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Bazi-ha-ye Nameyeshi: Iranian Women's Theatrical Plays

Anthony Shay

Introduction

Iranian women's comic improvised traditional theatre is a rich and important, but little-known, source of performative and textual material that has been rarely documented or discussed by serious students of folklore and dance, either in Iran or in the West. I argue that this amateur theatrical form performed and created by women for other women is the single most important source representing the multivocality of traditional Iranian women of all classes. Both in content and performance, these theatrical plays or games are a unique form of expression that needs several analytic approaches to elucidate its meaning and place in women's lives as well as in the wider area of traditional Iranian performance practices.

The term coined by S. A. 'Enjavi-Shirazi, the Iranian folklorist and literary scholar, to describe the theatrical plays performed by and for women, *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*, is probably best rendered in English as 'theatrical' or 'dramatic' plays. The *bazi-ha* (*ha* denotes the inanimate plural in Persian) are basically folk or traditional plays and games (*bazi* can mean either play or game, *namayeshi* translates as dramatic) that are primarily created and performed domestically by women throughout many parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. In this author's opinion, they form part of a greater continuum of traditional improvised comic theatre that permeates the entire Iranian cultural sphere (1). The women's domestic theatrical plays are related to other traditional theatrical and entertainment phenomena, including *ru-howzi*, *siyah-bazi*, *kachal-bazi*, *maskhareh-bazi*, names for some of the different varieties of folk theatre forms. Almost all of the theatrical forms are comic, and use satire to criticize those in power. They are improvised, and involve dance, patter verses (similar to the current rap), use of minimal costume or makeup of some kind, and minimal props. The women's version of this theatrical form relies more heavily on dance and patter verse than the corresponding male theatrical forms. In all of the theatrical forms the basic stories and stock characters of all of the plays are familiar to everyone who makes up the potential audiences. Some of the more skilled players have extensive repertoires of these *bazi-ha*.

Improvised solo dancing is also a ubiquitous element of both male and female performances of these theatrical forms, and thus these plays serve as a prime source for research in dance and patterned movement in the Iranian cultural sphere.

For the researcher in dance, part of the problem of finding material (what little exists) in the Iranian cultural sphere is that dance is often found in contexts that Western oriented scholars sometimes overlook: theatre and games. Dance is so deeply embedded in these other forms that the dancing is taken for granted by those who write about theatre and games. Even when it is mentioned that dancing occurs, there is never any description of it. The dancing in the theatrical performances never takes the form of regional folk dances (a focus of interest on the part of some researchers). In theatrical contexts the performers dance in the solo improvised style that is found throughout this vast region. Many serious researchers ignore the form both because of its amorphous choreographic characteristics and because of its social and moral ambiguity in Iranian society (see Friend 1994; Shay 1993; 1994 for a description). Also, much of this activity is segregated along gender lines so that researchers of either sex can be hampered by lack of access to all-male or all-female gatherings (2).

As vehicles of women's expression the women's theatrical plays seem to be unique in Iranian literary and performative expression. The importance of the *bazi-ha* is that these theatrical entertainments embody the only collective voice of many Iranian women. In these games one gains informative insights into a woman's world view, her feelings about men and other women, and her view of her place in life and society, as I will show in a description of the content of some of the representative plays.

Iranian women's voices in Iranian national discourse are few. Hillmann contends that Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967), a famous Iranian poet, is the only genuine Iranian feminist voice in the past thousand years, even though there were other women writers (1990, 148-149). But Farrokhzad, like many in the modern Iranian literary establishment, speaks almost exclusively to the educated. By contrast, the *bazi-ha* are much more representative of women who lead more traditional life styles, of all social classes. They thus reveal the everyday thoughts and concerns of a large number of women, although they are certainly not feminist in the Western sense. In fact, some Western-educated women are ashamed of them and judge them to be a nonfeminist and old-fashioned embarrassment (3). One must remember that general education for Iranian women is a recent phenomenon (see Farman-Farmaian [1992]

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and Mahdavi [1994] for a discussion of this issue).

In his *Namayesh dar Iran* (Theatre in Iran) (1965, 218-219), Behzad Beiza'i devotes a scant few sentences to this female theatrical form. He correctly observes that no one knows how many such plays or games exist, who created them and who the leading performers have been. I would, however, contest his assertion that "with the appearance of women on the stages of theatres and the planks of the *howz* (pool) in the present century, they rapidly disappeared." They are still known and performed. According to Parvaneh Azad and Azadeh, two female informants, they are performed today by some women in social gatherings, including upper class parties, of the Los Angeles Iranian community (personal communications, 1991, 1994).

