

Decreasing the Distance to the Rest of the World

History and Present of the Education for Performing Arts in Iran

by Rahmat Amini

In Iran, academic activities in the area of theatre began in the late sixties. In 1964, Mehdi Forough (1911–2008) founded the first University Institute for Performing Arts in Teheran. He was supervised by translators and scholars from the areas of Theatre Studies and Music. The institute offered the following courses: Decoration and Stage Design, Cinema, Television and Radio, Creative Writing and Dramatic Literature, Directing and Acting and, since 1972, Puppet Theatre. In 1966, the subjects Music and Theatre were introduced at the University of the Fine Arts. The first head of the Theatre Department was the musicologist Mehdi Barkeshli (1912–1987).

The University Institute remained closed between the year of the revolution 1977 and 1986. Later it was annexed on to the state-run Teheran University of the Arts as the Faculty for Film and Theatre. Nowadays, Bachelor and Master students can enroll in three core subjects – Theatre, Cinema, and Animation. The core subject Theatre includes the focuses Dramatic Literature and Directing as Bachelor and Master courses as well as Set Design and Acting as Bachelor courses only.

The interest in theatre studies was so remarkable that when led the Free Islamic University was set up in 1989, it also offered Theatre as a course at its central branch in Teheran. The institution also accommodated the Faculties of Art and Architecture and among its founders were Farhad Nazerzadeh Kermani and Mostafa Mokhtabad, both specialists in theatrical studies, as well as the director Hamid Samandarian. After the initial Bachelor courses – Acting, Set Design, Dramatic Literature and Directing – for several years now, students have also been able to study the last two of these on a Masters level. Some years ago, the University of Fine Arts in Teheran also offered the one-time option of writing a PhD-thesis in one of the subject areas. In the course of the expansion of the Free Islamic University, theatre faculties were also set up in other cities like Arak, Bushehr, Tonekabon und Shiraz. Due to the great popularity of Theatre as a course a university, under the supervision of the Ministry of Science other higher education institutes also added it to their curricula. Among these was the Sureh University in Teheran and Isfahan as well as the University College of Nabi Akram in Tabriz.

Nowadays, state and non-state universities take on around 1,000 students per year in theatre-related courses. In addition to this, for those interested in theatrical arts there are many free educational facilities that offer courses in different areas on a short-term basis. What is more,

in many cities pupils at grammar schools with a focus on arts can also complete their A-levels in the subject Theatre. Statistically, the university subject Dramatic Literature attracts most students, followed by Directing, Acting, Stage Design and Puppet Theatre”.¹

Marking systems and contents of theatre courses

The number of tutorials and teaching points are set down similarly in all universities in Iran. The same applies for the focus of course contents and course modules and/or related courses. Theatre is a living art however. Therefore, even if there are uniform descriptions and specified focuses laid down for the same modules and teaching units throughout the country, there are different methods for teaching the contents of the courses on offer depending on the respective understanding of life and art of the teaching staff in question. The course outline is determined by theoretical subjects such as Theatre and The History of Theory, Theory of Literary Characters and Antique Literature as well as practical exercises like directing, acting, work on the body, forms of expression. – Additionally, there are mixed teaching units that take into consideration the interaction of theory and practice, such as Theatre Aesthetics, Performance Practices, Special Features in Iranian Theatre and Ta’zieh (religious theatre with musical performance). The usual teaching method in the theory tutorials is to have the students carry out research work themselves and exchange their ideas in discussions and exercises with the lecturers. Students also have the option of observing practical exercises which promote debate about and an understanding of contents and methods. In addition, depending on the lesson type, students can perform scenes or plays individually or in groups under the active influence of the teaching staff.

During the four-year Bachelor course, students must collect 132 study points. These also include general and interdisciplinary tutorials like Persian Literature, English, Religion and Sport. In the two-year Masters course, the students from the same course of studies must gain 32 points. In both systems, it is mandatory for the students to complete a theoretical and a practical piece of work, which they then have to defend before a panel of jurors. There are rooms available for presentations of theoretical works and practical exercises as well as spaces where students can practice and rehearse several hours per week. Students of Stage Design are also provided with wood and metal workshops. As a rule, every Theatre faculty has a well-equipped stage for student performances and to present works for final exams.

¹ In this context, it is interesting to note that in the year 2008, out of 73 394 art students 49 767 (67.8 per cent) were women. In 2000, 63 per cent of all students were women, at some universities even up to 75 per cent. In 2010, out of 3 790 859 students, only 49.5 per cent were female. Source: Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (editor’s note).

Integration into the global community

Due to the perseverance of several publishers and the direct support of university lecturers, the translation and publishing of specialist literature on theatre has thankfully been booming in the past years. Most relevant reference books in the areas of training, theatre education and practice have already been translated or published. Thanks to the setting up of theatre workshops at international festivals such as Fadjr or the University Theatre Festival, students, teaching staff and those working in theatre can nowadays debate working methods and theatre aesthetics far better and much more intensively than used to be the case. It is also of great importance for theatre in Iran that young theatre artists and lecturers who have completed their studies in Europe or the United States return and share their experiences with the students. All of this, added by other aspects such as access to the internet, contacts to theatre groups worldwide and the presence of Iranian students or professional groups on the international scene have served to significantly reduce the distance between Iranian theatre and that of the rest of the world.

Translation from Persian: Mehdi Moradpour.