

Fragments of a Revolution

Performativity vs. Theatricality in Iran, September 2022–January 2023

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translated from the French by Richard Schechner



The Conference of the Birds

In the spring of 2022, the theatre company of Tehran's Fanous Art and Culture House¹ decided to begin work on staging a contemporary adaptation of *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid al-Din Attar, the 12th-century Persian poet. Fanous planned to collaborate with Marco Berrettini, an Italian-German choreographer. The goal was a new reading of the poem in light of Iran's contemporary social circumstances.²

Attar tells the story of an assembly of birds that decides to choose a king in order to establish a more satisfactory order in their kingdom. After many debates, they choose the Simorgh, a legendary bird that is hard to find. At the start, each bird finds an excuse not to go on this quest because the journey is long and full of pitfalls. The wise and knowledgeable hoopoe bird then goes into action. He encourages them, and despite everything succeeds in mobilizing them. He takes them through the seven valleys: research, love, knowledge, detachment, uniqueness, amazement, and

1. See <http://fanousehonar.com>.

2. In 1979, Peter Brook directed Jean-Claude Carrière's version of *The Conference of the Birds* at the Avignon Festival. See <https://festival-avignon.com/fr/edition-1979/programmation/la-conference-des-oiseaux-32957>.



Figure 2: The rehearsals of Ba'ad az in (After that), the first adaptation of *The Conference of the Birds* by Fanous company. Tehran, Fanous House, 2016. (Photo courtesy of Reza Fallahi)

annihilation. By the last valley, only 30 birds have been able to pass the tests and endure the tribulations. Their journey ends at the top of Ghaf mountain where, in the final scene, a mirror appears. The birds expect to discover the Simorgh, but instead of this mythical bird, they see a reflection of themselves: 30 (*si* in Persian) birds (*morgh* in Persian). Attar reveals thus a “Simorgh” that was there from the start, but understanding this depends on a common knowledge and consciousness developed by many trials and experiences. The work, beyond its Sufi and mystical dimensions, sends its reader to this collective and “popular” force, an ideal

power capable of bringing order and peace to all. The Fanous Company thus strongly attached itself to a rarely explored political and social reading of the text.

The adaptation by Fanous³ is the story of a theatre director who finds herself almost by chance obliged to direct *The Conference of the Birds*. She goes through several stages of reflection and work to evoke what the piece represents in today’s Iran. The staging is simultaneously mystical, comic, and choreographic, addressing the place of theatre within Iranian society where economic and political problems isolate and restrict art. The main character gradually discovers new aspects of the text, crossing the seven valleys in a very contemporary way, very personally, as a responsible Iranian individual. What should be said, what should be done today? In her dramaturgy, the character of the director redefines the role of the hoopoe. While this bird has a central place in Attar’s text, in Fanous’s version it loses its central status because the director observes that the new generation doesn’t wait for a single

Figure 1. (previous page) The crowd marching towards the cemetery of the city of Saqqez for the traditional commemoration of the 40th day after the death of Mahsa Amini, 26 October 2022. (UGC/AFP)

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3. Project by Neda Shahrokhi, Yassaman Khajehi, and Nasim Adabi.



Figure 3. Marco Berrettini training the choreographers during the rehearsals of The Conference of the Birds by Fanous company. Fanous House, Tehran, 2022. (Photo courtesy of Mona Moghadam)

“guide” to determine the trajectory of their quest. She realizes that young people are revolting because they demand a more collective management of society. They want to get rid of the traditional patterns whether based on the monarchy, the family, or the political system. The director draws inspiration from the Simorgh as a collective and wonders: Why not extend this mystical and symbolic aspect of the text to all the birds equally? Then each individual can be both this guide, the hoopoe, and this legendary king, the Simorgh; each can have the will to leave the current circumstance and change their situation. She creates in her staging an elan that comes from a collegial and polyphonic organization: a true conference, a song or canticle of birds as the various French translations of Attar’s text offer them.