The principal source of the texts of several of these plays is 'Enjavi-Shirazi's work, *Bazi-ha-ye namayeshi* (Theatrical Plays) (1973). His collection of texts, descriptions and background notes does not include purely mimetic activities such as those described by Bolukbashi (1964) and Farman Farmaian (1992), which I would include within the category of women's theatrical plays since they are performed in the same settings and performance events. 'Enjavi-Shirazi's texts include several of the most popular and representative of the *bazi-ha* with their regional variations and he demonstrates what a widespread phenomenon these games are in Iran, both in urban and rural settings, and among members of all classes. The wealth of traditional theatre is further demonstrated by the research of Mir-Shokra'i (1978) in the Caspian Sea Provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran, and Karomatov and Nurdzhanov in Tajikistan (1986).

An important factor for the development and continued performance of these theatrical plays that are different from such male-oriented theatrical forms as *siyah-bazi*, with its political emphasis, is the sequestered and isolated lives that traditional Iranian women lead. "Basically, women are seen as a disturbing element for men in their conduct of everyday life, particularly as the male's sexual passion is considered uncontrollable. Both the veiling and seclusion of women and the practice of polygamy have their origin in the above belief" (Mahdavi 1994, 374).

Several scholars have documented how, in many societies in which some or all of its members feel cultural, sexual, religious, economic, or geographic isolation, some groups will create a wealth of theatrical plays, playlets, or games, usually with some type of rhythmic, musical and/or choreographic elements. Their structure and content are most often designed so that most, if not all, members may participate. For this reason the stories, plots, verses, dances and movements may appear to be simple, formulaic, and repetitive. Although the causes of the isolation in which they were created and developed differ, rich play-party or folk theatre traditions are found in Bosnia (Dopuda, 1953, 1955, 1986), Early California (Shay 1982), Northern Caspian Iran (Mir-Shokra'i 1978), rural Tajikistan (Nurdzhanov 1965), and Midwestern and Southern rural United States (Botkin 1972; Buckley 1968).

Unlike some of the other societies mentioned earlier (Early California, Bosnia, the American Middle West) in which play party-games or folk dramas are or have been a major source of social interaction, sometimes the only one in which the sexes

may meet in a socially sanctioned setting, the *bazi-ha* are segregated along gender lines (except for small boys who at some point between five and seven years of age are ejected from these gatherings). The Iranian women's games are further distinguished from play-party games from other areas of the world by the eroticism and transgressive quality of both the content and its performative expression.

The Content

It is in the content of the plays that one may seek the issues that trouble and interest women. The subjects of the plays encompass the everyday problems and fears that women harbor, and which they may act out in these dramatic, comic productions. Further, the underdog always wins, and so a woman has at least this arena in which she may be a winner.

In this section I lay out some of the brief plots found in these plays to indicate the types of issues that interest traditional Iranian women: keeping a husband's interest, infidelity, children born out of wedlock, being forced to marry a man whom one does not like or know and who has been chosen by one's parents, problems with female in-laws (with whom a young bride traditionally lives), proper and circumspect behavior. In these plays, a woman may briefly escape the bonds of everyday behavior within the authoritarian, patriarchal system in which she often feels helpless and insecure, and performatively act in a free manner denied her in everyday life. I maintain that these plays serve to mediate between what Behnam characterizes as the "conflict between authoritarian and antiauthoritarian behavior" which he asserts pervades Iranian social and political life (1986, 9).

The *bazi-ha* that have plots and verses, as opposed to those in which just miming and movement occur, range in nature from what might essentially be called a patter song or rap piece by a single performer to more elaborate plays with two or more performers with props and sometimes costumes.

The most elaborate, and most frequently cited, of the *bazi-ha* is probably *khaleh-ro-ro*, an enactment by a young woman who comes to *khaleh* (maternal aunt), a term of endearment for an older woman (4). She is "one month married and two months 'gone.'" She is unsure whether the father is "the butcher, the baker, or the candle-stick maker" (in our terms). During the course of the play the young woman stuffs her clothes with rags. With extreme authenticity and verisimilitude she emulates childbirth. The play goes month by month as the tempo of the rhythm increases until, amid much yelling, screaming, cursing, and general hullabaloo, the child is born. The process of the birth includes bringing the midwife, who rides one of the other participants playing the role of the donkey, shouting her displeasure at assisting at the birth of an illegitimate child. All participants help the young mother. The play is filled with action and noise. The baby is carried around the circle and ritually slapped by everyone because the baby is illegitimate. The young mother then dances around the circle speculating who the father might be, saying it could not be the soldier, the perfumer, the coppersmith, etc. Finally she unfurls the blanket showing it to be empty and chanting "*hamash bad bud*" (it was all air), just a play.

