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IN MEMORIAM

Bahram Beyzaie (1938–2025)

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Renowned as both filmmaker and playwright, Beyzaie's extraordinary career spanned over six decades, with an oeuvre that left an enduring mark on Iranian cinema and theater. He is known as a visionary auteur and dramatist who bridged the worlds of traditional Persian culture and the contemporary arts. As scholar and artist, Beyzaie's deep erudition made him possibly the most influential cultural figure of post–twentieth-century Iran.

Bahram Beyzaie was raised in a literary Baha'i family. His father, Ne'matallah Beyzaie, was a poet (writing under the pen name Zoka'i); he exposed young Bahram to classical Persian poetry, the principles of the Baha'i faith, and the writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l Baha. Folktales and myths, the stories told by his mother and grandmother, ignited Beyzaie's lifelong fascination with literature and literary history.

Born on December 26,' 1938, in a turbulent moment in Iranian history in which he himself became subject to marginalization and othering, Beyzaie's life was shaped by a deep awareness of national history, identity and otherness, and the unyielding social demand for equality and justice—the themes of this era would come to permeate Beyzaie's work. Beyzaie's conscious awareness of the life of the meek and vanquished naturally drew him to the dramatic and temporal tropes of the *ta'ziyeh* (his forefathers were leading directors and writers of this Persian passion play in Kashan) and the study of pre-Islamic legends which he came to discover had shaped these traditions, and from there to techniques in Eastern theater: Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian. These became the subjects of his first book, published when he was only 27, the seminal work *Theatre in Iran* (1965), which today is considered an authoritative study of Iranian drama from ancient times to the modern era.

Bringing together the mythic past and contemporary social commentary on Iran's present in the plays that he staged in the 1960s and 70s, his works reinvigorated Persian theater and earned him acclaim as the greatest Persian-language playwright of the modern era. His dramatic work explores historical and existential themes, reinterpreting epics and legends through a lens that is at once historical, visionary, modern, and creative to address contemporary dilemmas. One of his best-known plays, *Marg-e Yazdgerd* (Death of Yazdgerd, 1979), for example, revisits the mysterious death of an ancient Persian king to pose, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, enduring questions about truth and accountability. In works like *Soltan-e-Mar* (The King Snake, 1968) and *Chahar Sandoogh* (Four Boxes, 1967), Beyzaie weaves Iranian folk motifs and poetic tropes into avant-garde theater. *Khaterat-e Honarpisheh-ye Naqsh-e Dovvom* (Memoirs of the Actor in a Supporting Role, 1981) offers a meta-reflection on art and power. Overseeing all aspects of his dramatic productions personally, Beyzaie's stagings drew on and incorporated anything and everything from the traditional Iranian performance arts, from classical Persian music to shadow play and puppetry originating in

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traditions from the far East. Comprising fifty plays in total, his inspired work for the theater has been translated into several languages from the original Persian.

Beyzaie was among the founders of the Iranian Writers' Guild established in 1968, an organization that boldly challenged censorship in the arts. He joined the theater faculty of the University of Tehran's College of Fine Arts and was appointed head of the Theater Arts Department in 1972. His tenure there, until 1979, coincided with one of the most vibrant periods in Iran's theatrical history.

In 1981, amid the widespread purges of the Iranian cultural revolution, which included Baha'i students, teachers, and professors in higher education, Beyzaie too was expelled from his university position, as authorities cracked down on intellectuals and artists. Persevering, Beyzaie committed to writing and occasionally staging plays, although often under unofficial conditions. Censored, his manuscripts sometimes circulated hand to hand in private readings. In 1998 he directed and staged The Lady Aoi in Iran (*Banou Aoi* is an adaptation of a modern Japanese play written in 1954 by Yukio Mishima), and in 2012, after his exile to California, the innovative shadow play, Jana and Baladoor. Arash and Ardaviraf's Report were then staged in 2013 and 2015, respectively. His epic multipart piece *Tarabnameh* was first staged in 2016 as a nine-hour production at Stanford University; *Crossroads* followed in 2018. A few years later, *Dash Akol according to Marjan* was staged in two parts, in 2024 and 2025 in Berkeley, California, as a reconsideration of Hedayat's short story *Dash Akol* from the perspective of a silent female character in the same story, namely Marjan.

