

# Reviews

**The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics and Culture in Iran**, Eric Egan, Washington, DC: Mage, 2005, ISBN 0-9342-1194-9, 229 pp.

The first two decades following the 1979 Revolution in Iran witnessed the unexpected emergence of Iranian cinema as an international phenomenon. Post-revolutionary Iranian films offered the world not only fresh images of Iran heretofore unseen in the Western-dominated mass media but also, and even more significantly, a new cinematic language that has become part of the global development of cinema as an art form. Iranian cinema became the cultural ambassador for a society unsure and insecure in its place in the international community, and a number of Iranian filmmakers became the public face of this artistic wave. Their films became creative interventions not only in a world intent on continuing hostilities between a post-revolutionary regime and an uncomprehending world, but within Iranian society as well. As Eric Egan states in his introduction to *The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics and Culture in Iran*, “this kind of undertaking [gave] rise to the emergence of one of the world’s [sic] most exciting and engaging cinematic movements, in which Iranian filmmakers are constantly striving to combine their own interests and aspirations with a popular discontent while at the same time questioning film’s ability to express these desires” (p. 18).

Eric Egan’s book is a comprehensive look at one of the most visible filmmakers of this period, and the one who, in the words of the author, “stands

out as a living embodiment of the social, cultural and political contradictions and upheavals that have taken place in [Iran] for the past twenty-five years” (p. 15). From Makhmalbaf’s early dedication to making socially organic ‘revolutionary art’ in his early 1984 film *Este’azeh* to a highly stylized detachment from his subjects bordering on anthropological voyeurism in his 1996 film *Gabbeh*, Makhmalbaf’s journey has indeed been part and parcel of Iran’s experiment with an Islamic Republic. This artistic development was closely tied to Makhmalbaf’s political transformation. “From his early promotion of the virtues of the Islamic regime, under the guise of an ‘Islamic cinema,’ through his disillusionment and critique of the failings of the revolution as articulated in his *Mostazafin* Trilogy, to the eventual castigation and censorship of his work by the authorities, his films have at all times been deeply engaged with and influenced by the historical development of the Iranian nation” (p. 191). As such, *The Films of Makhmalbaf* is not an analysis of the artist’s films as cinematic and aesthetic pieces. There is very little “film theory” in this study; instead, Egan has set out to contextualize Makhmalbaf in a historical trajectory and to follow Makhmalbaf’s career as a reflection of the development of Iran’s modern culture and the Islamic Republic’s social and cultural policies.

However, Egan’s attempt to weave Makhmalbaf together with such diverse entities as the modernist female poet Forough Farrokhzad, medieval nihilism of Omar Khayyam, and the aesthetic values of Persian carpets would need a strong theoretical outlook to succeed. Unfortunately, the book lacks such a theoretical framework. Egan is trapped in a time-honored desire to “examine critically the endless array of the diverse and sometimes opposing aspects of the Iranian psyche” (p. 183). This search for the “Iranian psyche” falls into the most rudimentary and knee-jerk expressions of Iranian nationalist thought: the battle between Persian versus the Islamic roots of the Iranian nation. In contextualizing Mohsen Makhmalbaf in what Egan perceives as the ideological battle between the Persian and the Islamic, Egan is simply stripping from himself the tools necessary to say anything interesting or new about Makhmalbaf as a social actor or as an artist who has influenced cinematic language internationally.

The study therefore becomes an example of the confusion in Iranian Studies whereby the *ideology* of modern Iranian nationalism has been raised to the level of the overarching *theoretical tool* to understand modern Iran. This horrid conflation of an ideological formation into an unquestioned theoretical framework is, of course, not limited to Egan or this book. Rather it is the continuing underpinning and the basic stagnation within contemporary Iranian Studies in general. What makes Egan’s book interesting is not his contribution to this idea, rather the way that this theoretical framework limits his analysis.