The theme of enumerating the qualities of men by profession (often using double-entendre) is reiterated in a number of

the less elaborate plays as well because women are concerned with the profession of their husbands and the accompanying social status the particular profession confers. In *Zari be Pari goft* (Zari told Pari), *Mashti Sanam goft* (Mashti told Sanam), and *hodor-modor* (nonsense syllables), one of the girls tells another why she will not marry the butcher, the priest (*akhund*), the perfumer, the grocer, the shepherd, the colonel, the tailor, the dervish, or the day construction worker, among others, because the description of their work describes the worst part of their (often sexual) behavior. As we have seen, it is also a subplot in *khaleh ro-ro*.

A more elaborate play featuring men of different professions, involving a mother and daughter, is acted out in *kiye, kiye dar mizaneh?* (who is it, who is it knocking at the door?). A series of men of different professions and trades arrive at the door bearing gifts of their trade. In contravention of normative Iranian behavior, the mother urges the daughter to accept their offerings, and thus, implicitly, their sexual advances in return for the gifts, behavior that is never countenanced in real life.

In another play, a dialogue between a mother and her best friend, *Abji Khatun*, tries to convince the daughter, Sakineh, to marry a rich, ugly, old merchant instead of the handsome, modern, but penniless, young man the daughter favors. The daughter, also contravening normative behavior, steadfastly refuses the old, but rich, man selected for her by her mother and her mother's matchmaking friend, *Abji Khatun*. She speaks disparagingly of the old *hajji* which in Iranian life would be unthinkable as he is older, male and a figure of respect. The witty dialogue concerns the relative virtues and deficiencies of rich and poor, young and old suitors.

Another major theme found in some of the *bazi-ha* is the tension between a young wife and her female in-laws. In the play called *Abji Gol Bahar* (a woman's name), the young wife picks up items of clothing from the laundry which she has been given to wash. As she holds a shirt of one of her male in-laws, she expresses her positive and affectionate feelings for her husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law. In contrast, while holding one of her female in-law's garments, she expresses her negative feelings about her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law. She hangs her husband's clothes on "flower bushes and washes them with flowery soap," while the female in-laws' clothes "stink, and have lice." Why should she wash them anyway?, "am I nothing but a laundress?" she asks. She will "hang their clothes over the privy to dry."

A popular game, not included in the 'Enjavi-Shirazi collection, is *In dast kajeh?* (Is this hand deformed?) The chorus responds *ki migh kajeh?* (who says it's crooked?). The young wife replies, *madar shohar* (mother in-law); the chorus says, *doshman-e te* (she's your enemy).

Interestingly, women rivals, mothers-in-law, etc., appear as the villains in these games; men never. Thus, even when a man fixes his erotic interest on another woman, it is the other woman on whom anger is focused. In this writer's opinion this is due largely to the patriarchal system to which the women in these traditional circumstances are subjected in which the notion of attacking the husband, the authority figure *par excellence*, would be unthinkable. Thus the anger and frustration which she feels are deflected to the rival, a non-authoritarian

figure, where a sense of the possibility of revenge exists.

Several of the *bazi-ha* are concerned with the dreaded appearance of a rival in the form of a young servant sleeping with and stealing the affections of the husband (*Fatmeh, Khanum*), or the appearance of a second, and rival, wife (*havu, daram, havu*—a second wife, my husband has a second wife) (5).

Some of these games are seemingly performed for the sheer transgressive fun that they provide the participants who would never be permitted to act in such a manner outside of this group of confidantes. For example, one such game, *murcheh dareh* (there are ants), is virtually a strip tease (the very term used by 'Enjavi-Shirazi [1973, 55-56]). During the dance-play, the main character points to various parts of her body asking, "*murcheh dareh*" (there are ants [here]). "*Che kar konam?*" ("What shall I do?"), to which the chorus responds, "*bekan o beriz, bekan o beriz*" ("take it off and throw it away), referring to the various items of clothing until the performer is nude. According to 'Enjavi-Shirazi, there is a male version of this game performed in Shahr-e Kord called *zar gazidam* (1973, 56) (6).