Even though dancing is officially forbidden in Iran—even to talk about it we have to use the phrase “harmonious movements”—the company decided to work with a choreographer. Despite the absence of professional dance training, 20 motivated young people worked intensely and collectively under the direction of Marco Berrettini to show how each valley is crossed. Beyond learning synchronized movements, the training required daily independent work.

The premiere was scheduled for mid-December 2022 in a room in the Azadi tower of Tehran (the freedom tower, the symbol of the city of Tehran). Berrettini planned his trip, the staging was finalized. But everything stopped on 16 September with the death of Mahsa Amini, the young Iranian woman arrested on 13 September in Tehran by the morality police.⁴ Iran entered a turbulent period full of political and social but also artistic conflict. Universities and other schools,

4. Mahsa Amini was arrested in Tehran on 13 September 2022 for not covering her hair with a hijab. She came to Tehran from Saqqez in western Iran to visit her brother. She was 22 years old when she died as a result of beatings in prison. Amini’s murder resulted in the most widespread protests throughout Iran since the 2009 Green Movement, perhaps even exceeding them. The government met the protests with extreme violence: by December 2022 nearly 500 people had been killed by security forces.

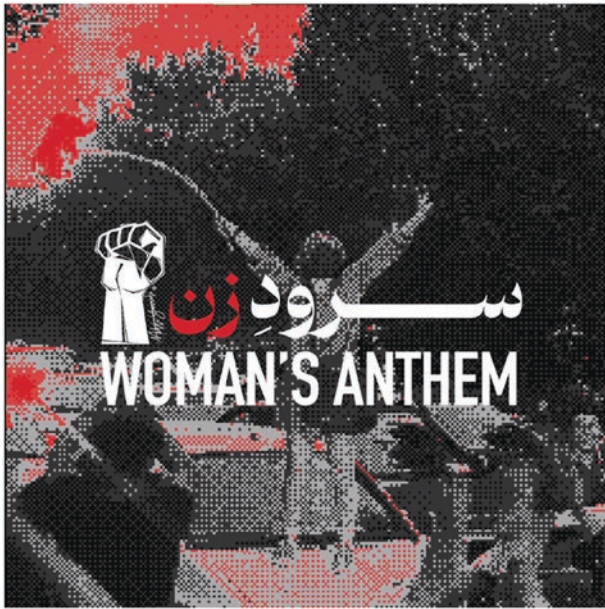


Figure 4. The cover image of Mehdi Yarahee's song, "Woman's Anthem," as it was shared on Yarahee's YouTube and social media pages. (Screenshot by Mohammad Amin Zamani)

as they have been throughout the history of protests and revolutions in Iran, became central as students boycotted classes scheduled to begin on 21 September. Many artists took part in this movement in their own way, referring to it as an uprising or even a revolution. Since September 2022, doing your theatre or showing your film or exhibiting your artwork in conventional venues (theatres, cinemas, galleries) has been considered a form of collaboration with the authorities, a way to "normalize" the situation.⁵ A majority of Iranian artists boycotted the Fajr International Theater Festival. Even if this great state festival—which has hosted well-known Western companies and artists such as Rimini Protokoll, Thomas Ostermeier, Romeo Castellucci, and many others—has for years been "the stage of resistance" for Iranian artists such as in 2010 just after the Green Movement of 2009; it seemed a non-event in 2022.⁶ The debates of previous years concerning the possibility of doing theatre and paying the price of censorship are no longer on the agenda; the fight of artists is on

the frontline of protests. To this must be added the struggles manifest in a *hyperperformativity* that opposes traditional dramatizations of societal and political questions. The theatres are emptying onto the streets where performance is flourishing.

Vive la Rue!

