

## The land of Turquoises

### Four thousand years of dance in Iran



The theatre of the educational science of the London University, on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> March witnessed one of the most interesting Iranian arts programmes since the past few years. This programme was to celebrate Mr. Nima Kian the founder of the Ballet organization of Iran and also to review the history of four thousand years of dance in Iran. The programme which was supported by the Toos Foundation under the management of Miss.

Jamileh Kharrazi contained plays under the titles of: "the land of Turquoises", "the Sufi dance, Mawlana, Mawlana", "woman", "the history of cruelty and tyranny on women in Iran" and "the countenance of the soul" (Simā-yi Jān).

At the start of the programme there was an overview of the 3000 years history of dance in Iran by Nima Kian: Mithraism period, Achaemenid Empire,

Qajar Dynasty, Pahlavi Dynasty to the Islamic republic of Iran and the abolishment of the national ballet. This was presented in English and Farsi by Elizabeth Mansfield and Fakhri Nikzad followed by dances with beautiful choreography and costume designs with music from the album Bidād and Dastān by Shajarian written by Parviz Meshkātīān. These dances were the fusion of Iranian folklore and ballet. Nima Kian,

choreographer and costume designer commented, “Our young ballet dancers were capable of combining western ballet with the eastern music despite not being originally Iranian.” These dancers who have been accustomed to

dancers could deliver; otherwise the end result would not be professionally acceptable. For preparing a ballet for the stage they have to practice every day for ten to twelve weeks and it could be very tiring. The choreographer should

Nima continues: The dancers who worked on this project had no previous knowledge of the contents and what was expected from them, they have not even heard about Sufism and Samā’. The dancers who performed” The land of turquoise”,



“Swan Lake” “The Nutcracker” and “Sleeping Beauty” had to adjust their dancing with the traditional Iranian music and the voices of Shamsi Assar, Shusha Gupy and Zohreh Jouya, no doubt they worked very hard.

Nima Kian explains when western dancers are asked to dance with the traditional eastern music, it is my duty as the choreographer to design and select the music in such manner that the

know and estimate the approximate time needed for the preparation of a ballet. After the initial learning of the ballet, for repeating the programme usually three weeks practice would be sufficient. Combining the ballet with Iranian music and fusion of folklore has not a long history and there are not many examples for reference and we must congratulate Nima Kian for his work since the reaction of public to a totally new art is usually unpredictable.

“Mawlānā Mawlānā”, “Woman” and “Simā-yi Jun” were from England, Australia, Hungary and Japan. The Iranian ballet company has had ballet dancers from over 28 countries including Egypt, Azarbeyjan and Armenia, but unfortunately, nobody from Iran has danced in this company yet. Nima Kian explains: The reason for the absence of the Iranian ballet dancers in this company is that ballet has a very small place in the culture of the

Iranian families and most students who are learning this dance and are willing to join the company are not encouraged to progress further to professional level.

Nima comments: Despite the abolishment of the Iranian national ballet 29 years ago, the wealth of the Iranian traditional music is indestructible. For example the music that I have selected for the ballet "Woman" is part of a piece by Alizadeh by the name of "Ussyān" (rage) from his album "Avayeh Mehr". The music for the land of turquoise is by Meshkatian the great Iranian composer.

The spectators also loved the second part of the programme and the Sufi dance. The dancers wearing white costumes with Persian words written on them danced harmoniously and delicately making the ballets spectacular. According to Nima, young dancers should be selected for this type of work; because, their bodies must be capable of movements demanded by the eastern dances and it is interesting to know that some dancers who have performed these ballets have become interested in the Iranian culture and have started reading to familiarize themselves further. Nima tells us about the selection procedure of the dancers

for his company: advertising is the first step followed by audition and selection. Practicing takes place in the Iranian ballet center in Stockholm. The interesting point is that every movement has to be designed and choreographed in advance. In ballet, there are no spontaneous movements and the entire dance routine must be precisely learned and practiced repeatedly. The other point worth mentioning is that in ballet most of the organizers are working behind the scene for example for every 8 dancers there are 20 people specialized in different areas working back stage.