In a brief article, Bolukbashi (1964, 27-28), mentions seven women's games that he documented in Tehran, including three analogues to those in the 'Enjavi-Shirazi collection. Bolukbashi concentrates particularly on two games which feature miming and cross-dressing, i.e., in which the women performers are elaborately dressed as men, or they use elaborate make-up to produce a grotesque effect by painting the face of a man on a woman's stomach and then making the facial features move as a result of muscle contractions of the abdominal region.

Whenever they [the women] took the role of a man, mimicked him, wore men's clothes, made themselves up like a man, and took on the aspects of walking and moving their arms like a man and changing their voices to sound like a man, one would have said that a real man was playing the role of a man. (1964, 26)

Sattareh Farman Farmaian relates how, during her childhood, one of the servants in the royal harem entertained the others, and how these games were enjoyed by individuals of both high and low stature.

With *Batul-Khanom* there was someone with whom to sew, visit the baths, and enjoy the jokes, games, and clowning with which women entertained themselves in a big, fancy *andarun* like Ezzatdoleh's (daughter of the shah, and the first and former wife of Farman Farmaian's father). My mother was too strict a Moslem to clown, but she enjoyed watching the others' horseplay, especially one of Ezzatdoleh's maids, who could paint her naked buttocks to look like two eyes and, dancing with them to the onlookers, would roll

them so that the two eyes crossed. This made my mother, her little sisters, Batul and her daughters, and all the other women laugh until their sides ached. (Farman Farmaian 1992, 37) (7)

The Setting

Traditionally, the most common setting for the performance of the *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi* has been the women's quarters or a courtyard or garden off limits to males (except infants and very young boys). During these events, the female friends, family members (cousins, in-laws [who may also be cousins and aunts due to traditional marriages between first cousins], aunts, sisters, mothers, grandmothers), and female servants are invited and allowed to participate.

The women sit in a circle in a large room, leaving space for musicians and the performers. In the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, if held outdoors, the ubiquitous pond (*howz*), usually located in the center of the courtyard, was covered with boards to form a platform; the musicians, almost invariably females, would sit there and play. Since World War II, this practice has been discontinued due to new styles of house construction. Now the music is almost always rhythmic accompaniment played on a variety of percussion instruments, especially the frame drum, *daireh*. In the absence of formal musical instruments, trays, pots or pans might be employed. This rhythmic accompaniment, played by the participants themselves, heightens the pater verses spoken or sung by the players. In the older period, for a more formal gathering in a wealthy home, professional female musicians were sometimes hired, but this class of performer began to disappear after 1925 with the advent of the Pahlavi dynasty and its accompanying modernization. These professional performers also danced, sang and played musical instruments in a light, entertaining style known as *ru-howzi* (over the pond), a term that contemporary classical musicians find denigrating, since the social class of professional entertainers (*motreb*) was the lowest (8). In the late 1970s, when a certain nostalgia for things Qajar (nineteenth-century royal dynasty) swept Tehran and other large Iranian cities, several traditional theatrical productions were created for the stage and television. During these performances, perhaps because suitable women musicians were not available or for other dramatic or pragmatic reasons, blindfolded men were shown as musicians accompanying the women's games. One informant, Jamal (personal interview, December 12, 1992), states that he never saw anyone but fe-



A scene from the dance ca. 1920.
Artist: Jamal. Reprinted with permission.

males participate, and given the highly sexual nature of the *bazi-ha*, he doubts that traditional homes would have permitted such a practice. (As the youngest child in a large family with many women, Jamal witnessed these plays until he was seven). Night club and theatrical performances are different, and have other agendas in their representation of women (Jamal: *ibid.*).

The Participants

In describing the typical makeup of the *bazi-ha*, Safa-Isfahani states that, "the female gathering of the *bazi-ha* is characteristically egalitarian. While they may be sponsored by wealthier women or their families, poorer guests, including servants and wet nurses, may participate freely and equally" (1980, 37). Further, "It represents a sort of cultural subversion in which all female participants in the games—married and unmarried—are accomplices" (*ibid.*, 48).

