**Raqs-e melli**

**Summary**

Iranian-Armenians Madame Cornelli, Madame Yelena Avakian, and Sarkis Djanbazian, all of whom had learned ballet in Russia or Europe, came to Iran where they opened private dance studios. They began the process of modernizing Iranian dance for performance on proscenium arch stages. To accomplish this task, in a choreophobic environment like that of Iran of the late 1920s to the 1950s, they performed two important activities. First, they created a new dance genre, an invented tradition that the Ministry of Fine Arts designated as ‘*raqs-e melli*’, national dance. This new dance form borrowed from classical ballet, Armenian and Iranian solo improvised dance, Armenian and Iranian folk dances, and other western sources. Second, in order to appeal to the educated class of Iranian Muslims who were familiar with the West, they adopted themes that were taken from Persian literature and pre-Islamic history, as well as bucolic scenes from village life. Their studios were the first sites of dance recitals and concerts using western style stages and techniques. In the 1950s, the Iranian government founded the first professional dance companies, a ballet company and a folk dance company based on the techniques and work begun by these teachers.

**Contributions to Modernism and Modernization**

Iranian-Armenians Madame Cornelli, Madame Yelena Avakian, and Sarkis Djanbazian were among the first professionally trained ballet dancers to open dance studios in Iran beginning at the end of the 1920s and into the early 1930s. The newly established Pahlavi dynasty had just ushered in the beginning of a period of socially engineered modernization, including the unveiling of women, which would continue until its fall in 1979. New stagings of dance with pre-Islamic Iranian themes and scenes became a part of that modernization program.

In the beginning, these teachers faced daunting odds. Women dancing in public were equated with prostitutes so finding students was difficult. Their first students came from the Armenian community, and other minority groups, and boys outnumbered girls (Ramazani 2002). Eventually elite Muslims from families familiar with the West and the prestige that ballet enjoyed there began to send their daughters to class. Because of the choreophobic attitude that was widespread in Iran, these teachers held private recitals in their studios that were by invitation only. Members of the royal family attended these performances to give this modernist project further prestige—a practice that continued until 1979.

To spread the appeal of the classes and to promote their concerts, these Iranian-Armenian teachers created ballets with Iranian themes from poetry and epic history—subjects that had a positive attraction for Iranians for whom poetry was the most beloved art form. They also began to use idyllic and nostalgically bucolic themes like village girls going to the well for water and flirting with the village boys. The resulting choreographic works were the first appearance of staged folk dance in Iran.

In order to create these new fantasy productions with their orientalist themes, the dance teachers invented a tradition of new movements and choreographies that combined Armenian folk and solo improvised dance, Iranian folk and solo improvised dance, ballet, and other Department of Fine Arts (later the Ministry of Fine Arts) Ministry of Fine Arts designated this invented tradition as ‘*raqs-e melli*’ (national dance). Although never codified with a named vocabulary, an increasing number of choreographers began to use this new dance genre during the 1940s. An American, Nella Cram Cook, managed to secure funding from the royal family to form a dance group and studio called the Revival of Iranian Classical Arts in 1946, which toured extensively throughout Europe, the Middle East and India.

By the 1950s, the Ministry of Fine Arts, which oversaw all of the performing arts, established both a ballet company, the National Ballet of Iran, which performed both western classics and Iranian-themed ballets, and the second company, The National Folklore Group that performed both *raqs-e melli* and staged folk dances. The latter was influenced by Igor Moiseyev’s work, and operated under the direction of Nejad and Haideh Ahmadzadeh, former members of Cram Cook’s dance group. In 1966, Abdollah Nazemi founded the Pars National Ballet, a private company that used *raqs-e melli*, among other styles, in its repertoire. In 1967, Robert de Warren, an English ballet dancer, was appointed to found a third company, the Mahalli Dancers, which also performed versions of *raqs-e melli* and staged folk dance.

With the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, and the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1980, all professional dance was banned. However, the legacy of these early Iranian-Armenians lives on in the diaspora community where *raqs-e melli* and staged folk dancers have been widely adopted by groups that are led both by Iranians and other non-Iranians interested in Iranian-Armenian culture.

**Anthony Shay**

**References and Further Reading**

Ahmadzadeh, H. (n.d.) *My Life as a Persian Ballerina*. n.p.

(This self-published autobiography is a first-hand account of the first performances of Iranian staged dance. Ahmadzadeh and her husband were the founders of the first professional folk dance company in Iran. Her life spanned the entire period of the development and performance of raqs-e melli in Iran.)

de Warren, R. (2009) *Destiny’s Waltz: In Step with Giants*. New York: Eloquent Books. (A vanity-press autobiography of the director of Iran’s state government-sponsored folk dance ensemble with a many details of his career as a dancer and choreographer.)

Meftahi, I. (forthcoming) ‘From Zanpush to Angel and Persian Princess: The Invention of a Female National Dancer in 20th-Century Iran’, in A. Shay, (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Forthcoming).

(This is a scholarly approach to the development and creation of raqs-e melli.)

Ramazani, N. (2002) *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

(An autobiography that is a useful, first-hand account of the first performances of Iranian staged dance. Her memories of the kinds of choreographies that characterized these dances and dancers and choreographies of the period is interesting.)

Shay, A*.* (2002) *Choreophobia*: *Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian World*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

(A scholarly study of Iranian dance in its social and performance manifestations, in Iran and in the diaspora. It focuses on the ambiguous attitudes that Iranians have toward their own dance tradition.)

* ----- (forthcoming) ‘Reviving the Reluctant Art of Iranian Dance in Iran and in the American Diaspora,’ in Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell, (eds). *Oxford Handbook Music Revival*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
* (This article is an in-depth study of raqs-e melli and staged folk dance.)
* **Moving Image Material**
* Anthony Shay’s Avaz International Dance Theatre. 1989. A retrospective film of dances of Iran and Central Asia, including several examples of raqs-e melli and staged folk dance. Some of these can be found on You Tube.
* Mahalli Dancers. Pars Video. This film, made in Iran in the 1970s by the Ministry of Fine Arts, features choreographies by Robert DeWarren that shows both raqs-e melli and staged folk dance. Some of these can be found on You Tube.

**Paratextual Material**

There exist photos which I can provide of my former dance group, the AVAZ International Dance Theatre, which I will give permission if you wish to use them. They are fairly typical of the wide variety of images of this dance tradition. [Contact Anthony Shay at Pomona College: [Anthony\_Shay@pomona.edu](mailto:Anthony_Shay@pomona.edu).]