In one of the most egregious examples of this shortcoming, Egan ties Makhmalbaf, Iranian national identity and Omar Khayyam into a baseless hodgepodge of senseless essentialisms. “Nationalism has been a constant element of Persian literature since writing in Persian began. . . . As such it has been a social, political and personal search for an authentic national and historical

identity. For Khayyam . . . this search led to a deep-seated nostalgia and sadness at the loss of Iran's pre-Islamic grandeur" (pp. 180–181). On the contrary, Khayyam is one of the medieval poets in Persian who had no pretensions with or nostalgia for ancient Iranian myths or civilization and to read Khayyam's poetry as such shows an unjustifiable coercion of the past into a shaky ideological framework of the present. Egan's analysis of Makhmalbaf and the culture of the Islamic Republic suffers from the same theoretical problem where he creates this tension in his analysis only to complain about its limitations without himself being willing or able to transcend it. "Khomeini's Iran, based solely on Islamic principles," quips Egan triumphantly, "is as distorted a creation as that which operated during the Pahlavi dynasty which sought to define the nation mainly by its ancient Persian heritage. Indeed they are not mutually exclusive, but are both essential components of Iranian culture" (p. 67). In this narrative, Makhmalbaf becomes the embodiment of contemporary Iran because he "examines Iran's cultural history, and its manifestations within current social and political developments, and appeals to universal themes beyond the local, as a way of challenging an Iranian nativism and a primordial, exclusionary essence that has historically blighted Iranian cultural development and debate" (p. 182). Egan projects this vision of Iranian culture throughout his book. On the one hand he argues that the Persian and the Islamic should no longer be seen as contradictory essences; however, he continues to understand Makhmalbaf and Iran through them.

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**The History of Children's Literature in Iran**, Mohammad Hadi Mohammadi and Zohreh Ghaeni, 7 vols. Tehran: Cheesta, 2001, ISBN 9-6492-7150-3 (vol. 1), 9-6492-7151-1 (vol. 2), 9-6492-7152-X (vol. 3), 9-6492-7153-8 (vol. 4), 9-6492-7154-6 (vol. 5), 9-6492-7155-4 (vol. 6), 9-6492-7156-2 (vol. 7), xiv + 2762 pp., illustrations,, bibliography, and index

The education system in Iran suffers from over-centralization. It is a system relying heavily on dry standardized testing, outdated textbooks, and poorly paid teachers, all arranged in a vertically integrated structure wherein virtually all roads lead to the Ministry of Education in Tehran. It was a major project of Reza Shah's regime (1925–41) to try and establish absolute control of the government over schooling. The Islamic Republic has continued to exercise the same strong control over the education system. Education, however, particularly in a developing country such as Iran, is a matter that concerns everyone involved in the cultural life of the society. To be shut out from the learning processes of children is to be excluded from taking part in the shaping of the all-important future—the future

that promises to bring either great progress or a reproduction and worsening of the ills already suffered by a Third World country. It is then not far-fetched to assume that children's literature in Iran, a less officially controlled segment of education, must have a dynamic history chronicling a dialogue and a struggle between the various forces shaping the destiny of the country.

Until recently, however, very little work had been done in the way of documenting and analyzing the patterns in Iran's children's literature. The only publications were limited to academic articles and a handful of studies prepared for teacher training universities (*Tarbiat Mo'alleem*). Educational history in general has been a neglected field in Iranian research—the few published efforts having been hastily prepared attempts at providing some background to the discourse. A by-product of this neglect has been a common and fallacious belief that history of education in Iran is a brief one, with its major influences arriving periodically from beyond the borders. In fact, when the writers of the ten-volume *History of Children's Literature in Iran (HCLI)* began their research in 1997, they imagined that their work would be concluded to their satisfaction in the space of one or two years, requiring no more than two volumes (vol. 1, p. iii). The result of their meticulous research, however, is a monumental study that fills a large part of the gap in the discipline.

The series begins rather courageously in the scarcely documented pre-Islamic era, and the last volumes study the period leading up to the 1979 Revolution. The writers have adopted an expanded definition of children's literature. The documents gathered and studied are not limited to works composed exclusively for children, such as stories, songs, folklore, and collected mythologies, but include literature written *about* children as well. Also included are the relevant aspects of works written for adults but historically read by younger audiences. Dramatic literature, photographs and illustrations, radio programs, translations, and even games and puzzles have been considered. The writers of *HCLI* investigate textbooks and instructional manuals, and they explore the history of periodicals dealing in any way with children's issues and education. The writers also examine chronicles, autobiographies, and internal papers describing educational institutions—documents whose study will surely prove significant to future research.