Jamal, an informant who comes from one of the older districts of Tehran, and a rather conservative merchant family, relates:

The hostess sits in a place of honor, and especially if she is older, she will not dance. My grandmother and an aunt in this position would sit on special cushions and play the *daireh* and oversee the serving of fruits, sweets, nuts, tea, and sherbets. Incidentally, the young women were also sized up for marriage potential, which was duly reported back to husbands and sons. The groups of women were a solid clique who did everything together. Often they were closely related. (Personal interview, 1991)

The gatherings in which these games are performed can be either formal or informal. Formal gatherings very often feature musicians hired for the occasion and elaborate refreshments. These formal events celebrate such special events as engagement parties (*khastegari*), henna parties (*hanna-bandan*) during which elaborate henna decoration is applied to the bride's hands and feet, marriages (*arusi*), circumcisions (*khatneh-surān*), births and the important seventh (*hafte-ye bache*) and fortieth (*cheleh-ye bache*) days-after parties and *Now-ruz* (Persian New Year).

Informal gatherings are far more numerous and might include an impromptu party or a *dowreh*, a regular monthly or weekly party, often in the early afternoon before the arrival of the household men and hosted in turn by the several women who comprised the basic social unit around which most of these events were held (Jamal 1991). During the informal events the women might play the *daireh* or *tonbak* (goblet drum), or even drum out the rhythms on trays. Those women not performing "principal" roles clap and participate as a response chorus which propels the action forward. Importantly, this is an activity of general participation. At intervals during the event, each of the guests is encouraged to dance. Jamal, for example, said that two women in his family were excellent *daireh* players and regularly accompanied the *bazi-ha*, which he witnessed as a child (1991).

In this nonprofessional, domestic theatrical form the roles are not very differentiated in terms of character. Any woman or girl with the requisite talent can take any part, although it is more usual to have older women play mothers and older wives, while younger girls play daughters or servants. Beeman states that "many of the theatrical conventions of *ru-howzi* suggest that it may be related to European *commedia dell'arte*" (1992, 16). Although the two theatrical forms have much in common, I would hesitate to posit a direct connection between them.

Because of the suggestive and earthy nature of the movements and the lyrics of the theatrical games, *bazi-ha* such as *beshkan-beshkaneh*, *in dast kaj-eh*, and *amu sabzi forush* are also known and performed by professional women performers for male audiences in such lower class milieux as proletarian night clubs and locations in the former red-light district. This type of public performance is one reason that many Iranian men are familiar with this repertory of games and plays that some of them experienced as young children in the women's quarters. In fact, much of the liveliest and best of traditional improvisational Iranian theatre was performed in theatres in, or adjacent to, the former red-light district in the period from at least 1950-1970 (Mofid 1994; Jamal 1991). Many well-known actors and actresses learned their trade in this milieu (9). Since the Iranian Revolution, all traditional comic theatre and solo improvisational dancing has been banned (10).

The plays were also seen in numerous Iranian comedy films largely appealing to the nonintellectual classes. The songs from some of the *bazi-ha* were also recorded by Mahvash, Afat, and Parivash, female singers who were immensely popular, especially with the working class.

Performative Characteristics

While textual sources such as those of 'Enjavi-Shirazi are useful for indicating something of the content of the performances, they cannot convey a sense of the performative aspects. These aspects include such vital elements as the tones of voice of the soloists, the dramatic delivery of the lines, facial expressions, the style of dance and mimetic movements performed, the level of excitement and participation of the onlookers who form the response chorus, the rhythms and drumming, and the general hilarity that characterize each particular performance. The plays are improvised. While the story-lines documented in the texts reveal the nature of the plots that are generally followed, each performance is unique. Performers rarely repeat word-for-word or movement-by-movement previous performances. In addition, such texts can give only a hint of the actual activity and interaction of the participants and the principal actresses in the performance moment.

A unique performative element in the *bazi-ha* is the sensual and even bawdy manner of performance. This earthy quality, which also characterizes the performances in the male theatrical plays such as the *siyah-bazi* (blackface theatre) and other comic theatre forms, dramatically contrasts to the reality of how Iranians conduct themselves publicly. Formality and recititude characterize typical public interchanges between Iranians of all classes. The behavior of the participants of the *bazi-ha* stands in stark contrast to that formal behavior.

Bazi-ha as a Mirror of Iranian Culture

Ruth Benedict was one of the first to point out that "folklore tallied with culture and yet did not tally with it" (1935 [1968]: 105). Further, she points out that "no folktale is generic. It is always the tale of one particular people with one particular livelihood and social organization and religion" (ibid.). These observations are particularly applicable to the way in which the *bazi-ha*, similar in this regard to other forms of Iranian traditional comic theatre, do not reflect Iranian reality. Rather, it provides an escape from that reality, in the same manner as the carnival does, by emphasizing the world upside down through role reversal (11).

