

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FINAL DECADE

**THE UTOPIAN STAGE:
FESTIVAL OF ARTS, SHIRAZ -
PERSEPOLIS (1967-77)**

Curated by Vali Mahlouji

Retracing the Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz - Persepolis

The Festival of Arts was a radical artistic and cultural festival of performing arts, held annually in Shiraz and the ancient ruins of Persepolis every summer between 1967-1977. By the early 1970s, the Festival of Arts had become the principal, transgressive platform for transnational experimental exchanges of creativity and knowledge. These exchanges intercepted historical, political and ideological demarcations, to which a new wave of Iranian artists were actively linked. It was successful in its artistic and diplomatic undertaking to bring together artists from across the North-South divide and both sides of the Cold War political standoffs.

Interrupted by the 1978-79 revolution and declared decadent in a decree by Ayatollah Khomeini, all materials associated with the festival have been removed from access and officially remained banned in Iran.

Considering the decade long controversial festival as an historical object, the project retraces its unique landscape and utopian stage.



A Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz – Persepolis 1967-77, is a project of **Archaeology of the Final Decade**, a platform which identifies, investigates and re-circulates cultural materials that have remained obscure, under represented, endangered, banned or in some instances destroyed. The retracing and reintegration of these materials into cultural memory counteracts the damages of censorship and systemic erasures and fills in gaps in history and art history.





Orghast Parts I and II, Ted Hughes and Mahin Tadjadod (playwrights) Peter Brook (co-director with Arby Ovanessian, Geoffrey Reeves, Andrei Serban), International Centre for Theatre Research, commissioned by the Festival and the French Ministry of Culture, Persepolis, 1971

Modernity Looking South and East

The festival introduced artist and expressions from the global south into the international cultural discourse in an unprecedented scale, radically dismantling the hierarchies of local and international narratives. It proposed a paradigm shift in opposition to, and beyond, the authoritarian hierarchical model of the European mission civilisatrice by shifting the centre of gravity of cultural production and politics towards the re-emerging others in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation. Highlighting the discourse of minorities and marginalised within geographical and political divisions of the 'first and third worlds', it was, in essence, what Homi Bhabha would call a third world re-writing. It focused on a radical cultural shift towards the present.

The genealogies and rhetoric of the festival demonstrates that, contrary to our general preconceptions, other modernities did not always look to Western traditions and canons in their quest for progress and modernisation. Instead, the festival positioned the local within a relationship to South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, the Caucuses, Latin America, North and sub-Saharan Africa. Here, they turned to the south and east for inspiration.



A Panoramic View of World Culture

Performers and academics across cultures and disciplines recognise the festival as the most uniquely transformative intercultural experience, perhaps the most radical multi-disciplinary crucible, of any commissioning performance festival in history.

In liberating and defining a radical and revolutionising 'Third World' writing back, the festival's stage was a precociously inclusive one that looked to expand the area of overlapping community between former metropolitan and formerly colonized societies.

This artistically pioneering world stage predated the 1989 Havana Biennial by nearly two decades.

The festival aimed to bridge the gap between the formerly colonised and the metropolitan societies by proposing an inclusively universalist model of culture. This was in contradistinction to, and more complex than, sectarian nativist attitudes that dominated the Iranian and developing world contexts. The festival implicitly entered into an intercultural dialogue with



contemporaneous regional iterations; in the case of Africa, most notably the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar (1966) and the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers (1969). The nativist, regional nature and purposes of these, and various biennials of art founded since the 1950s, contrasted sharply with the panoramic view of world culture. The festival's non-sectarian attitude took a panoramic take on world culture and the historical moment. It provided opportunities for a juxtapositional complementarity between cultures- a utopian unity of disunities- a process that aimed to relationally reinforce or extend a whole. This followed a liberal praxis of pluralistic accommodation of the other in the narratives of the same.

Hymnen, Karlheinz Stockhausen (composer), electronic and concrete music with optional live performers, Aloys Kontarsky, (piano), Christoph Caskel (percussion), Peter Eötvös (electrochord), Harald Bojé (electronium), Karlheinz Stockhausen (filters and potentiometers, Persepolis, 1972, courtesy of Stockhausen Foundation for Music

Festival as a Temporary Autonomous Zone

In relation to those prevalent political discourses, the festival prevailed in an intellectually autonomous and meta-political zone, determinedly negotiating its own terms. It developed its own political and spacio-temporal set of values and parameters of expression and encounter in order to function as a temporary autonomous zone beyond and outside the conventional realities of its time.