The seven volumes published so far divide the history of children's literature into four major eras: the first volume considers the pre-Islamic period, the second volume is a study of the Islamic era until the early Qajar dynasty, volumes three and four are detailed accounts of the period characterized by the Constitutional Revolution, and volumes five through seven concentrate on the modern era ending in the early 1960s. The yet-to-be-published volumes eight to ten deal with the two decades leading up to the 1979 Revolution. Discussion of each period begins with a brief description of that era's major historical events and developments. Next, the cultural concerns and movements of the period are briefly discussed. Yet another separate section discusses the factors affecting the daily lives of children and their education. Here the writers have paid detailed attention to issues concerning public health, class structure, modes of pro-

duction, and ideological movements. Extraneous as these background studies may initially appear to academic readers, they help ground the analysis in the larger context of Iranian history and clarify the factors that have shaped the authors' perspective on each era. It is essential, for example, to be aware of the rates and causes of infant mortality in old Tehran (vol. 3, pp. 18–20) in order to understand the history of childcare and school environments.

The main content of the book is a comprehensive analysis of developments in children's literature. The analysis is well referenced, drawing on both primary sources and available critical literature. The writers discuss a wealth of academic articles, dissertations, and books as examples of the critical tradition in education. Despite the scholarly tone of the analysis, however, the format of the books deviates from the dry boundaries customary for academic writing. All sections include selections of texts from the works discussed in the analysis. The reader will find, for example, long excerpts from Obeyd Zakani's *Fable of Cat and Mouse*, Qajar era magazines, or the poems of Nasim Shomal (1872–1934). These selections are set apart from the main text in color-coded boxes. In the case of the more hard-to-find literature, such as out-of-print or unpublished pieces, the writers have made sure to include extensive selections. For those unfamiliar with the lives of the historical characters mentioned in the series, the authors have provided extensive biographies, bibliographies, and biographical interviews. These additions not only unburden the main analysis from providing all necessary background information, but they also give the reader a chance to experience and explore the literature independently. This is a welcome option, considering the large number of sources already lost or fading, banned, or locked up in private collections.

Academic readers should not be discouraged by the colorful format of the books. The analysis remains strong throughout the series and increases in depth as it covers the later, better documented periods. The principal authors, Mohammad Hadi Mohammadi and Zohreh Ghaeni, are both scholars of considerable reputation in the field of children's literature. Their analysis does not shy away from theorization, and the authors keep an ear out for new trends that arise and may help explain further developments. Significantly, the authors consistently refuse to define and justify the boundaries of the research to fit their theories. Instead, they try to mention and study as many examples of children's literature as possible, no matter how exceptional or outlying the examples may be.

The Institution for Research on the History of Children's Literature in Iran (IRHCLI), a Tehran-based NGO, is responsible for conducting the ongoing research project that has resulted in the volumes discussed in this review. The institution is a recent offshoot of the Children's Book Council of Iran (CBCI), the oldest active independent educational foundation in the country. According to the authors' acknowledgements, the project enjoyed the guidance of many experienced writers and educators working with the Council, among them Touran Mirhadi, the godmother of progressive education in Iran; Mehdi Azar-yazdi, a famous children's author and collector of children's literature; and

Noushafarin Ansari, an eminent librarian and the Secretary General of the CBCI. Besides Mohammadi and Ghaeni, the books credit a host of writers and researchers as direct contributors to the series. While some are recognized names in education, the majority clearly are new researchers in training, entrusted with the collection and organization of data. The fact that some of these contributors work from provincial centers or within minority communities has helped the series avoid the Tehran-centric tendency plaguing much of the historical research published in Iran. In short, the series brilliantly features the significant potential of new NGOs for expanding the educational and intellectual discourse in the country. Unfortunately, the project also faces the same obstacles that have become common to NGO activities. The last three volumes of the series, volumes eight to ten, have been banned from publication by Iran's Ministry of Culture. As is customary, the Ministry has not offered an explanation for enacting the ban. The three books cover the period leading to the 1979 Revolution, and it is possible that the censors are not in agreement with this particular portrayal of recent, pre-Revolutionary history.

