embraces an unusually high number of experimental plays. This interest in the avant-garde goes back to before the Islamic Revolution. In 1969, Kargah-i Namayash (the Theater Workshop) became a center for experimental theater with influential directors and playwrights. The Shiraz Festival of the Arts, for a decade Iran's prominent theater festival (1967–77), also brought in innovative directors such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Robert Wilson.

In 2004, Atila Pesyani, taking inspiration from the Kargah-i Namayash, started a new space in the City Theater and invited many directors to join and experiment. One of the key goals was for different independent groups to form. In 2013, ten leading experimental Iranian directors, including Pesyani, and their companies formed the influential Dayirih-i Dah (Circle of Ten) collective. Experimentation also has been a part of higher education, with Markaz Ti'atr Tajrubi (the Center for Experimental Theater) at the University of Tehran, which runs Jashnvarih-i Ti'atr-i Tajrubi (the Experimental Theater Festival).

What often distinguishes this theater is the unique role that directors play in shaping their works. Many Iranian directors are trying to carve out their own distinct styles. Playscripts are like screenplays

²²Marjan Moosavi, "Desacralizing Whispers: Counter-Conduct in the Iranian War Theatre," *New Theatre Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2018): 239.

that are usually used by the film directors at will. Playwrights seem to have a peripheral part in the production. In fact, very few playwrights, such as Bahram Beyzaie, Akbar Radi, Naghmeh Samini, and Mohammad Charmshir, are regularly performed by different directors. Almost half of Iranian directors write their own scripts. An analysis of the past two years of productions shows that roughly 45 percent of plays are written and directed by the same person.²³

Iranian directors seem to freely appropriate and assimilate various foreign texts as well as traditional Iranian narratives and techniques. In the United States, directors need to get permission from the playwright and often adhere closely to the original text. Since Iran does not follow international copyright law, directors are free to use the foreign text as they wish. When American directors experiment with texts, they often adapt a well-known older work, such as a Shakespeare play, that has been regularly performed in traditional ways. But in Iran these classical Western texts are rarely performed in traditional or realistic productions. Instead of following the script's dialogue and plot, many Iranian productions are loose adaptations. At times, the performance may barely recall the original text. For example, there are only traces of Shakespeare and Tadeusz Rózewicz in Reza Sarvati's *Macbeth* (2016) and *Fihrist* (Card Index, 2018). Furthermore, it would not be surprising for the adaptor to be listed as the writer and for the foreign source to not be mentioned at all. Of course, some of these Iranian directors' adaptations are in fact provocative and unique works in themselves.

In addition, foreign texts allow the directors to address topics that would not have been possible in an Iranian setting or by an Iranian writer. Directors often recontextualize the works for the Iranian audience. A different time or a different culture can bear witness to the current conditions.²⁴ Settings like prerevolutionary Iran, the United States, or the Soviet Union allow directors to present a more critical picture and to question authority. For example, Artaud's *The Cenci* allows Amin Saadi in his 2019 production to comment on the depravity in religious institutions with links to power and wealth. Atabak Naderi uses Dimitris Psathas' *Liar Wanted* to consider political corruption and the unscrupulous behavior of elected representatives. His 2018 staging, titled *Diputat*, throws in contemporary quotes and references from Iranian media to provide further relevance. Arash Abbasi directs Stefano Massini's *7 Minutes*, which explores issues of labor rights and workers' bargaining power, the anxiety of losing a job, and the role of unions. For his 2019 production, he uses seven Afghans, one Tajik, and one Iranian woman, adding another layer to the complexity.

