

The Rise and Fall of Lalehzar, Cultural Centre of Tehran in the Mid-Twentieth Century



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I. Introduction: The Place of Lālehzār in the History of 20th Century Tehran

During the late 19th and early to late 20th centuries (up until the 1978 revolution) Lālehzār figured as one of the most iconic and important neighbourhoods of Tehran. With some degree of exaggeration that is however closer to fact than fiction, one might say that the Lālehzār district served as Iran's avenue to the modern world. During this period, Lālehzār incarnated everything that Iran as a modern, developing country aspired to represent in terms of 'high' cultural life — in the way of theatres, print journalism, cinemas, cabarets, cafes, as well as the best and the worst that Western consumer culture had to offer the new, modern nation of Persia.

In what follows I will give you an overview of how the Lālehzār district became the centre and epitome of all things modern, in terms of culture, politics, art and commerce. At the end of my talk I endeavour to explain how and why it declined into a neighbourhood for working men's' entertainment, and finally—as of today in the Islamic Republic—into simply a centre for wholesale electrical goods.



II. The Lālehzār Garden from the Reign of Fath ‘Ali Shah (reg. 1797-1834). to Nasir al-Din Shah (reg. 1848-96)



Tehran: Plan de l'Ark – Feuvrier Map 1885



'Abd al-Ghaffar Map: *Naqsha Shahr-e Dar al-Khalafa-ye Naseri*, 1891

The name Lālehzār, which literally means ‘Tulipbed’, derives from the old “Lālehzār Garden” that was located just outside the city walls of Tehran during the reign of Fath ‘Alī Shāh. By all accounts it was a beautiful garden where many foreign visitors were housed and entertained. (Karīmān 1976, 205-6; Najmī 1985, 222)



In 1807, for instance, Napoleon’s Envoy to Persia: Charles-Matthieu, Comte de Gardane, stayed there for about a year as well as numerous other envoys and ambassadors from abroad. During Fath ‘Alī Shāh’s reign, Lālehzār Garden served as a resort for recreation and entertainment for the king’s sons, noblemen, and men of high rank, where they could go to relax, have a good time and not be subject to the royal protocol necessitated in an official royal residence. (Karīmān 1976, 205)

It functioned thus as a kind of royal garden adjacent to the city for the royalty, their guests and friends, where they would drive out in their carriages to enjoy a day out or to celebrate holidays, particularly during the Nawrūz period and *Sizdabeda*. Covered as it was with wild tulips during spring, Lālehzār Garden was a kind of ideal paradise on earth. (Mu‘tamidī 2002, 291)

During the reign of Muḥammad Shāh (reg. 1835-48), the king, due to his ill health spent more time in the Muḥammadiyya gardens in the foothills near present-day Parkway intersection in Tehran and so only visited Lālehzār Garden infrequently. When Muḥammad Shāh died in 1848, his corpse was first taken to the Lālehzār Garden, until his son Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh arrived from Tabriz to pay his respects before the king’s body was transported to Qum for burial. (Mu‘tamidī 2002, 291)

During Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh’s reign, Lālehzār Garden was visited less frequently by royalty, but nonetheless remained admired as a beautiful and pleasant garden that continued to host foreign visitors. For some time, part of the garden was used as a zoo to house the rare animals sent to Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh by his daughter, the wife of the Ismā‘īlī leader, the Āqā Khān, who lived in India, as well as by others. (Mu‘tamidī, 291)



Detail from the ‘Abd al-Ghaffar Map, Tehran 1891

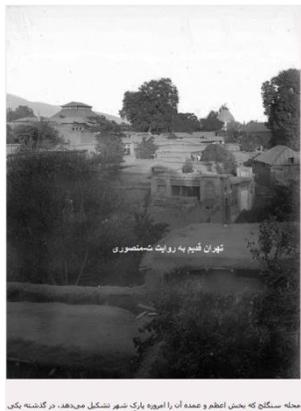
III. Lālehzār from the Age of Nasir al-Din Shah (reg. 1848-1896) to Ahmad Shah (reg. 1909-1925)

It was during the reign of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh that Lālehzār Garden underwent a significant transformation. During the mid-1860s when Tehran was growing rapidly in population, the Shāh decided to tear down the old city walls



Old Tehran with the old city walls and moat

A decision was taken to fill in the moat surrounding the old city of Tehran and expand the city from 12 kilometres in circumference (which was the area of the so-called Tamasp city walls), to about 32 kilometres in circumference. As a sign of Tehran being the capital of Iran and the site of the royal residential palace of the monarch, the name of the city was changed to *Dār al-Khalīfa Nāṣiriyya* (City of Nāṣirian Caliphate). (Najmī 1985, 29)



View of the Sanglakh Area



Demolition of the Tehran City Walls with Moat

By the middle of the nineteenth century, many of the Persian aristocrats had built palatial residences for themselves to the north of the old city walls and moved from the now crowded Sanglakh neighbourhood south of the Arg. By expanding the city walls, these residences along with their gardens and underground wells (*qanats*) could now be included within the new city of Tehran. This change in urban topography not only offered the aristocrats more protection, but also made it easier for the state to control and tax goods entering the city. Likewise, the water sources from their underground wells benefited the city, which in the past had suffered bouts of cholera due to poor quality of its water supply. (Gurney 1992, 57-59)



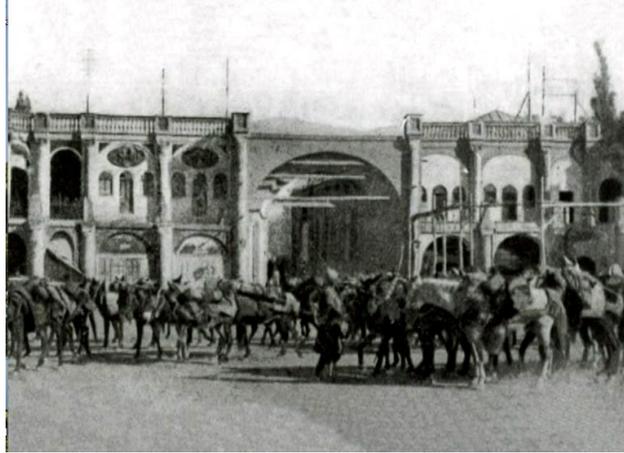
New Walls of Tehran in the Time of Nasir al-Din Shah

However, as a consequence of this redrawing of the Tehran urban landscape, Lālehzār Garden now no longer fell outside the walls of the city. No longer a private royal pleasure garden but a semi-public garden inside the city, Lālehzār Garden became slightly a less prestigious yet still very much sought-after resort for Persians of all walks of life.