What emerges from reading *The History of Children's Literature in Iran* is a history of widespread, though scattered, efforts at creating suitable educational solutions for a country that has persistently remained in dire need of drastic educational reform. It is a history involving, particularly in the last two centuries, virtually every Iranian luminary concerned with progress or modernization. Their writings, as represented in the series, reveal a deep collective understanding of local problems. The remedies and solutions proposed by these men and women are also intensely Iranian—efforts in dialogue with, and not merely shaped by, foreign influences. For those attempting to improve the Iranian education system today, the books achieve the much-needed task of establishing a lineage, linking modern educators with predecessors whose efforts in hindsight appear as heroic endeavors. Hasan Roshdieh (1851–1944), the founder of modern schools in Iran, repeatedly saw his school buildings destroyed and his person harmed by mobs aggravated into action by guardians of the old, *maktab-kehane* classrooms (vol. 3, p. 192). Mohammad Bahman-Beigi (1921–) established a vast network of educational institutions for the neglected nomadic tribes; his outdoor classrooms, which employed locally-trained teachers and offered equal opportunities for young women, outperformed metropolitan schools. Still, the volumes are only a survey of children's literature in Iran. Each separate topic within the series can provide for volumes of research. None the less, *The History of Children's Literature in Iran* is a valuable guide, providing direction for future work. It encourages the examination of past experiences and the meticulous recording of present ones, and it is a major step in releasing Iranian education from its historical isolation.

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**Komödiantische Volkstraditionen in Iran und die Entstehung des iranischen Berufstheaters nach europäischem Vorbild von der Jahrhundertwende bis 1978**, Andrea Ritzel-Moosavi Male, Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1993, ISBN 3-631-45399-X, 167 pp.

The book offers a description of Iranian theater, opening with various forms of Iranian popular performance culture (*taqlid*) from the sixteenth century to the end of the 1970s. The *taqlid* performance culture primarily consisted of comic improvisation rather than professional drama performance.

As the author rightly notes, apart from *ta'ziye*, the Iranian theater tradition failed to draw the attention of European travelers for a long time (p. 1f.). We therefore have only little information on other popular performances. Nevertheless, few Iranians have worked on the field of the history of *taqlid* until the end of the 1980s. Approximately ten years after the completion of Ritzel-Moosavi Male's doctoral thesis, Oskoui also notes that only a few publications on Iranian theater were published.<sup>1</sup> Floor's study might be the best and comprehensive work on Iranian popular theater today.<sup>2</sup>

The work under review is structured chronologically. It is based on the classification of Iranian performance traditions into three categories: *ta'ziye*, *kehyme shab bāzi* and *taqlid*. Hasan Mir-'Ābedini alludes to other forms such as *ruze'kbāni*, *parde-dāri*, *shamāyel-gardāni* and *naqqāli* with *shābnāme-kebāni*. In his view *ta'ziye*, *mazhake* and *taqlid* has emerged from *naqqāli* whereas Ritzel-Moosavi Male subordinates recitations of epic dramas, *naqqāli*, under the heading of *taqlid* (p. 12).<sup>3</sup> Floor, however, uses the categories of puppet drama (*kehyme shab bāzi*), comic improvisatory drama (*taqlid*), narrative drama and dramatic storytelling (*naqqāli*), and religious epic drama (*ta'ziye*).<sup>4</sup>

The book under review focuses on selected Iranian *taqlid* traditions as a form of folk theater, at first the *siyāhbāzi*. The author gives a detailed account of its provenance, roles, leading part, subjects, structure and other characteristics. After explaining the differences between performances in urban and rural areas, the author sums up the position of *siyāhbāzi* in the Pahlavi period. Then she depicts *taqlid* performances of laymen such as the *kadkbodābāzi*, *namāyesh-e ābyāri*, women theater groups, *baqqālbāzi* and *ma'reke*, with attention to location and time of performance, roles, content and subject. The author comes to the conclusion that *taqlid* is a traditional element of popular entertainment that still exists alongside the professional theater. She denies that Iranian theater could have developed performance modes and techniques at the beginning of the