By circumventing reductive and dichotomous binaries of modern and traditional, native and alien, the festival asserted its own “democratic relational sphere”, temporally, spatially and politically.

The fact that it chose its field of operation intentionally outside conventional systems of art production and political dogmas set the Festival of Arts up, from the outset, against conventional norms- aesthetic, cultural as well as political.



A Universalising Heterotopia

The festival produced a precociously intercultural and heterogeneous crucible that confronts our reality today, and our contemporary struggle with a homogenised global culture.

The new universalist order it proposed consciously set out to map a modern discourse around coexisting heterogeneities, temporally and aesthetically. In the search for, and the revelation of, a common source, a universal pool, it consciously and circumstantially designed opportunities for artists to investigate shared roots of drama, music and performance. Here, the artists' varied, but broadly shared sensibilities were bent on releasing universal cathartic and ecstatic powers. Eschewing conventional emotional devices, they sought a purer abstracted resonance with elemental instinctual drives. By design and by default, the festival became the principal bedrock and launch pad of meta-theatrical preternatural investigations that supplanted conventional definitions of modern and traditional, native and alien.





Vis-o-Ramin, Mahin Tajaddod (play adaptation of Gorgani's 11th century verse), Arby Ovanessian (director), Persepolis, 1970

A Nexus for Modernising Nativists and Ritualising Modernists

Striving for authenticity through nativist drives, modernisers from the Third World were keen to base their investigations on native rituals, traditions and folklores. The process of discovery, deconstruction and reorientation found a natural ally in the internationally fluid and subversive Western avant-garde, whose modernity sought a break from the constraints and stabilities of its own traditions.

The festival became an authentic nexus for the Third World modernising drives that rooted themselves in a compost of local tradition, folklore and ritual and the Western modernists who were experimenting with ritualisations and encounters with other cultures in an effort to breakaway from the strictures of European artistic tradition.



The festival juxtaposed a wide range of artists including: Ravi Shankar, Bismillah Khan, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, Olivier Messiaen, Yehudi Menuhin, National Ballet of Senegal, Rwanda Drum Ensemble, Balinese Gamelan musicians and dancers, Kathakali dancers, Shantara Rao, Merce Cunningham, Maurice Bejart, Shuji Terayama, Peter Brook, Andrei Serban, Robert Wilson, Robert Serumaga, Japanese Noh theatre, Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin, Nuria Espert and many more leading directors, musicians and performers.

Unification Through Sound: Percussion (1969)

Shiraz-Persepolis identified and tapped into a repository where non-European expressions were highly developed in order to exercise an anti-hegemonic, democratizing, global attitude. This was actualised in the third year (1969) around the theme of Percussion. Rhythm as the most fundamental ingredient to all music signified a return to basics and resonated with elemental instinctual drives. The theme allowed for a fluid programme that included: traditional Iranian naqareh-khaneh and zurkhaneh music; the Rwanda Drum Ensemble; Balinese Gamelan concerts, Iranian masters Jamshid Shemirani, Hossein Tehrani (*tombak*) and Faramarz Payvar (*santur*); American jazz percussionist Max Roach; French/Greek experimental musician Iannis Xenakis with a site-specific commission Persephassa (1969). The festival not only put expressions from the non-European and Euro-American traditions on the map as valid and equal, it also actualised a utopian direction, articulating notions of unification and universalism through sound.



Traditional Iranian Percussion, Faramarz Payvar (*santur*), Hossein Tehrani (*tombak*), Hafezieh, 1969

Universal Ecstatic Powers: Theatre and Ritual (1970)

These trajectories were successfully articulated the following year through the theme of Theatre and Ritual (1970), intersecting various archaic, “primitive” and primordial rituals with contemporary avant-garde experiments. Investigations of ritual promised release of universal ecstatic powers and insight into the unconscious world of the collective on the basis that it brought theatre closer to its essence. Ideals of catharsis and a connection with the emotional core of drama were unifying underlying drives. Furthermore, the performative, represented by the “primitive”, supplanted the textual, or European tradition. A wide range of expressions included: influential Polish creator Jerzy Grotowski with Calderon’s *The Constant Prince*; adaptation of Gorgani’s verse *Vis-o-Ramin*, by Mahin Tajadod and director Arby Ovanessian; Jean Genet’s *Les Bonnes* by director Victor Garcia and Teatro Núria Espert; *Fire*, by Bread & Puppet Theatre directed by Peter Schumann; *ta’zieh* of Moslem ibn Aqeel.