Safa-Isfahani states one of the underlying principles found in all Iranian traditional comic theatre:

It is significant, however, that the perspective which ultimately gains dominance is that of the structural underdog, for example, the daughter's as opposed to the mother's perspective in deciding the ideal mate or husband. (1980, 38)

In terms of Bakhtin's (1984) definitions of the carnivalesque, the *bazi-ha* embody several of his qualifications: the world upside-down (WUD) in which, as we have seen, the underdog is always the winner; comic public laughter, lower body stratum expression in the overt sexuality, grotesquery in costume and movement, and role reversal. What is unique about the *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi* is that they are created by and for women, and they deal exclusively with women's lives and issues. They embody the carnivalesque and grotesque as set out by Bakhtin (1984), in which the world is turned upside down, and those on the bottom, are, temporarily at least, on top. As we have seen, the content of the plays, where the underdog always wins, demonstrates a distinct area of women's lives where they are in charge, in control of their lives and fates, in direct contrast to the actuality of their real social and political status.

Enjavi-Shirazi feels that the erotic and sexual content of many of these games is a kind of role reversal for women who are expected to be demure and proper in daily life, only letting their hair down when they are among intimates, an opinion shared by this writer (1973, 114). Sexuality and sensuality in the context of the theatre and dance has been avoided by many investigators. For example, William O. Beeman has written several excellent descriptions of related forms of Iranian improvisational theatre such as the *ru-howzi* and *siyah-bazi*, in which he describes the sexual content of these forms: "Indeed, the rural comedy form contains a great deal of broad explicit body and sexual humor. *Ru-howzi* performances, while not using such broad strokes, nonetheless have a good deal of sexual and body humor in the form of double meanings, veiled references, and explicit gestures" (1981, 515).

As a result of this he finds that "it is much more difficult to explain why sexual humor is interpreted as being humorous by audiences" [because] "Iranian villagers are reticent concerning sexual matters, if not absolutely prudish" (521). His explanation that it is because of the sexually super-charged atmosphere in a wedding celebration and that "the broad sexual

humor manifested in the performance of the hired players is an important release for all of this tension" (522) needs to be reexamined.

I will posit five reasons why I believe the sexual content of the plays performed in the women's domestic theatre is enjoyed on its own merit: 1. These entertainments are staged in other celebratory events besides weddings. 2. The evidence that we have just seen from the women's *bazi-ha* shows the performers in the traditional comic theatre, both male and female, use both implicit and explicit sexual body and verbal humor as an important element of their performance which is enjoyed by all of the participants. 3. Many, if not most, Iranian men (and, I am told, Iranian women), have sexually explicit joking relationships with an intimate group of close friends, usually of the same general age. Informants who have lived in rural areas for significant time periods told me that rural dwellers enjoy the same bantering relationships (Nasiri, Valipour, Jamal 1994, personal interviews). Informant Nasiri, who often accompanied his rural veterinarian father to many remote villages in the northern province of Gilan, stated that the peasants, both men and women, were much more forthright than the urban population in talking openly about sex, and that he was often startled at their frankness. 4. Many of the widespread and staple Iranian jokes regarding the behavior of regional peoples, such as the people in Rasht and Qazvin, are sexual in nature. 5. In a recent private party of middle-class Iranians I attended with a mixed crowd of fifty to sixty guests, a man told explicitly sexual jokes in Persian (Farsi) for half an hour to the hilarity of all of the guests; no one walked out or appeared uncomfortable. These kind of jokes are also staples of Iranian night club acts in Southern California that both women and men attend.

All of the above informants felt that the impression of prudishness that Beeman perceived was much more related to the possibility of both his role as a foreigner and a visiting scholar than to people's actual private behavior. No one would have wished to create an impression of looseness or possible rudeness in front of a visiting American professor who, in their eyes, would be considered a distinguished person (12).

In conclusion, this writer finds that the *bazi-ha* are unique in a number of ways: 1. Because of the isolation of women in traditional Iranian society, they are segregated by gender, and these specific plays are created and performed by women for female audiences. 2. They deal with deeply-felt psychological tensions that women feel in everyday life, and so these games in many ways resemble and function as psychodramas in that feelings of anxiety can be expressed in a supportive environment of close women confidantes in an almost ritualized manner. 3. The games create a sense of solidarity among women who can, in the context of the games, flaunt society's values and restrictions. 4. The *bazi-ha* are played from the viewpoint of the underdog, who always wins, and 5. The element of eroticism, both in content and performance, set them dramatically apart from similar European and North American performative practice.