Her back to the camera, with a determined gesture a woman ties up her hair and rushes towards the chaotic scene of repression in the darkness of night in the city of Karaj. Karaj is one of the cities most affected by the current wave of protests. The next day, rumors are circulating: the girl tying up her hair is Hadis Najafi and was killed by a bullet in the head fired by the regime's militia forces. The picture goes viral. Hadis's family reacts and affirms her death by gunshot, yet they say that the image is not of her. A few hours later, Persian-language media based in Europe broadcast a video of a girl with her back to the camera, dressed in black, tying her hair back, repeating the exact same gesture with the same determination: "I am the woman in this video, I am not Hadis Najafi, but I continue to fight for the Hadises and Mahsas of Iran. You don't scare us with death. We are here, for the freedom of Iran!"⁷ The image, soon reproduced in various pictorial and graphic forms, becomes the icon of Iranian women determined to challenge power and change their situation in Iran. This scene is also reproduced by Hengameh Ghaziani, an actress and comedian who first shows herself unveiled in front of a camera and then turns to tie up her hair. She was quickly arrested and thrown in prison. The gesture of tying the hair continues in the words of "Soroudeh Zan" (The Woman's

5. Even though some artists put on shows for economic reasons, advertising through social media and inviting the public to the theatre is taboo.

6. The Green Movement began in June 2009 as a protest against what protestors believed was the fraudulent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president. Green was the color of Ahmadinejad's opponent Mir Hossein Mousavi. Brutally suppressed, the Green Movement persisted until February 2010. The Green Movement was the largest uprising against the Iranian state until the reaction to Mahsa Amini's murder in 2022.

7. The video was shared on the Twitter page of BBC Persian: <https://twitter.com/i/status/1574197898883088385>.

Anthem): Basteh bālāyeh sar guisovān, tcheh heybatist! (Hair tied up high, what a tremendous sense of awe!).⁸ “The Women’s Anthem” in turn immediately became the song of a revolution that already had a slogan: “Woman, Life, Freedom.”

These are just a few illustrations among thousands of protest gestures, acts, images, and interventions performed every day in the streets and other public spaces across Iran. These protests immediately spread on social networks. Collective performances by ordinary citizens are shown to a heterogeneous public: Iranian society, the omnipresent eye of the regime, and the media of the whole world. However, rather than simple acts of protest, these performances—still being created by Iranian men and women—should be understood as a moment of no return in the relationship between Iranian society and the mechanisms of domination and repression put in place by the Iranian regime. This turning point is manifested, above all, in the will of citizens to recover their daily social lives; more precisely, all that emerges in the public space and sphere, which the Islamic Republic has always subjected to daily surveillance—tireless *regulation* according to its ideological and political dogmas.

With a little hindsight, we can see that theatricalization has already had an important place in Iranian popular culture. Compared to Western life, the social life of the Middle East is much more subject to codes and customs. Iranian society for centuries has habitually separated its interior and exterior worlds. The concept of *andarouni* (interior space) and *birouni* (exterior space) in traditional architecture testifies to this system.⁹ This became widespread in a more important way after the Islamic revolution of 1979 when the state began to ardently impose its way of life and being. There are also testimonies from the first years after the revolution concerning the fact that schools asked students to denounce practices done in their homes—that is in their private spaces—that were “illegal” and did not conform to Islamic mores. Thus, the postrevolutionary generation learned to lead two parallel lives, the private life and the public life, which were often in opposition. These children, especially the girls, have grown up with this idea of wearing a mask, presenting themselves with a disguise and playing a character both in terms of physical appearance and behavior. We can cite, for example, the ban on wearing makeup—still in force in schools and universities—showing piousness and participating in collective prayer sessions, not disclosing the fact of having access to Persian-speaking diaspora television channels, especially American and British, etc. While children know by heart Iranian songs produced by Iranian singers exiled in the United States or by Western pop groups, at school only revolutionary songs are sung. Even though during the 2010s, these limits were challenged and relaxed by Iranians as their lifestyles changed significantly, they are still in place. In these circumstances, we see a permanent theatricalization of the individual within society. What is happening today, particularly in the public space, is interpreted as a demand for the end of this theatricalization. The younger generation wants to abolish the border creating the exterior-interior duality of their daily lives, starting with dressing and behaving as they please, and being able to dance freely outside their homes.