The second major transformation to occur to Lālehzār Garden also happened during the reign (1848-96) of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh. Due to the granting in 1890 of a tobacco concession by the king to a British citizen, Major Gerald F. Talbot, to buy, sell, and manufacture tobacco throughout Persia for 50 years, the Imperial Tobacco Corporation of Persia was formed. But leading mullahs issued *fatwas* against consumption of tobacco, declaring it to be *harām*. Following bloody demonstrations in front of the royal palace, the shah was finally forced to succumb to the pressure from these *‘ulamā* and the populace and cancel the concession in 1892. (Katouzian 2009, 163-4)

During the same year, to pay off the £500,000 compensation demanded by the Imperial Tobacco Corporation of Persia for breaking their contract, Lālehzār Garden was sold off by the Shah. As a consequence, large tracts of the garden were quickly snapped up by wealthy Persian aristocrats, such as Mīrzā ‘Alī Aṣghar Khān ‘Aṭābakī, Zahīr al-Dawla, Nayib Sulṭān (one of the king’s sons), Mu‘īn al-Tujār Bushīrī, and Riḍā Qulī Khān Hidāyat Mukhbar al-Dawla, who built elegant villas for themselves in this neighbourhood. (Mu‘tamidī 2002, 292; Gurney 1992, 67-8)

This gentrification of the area during the late 1890s soon turned the Lālehzār Garden district into the most fashionable part of town. Many of the most important foreign embassies (English, Turkish, Russian, German, and Belgium, Dutch) relocated to this neighbourhood in north Tehran. (Mu‘tamidī 2002, 268-9)



Tūp-khāna Entrance to Lālehzār

In terms of the topography of early modern Tehran at the end of 19th century, the Lālehzār Garden district covered the areas between Firdawsi Street in the West, Sa'dī Street to the East, and the Armoury (*Tūp-khāna*) in the south, and stretched up to Istanbul Street in the north. Eventually, Lālehzār began to be known now—not as a garden—but as a street. It was designed at first as a semi-private road, off which these various villas and embassies opened onto.

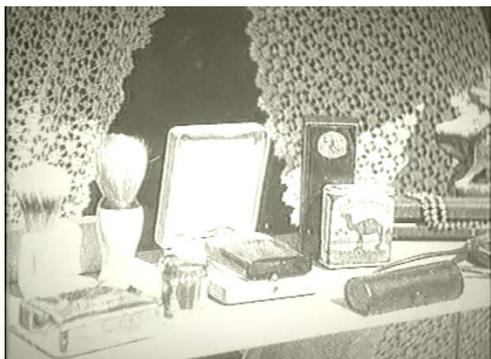


Map of Tehran and its Walls over History down to 1960

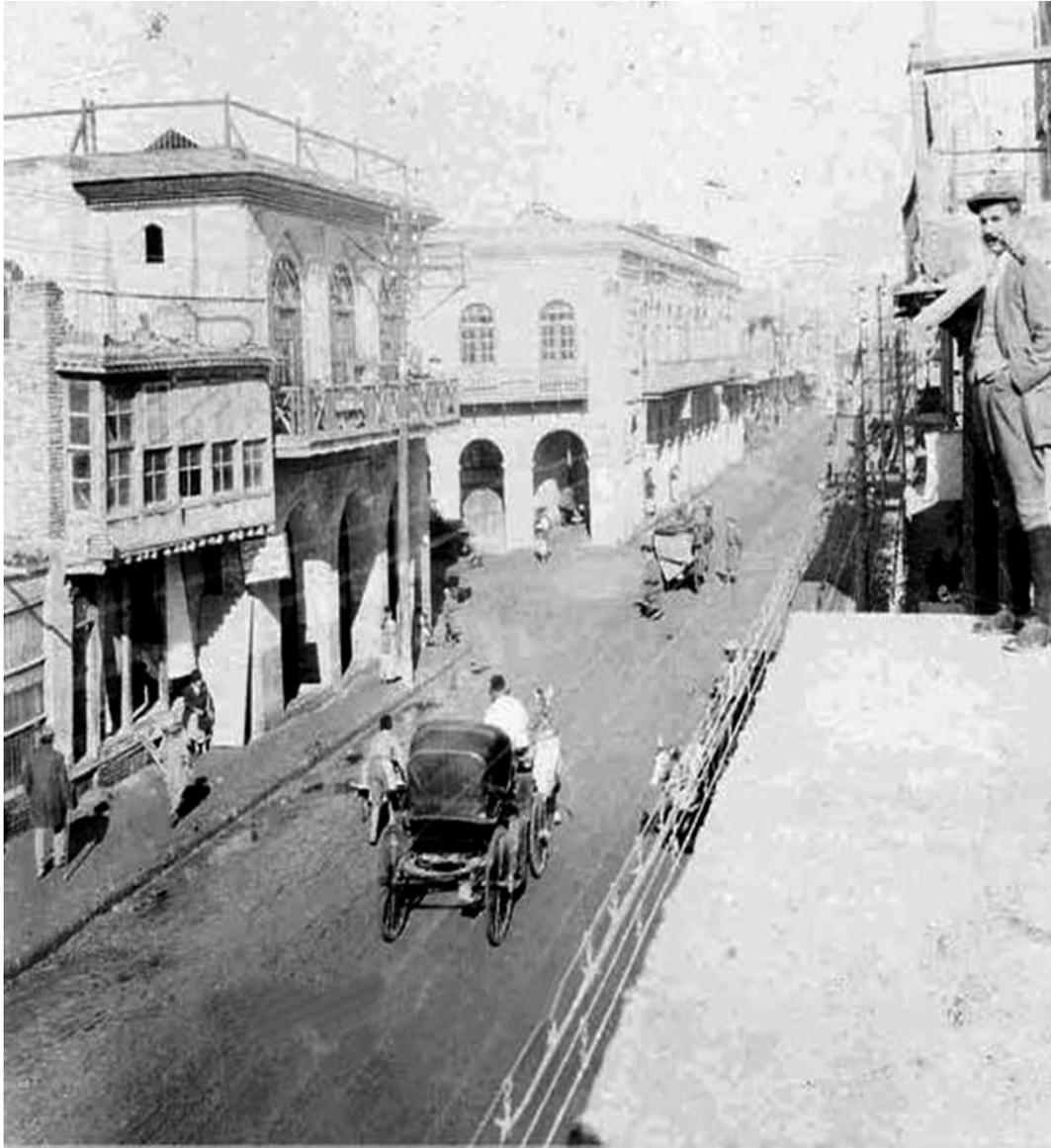
In 1896, Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh was assassinated, and succeeded by his son Muẓaffar al-Dīn Shāh (reg. 1896-1907). A weak, pleasure-loving, simple-minded, and considerate king, he only ruled 11 years, and it was his reign that signalled the decline of the Qajar dynasty.