1. The Iranian Culture Sphere is a term I coined to refer to a concept of Iranian culture beyond the current borders of the Iranian state. Looking at dance, music, and traditional folk theatre in the context of a larger geographical sphere is a relatively new idea, and certainly not mine originally. However the conclusions and assumptions reached by researchers in dance, at least, that are confined only to the present state of Iran are largely untenable because the vast area which includes Kurdistan, the Caucasian republics and large areas of the Central Asian republics, as well as Afghanistan, are culturally, historically, linguistically, musically, and choreographically indivisible in spite of the politics of the past century. Ethnomusicologists such as Mark Slobin and Jean During, who refers to the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as "external Iran," have certainly shown sensitivity in this area in their studies of Iranian and Central Asian classical music over the past twenty years.

2. I have spent forty years (since 1954) as part of the Iranian community. My door of access is through my artistic direction of two dance companies, AMAN (1963-1977) and AVAZ (1977 to the present). A large number of people in the Iranian community in the Southern California area, the largest outside of Iran, regard AVAZ as their dance company and support its activities in many ways; one of the most important is that many individuals seek me out to give me information on dances, costumes, music and customs in order for me to create stagings of the material. This support from sizable elements in the Iranian community stems from the fact that AVAZ performed Iranian dances in the period of the Iranian hostage crisis in the face of opposition by some American sponsors. Thus, AVAZ and its activities is viewed by many Iranians as a bridge to the understanding of Iranian culture by Americans.

During my research on the *bazi-ha* which began a decade ago, many wonderful Iranian women provided me with information. I am particularly grateful to Mrs. Azadeh and Mrs. Pary Azad for first-hand information. In addition, Jamal, an individual who is the stage designer for AVAZ, has an acute memory of the performances of these plays in his own family where they formed a regular part of the women's social activities.

I first personally became aware of these plays when I was in Iran in the late 1950s and watched performances by the entertainer Mahvash, a popular singer-entertainer. I was then informed by friends that such plays were commonplace among women.

3. During a performance in the Los Angeles Festival, in August of 1993, AVAZ (a dance company I direct) recreated two of the *bazi-ha* on the stage at the opening concert. An outraged, richly-dressed Iranian woman told me that I had to tell the audience that not all Iranian women participate in such (low) games. Generally our sizable Iranian audiences enjoy the production, and sing along with it. For many, it brings nostalgic memories of a world they left behind.

In addition, some of the young Iranian women in my company, who consider themselves as modern feminists, were con-

cerned about the message these distinctly non-feminist plays would send to non-Iranians unfamiliar with their contexts, although they ultimately participated in the stagings.

4. This game has been theatrically performed on television in Iran (before the 1979 Revolution) and is cited as a separate play rather than part of an opus of performative activities, in part, I think, because the total body of these plays is not well-known by many of the male investigators who have exclusively written about theatrical practices in Iran.

5. Because of the nature of Islamic marriage in which a man is permitted four wives, and Shi'ia Muslims are permitted serial temporary wives (*sigheh*), the first wife is under much pressure to perform well, on a number of levels—wife, mother, homemaker (Dr. Shahla Haeri was written a penetrating study of this temporary marriage phenomenon in *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran*. NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989). This potentially fragile marriage relationship means first and foremost producing a male child, which is an important event in many traditional societies. Until the child appears, the new wife is called *arus* (bride). In some social classes after the birth of the first child she may be called *madar-e Hasan* (if Hassan, for example, is the name of her first-born), even by her husband. In other words, it is the male child who gives the mother status. Jamal states that wives can also be called "*manzel*" (house) (1994).

Because of the possibility of a rival, legally within her husband's rights, the wife often feels that the marriage is insecure. This is not to suggest that there are not many, if not the majority, of marriages which are full of affection and respect, but that the safety nets that many Western women take for granted do not exist for many women in traditional Iranian society. These games reflect that uncertainty.

Well-educated, middle class urban dwellers do not, as a rule, practice polygamy.

Not alluded to in the games is the fact that the wife who is most in favor with the husband at the time of his death can affect the inheritance dispensations. It also can determine the heir in royal families. For this reason harem rivalries have loomed large in Middle Eastern history. This favor with the husband often implied the husband's current erotic interest was fixed on his favorite wife. (See especially Leslie P. Peirce, *Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).

