



Talk with veteran performer Abolfazl Mirza-Ahmadi

Ta'ziyeh is more than religious play; it is mother of Iran's performing arts

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INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

Ta'ziyeh is Iran's traditional passion play, a form of ritual theater that recounts the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (PBUH), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the third Imam of Shia Islam, through a powerful blend of poetry, music and symbolic performance.

Imam Hussein (PBUH) was martyred in Karbala, Iraq, along with several dozens of his loyal companions and family members, more than 14 centuries ago in an unequal battle against the army of Yazid, the tyrannical ruler at the time.



Abolfazl Mirza-Ahmadi

For more than six decades, Abolfazl Mirza-Ahmadi has been a fixture on the Ta'ziyeh stage. He entered the art form as a

child and, after years portraying the revered figures of the Karbala tragedy, became one of Iran's best-known performers of its antagonists, most notably Shimr, the commander widely associated with Imam Hussein's martyrdom. Mirza-Ahmadi argues that Ta'ziyeh is far more than a religious ceremony. In his view, it is a complete dramatic tradition that brings together music, theater, storytelling, movement and moral instruction within a single artistic form.

In an interview with Iran Daily, he reflects on performing Ta'ziyeh both in Iran and abroad, the oral tradition through which the art has been passed from one generation to the next, audiences' emotional reactions to his portrayal of Shimr, and the importance of preserving the authenticity of Ta'ziyeh in a rapidly changing world.

Few performers become so closely identified with a role that audiences continue to see them as the character long after the curtain falls. That has happened repeatedly to Mirza-Ahmadi. Having portrayed Shimr for more than 60 years, he recalls that many spectators became so immersed in the performance that they continued to regard him as the historical figure even after the play had ended. To him, those reactions speak to Ta'ziyeh's enduring emotional

power.

Having entered the world of Ta'ziyeh in childhood and portrayed a wide range of characters, from the teenage sons of Muslim ibn Aqil, the cousin of Imam Hussein (PBUH), and Qasim ibn Hassan, Imam Hussein's young nephew, to Shimr, Mirza-Ahmadi sees the tradition as a living cultural inheritance passed down orally across generations. He believes it has played a vital role in preserving both Iran's classical musical heritage and its dramatic arts. In the interview, he discusses what makes Ta'ziyeh unique, how younger performers are trained, the experience of staging it for international audiences, and the challenges it faces in the age of social media. While the tradition must continue to engage contemporary audiences, he says, its artistic and cultural authenticity should never be compromised.

IRAN DAILY: If you had one minute to explain Ta'ziyeh to someone who had never heard of the tragedy of Karbala, how would you describe it?

MIRZA-AHMADI: The best way to introduce Ta'ziyeh to someone unfamiliar with Iran or Imam Hussein (PBUH) is simply to stage a performance. It is a theatrical art that combines drama, music and movement to tell a story of courage, dignity, self-sacrifice and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (PBUH). Even without understanding Persian, audiences can connect with its emotional and visual language. Ta'ziyeh has the power to introduce people around the world to Iran's culture, history and human values. In my view, it is one of the country's most authentic cultural legacies.

You have spent more than six decades portraying Shimr, the principal antagonist in the story. Have people ever mistaken you for the villain off stage?

Many times. Whenever I step into the role of Shimr, I do everything I can to make him completely believable and to portray the cruelty and malice attributed to him in history. Because of that, after performances I have often heard children point at me and say, "That's Shimr." Some audience members became so immersed in the story that they threw stones, slippers or whatever they had at hand. On a few occasions, women, overcome with emotion, even tried to confront me physically. I've always taken those reactions



Abolfazl Mirza-Ahmadi, an actor of the Iranian passion play Ta'ziyeh, is seen performing on horseback at an undisclosed location in Iran.

as a compliment. They tell me I succeeded in making the character feel real.

In Western theater, costumes and makeup largely define a character. In Ta'ziyeh, however, audiences often recognize heroes and villains from the singing before they even notice the costumes. How does that musical language work?

Every character in Ta'ziyeh has clear visual and musical markers. Audiences know that performers dressed in red represent Shimr's camp and the opponents of Imam Hussein (PBUH), while green signifies his family and companions. Yellow is typically reserved for figures such as Hurr ibn Yazid al-Riyahi, a general in Shimr's army who defected to fight for Imam Hussein (PBUH). But costume is only part of the storytelling. Music plays an equally important role. The protagonists perform their verses in traditional Persian modes such as Nava, Mahur and Esfahan, using a lyrical, melodic style. Those portraying the antagonists use the same musical modes, but deliver them in a broken, declamatory manner with a distinctly different vocal approach. That contrast allows audiences to recognize whether a character is a hero or a villain almost as soon as they hear the voice.