The centrality he offered his self-reliant, headstrong female characters is what initially drew my attention to Beyzaie's exquisite films, in the context of an industry that was attempting to respond to the demands of the Islamic Republic by producing films that depicted women as meek, modest characters, captured with a short lens, at a distance. Indeed, in the 1980s and early 1990s, many of Beyzaie's Iranian colleagues were avoiding female characters altogether for fear of censorship. He had come to film slightly later than most Iranian directors (he made his first short film at age 30) but quickly established himself as a singular cinematic auteur known for his bold representation of female characters, his unyielding will, his intellectual rigor, and unique, often formal, always epic, narrative style in the face of forced dictates and compulsions.

Like his contemporary, Abbas Kiarostami, Beyzaie began by making films for Kanoon, the state institution dedicated to producing cultural works for and about children and young adults. The Journey (*Safar*), made in 1972 for Kanoon, follows an orphaned boy in search of his parents along wastelands on the outskirts of Tehran. What unfolds through his movements in these landscapes on screen, where he is accompanied by his loyal mate, are not geographies per se, but dreamworlds, sacred geometries in which cars, train tracks, abandoned wheels and carriages, ladders, doors, and street signs stage a world devoid of conventional directions and in which everyone seems to be asleep as the wind addresses the wakeful children, who in their quest, configured by a dream, go in search of those who are waiting wakeful for their arrival. The elemental force, the wind, carrying the voice and wisdom of other realms in the here and now, course corrects, and directs. The wind returns, again and again, in this capacity in the many films that followed upon the children's epic journey.

Bashu is one such example in Beyzaie's oeuvre. Beyzaie's soulful wartime film *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986) configures a conventional geography in which Bashu, an Arabic-speaking Iranian boy from the South is displaced by the fires of war, only to find shelter on Na'i's verdant farm in northern Iran. An illiterate herself, Na'i speaks Gilaki and dictates her letters to her husband at the warfront to a village doctor, who in turn reads her husband's words to her and to her children in a nearby courtyard. It is with the penultimate epistolary exchange between this husband and wife that a violent wind arrives, and Bashu disappears into it, feeling once again deserted, bereft of his own family who died in the war in the South.

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Her husband has deemed Na'i's acceptance of Bashu, a stranger, a risk: for, how can one trust a stranger? She hides her husband's damning words from Bashu under a mat, but the wind, spirited, blows the open letter onto the fields, and finds Na'i, bearing in its firm grasp the knowingness of Bashu's distress and his lonely disappearance. The wind in *Bashu, the Little Stranger* speaks the anguish of Bashu's heart to Na'i in words she can comprehend, and comes to represent one of the ways in which this elemental force takes on tangible form and a transpersonal consciousness, capable of transcending boundaries—spatial-temporal, interpersonal, or inter-species—and overthrowing conventional coordinates of time and space in film, constituting, instead, messianic and atomistic coordinates derived from the *ta'ziyeh* passion play that, for Beyzaie, root this consciousness in national soil. In the *ta'ziyeh*, both the here and the hereafter are interchangeable, and all spaces and times collide in a theater-in-the-round in which actors play themselves as well as the mythic characters they are assigned, as if in natural continuity. Beyzaie brings this sacred geometry to *Tcherike-ye Tara* (*The Ballad of Tara*, 1979), where in the midst of the villager's performance of the *ta'ziyeh* the historical man tells Tara of his tribe and its forgotten history, and also to *Gharibeh va Meh* (*The Stranger and the Fog,* 1974), in which Ayat, Rana's lover, finds himself between two worlds, the present and the historical-future, and, too, center stage in the circular theater that is the village.