<sup>1</sup>Mustafa Oskoui, *Seyri dar tārikh-e te'ātr-e Irān* (Tehran, 1999), 31 (First published as: *Pa'hubeshi dar tārikh-e te'ātr-e Irān* (Moscow, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>Willem Floor, *History of Theater in Iran* (Washington, DC, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>Hasan Mir-'Ābedini, *Seyr-e tabanwol-e adabiyāt-e dāstāni wa namāyeshi (az āghāz tā 1320 shamsi)* (Tehran, 2008), 14.

<sup>4</sup>Floor, *History*, 23.

1980s, with the argument that its aims were solely instructional and propagandistic (p. 38).

Before embarking on a detailed description of the beginning of professional theater, the author then makes an excursion, discussing the topic of royal court jesters in Iran since the sixteenth century. In her view, references to the phenomenon of jesters at Iranian courts are not to be found until that point in time. However, a limited number of publications on the subject may have been available at the time of the author's research. In 1998, 'Ali Asghar Halabi published a good overview on jesters in Iranian medieval history, albeit in the context of satire.<sup>5</sup>

Ritzel-Moosavi Male describes *taqlid* with popular topics as a relatively late development at the royal courts. She states that she only found references to entertainment and criticism of court jesters under Naser al-Dīn Shāh (p. 41). Here, mention should at least be made of 'Obeyd Zākāni who, a few centuries earlier, provides a good instance of both criticism and entertainment. However, it is true that in later centuries obvious criticism at court was rare. Whether Qajar rule marked the beginning of a confluence of jester tradition and folk theater at court (see p. 44f.) might be discussed in further studies.

The role of *ta'ziye* in the history of Iranian theater has been discussed in various other publications.<sup>6</sup> Parwiz Mamnoun's thesis which, as the author states, complements the present work (p. ii) unfortunately is not available. Despite the relative importance of Mamnoun's work for Ritzel-Moosavi's studies she does not provide any other references to it.

In the third chapter, the author associates nineteenth-century developments in Iranian theater with the beginning of new literary influences from Europe, the foundation of the first Iranian university (*Dār al-fonun*), and the emergence of a new intellectual elite. Knowledge of European literature was both a prerequisite and the reason for the performance of European plays. In this way, the connection with the folk performance tradition—as well as the author's line of argument—was interrupted. Later, she points out that obvious interfaces with performances influenced by Western theater do not exist (p. 152), and that modern Iranian theater was independent of traditional performances and more closely related to literary developments (for the period until 1941, these are discussed in detail by Mir-'Ābedini).

The author next discusses the first Iranian playwrights. The works of the Azeri immigrant Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzādeh—who did not receive a European-type education—were translated into Persian. He is considered to be the first Iranian playwright. The role of Azeri and Armenian immigrants—particularly in Shiraz,

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<sup>5</sup>'Ali Asghar Halabi, *Tāriḵ-e tanẓ wa shukhtab'i dar Irān wa jabān-e eslāmi tā ruẓegār-e 'Obeyd-e Zākāni* (Tehran, 1998), in particular 178–340.

<sup>6</sup>M. Rezvani, *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran* (Paris, 1962); Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh, Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York, 1979); Oskoui, *Seyri*.



where there had been a more developed theater tradition since 1888—is mentioned (p. 86) but not elaborated upon.