Many researchers argue that Ta'ziyeh helped preserve elements of Persian classical music during periods when formal musical education was not possible. How have you seen that reflected in your own experience?

Ta'ziyeh has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Its performance traditions and vocal techniques have been passed down orally from one generation to the next. As a child, I played roles such

himself in that role. If he cannot do that, the audience will not believe the character. When I portray Shimr, Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Ziyad or Harith, I must perform in a way that makes the audience feel they are truly facing those historical figures.

The aim, however, is not to promote violence. It is to present a historical reality and depict the struggle between truth and falsehood. When the audience believes that the character on stage is the same person who stood against Imam Hussein (PBUH) or killed the sons of Muslim ibn Aqil, it means the actor has fulfilled his responsibility.

Social media and short videos have changed people's attention spans, while some Ta'ziyeh performances last three hours or more. Should Ta'ziyeh adapt to today's audiences or preserve its traditional form?

Things are very different today compared with the past. When I performed Ta'ziyeh as a child, people would sit and watch for four or even four and a half hours without leaving their seats. Back then, there were no loudspeakers, no television, no social media and no mobile phones. We had to rely on the strength of our voices and our vocal ability to reach the audience, and people listened with patience and full attention.

Today, with the emergence of social media and changes in the way people consume media, audiences have shorter attention spans. In my view, Ta'ziyeh must preserve its authenticity, but its storytelling methods and performance length should be adapted to today's audiences. If we can present the central message of Imam Hussein's uprising in a more coherent and shorter format, we can both preserve the essence of this art and maintain its connection with the younger generation.

In Iran, Ta'ziyeh is a religious ritual, but it is also a theatrical and musical performance. Do you think people with different religious beliefs can connect with it? Why?

Yes, absolutely. If Ta'ziyeh is performed properly, it can appeal to any audience, including people with different religious beliefs or those who have little knowledge of the events of Karbala. Just as a successful film or theatrical production can move audiences from different backgrounds, Ta'ziyeh can also connect with all people through music, acting, movement

and storytelling.

Today, one of our most important responsibilities is to introduce this art to the younger generation and encourage them to continue this tradition so that this valuable heritage can be preserved for the future.

After more than sixty years on stage, which moment has stayed with you the most, a moment when you felt the line between performance and reality had disappeared for the audience?

One of my most unforgettable memories goes back to a Ta'ziyeh performance in France in 2012. In one scene, we portrayed the martyrdom of Hurr's son using a theatrical technique in which blood appeared to flow naturally from beneath his throat.

The audience was deeply affected by the scene and believed what they were seeing was real. Some even told us that the performance was extremely violent. After the show, we brought the child performer in front of them so they could see that he was safe and that everything they had witnessed was part of a theatrical performance.

The audience then applauded our group for around 25 minutes. Their reaction showed that Ta'ziyeh, even for people unfamiliar with its culture and background, can leave a profound and lasting impression.

If UNESCO or a major international festival asked you to share only one message about Ta'ziyeh with the world, what would you want people to know about this art form?

My message would be that Ta'ziyeh is not just a religious ritual; it is one of the most complete forms of performing art in the world.

In Ta'ziyeh, acting, music, singing, storytelling, horsemanship, combat, movement and many other theatrical skills come together. A Ta'ziyeh performer must be able to bring all these abilities to the stage at the same time.

That is why I believe Ta'ziyeh can be considered the mother of many performing arts. In many forms of theater, actors receive separate training for each of these skills, but in Ta'ziyeh, all these elements are combined in a single art form.

I would like people around the world to recognize Ta'ziyeh not only as a religious tradition, but also as a cultural, artistic and human heritage. It is an art that uses emotion, music and drama to convey universal values such as dignity, sacrifice and justice.



Abolfazl Mirza-Ahmadi (red), an actor of the Iranian passion play Ta'ziyeh, is seen performing the role of a villainous character on stage.



The photo shows Ta'ziyeh actors performing the centuries-old passion play, a deeply symbolic reenactment of the Karbala tragedy.