Beyzaie's signature circular camera movement produces a similar *ta'ziyeh* in the round and a "holotropic" sense of oneness in *Bashu*, although here it feels differently than the narrative tropes of the epic form it took in *Tara* and in *The Stranger and the Fog*. In *Bashu*, a transpersonal vision merges and connects time and space as Na'i dictates her final letter to her husband, this time with the help of Bashu, who she describes as her son, who is "like all children, the offspring of the sun and the earth." She dictates her letter partially in the language of the book, as she paces about the courtyard hanging up wet clothes to dry. As she moves, an embodiment of the force of nature, the camera follows her, and we see the oven in her own courtyard burning high in the wind in the background of the action. She moves and as she does, the Southern war front appears in the background: the barracks where her husband will receive her words in letter-form. Then her movements again reshape space and disrupt time as if the material world wraps around her form, and the site of war is replaced, once more, by the courtyard where Bashu dutifully writes down Na'i's every word as she addresses herself to her husband.

The wind that has brought home the history of the past and the cultures of the East and the West to the primordial feminine character (Tara and Rana) in Beyzaie's oeuvre speaks in Na'i's tongue in *Bashu*, and now disrupts in her figure, all boundaries, all spatial and temporal continuities, *ta'ziyeh*-like. Animated by the language of nature, and the wind in particular, this figure, Na'i, breaks the new constraints placed on the representation of the female form under the rule of the Islamic Republic as her transpersonal connection to the elements links all time, all spaces, and all cultures, embodying boldly the very undoing of a polarizing lived reality. Beyzaie's primordial female is at once a witness and alchemist, calling into being a new way of seeing in film: a vision of the oneness of the world's pasts and their coeval ever-presence.

Mirroring the approach he had long taken in his plays, this synthesis of a mythic vision in the presence of contemporary dilemmas became a hallmark of Beyzaie's cinematic style. In *Mosaferan* (*The Travelers*, 1992), about a family's drive from the Caspian to a wedding in Tehran, Beyzaie introduces a wrinkle in time in which the dead are awakened for a festive wedding. In the film's final sequence, the bride plays the role of the bridegroom, Qasem (the Prophet's grandson), from a classical wedding *ta'ziyeh*, enacting a gender reversal.

Although grief-stricken, the bride in *The Travelers*, Mahrokh, makes a decision to move forward with her wedding despite the mourning ceremony arranged for her sister's sudden death in its place. In this way the film reenacts the key scene in the classical Ta'ziyeh of Qasem, in which the bridegroom chooses to celebrate his union in the midst of a wake.

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Mourning and celebration intermix in this *ta'ziyeh* just as mourning and joyous ululation fill the screen in the final sequence of Beyzaie's film *The Travelers.*

Beyzaie made *Maybe Some Other Time* (*Shayad Vaght-e Digar*) a few years earlier, in 1988, and, after several of his proposed film projects were blocked by authorities, directed two final features in Iran. *Sagkoshi* (*Killing Mad Dogs,* 2001) was a taut social thriller and pointed social critique with a strong female lead addressing corruption and social decay in the post-war era in Iran. *Vaghti Hame Khaabim* (*When Everybody Was Asleep*, 2009) shot in noir style as a crime film, is in every sense an allegory about the corruption of the film industry, the star system, and indeed the misery of every lived experience under the dominance of capital.

Increasingly frustrated with the limitations imposed on his work in Iran (most of his screenplays remained unfilmed due to censorship), in 2010 Beyzaie accepted an invitation to join Stanford University in the United States as a visiting professor of Iranian studies. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in Beyzaie's life. A beloved mentor to his students and colleagues at Stanford University in California, there Beyzaie taught courses on Persian theater, cinema, and mythology. He organized workshops on Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (the Persian Book of Kings) and the history of Iranian performing arts, wrote new plays and directed stage productions, and oversaw the publication of new editions of his plays and essays, ensuring that his intellectual output continued to reach Persian readers.

He was the 2014 recipient of the Bita Prize for Persian Arts, awarded for his lifetime contributions to Persian culture. In 2017, the University of St Andrews in Scotland conferred on him an honorary doctorate of letters, praising his unique role in rejuvenating Iranian cinema and theater.

For an artist so attuned to monadic and cyclical temporalities and to the geographies of the mythic, it is symbolically resonant that Beyzaie's life came full circle with his passing on the anniversary of his birth in 2025 at the age of 87 in California. That restless elemental force of the wind that dwells in the upending frequency of Beyzaie's voice and vision continues to galvanize a generation that, like him, is wakeful and unyielding in its stand for equality and justice, and, too, in that enduring will to dream boldly and free from all compulsion.

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