Ritual theatre’ was the theme of the Fourth Festival an appropriate choice since Asia still remains a rich storehouse of ritual and ceremony and after a long period of lack of interest, the West is once again rediscovering its roots in Asian arts. Shiraz was the ideal meeting place for the purpose.

- 8th Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis Programme



Legong Keraton Dance, Balinese Gamelan and Traditional Dances (Persepolis, 1969), courtesy Malle Letrange



Ballet National du Senegal, Music and Dance, A diverse ethnic musical map of Senegal , Open-Air Theatre, 1970



Iannis Xenakis (composer) in preparations for the premiere of *Persepolis* music and light spectacle, Persepolis, 1971

Reverse Transmission of Knowledge

The curating underscored the reverse transmission of knowledge from the so-called periphery to the centre, highlighting the depth of Asian philosophical influence on Europe. Important experimental practitioners were aligned with non-European traditions to which they were indebted. John Cage had studied with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, a theologian of Zen Buddhism. With Cunningham, they drew inspiration from the Chinese divination text *I Ching* (Book of Chance) to explore notions of chance and indeterminacy. Stockhausen's compositions aimed at reaching a state of inner ascetism and spirituality correlating with philosophies of Hinduism.

Our societies have been evolving in recent years under the shadow of the technologically dynamic West. Our cultures are becoming recast in a new crucible. The impact of the West is a force we must contend with. Our responses to it should well be witnessed, both for the mutual edification of non-Western countries, through which we can study precedents and solutions in reasserting our age-old cultural heritages, and for the interest of Western artists, who might draw inspiration from the perspectives of other cultural arenas.

- 7th Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis Programme





Shahr-e Qesseh (City of Tales), Bijan Mofid (playwright & director); from left: Soheil Souzani, Mehdi Ali Beigi, Jamileh Nedai, Mahmood Ostad Mohamad, Rashid Kanaani, commissioned by the Festival, University Hall, 1968, courtesy Bijan Mofid Foundation

Exhibiting A Utopian Stage

Archaeology of the Final Decade has exhibited *A Utopian Stage* in different iterations.

A Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz – Persepolis
(1967-77)

Whitechapel Gallery, London
21 April 2015 – 4 October 2015

Retracing a Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz – Persepolis
(1967-77)

Part of *Unedited History (Iran 1960 – 2014)*
MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome
11 Dec – 29 March 2015



Retracing a Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz – Persepolis
(1967-77)

Part of *Unedited History (Iran 1960 – 2014)*
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris
16 May – 24 August 2014

Kathakali from Kerala Kalamandalam, Traditional Dance-Drama from Southwest India, scenes from *Ramayana and Mahabharata*, Open-Air Theatre, 1968

Selected Materials

Performances:

- *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia Terrace* (Robert Wilson 1972, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Maurice Bejart, Merce Cunningham, Bread & Puppet Theatre, Peter Schumann, Peter Brook, Ted Hughes, Andrei Serban, Robert Serumaga, Ballet National du Sénégal, Squat Theatre Co.

Film footage:

- 3 hours of *KA MOUNTAIN* (Wilson)
- Footage from Merce Cunningham.
- Footage of Iranian, Afghan, Indian music.
- Video footage from Shuji Terayama, Balinese *Gamelan*, Indian *Kathakali*.

Audio material:

- Audio available from John Cage, Xenakis, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian pieces, Stockhausen, and 20 mins of *KA MOUNTAIN*



Interviews:

- Farrokh Gaffari, Director of Festival of Arts
- Bijan Saffari, Board Member
- Empress Farah Diba, Patron
- Robert Wilson, Artist
- Henriku Morisaki, Artist- Shuji Terayama Co.

Publications:

- Catalogues, Bulletins, Daily Programmes, Newspaper reviews

Graphics:

- Posters, Postcards, Stamps



KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE, a story about a family and some people changing, Robert Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, Qavam House, 1972, courtesy Bahman Jalali and Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation

Vali Mahlouji is an independent curator, writer, and advisor to the British Museum . He serves as agent and curator of Kaveh Golestan Estate. He is founder of the research and curatorial platform **Archaeology of the Final Decade**, a non-profit organisation which identifies, investigates and re-circulates significant cultural and artistic materials that have remained obscure, under-exposed, endangered, banned or in some instances destroyed. Mahlouji's recent curatorial work includes exhibitions at FOAM (Amsterdam), Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, MAXXI National Museum of XXI Century Arts, Whitechapel Gallery, Photo London and Prince Claus Fund.

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