By the time of Aḥmad 'Alī Shāh (reg. 1909-1925) these foreign influences became very pronounced in the Lālehzār district and street, since by then nearly all the foreign embassies and their staff were located in the neighbourhood. Many of the Persian aristocrats also could afford to

travel to Europe and studied abroad, and had wives who enamoured of the sophistication of Western life and the luxuries they had seen on their travels. (Mu‘tamidi 2002, 490-1)



Because of this Lālehzār became first street in all of Iran, even before Reza Shah’s decree in 1932 ordering the unveiling of women in public places, where European and Europeanized ladies could be seen promenading down the street unveiled in their hats and parasols.



Unveiled Women on Lālehzār Street, prior to 1932

Shops began to appear on the street catering to the demands for luxury goods like perfumes, the latest fashions from Paris, modern gadgets like phonographs, radios, cameras, fancy cigars and men's and ladies' hats which were in demand on the part of foreign dignitaries and local aristocrats. (Nafīsī 2002, 285, 510)



Lālehzār Street in the early 20th century

At the same time, Guards and gates were placed at either end of Lālehzār Street to prevent members of the lower classes from disturbing the atmosphere. Large urns of flowers were placed in the middle of the street for both aesthetic purposes and to help control the traffic. The guards had their work cut out for them, as everyone was fascinated to see who was who on Lālehzār Street, where fashionable ladies or chicly attired gentlemen promenaded. (Shari 2001, 276-8)



Lālehzār Street with Guard, circa 1910-20

Lālehzār was the first street in Tehran that one could call a ‘mixed neighbourhood’ – where Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians and Armenians lived and did business along side each other; and where homes both grand and modest, as well as schools, shops, newspapers, theatres, cinemas cafes, all on one street, could be found.

IV. Lālehzār in the Early Twentieth Century

It is clear from Nāṣir al-Den Shah’s travelogues of his trips to Europe that he was very fond of theatre, concerts and ballets, since whatever European city he went to, he frequently



attended plays and theatrical performances. Evidently he was deeply impressed by what he saw in Europe that in the ‘Interior Private Precincts’ (*Andarun*) of his palace in Tehran, he arranged for private plays, pantomimes and musical performances to be put on. When he returned to Iran he had a western-style theatre built in the Dar al Funun. (Milani 2008, 1108)

Around the same time, that is, during the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century, the first Western-style secular plays were staged. At first makeshift temporary venues, but eventually purpose-built venues were built. Lālehzār street, being the central location where these theatres were located, became Tehran’s new theatre district, resembling what Leicester Square is to London or Times Square is to New York City.



Theatres on Lālehzār street: Grand Hotel, Farus Printer and Theatre

Theatre was seen by the intelligentsia and reform-minded elements in Iranian society as having a distinct social purpose—as an art form that was morally uplifting, edifying and educational. This was especially the case during the early Constitutional period (i.e. 1906-20), when the subject matter of most of the plays was political satire denouncing royal despotism and corruption. Around the same time, secular nationalistic plays were written and performed, the aim of which was also social criticism and political edification. (Miransari 2010, 246, 248)

It is significant that the Sufis were located at the vanguard of this efflorescence of interest in the opening of theatres and performance of plays, since the first western-style play was performed at Ṣahīr al-Dawla’s ‘Fraternal Society’ or *Anjuman-i ukhuwwat*, which was a Sufi lodge of the Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāhī Order. ‘Ṣahīr al-Dawla’, who was the son-in-law of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, had launched *Anjuman-i ukhuwwat* (supported by a royal decree) on 15 Sha‘bān 1317/19 December 1899. (Nafīsī 2002, 488)

In the social sphere, the *Anjuman's khānaqāh* in Tehran was known for its many charitable and musical events, and firm defence of political freedom in Iranian society. The play, which was written by Ṣahīr al-Dawla himself, was performed in the hall of the garden of the *Anjuman's khānaqāh* on Lālehzār Street in 1907. Tickets were sold to politicians, foreign envoys and pro-reform-minded elites, with the proceeds dedicated to philanthropic causes. Its plot in brief was as follows: (Ridgeon, 156-7)

1. The Shah is seated on his throne. A corpse (Iran), dressed in royal finery lies before him.
2. One by one, representatives of different foreign powers come and steal items from the corpse.
3. First, the English come, but are ignored by the Shah. However, they take the corpse's hat.
4. Next come the Russians come to see the Shah, who also ignores them. The Russians steal the jewels that bedeck the corpse.
5. The play continues along this line, with nation after nation coming on stage and stealing items from the corpse of Iran.
6. Finally, a group of friendly Iranian nationalists point out to the Shah what is happening. They stand the corpse up and put it's hand into that of king.
7. When another group of foreigners now arrives to plunder the corpse, the Shah, taking the corpse's hand into his royal palm, now manages to repel them.

