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Forbidden dance

As Iran teeters on the brink of political and cultural revolution, the country's severe restrictions on freedoms we take for granted in the west come into sharper focus. The present story offers a poignant example of those restrictions: it tells of how one Iranian refugee living in Canada waited more than 20 years for the opportunity—and the courage—to express herself through 'harmonious movements.'

Story by Dr. Maria Sabaye Moghaddam / Photos by Alli Asudeh

When I was a ten-year-old schoolgirl in Tehran, one day a woman came into my classroom who looked different from every other teacher we had: she was young, beautiful, in very good shape, and dressed in very tight outfit. She said that she was going to teach dance.

We did not take her seriously, but she was very serious, almost stern. She kept telling us that dance is an important art form and should not be taken lightly. She taught us steps from various regions in Iran, the names of some of which I had only heard of in our geography class. This was a life-changing event for me. I knew then that I wanted to dance; I just didn't know how to go about it. Ultimately, largely because of Iranian politics and culture, it would take me more than twenty years to find the way.

The dance teacher had appeared as part of an effort by the Iran's secular government of the day to include dance in the school curriculum to present dance as an art form and promote national dance. Creating awareness about importance of education in dance proved to be no simple task, even for a government.

At that time, many people in Iran did not recognize dance as an art form and instead associated dance with cheap, frivolous entertainment which implied a life of drugs, alcohol, and scandalous affairs. Most people were exposed to dance by commercial movies where a woman in a skimpy outfit in a cheap cabaret setting would move her body in suggestive ways in front of a more-often-than-not drunk male audience. The dancer was often a young woman who had been led astray in her teenage years, sometimes drawn into prostitution, and often expected to accommodate the male customers.



So, for many people, dance was virtually a taboo subject in those days. Djanbazian, a man often remembered as the father of ballet in Iran, was thrown out of the city hall in Qazvin when he tried to obtain a permit to establish a dance school. No respectable daughter in my family would possibly be allowed to become a dancer. Science and medicine were the only acceptable options for me. I went into hiding with my desire for dance, patiently waiting to grow up to be eighteen.

Secretly and very carefully, I planned how I would pursue dance. I studied hard to make sure I would pass the entrance examinations and go to the university. Then I would have enough independence (access to the outside world and some money) to get lessons, secretly of course.

But my dream met a harsh reality in 1979, when the Shah, King of Iran, was overthrown and the secular government was replaced with an Islamic one. In keeping with Islamic demands on women, we were forced to cover ourselves from head to toe. Religious restrictions were imposed in every aspect of private and public life. Music had limited acceptance; dancing was strictly forbidden.

Soon, Iraq invaded Iran and a war that lasted eight years ensued. Gradually, I buried many of my dreams, including those of seeking secret dance lessons at eighteen.

New Country, New Culture

I left Iran and came to Canada. I did not know the language, I had no knowledge of where I was going to live, and I had no transferable skills to find a job. Dreams of dancing were buried within me even more deeply.

I went into science and pursued that passionately. Every year I finished with distinction and won many awards and scholarships. Eventually, at the beginning of my Ph.D. program in chemical physics theory in 1996, I started taking dance lessons at the University of Toronto.

Later, I continued in Santa Barbara where an instructor was teaching Persian dance. I went back to Iran and took lessons there. I also took elementary ballet, kathak, flamenco, and ballroom.

In 2001, I gave my first performance of Persian dance at an annual dance festival at the University of Toronto. It was the longest five minutes of my life. I felt my heart jumping out of my chest and was certain that everyone saw this in the audience. But when I looked at a video recording of the performance, I could not believe the woman on stage changing poses and facial expressions while moving about effortlessly. And her heart never came out of her chest!

I continued training and performances and later I started teaching. My most rewarding activity was acting as dance director at the Tirgan Festival in 2008, where I invited four amazing Iranian dance artists with vastly diverse styles to showcase their art and educate the audience.

I also started researching Iranian dance and its forgotten history. I interviewed artists, wrote about them, and published articles on dance and dancers. My favourite article—recently published on *Encyclopaedia Iranica*—is about my favourite figure in dance, the late Djanbazian.

This year, I was honoured to become a member of the International Dance Council, the official umbrella organization of dance recognized by UNESCO.

**Still Forbidden**

To this day, dancing is forbidden in Iran and even the use of the word “dance” is strongly discouraged. When forced to name the art form, officials in theatre, cinema, or other realms use the phrase “harmonious movements.”

To avoid trouble when I travel to my homeland, I do very little to publicize my performances. It is a challenge to be constantly on guard about what I express while engaged in an expressive art form. To desire a connection with people but to constantly limit myself and often shy away from publicity makes my task complicated, but it also helps me to reach the deepest layers of creativity within my mind and my soul.

I do not have the freedom I should have in this field, but this does not make my work any less rewarding. Every year, at much personal expense and personal risk, I travel to remote places in Iran to observe and learn about movement, costumes, and folkloric dances of Iran.

People kindly give me advice such as, “You have to pause and think about this. So much effort, so much risk is very unreasonable.” They are absolutely right, but then who has heard of reasonable love? When I was burying my dreams at the age of sixteen, had someone told me that one day I would leave my homeland and travel thousands of miles away where I would learn and perform Persian dance, I would have thought them mad.

Love works in mysterious ways. That is why I keep performing, learning, and teaching. When forced to suppress my free-spirited love of dancing, I had to suppress part of my human spirit. Now I have a chance to let all of that spirit to rise within me, with all its complications and all the hazards it puts me through.

I doubt that I will ever grow wise and reasonable about this. As for my family still living in Iran, they have accepted my love for dance, perhaps because I did become a scientist along the way. So at the end, we all won.



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