As previously mentioned, the programme 3000 years history of dance was put on the stage as the result of the great efforts by Jamil Kharrazi who was once an active member of the Iranian ballet company in the ministry of arts and culture. He explained to Keyhan: De Warren has a great share in introducing the Iranian dance culture to the world. He is one of the pioneers in the fusion of ballet and Iranian traditional music. Jamil Kharrazi commented that the absence of the Iranian dancers in ballet might be the great physical demand that this dance places on the students. According to Mrs. Kharrazi the dancer's costumes were

designed by Nima Kian and some made in Iran. Including the costumes for the ballets, "the land of turquoise" and "*Simā-yi Jun*" which depicts cloths worn by the people in the North of Iran and the writings on the cloths of the Sufi dancers were Nima's handwriting. Each ballet was reflecting a message in the titles with words such as pearl, turquoise, and emerald.

## The appearance of the Iranian dance

Iranian dance as an independent art appears to coincide with the commencement and spread of the Mithraism faith. At that, time men danced in religious ceremonies when they slaughtered a cow as an offering. This traditional dance is known to be the oldest dance routine in Iran and marks the beginning of this art.

## Achaemenid Empire

Ketezius the Greek historian writes about an Iranian dance performance during "Mehregan" celebration in the presence of the king. The king would drink wine and take part in the ceremony held in honor of Mithra. Dancing was an important part of the religious celebrations during the Achaemenid

and the Zoroastrians also place a great importance on this art. Professor Bryant, quotes from Xenophon the historian biographer of Cyrus the great: When Cyrus attended the traditional celebrations of “animal offerings” he would command people to dance and this was a tradition left by their ancestors “Katada Patria” Other styles of dance were part of the traditions of the royal courts and were usually performed with dancers riding horses and pretending to fight with their sabers. This dance was a popular and admired art during the other ancient Persian dynasties including Sassanid and Parthian Empire.

### Forbiddance of Dance in Islam

Arabs and the dominance of Islam forbade dance in Iran after the invasion of this country. Folklore dances survived in smaller cities. J. E. Brown who researched the Iranian dance in nineteenth century mentions the folklore dances of Khorassan and Kordestan. In some remote parts of Iran, farmers would dance in the evenings after they have finished working. In Tehran girls from Gorgestan were employed for dancing and thanks to the interest and efforts of the ethnic Armenian and

Jewish Iranian, dances were not forgotten and have survived to this day. The existence of dance in Iran that is part of our heritage from the ancient past is the legacy of the ethnic Iranians otherwise this remarkable art would have been completely forgotten.

### Sufism and the dance of “*Samā*”

Dance plays a central role in Sufism and great Persian poets Hafez, Sa’di, and Mawlānā have recognized dancing as a symbol of unity and solidarity with the creator Almighty. *Samā*’ is the famous Sufi dance originated by Mawlānā Jalal al-Din Rumi in the eleventh century.

### Dance during the Qajar Dynasty

The only style of Iranian dance that has been preserved over centuries is the folklore that has been admired by the Qajar nobility. According to the historians dance was free in Iran during the nineteenth century Qajar dynasty. Interesting photographs from that period depict dancing in the royal courts and nobility during ceremonies such as coronation, wedding and *Nouruz* (Persian New Year) and apparently dancing was a mandatory part of these celebrations.

### Pahlavi and the rebuilding of art and culture in Iran

During the Pahlavi dynasty, Iran progressed with westernization. Ballet in Iran commenced in 1928 when Madame Cornelli started a ballet school in Tehran that continued until 1980. Serkis Janbazian and Yelena Avidissian (Alias Madame Yelena) emigrated with her husband from Armenia to Tabriz in 1945 and was one of the greatest teachers of this art.

During 1930s-1950s, other styles of dance were originated in Iran. These were modern and for fun. They became the traditional popular dances of the time and were performed in parties and celebrations including, *Motrebi*, *Rouhozi*, *babkaram*, *Shateri* and *Tehrooni*.

The Iranian folklore dance group was founded in 1958 in the ministry of arts and culture and was directed by Nejad Ahmadzadeh and a group of experts were sent to the rural country and villages to research in the Iranian folklore dance to arrange choreographies. Some of these dance routines were performed in the presence of royal guests including the Queen of England.