This display of unity between the Shah and the ailing – if not completely dead – body politic of Iran became a very popular image, and the play reportedly had a profound influence on the political awakening Iranian civil society.

Although the *Anjuman-i ukhuwwat* was purportedly apolitical, it was affiliated with the new Democratic Party (*Hezb-e democrate*), and thus regularly put on plays with anti-despotic themes. It also held concerts, where songs (*tasnīf*) on reformist-minded themes by the likes of 'Ārif Qazvīnī were performed, the proceedings of which benefited charitable causes. (Floor 2005, 226)

Aside from the *Anjuman-i ukhuwwat*, another organization that made use of theatre to promote political reform was the National Philanthropic Council of (*Hayāt-e khayriyya mellī*). This organization staged a series of plays on reformist themes, most of which were translated



from Ottoman Turkish. Another organisation was the Intellectual Cultural Association (*Sharkat-e 'Ilmiyya-e Farhangī*) was formed at the same time. It called itself an Association (*Sharkat*) since many of the political *Anjumans* had been banned. Its executive committee consisted of some of the leading Iranian reformist intellectuals of the day, including the likes of Muḥammad ‘Alī Furūghī, Sulaymān Mīrzā Iskandarī, and ‘Abdu’llāh Mawtawfī, some of who wrote or translated the plays that they performed. (Ettehadieh Nezam-Mafi 1992, 131)

In 1911, the National Theatre (*Tā’atir-e Mellī*) was formed, by ‘Abdol- Karim Muhaqqeq which included ‘Alī Naṣr, Maḥmūd Baḥrāmī, Muḥammad ‘Alī Khān Malikī, and ‘Ināyat Shaybānī amongst its members. Using rented accommodation above the Farous printing house on Lālehzār Street, the National Theatre staged satirical comedies, historical tragedies, translations of foreign plays, as well as original Iranian plays. From 1915 to 1917, the National Theatre staged its plays in the hall of the Grand Hotel, where it figured as the most active theatrical group of its day. *Tā’atir-e Mellī* disbanded in 1917 after the eath of ‘Abdol- Karim Muhaqqeq (Talajooy 2013, 388; Floor 225, 226)

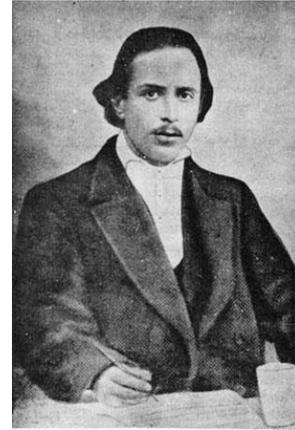
Most of the actors who performed in the plays during this early period were not professionals who acted in dedicated theatres; they were rather, by and large, amateurs who staged their plays in temporary premises. These actors were usually highly educated but still all had day jobs, whether as bureaucrats, politicians or other high-ranking professions, and certainly did not make their living by performing in the theatre. (Zoulfonoun 2006, 82-85; Floor 275, 276) Any profits made from ticket sales from the performances were usually donated to worthy causes, like the support of schools, famine relief, learned publications or occasionally, dedicated to funding political campaigns or parties. Theatre was considered to be means of self-expression for socially committed Iranians, who viewed it as an excellent political art form and a means to enlighten the general public about social issues, to further the development of Iran and to uplift the society morally, socially, politically – and ultimately, economically. (Floor 2005, 227-8)

This socially committed and consciously public spirited attitude extended to the other performing arts as well, such as public music concerts or operettas that were performed by the great names in the realm of classical Persian music, such as the poet and songwriter ‘Ārif Qazvīnī, Colonel ‘Alī-Naghī Vazīrī (known as the ‘Father of modern Iranian Music’), the poet and songwriter Amīr Jāhid, and of course, the great female vocalist Qamar al-Mulūk Vazīrī,

during this period. In addition to the companies and associations mentioned above, the plays of Mīrzāzāda ‘Ishqī should also be cited in this context. (Chelabi 1999, 145-47)



‘Ārif Qazvīnī



Mīrzāzāda ‘Ishqī



Qamar al-Mulūk Vazīrī

In 1932 Shahrzad (aka Reza Kamal) co-founded Kānun-e Şan‘ati Art Group with Golām-‘Ali Fekri, Ḥabīb Ettehadiya, Mohammad Shams, ‘Abd-al-Hosayn Nushin, and Laretta and Maryam Nuri which performed mostly Shahrzad’s translation of French romantic plays, not to mention travelling theatrical troupes from Armenia, Azarbayjan and the Caucasus. (Tolouei 2013).