The Cemetery

A Place of an Emergent Performative

In addition to claiming the streets as their main scene of protest, citizens are taking over highly symbolic public spaces controlled by the regime, such as university campuses and cemeteries. These have been transformed over the past few months into large alternative performance spaces,

8. The song was composed by Mehdi Yarahee with lyrics by Mona Borzouei. The song was shared on Yarahee’s YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9Wd0tdM-rU.

9. In *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era* (2013), Pamela Karimi delivers a historical analysis of the complex relationship between interior and exterior, private and public, in Iranian society as it modernizes. She explains how the interior vs. exterior dichotomy is a social and architectural construct that is being transformed. The installation of the Islamic republic is a historical turning point that has reestablished the private vs. public distinction and makes the interior a space of resistance.

representing also the confrontation of life and death, reality and theatricality. Indeed, Iranian cemeteries are among the Islamic Republic's most codified and controlled public places. Death rituals are directly linked to religion, and the political importance of mourning is at the heart of propaganda. In such a context, from the first days of the movement, cemeteries became places of gathering and conflict: from the day of burial to the traditional commemorations of the third, seventh, or fortieth day after death, cemeteries were the site of popular outbursts. These ritual performative ceremonies, enacted in places dedicated to the dead in the presence of bereaved families and other participants, create a living subversive power. *Ārāmgāh*, the word for cemetery in Persian—which literally means the place of peace—became a place of extreme agitation. During the burial of Mahsa Amini in the Saqqez cemetery, in Iranian Kurdistan, the women removed their headscarves and brandished them in the presence of the police while chanting, “Death to the dictator.” The video of the scene immediately circulated on social networks; the gesture was repeated and gained momentum across the country. *Guisso borān*, “cutting your hair,” has also become a widespread act of defiance during burial ceremonies. One of the first widely circulated images is of the sister of Javad Heydari, a 40-year-old man shot dead in the town of Qazvin. Bursting into tears and surrounded by a crowd, she cuts her hair and scatters it on her brother's grave. The gesture from ancient Persia,¹⁰ almost forgotten until recently, became one of the symbols of the movement. Many women around the world also cut their hair in solidarity with Iranian women.

In Izeh, in the southwest of the country, Kian Pirfalak, a 9-year-old boy, was shot dead on 16 November 2022. Six others also died in the assault and Kian's father was wounded. The country was in shock. Thousands of people gathered for the boy's burial. In an angry speech, Kian's mother denounced the authority's false account that “terrorists” killed her son. She confirmed that her son was killed by an armed militia of the regime as her family was passing in their car through the city center where demonstrations were taking place. She finishes her statement with a satirical poem ridiculing the Supreme Leader's resentment of his people. Following the boy's burial, the burials of the others killed followed one after the other in the cemetery of the city. Families of the slaughtered refused to carry out the religious obligations, such as the prayer over the remains of the body. New performative rituals, contrary to what had existed for years, took shape: mothers and fathers dancing and distributing pastries at the burials of their children, calling for freedom in Iran.

The performative dimension of denunciatory burials continues to grow. Some families have been prevented from recovering the bodies of their children. Victims have even been buried by the forces of the regime without the knowledge of their relatives. One family decided to perform an entire funeral ceremony as they buried their son's clothes, all they had of him. It was an unprecedented event shared many times via social media: an *imaginary reconstruction* of an act that never took place. While the burial was fictitious since there was no body, burying the clothes of the victim publicly with the participation of the actual bereaved people was a strong denunciation of the forces that killed and got rid of the body. Performing this act was more important than a funeral. Beyond highlighting the loss of a young person, such performances show the unimaginable injustice of keeping the victim's body from their loved ones. What kind of hybrid performative practices are these? Unauthorized by the state, new profane customs related to death emerge and claim a sacred place. Cemeteries become places to perform this revolution in the making—a revolution fought digitally by sharing these protests.