The aim of Ritzel-Moosavi's work is to discuss European-style Iranian theater, focusing on the professional theater. She shows that, as a result of Western influences in the nineteenth century—like the foundation of the *Dār al-fonun*, the acquaintance with Western drama through translations from European languages but also through the influence of immigrants—the first Iranian dramas were written, and theater performances took place in various Iranian towns. From 1927 onwards, Iranian theaters were founded as private initiatives. While the performances criticized Iranian society and politics at first, this development stagnated for some years. After World War II, and particularly in the 1960s, new theaters were opened with financial support of the Iranian state. New drama writers (or playwrights) were looking for appropriate subjects and forms. In the 1970s, the annual Shiraz Festival of Arts was a highlight in Iranian cultural life, and a mirror reflecting Iranian society at the time. The author states that only the wealthy and intellectual elite could attend and understand the foreign presentations and performances, while the majority of the Iranian people lived in poverty and were still illiterate. Performances of Iranian plays were quite rare at the Shiraz Festival: at most twenty such plays were performed, only five of which were traditional (p. 139f).

The author ends with the conclusion that the Iranian theater continued to evolve after the Islamic Revolution, although radio, TV and cinema are more popular in Iran than theater.<sup>7</sup>

Ritzel-Moosavi's book focuses on comic entertainment with critical connotations and realistic characters as in popular traditional, and later in modern theater. The author's underlying hypothesis is based on the assumption that criticism and humor in indigenous public folk and improvisational performances (*taqlid*) are also present in professional theater performances influenced by Western culture. Here, however, the lack of definitions or descriptions of used concepts in the context of Iranian performances and society makes itself felt; the same is true of the lack of a clear focus in the author's approach.

Other traditional forms such as *ta'ziye* and *kebeyme shab bāzi* are not included in the discussions. One can only assume that the author, following Beeman<sup>8</sup> and Mamnoun,<sup>9</sup> sees *ta'yizē* as essentially different from Western theater and drama.

In general, *Komödiantische Volkstraditionen* does not offer clear answers to the question of the systematization of the Iranian theater tradition, although the author does distinguish between theater in religious and worldly contexts; the use of performance as ritual or entertainment; between professional and lay

<sup>7</sup>For further information on theater in the Islamic Republic of Iran see Floor, *History*, 297–304.

<sup>8</sup>William O. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'yizēh," in *Ta'ziyeh, Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. by Peter Chelkowski (New York, 1979), 24–31.

<sup>9</sup>Parviz Mamnoun, "Ta'ziye from the Viewpoint of the Western Theater," in *Ta'ziyeh. Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. by Chelkowski, 154–166.

performances; and urban and rural ones. Here and there the gender issue is also referred to.<sup>10</sup>

Although the author's aim is to draw the reader's attention to popular Iranian performances, one misses an obvious thread linking various parts of the argument. This could have been realized by means of a broader introduction with a clear-cut theoretical framework, a discussion of the main focus of the work, or at least a chronological overview. The important information that Iranian theater in European style was not popular and has little or no connection to popular forms of performance, is only mentioned on page 152: "[Our] inability to precisely define the specific [character] of the Persian drama is due to the fact that it has not grown out of the traditional forms of theater." The author often criticizes the narrative dominance in Iranian dramatic forms which, from her point of view, detracts from active performance.

There are some inconsistent transcriptions of the Persian texts, of Iranian proper names—e.g. Gholām-Hosseyñ Sā'edi transcribed as Gholāmhosseyñ Sa'di (p. 104) or Gholam-Hosseyñ Saadi (p. 143)—Islamic data (pp. 86, 95), and wrong translations—e.g. "Qalandar khune" translated as "Bloody dervish" (p. 137). The use of an English form "Awestan" for German "Awestisch" (p. 131) is unusual.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, this work provides important data on the history of Iranian theater and popular *taqlid* traditions that, while well-known, had not previously been explored in such detail. It also takes a critical look at the Shiraz festival of Arts in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> As the first wide-ranging publication on the field of *taqlid*, this book is relevant in so far as that it touches on important issues concerning the history of the Iranian theater in general, and on comedy and critical performances in particular. Both might be discussed in further studies.

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<sup>10</sup>For a systematic analysis of Iranian traditional performances, see Shireen Mahdavi, "Amusements in Qajar Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 40, no. 4 (2007): 483–499.

<sup>11</sup>Compare Robert Gluck, "The Shiraz Arts Festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in the 1970s Iran," *Leonardo, Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology*, 40, no. 1 (2007): 20–28.

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