Early Theater journals

Lālehzār street, being the cultural and artistic centre of Tehran, the capital of early 20th century Persia, was definitely the place to be and to be seen in the 1910 and 1920s. It was also the district of the capital where all the most fashionable and exclusive stores and cafes were located. Some of the fabulous shops and cafes on Lālehzār street included: (Nafisī 2002, 204,285)



Anton Severeign's Photo Shop on Ala al-Dawla St. and Book Shop



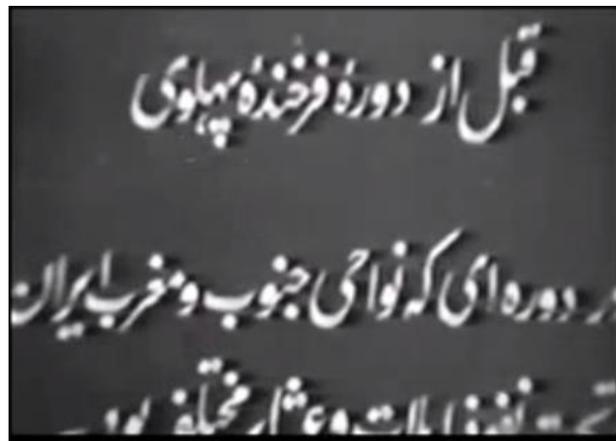
Café Pars and Shops on Lālehzār street

1. Pirayesh, which was the first department store in Iran, comparable in its time to Fortram & Masons in London, or Bergdoff Goodmans in New York, today. Pirayesh specialized in stocking and selling all the finest imported and domestic luxury items – from silver vases, to mink coats and children’s clothing.
2. Another shop was Gīv Textiles, that stocked and sold the finest silks, woollen and delicate fabrics, both domestic and imported. Persian aristocrats and royalty shopped at Gīv Textiles.
3. The Tomijian store specialized in every kind of button possible: it was where you could order designer buttons to be made to order to fit your outfit.
4. The Holland shop was where you could buy the most rare and expensive perfumes, colognes and soaps.
5. The American department store General Mode sold everything from children’s clothing to kitchen appliances. It also featured the first escalator to be seen in Iran.
6. On Rafā’ī street at the north end of Lālehzār could be found the most exclusive barbers, where all the ministers of state would line up to be shaved before they headed off to Parliament.
7. There were also exclusive beauty salons and the most fancy dressmakers and tailors, where one could order the latest Parisian fashions made to measure to the highest standards.
8. The first Law School in Iran, founded by Prime Minister Mushīr al-Dawla, whose degrees were internationally recognized, was also on Lālehzār street.
9. St. Louis – an exclusive private boys school where the sons of aristocrats and prime ministers were educated – was also on Lālehzār street.
10. The most fashionable cafés were there as well, such as:
 - a. Café Fard on the corner of Lālehzār and Rafā’ī streets;
 - b. Café Pars, frequented by famous writers and playwrights, such as Šādiq Hidātyat, Chubak, Rahī Mu‘ayyerī and Parvīz Khātabī, and by musicians such as Maḥjūbī, Tajvīdī and Banān.
 - c. Café Mulī where one could run in to all the famous actors. (Khatibi 1993, 93; Milani 2008,1078-9; Naficy 202, 204)

In sum, anyone who lived in Tehran at the beginning of the 20th century had very good reason to go to Lālehzār street for the best and most exclusive of everything. (Khatibi 1993, 93; Milani 2008, 1078-9; Naficy 202, 204)

V. Lālehzār in the Age of Reza Shah (circa 1921-1941) and Early Pahlavi Period

By as early as 1921, Reza Khan had realized how important and influential the burgeoning Iranian theatre was to the new political landscape of early modern Tehran. Accordingly, he created a separate arts' budget to pay for free-of-charge performances of plays and cinema, so as to help mobilize popular support for his new state projects such as the national army, or the training of the Iranian military by foreign advisors. (Werner 2013, 202) By 1925, it had become the norm for theatrical or cinema performances to be prefaced with patriotic songs and words in praise of Reza Khan and his prime minister. (Naficy 2011, 247)



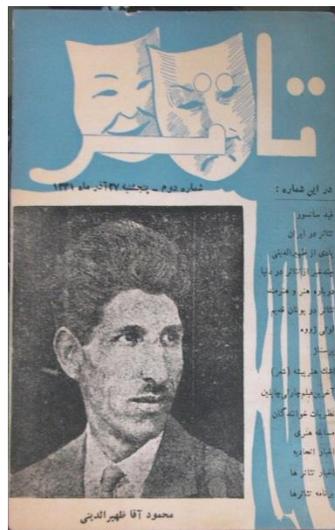
Introduction to Dukhtar-e Lur film with apology for its primitive nature and praise of Reza Shah

However, once the Pahlavi government under Reza Shāh was formally established in 1925, the freedom of expression that playwrights, actors, writers and artists had formerly enjoyed during and after the constitutional period came to an abrupt end. In particular, Reza Shāh was intolerant of any form of satire, unless it was directed at what he considered the defunct and ‘backward’ Qājār monarchy. (Floor, 258)

Nonetheless, despite the rise of censorship in the 1920s, Iranian theatre on Lālehzār Street continued to thrive. There were by now several dedicated premises where plays were performed (some of which doubled as cinemas) located on Lālehzār Street or the streets adjacent or opening on to it:

1. *Tā'atir-e Tihrān* (Tehran Theatre), which changed hands and names several times and was also known as the Naṣr Theatre and the Deghan Theatre at various times.
2. Cyrus Theatre
3. Shahrzad Theatre
4. Firdawsī Theater
5. The Grand Hotel, which had a hall used as a theatre
6. Sa'dī Theatre on Sa'dī street, which was parallel to Lālehzār Street.