Another ritual linked to death and the opposition is also gradually forming, this one digital from its inception: broadcasting videos of the victims dancing and singing. From a birthday dance to a turn at karaoke to a recorded rap, relatives broadcast these videos, which are widely shared on social media as postmortem protest dances. While this happened for the first time after the murder

10. In his famous epic, the *Shāhnāmeḥ* (The Book of Kings), Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940–1025) repeatedly tells of how mythical heroines, such as Farangis, cut their hair as a sign of mourning and protest (see Dabashi 2019; Ferdowsi [2007] 2016).



Figure 5. Soheila Golestani, Hamid Pourazari, and their team in the video they shared on social networks in support of the Iranian women's revolution. (Photo courtesy of Hamid Pourazari)

of Neda Agha-Soltan in June 2009 during the Green Movement, with a video that shows her dancing, in 2022 to 2023 the broadcasting of dancing has been renewed as a practice. For example, the dances of Khodanour Lajai, a young Baloch who was seriously injured during the protests of Mahsa Amini's death and later died in hospital himself in October 2022, have been broadcast by others.

The Show Is Over!

While the debate on the place of art in the social context of an Iran in full revolution gives rise to lively controversy in the art world, actor Soheila Golestani and director Hamid Pourazari simultaneously released *The Show Is Over!*, a short video, on their Instagram accounts on 27 November 2022.¹¹ The video is accompanied by a short text: "The show is over and the truth is laid bare. Our real protagonists are the anonymous people." The video immediately went viral. We see in a park, at the foot of stairs that will be used as risers, Pourazari standing on the left of the frame. Hands in his pockets, dressed in black, with an air of being both nonchalant and annoyed, he looks at the camera. Then Golestani, her short hair unveiled, dressed in black, enters the frame and stands center; with a determined gaze she stares at the camera. Young men and unveiled women, all dressed in black, continue to enter and fill the frame. In a heavy silence they stand on the steps and stare at the camera with the same determined, defiant, yet sorrowful look. A few days earlier, an open letter signed by theatre artists had been made public. The letter declared that after 40 years of resignation, the artists will no longer comply with censorship, they will no longer submit to its constraints and compromise their work. The video by Golestani and Pourazari was the first attempt at blatant disobedience, the first public act to fulfill the promise of the letter. The next day, Golestani and Pourazari were arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence. But this arrest was not the end of their performance. It provoked a wave of videos showing groups of artists or students in Iran and around the world reproducing it and distributing it on social networks. Golestani and Pourazari's performance thus continues with its reenactment by others, with its repetition and multiplication.

11. https://www.instagram.com/p/CleQ9MEo83U/?img_index=1



Figure 6. The daughter of Minoo Majidi without a hijab, head shaved, at her mother's grave. Minoo Majidi was intentionally shot on 20 September 2022 by Iranian anti-riot police in the Kurdish city of Kermanshah. (UGC photo shared by the Twitter account @1500tasvir)

So, the title may announce that “the show is over,” but the performance absolutely does not stop. The artists were released two weeks later.

It should also be noted that Pourazari's artistic career is not common. Having already been a well-known director, he decided to leave institutional and conventional stages 20 years ago to work in unusual spaces, which he modifies according to each project. Joined by hundreds of young people, mostly from socially marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds, he creates his works with their participation. He also questions the place of theatre in a highly surveilled society (see Zamani 2020). His filmed performance, which lasts barely a minute, is a clear response: the theatre is finished. The real stage is now the street. There is no longer any illusion about the plausibility of a distinction between stage and reality. The heavy silence and the piercing gazes of Pourazari, Golestani, and their team are eloquent. They give us the last word on what theatre should be in Iran now,

today. The fourth wall has collapsed, it no longer exists; representation and reality merge and show themselves in the public space. An end to drama; we perform!

This confrontation of a dozen artists and actors facing the camera recalls the final scene of *The Conference of the Birds* when the birds discover the *collective body* as a new power structure. Although in 2009 the house arrest of the two reformers-protagonists interrupted the Green Movement, what is happening today has a long life ahead. The economic, political, and social crisis pushes the people toward a movement without retreat despite the obstacles, like an assembly of hoopoes, birds fully aware of the adventures of a new journey across the seven valleys.

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