Traditional Iranian theater—such as *naqqali* (storytelling), *ta'ziyeh* (Shi'a passion plays), *khiymih shab bazi* (puppetry), and *siah-bazi* (blackface comics)—continues to be performed, especially in street theaters and festivals. But directors also have been experimenting, refashioning classical stories and older techniques to serve as templates for new plays. Writers and directors combine Iranian and Western forms of theater while defamiliarizing both. They may supply a contemporary context to an ancient story or introduce traditional formal elements and structures to a modern play. They deconstruct the age-old narratives and customs or use them to reexamine and challenge the current social discourses. As Saeed Talajooy points out, using these modern and traditional techniques, Bahram Beyzaie engages in a “counter-narrative on heroism to create a deconstructive tragic paradigm, in which creative intellectuals and artists, historically victimized by radical elements in Iran's religious and political establishments, were depicted as sacrificial heroes.”²⁵ Although Beyzaie now lives in the United States, his works are performed more frequently in Iran than ever before. In 2016, Mohammad Rahmanian, one of the best interpreters of Beyzaie's work, delivered a powerful rendition of the subversive *Majlis-i Zarbat Zadan* (Act of striking), using elements of *ta'ziyeh* on a revolving stage. The play places the struggles of Imam 'Ali, as a righteous enlightened hero in an oppressive society, in a contemporary context using actors who are rehearsing for a play about his martyrdom. It was written after the “chain murders” in Iran (1988–89), when more than eighty dissident intellectuals disappeared or were found dead, and also deals with censorship and the role of artists. For his production, Rahmanian even changes the character of the playwright in the performance to a female, adding a further twist to the play. A different example is Hossein Kiani's *Chashm Bah Rah Mirghazab* (Waiting for the Executioner, 2019), a free

²³These data are from recent statistical reports that also can be found on the Iranian theater website, theater.ir.

²⁴This situation also is true in plays about the display of violence discussed earlier.

²⁵Saeed Talajooy, “Indigenous Performing Traditions in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Theatre,” *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 501.

adaptation of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It is a black comedy set during the Constitutional Revolution in which two characters argue about reform while awaiting their execution. In the play, the traditional master and his black servant of *siah-bazi* act as Beckett's Pozzo and Lucky.

Conclusion

In the Islamic Republic, theater—from the production process to the performance and its community of spectators and supporters—is deemed a public space under the supervision and control of the state. The negotiation of the rights to this public space is one of the long-standing characteristics of Iranian theater. For example, directors use codes signified by color, symbols, objects, and gestures to reimpose the forbidden intimacy and privacy upon the stage. Private theaters as well as digital and social media platforms also have provided new opportunities for the theater community to disrupt the state's hegemonic control and gain some command of physical and virtual public spaces. Although limited in scope, the result has been a resurgence of theater as a social space—a place for entertainment and imagination as well as reflection, meditation, and resistance.

The recent changes also have been the subject of great anxiety and criticism in the theater community. There have been many articles and interviews decrying the current state of theater, speaking of such things as the “theater of luxury,” commercialization, the financial crisis, and the poor quality of the theater halls and the productions. Some of these concerns may be valid. But the critics forget that a truly vibrant theater ecosystem includes all sorts of theater performances and halls, from professional to amateur productions or from large-scale musicals in well-equipped halls to free street theater and alternative experimental plays in small temporary venues.

It also should be noted that greater guidance and financial support from the state usually comes with greater control and demand over production. Theater groups need to be free in what they produce. Rather than accepting a top-down approach that depends on the state and ideology, the theater community needs to rely on the public by finding sponsors and building a supportive audience. The role of the state also needs to be redefined as facilitator. Instead of asserting control and supervising, the state can provide support through other means, such as education, subsidies, grants, tax deductions, and free or inexpensive long-term rental spaces.

Postscript

This essay was written in the summer of 2019, before November's nationwide protests against higher fuel prices and the government's subsequent crackdown. These events were quickly followed by the United States' assassination of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani and Iran's downing of Ukraine International Airlines' Flight 752. In the aftermath of these dramatic events, and the heightened threat of war, politics “trumped” art. Some theater shows were canceled, and others closed early. Attendance declined. A heated debate broke out over the role of theater during these troubling times. Many asked whether the artists should participate in government-sponsored events. Some boycotted the Fajr festivals (in art, film, theater, and music). The impact on this year's Fajr International Theater Festival was noticeable. Normally, tickets sell out within a few hours. This year, days passed, and tickets were still available for many shows. A number of established directors dropped out or postponed their runs until after the festival. World-renowned international guests: Romeo Castellucci and his company, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, and Eugenio Barba and his company, Odin Teatret, canceled their shows and workshops. The festival still went on, as the government continued to use it to promote unity and to celebrate the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, even sponsoring a new play on Soleimani.²⁶ The immediate impact on the Fajr festivals was evident. What all of this will mean for the future of Iran's flowering theater scene is unclear.

²⁶The Fajr festivals coincide with the annual celebration of the Islamic Revolution and the return of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.