In 1917, following the return of the producer, playwright and actor Sayyid Valī Naṣr from his studies in France, he formed the Iranian Comedy Association (*Sharkat-e kumidī-ye Īrān*) troupe, which featured actors such as Bayegan, Namdar, Zahir al-Dini (one of the greatest comedians of the day), Bahrami, Maliki, and Sheybani. They performed in the Grand Hotel, until the high rents forced them to move to another venue. Their troupe continued until 1924, when Valī Naṣr, who was the driving force behind the company left for Europe, due to his work. (Floor 2005, 229)



Comedian Zahir al-Dini

When Nasr returned from Europe in 1926 he re-launched the troupe with the actors, Ḥusayn Khayrkhwāh, Aṣghar Garmsīrī, Ṣādiq Bahrāmī, as well as Muluk Ḥusaynī and Shukūfa – the latter being the first actresses ever to appear on stage in the Muslim world. (Floor 2005, 263) This troupe performed comedies both written by Naṣr himself and Persian translations from (mostly French) playwrights such as Moliere. Nasr's troupe continued to be active until 1930,

when they ceased performances due to increased censorship and financial problems. Nasr remained active in theatre until 1946, when he was appointed Ambassador to India. He was one of the founders of the Tehran Acting school (*Honaristan Honarpishegi Tehran*) in 1939, and the Nasr Theatre in 1940. (Talajooy 2013, 340-1)



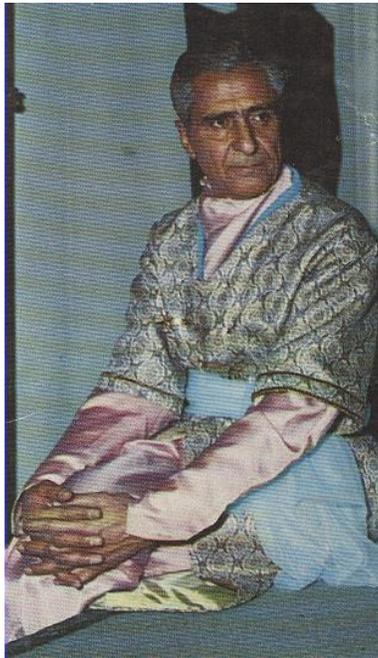
Early Iranian Theatre

Another troupe active on Lālehzār street was the Harper's Troupe (*Jāma'-ye Barbaṭ*), founded in 1926 by Ismā'īl Mihrtāsh with Adīb Khwānsārī, Abū'l-Ḥasan Saba and Shahrzad (Adib 206, 42-3) who had been inspired by the success of Vazīrī's Music Club (*Kulūb-e Mūsīqī*), which organized along its lines. Mihrtāsh was a musician, composer and theatre producer. His *Jāma'-ye Barbaṭ* functioned both as a theatre troupe and music academy, which not only staged plays, but trained actors, singers and musicians. Mihrtāsh was famed for discovering and encouraging talented actors and musicians. Most of the great names in Iranian theatre and music were at some point of their careers his students or protégés. He generously did not charge his students any fees. (Khatibi 1993, 61)



Mihrtāsh's *Jāma'-ye Barbaṭ* Theatre

Many of the great names in the history of Persian music studied under him or played in his *Jāma'-ye Barbaṭ*, including figures such as Mulūk Z̄arabī, Abū'l-Ḥasan Ṣabā, Luṭfu'llāh Majd, Javād Turabī, Faḍlu'llāh Bayegan, 'Abdu'llāh Ḥusayn Nūshīn, 'Abdu'llāh Vahhāb Shahīdī, Ḥusayn Qavāmī, Muḥammad Riḍā Shajārian, Marziya and Illahe. Mihrtāsh's plays were apolitical and mainly based on traditional stories adapted from classical Persian literature. They were usually performed as musicals or operettas and dealt with themes related to modernization, such as education, sanitation, etc. (Navab-Safa 2005, 87-89, Khatibi 1993, 87-89)



Ḥusayn Qavāmi



Farhang Sharif



Abū'l-Ḥasan Şabā

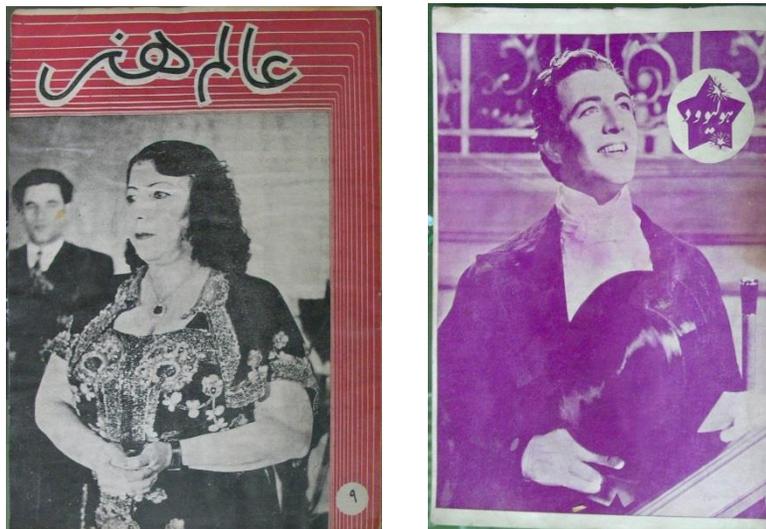


Luṭfu'llāh Majd

Another important name in the history of Persian theatre in the early 20th century is ‘Abdu’llāh Ḥusayn Nūshīn. He is credited – along with Sayyid Valī Naṣr – with being the father of modern theatre in Iran. He had studied theatre in Paris and returned to Iran in 1932. Along the famous Armenian actress Loretta, his wife, and the actor Ḥusayn Khayrkhwāh, Shahrzad, Gholām-‘Ali Fekri, Ḥabīb Etteḥādiya, Moḥammad Shams, and Maryam Nuri they formed a theatre company called the Arts’ Ensemble (*Kānūn-e San‘at*), which had performed in several theatres on Lālehzār street. This company aimed to stage translations of classical Western plays as well as the plays written by Nūshīn, Shahrzad and other members of his ensemble. Having formally studied drama abroad, he insisted on a high level of discipline and professionalism for the members of his troupe. His plays and productions were admired and very well received. He was associated with the Stalinist-Marxist movement popular among the Iranian intellectuals at the time. After the assassination attempt on Muhammad Reza Shah 1949, Noushin was arrested along with other members of the Tudeh Party and given a sentence of 10 years in prison. In 1950 he escaped from prison along with some of his Tudeh colleagues and went into hiding for about 20 months. He was eventually forced to flee Iran for Russia and his brilliant theatrical career was cut short. (Talajooy 2013, 342)

