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Sacred Defense plays still highly inspiring for audience



By Hamideh Hosseini
 Staff writer

Mehdi Motevasseli is a prominent theater producer and writer who has created great theatrical works on the subject of the Iraqi-imposed war in the 1980s, known as "The Sacred Defense" in Iran. Among his works is 'Halo of the Caravan,' which proudly holds the record for the longest continuous performance (34 years) among theater productions. 'Earth to Heaven' and 'The Wound of Medina' are also among his works. Iran Daily conducted an exclusive interview with Motevasseli, the full text of which follows:



IRAN DAILY: Please tell us a bit about your works.

MOTEVASSALI: After the production of 'Halo of the Caravan' in 1991, we decided to work on a text about Hazrat Fatimah (PBUH). We chose the text 'Another Narrative' with permission from Mohammad Akhtari, the owner of the work. When I took the script for rewriting, it occurred to me that it could have a parallel story with the Sacred Defense. The structure of the play was, in fact, a parallel narrative with the story of Hazrat Fatimah. But I changed the storyline into an ordinary life during the Iraqi-imposed war on Iran, depicting a family who has lost their mother in the missile attacks. The play, which was named 'The Wound of Medina,' was performed several times and got kudos in its time.

Later, the script for the play 'Earth to Heaven,' which is entirely related to the Sacred Defense, was suggested to me. In its storyline, it is said that some friends had collected soil from various sacred places, from the tombs of the Ahl al-Bayt to the war zones of the Sacred Defense, and they wanted it to be depicted in a play. I came up with the idea for the play 'Earth to Heaven,' which essentially embodies the Sacred Defense: Some Sacred Defense fighters

decide to return after 40 years, wherever they are, to stand together behind the parapet of this sacred soil.

'Earth to Heaven' was initially planned for five performances but ended up with 100 performances in total. 'Sardaran' was a silent work that combined movement, form, and performance closely related to the Sacred Defense. Overall, I was not satisfied with it. It had only 10 performances and was discontinued.

Why did you decide to shift from the field of architecture to producing religious and Sacred Defense plays?

Architecture is closely related to various artistic fields, including theater, music, and sculpture, and the arts in general. I had friends working in these fields, and even before going to the university, I had been involved in theater, including local and mosque-based plays. Later, during my university years, we had better facilities, and there were specialists in this field among our friends. So, I could pursue theater alongside my professional architectural career.

I chose religious and Sacred Defense theater because I felt that I had a story to tell. Various cultural managers I met wanted



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me to work in the field of ancient literature, for instance, which I wasn't interested in because many experts had already worked in those fields. I believed that working on religious and spiritual projects required a specific mindset, and it was crucial to have a deep understanding of religion. Since I had been involved in this field from childhood and had actively participated in religious activities, I felt I could be successful in this field. I tried to approach this field with finesse and ensure that the work was done excellently. We even managed to use humor in our productions related to Ahl al-Bayt, which was of course backed by thorough research.

What are the challenges of creating religious theater?

The most significant challenges in this field are conceptualizing and laying the foundation of the project. In the next step, the biggest challenge in production is budget limitations. In addition, sometimes cultural officials are in a hurry to see results and expect rushed productions, which usually result in subpar work. Personally, I'd rather not do a project than deliver one that is hastily produced and lacks quality.

What is your opinion about government support for theater, in general, and the Sacred Defense theater, in

formed internationally in the Netherlands (2007), London (2008), and Dubai (2009).

'Halo of the Caravan' was innovative in its time. We carefully selected the lamentations and created a social network where we essentially curated the lamentations. At the time, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting did not broadcast the lamentations performed by mourning groups, but we, in our way, became a social network dedicated to selecting and refining these lamentations. The success of this production was attributed to our exact selection of lamentations, the production's background, its setting, and the overall arrangement, which collectively attracted its audience. It demonstrated that artists and mourning groups could work together towards a common goal. Each year, the play was refined further, leading to continuous improvement.

Have you faced criticism from the government or the public for your productions?

Yes, some believed that religious beliefs should not be integrated into theater to the same extent that religious themes like lamentations are incorporated. We took into account the opinions of opposing views during our work and aimed to persuade

them. We collaborate with various individuals during our rehearsals and seek consultation, even from those with differing views and biases. We tried to ensure that any structural changes we made were well thought out.

Do you have any plans to create another Sacred Defense-themed production?

Yes, I have a romantic Sacred Defense project in mind that has not yet received government support due to budget limitations.

Why do you think there is a lack of risk-taking among cultural managers?

The main reason for the decreased risk-taking among cultural managers is budget limitations. During the production of 'The Wound of Medina,' for example, we practiced for over six months, conducted workshops, and had five performances. Despite making modifications, it was not successful, so we had to discontinue it.

What advice would you give to those who intend to create works related to the Sacred Defense?

They should not think about big projects. They need to start with small ones to gain experience and ensure that their work doesn't offend anyone.



'Halo of the Caravan' holds the record for the longest continuous performance among theater productions. It has been staged for 34 years.



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