6. These games are well known to both sexes, especially *murcheh dareh*. Before a showing of Iranian costumes which I was narrating and directing, I had several Iranian volunteers of urban origin trying to figure out how to wear the clothes properly. Suddenly, one of the women, in frustration, cried out, "*che kar konam?*" (what shall I do?). At that point one of the men shouted out, "*bekan o beriz, bekan o beriz*" (take it off and throw it away), at which the twenty-or-so young Iranians present in the dressing room broke out laughing.

During many years conducting research on dances of the Arab world, I heard from various informants, especially belly

dancers, of the existence of the "bumblebee dance" in Egypt, which is also supposed to be a strip tease such as *murcheh dareh*. Flaubert, in his famous encounter with the courtesan/dancer, Kutchuk Hanem (Little Lady) describes this dance which she performed for him (in Buonaventura 1989, 76). (My thanks to the editor of *DRJ* for bringing this citation to my attention).

7. In looking at the limited literature for evidence of similar play party games in neighboring areas only Metin And, the Turkish dance scholar, mentions the mimetic song-dance, *esnaf* (craftsmen) in which the work of the various tradesmen are shown mimetically in movements (1976, 154). (The author has obtained footage of two men in Turkey performing a dance with faces painted on their abdomens, like that described for women in Tehran by Bolukbashi 1964.

A female informant, Azadeh, who performs and is familiar with these games, is an Iranian Azerbaijani. She states that there is no such women's theatrical play tradition in the Azerbaijan (personal interview, October 26, 1994).

8. In Iranian cities, most houses have a walled courtyard with a pool (*howz*) which is tiled or of concrete. In order to prevent their cracking and freezing in the winter, they are covered with planks (Azad personal communication 1993). By the nineteenth century, at least, it had become the custom to create a platform of these planks for hired entertainers (*notreb*) to play, sing, and dance, and the music, theatrical performances, and dancing came to be known as *ru-howzi* (above the pool). Serious performers dislike and fear these terms because of the low social status of professional entertainers.

9. With the advent of Western theatre, many of the well-educated abandoned their patronage of the traditional comic the-

atre, considering it declassé. As a result, the players lost important financial backing and, in order to continue their activities, had to move their theatrical locations to areas adjacent to the red-light district where the rents were low, and they could find a dependable audience.

10. Farzaneh Kaboli, a former lead dancer with the Iranian State Folk Ensemble, Mahalli (disbanded 1979), stated that punishment for dancing, even in private, is severe and has resulted in loss of jobs and time in Evin, the dreaded state prison (personal interview, September 29, 1994).

Ardavan Mofid, professional actor in the traditional theatre, also stated that the improvisational theatre had been totally banned because of the regime's fear of the political satire which characterizes it, but that secret performances are held (personal interview, March 4, 1994).

The Iranian television program, *Shahr-e Farang*, gave a news bulletin that two television newscasters were dismissed from their important positions for dancing in a private wedding celebration (January 1994).

11. I would like to thank Dr. Robert A. Georges for his suggestion of utilizing Benedict's theoretical position, as well as for aiding me in the formulation of this essay.

12. In my more than forty years of having close Iranian friends, I can attest to the open sexual joking and jesting that goes on among small groups of intimate friends, whose friendships date back many years, usually from teen years in Iran or college years if they met in the United States. The explicitly sexual terms that they use when joking with each other might be considered disturbing to many Americans, another factor that would have precluded using such language and terminology in front of Beeman.

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INTERVIEWS

Azad, Parvaneh (female), December 17, 1991; September 23, 1992; September 29, 1992; February 2, 18, 1993; October 24, 1994, Los Angeles.

Azadeh (female), homemaker and player of *dairah* in public Persian and Azerbaijani classical music performances. October 26, 1994.

Jamal (male), December 6, 10, and 11, 1991; January 6, 1992; October 21, 1993; March 17, 1994, Los Angeles.

Kaboli, Farzaneh (female), former lead dancer with the Ira-

nian State Folk Ensemble, Mahalli. Ms. Kaboli currently resides in Tehran, Iran. Sept. 29, 1994.

Mofid, Ardavan (male), famous performer of traditional Iranian theatre, specializing in the role of the *gholam-siyah* (black-face clown). January 27; March 4, 1994.

Nasiri, Afshin (male), January 9 and 13, 1992; September 29, 1993; October 4, 1993, March 16, 1994, Los Angeles.

Valipour, Masoud (male), February 1, 1992, January 9, 1993; February 3, 1994, April 15, 1994, Los Angeles.