Although Reza Shah himself enjoyed theatre and often attended performances, the extreme censorship and political crackdowns instituted by his regime had a dampening effect on the development of theatre on Lālehzār Street. Despite the censorship of artists, playwrights and actors, however it can be said that Reza Shah was a progressive modernist. He certainly was not a religious conservative and in general considered the theatre, cinema, phonograph recordings and musical concerts to be positive, modernizing influences and encouraged their establishment and expansion. (Marashi 2013, 107-9)

Regarding the evolution of Persian cinema, from the year 1907, the first early silent films imported from France and Russia were shown in cinemas on Lālehzār Street. These films were often accompanied by orchestras and commentaries in Persian. In the beginning they were screened either in the hall above the Faros printers or in the hall of Grand Hotel on Lālehzār street, or in other public or private venues on and around Lālehzār street. (Bahārlū 2010, 85)



An Early Iranian Film Journal *Hollywood* About Western Films

The major event in the development of early Persian cinema was the opening in 1924 of the Grand Cinema in auditorium of the Grand Hotel, which had a seating capacity of 500. Women, however, were not allowed to attend. Soon thereafter, Murtazadī opened the Khurshīd Cinema on Firdawsī St., a short-lived venture that soon closed down. This was followed by Vazīrī's Art Cinema (*Sīnīmā-yi San'at*), which was exclusively for women, at which musicians from his Musical Club (*Kulūb-e Mūsīqī*) accompanied the silent films. This also had to close shortly after opening due to a fire.

Soon thereafter, Vakīlī reserved the balcony of the Grand Cinema in the auditorium of the Grand Hotel for women, where he created separate, segregated entrances for men and women to the cinema there. In the advertisement for the opening of the ladies' section to the auditorium, it clearly dictates that “the staff of the Grand Cinema will not permit immodest women and vulgar young men entrance, and no tickets would be sold to them.” (Issari 1989, 64)



Ladies arriving at Grand Hotel and Grand Hotel Cinema for opening night of *Dukhtār-e lūr*

At the same time, other cinemas gradually opened on Lālehzār street, one of the most important of which was the Maḥak Cinema, that featured imported films from the West and which played Western music during intermissions.

In 1930 the Cinema Artists' Training School (*Parvarishgāh-e artist-e sīnīmā*) was established (the first of its kind in Iran) on Lālehzār street. It initially had two instructors: Ohanian and Sa'īd Nafīsī. There were 18 students enrolled, one of whom (Aḥmad Dehgān) went on to become a major figure in theatre, cinema, politics and publishing on Lālehzār Street. (O'Dell 2013, 330)

The first Iranian feature silent film to be shown was a slapstick comedy called Abī and Rabī in the Maḥak Cinema on Lālehzār Street. It received a warm reception from the audience and having become a financial success, it went on to inaugurate the cinema industry of Iran. In 1933, Abī and Rabī was followed by “The Lūrī Girl” (*Dukhtār-e lūr*), which was the first Persian ‘Talkie Movie’ – Iranian film with audio sound – to be screened in Iran. It was also shown at the Maḥak Cinema on Lālehzār street. (Nafīcy 2011, 232-7)

A new era of Iranian cinema had begun, and Lālehzār Street was where it all was happening. As a result, a fledgling Iranian film industry was inaugurated, which could now begin

to compete with the imported Western films. Some of the best Persian actors from the theatre, along with their famous musicians and vocalists, collaborated with the new film industry. They continued to be active until the advent of the Second World War and the occupation of Iran by the Allies.

VI. The Lalehzar District in the Later Pahlavi Period, 1953-1979

In 1941, in the middle of World War II, Reza Shah Pahlavi (reg. 1925-1941), abdicated in favour of his son Muhammad Reza (reg. 1941- 1979) who at the time was in his early 20s, and had only recently returned from studying abroad. The three great Allied Powers (England, US and Russia) had combined forces and invaded and took over Iran, which they called the Bridge to Peace so as to supply the Russian front against the Nazis from behind. (Katouzian 2009, 229-31)



Allied Soldiers Doing Military Manoeuvres

With the abdication of Reza Shah, the atmosphere completely changed. The Allies were not interested in strict censorship, and anyway, the Iranian judiciary and courts were too weak to pursue and prosecute those who tried to exercise their newfound freedom of speech. For this reason, the 1940s was a very active period again for politics. Literature and the fine arts also flourished, while the performing arts were more or less freely cultivated and developed, in particular the theatre and cinema. (Cook 1949, 410-11)

At this juncture it will be helpful if I place the cultural efflorescence of Iranian Performance Arts in the 1940s through to 1960s in its political context. (Most of the information below is based on interviews conducted with Sa'id Muhammad Behishtī, Masoud Behnoud, Hadi

Nasrullāh Hadādī, Rahmat Majlesī, and Ahmad M. Tabataba'i in Tehran, England and Paris in 2014.)

Many of the young Iranian intellectuals and artists of this period were members of the Tudeh Party (Communist Party of Iran) that had its headquarters on Sa'dī street, parallel to Lālehzār street, and would commonly hang out in the cafés and attend plays in its theatres there. These leftist writers translated a lot of Soviet Russian plays, which were then performed in the theatres on Lālehzār Street. In literature, translations of the writings of Hemingway were very popular, and translations from other languages that particularly highlighted the plight of the working class, were all the rage.

The Iranian intellectual elite, during the later Pahlavi period were largely of Tudeh extraction, commitment and provenance. The contemporary Iranian journalist Masoud Behnoud, who I interviewed for this article, cited Prime Minister Hovayda's (1965-77) quip that the only Iranian who is not a communist and follower of the Tudeh Party is the Shah. Contextualized politically, this meant that since all the playwrights, actors, filmmakers, producers and poets usually belonged to the Tudeh Communist Party, the content and messages purveyed by the performing arts that flourished in Lālehzār street's cinemas and theatres were usually extremely radical and leftist.

On the other hand, playwrights such as 'Abdu'llāh Ḥusayn Nūshīn, who had formally studied drama in France, knew both English and French, and was thus in a league of his own, even though he was a member of the Tudeh party committee. He was often criticized by the dogmatic communist intellectuals for not being radical enough and for staging "decadent" western plays in the Arts' Ensemble (*Kānūn-e San'at*) that he directed and which performed its plays on Lālehzār street.

On the political right, one of the main enemies and rivals of the Tudeh Party was Sayyid Ziya Tabataba'i, who had briefly served as a Prime Minister during Reza Shah's coup in 1921 before he was driven out of the country. He had now returned to Iran after 29 years of exile in Palestine and formed a party to counter the Tudeh with the support of British oil company money. Supporters of Sayyid Ziya and the Tudeh often fought it out on Lālehzār street and in its theatres.

Another opponent of the Tudeh Party intellectuals was Aḥmad Dehgān, who, as I mentioned early, was a major figure in Iranian theatre, cinema, politics and publishing on

Lālehzār street from the 1930s onward. Realizing that the new Pahlavi monarch and government was opposed to leftist thinking of the Tudeh Party communists, he managed by cunning, hook and crook to take over one of the theatres on Lālehzār.

Aḥmad Dehgān became close with Razmara, a very powerful, competent but right-wing, anti-communist general who had played both the British and the Russians at their own game. With Razmara's and Sayyid Ziya's support, Dehgān soon became very powerful and rich. He inaugurated the popular journal "Tehran in Pictures" (*Tīhrān-e musawwar*) which was very popular and very anti-Tudeh. It ran a column by Ḥusayn Rūḥānī called "I was a Russian spy in Iran," which proved very popular and soon became a thorn in the side of pro-Moscow Iranian Tudeh party. Eventually, with the Tudeh sensing that Aḥmad Dehgān stood between them as the main obstacle to their political success, in 1950 they assassinated him in the lobby of his theatre on Lālehzār street.



Cover of *Tīhrān-e musawwar*, 21 March 1953

Three of the main forces patronizing the theatrical scene in Iran in the Lālehzār district had now been eliminated. ‘Abdu’llāh Ḥusayn Nūshīn had gone into exile in Russia, Dehgān has been assassinated and Sayyid Valī Naṣr had moved on to other projects. Some of the most influential and prolific play writes like Mirzāzādeh ‘Ishqī, Shahrzad (Reza Kamali) Ḥabib Meykada, Sayyed Rezā Ṣadr, and Sayyed Mojtabā Ṭabāṭabā’ī, were either assassinated or committed suicide. As a result, a kind of cultural vacuum in the world of theatre arose.

With the Allied forces' occupation of Iran in 1941, Lālehzār street for several years became the favourite haunt of American and British soldiers on leave. In contrast to the Russian soldiers who were unwelcome on Lālehzār street, as they came largely from poor, uneducated and lower-class backgrounds and had no money to spend, the American military personnel had

plenty of money to spend and, to a slightly lesser degree than the British soldiers, were generous patrons of the establishments on Lālehzār street.



Allied Soldiers Frequenting Bars on Lālehzār street

During this same period, Iran was also full of Polish refugees, who were enlisted into the Allied forces in Iran and many of the Polish women found jobs working in the shops, cafes and cinemas of Lālehzār.

The theatres there no longer showed serious plays, but staged much lighter comedies, musicals and burlesque acts. The ambiance of Lālehzār began to change gradually. Cabarets opened with song and dance routines, which served food and alcohol, and the atmosphere became consequently much less family-friendly. (Nettl 1972, 220)



Adds for Cabarets and Burlesque Theatres

Simultaneously, commercial cinema took off with the dubbing of Western – mostly American – films into Persian, and a huge efflorescence in the domestic Iranian film production occurred. Most of the new Iranian movies were comedies or dramas filmed in urban settings, with obligatory fist-fight scenes and song-and-dance musical routines. This genre of Iranian

films of the 1940s became known as Film-Farsi, and they were very popular with the working class who came to be the dominant clientele on Lālehzār street. (Talatof 2011, 12; Milani 2008, 2002)



Posters advertising Film-Farsi

In the mid-1950s, a very colourful character named Muḥammad Karīm Arbāb came on the scene, who was to have a strong influence on the cultural transformation of Lālehzār street.

There was an alleyway on Lālehzār street called Kūcha Mellī. The alleyway was a dead-end and at its end was a house that blocked the entrance to Firdawsī St. In the alley were a couple of cabarets, cinemas as well as bars and cafés, giving the alleyway a very bad reputation and making it known as the centre for all the scandalous and lowlife activity in Tehran. This alleyway was the haunt of a group of young urchins, who survived by cunning, trickery and deception. The doormen from the cinemas on Kūcha Mellī allowed them to sleep in the cinemas after closing.



Kūcha Mellī Circa 1950

As their parentage were unknown, they all adopted colourful names for themselves like Aṣadu'llāh Siyāh (Black Lion of God), Ḥasan Rizeh (Little Hasan), Ḥasan Iblīs (Hasan the Devil) and Muḥammad Khūshgela (Pretty-boy Mohammad). They knew everyone's business on the street and all their secrets. When this band of urchins grew up and became teenagers, not having a permanent home, they began squatting in the house at the end of the alley. They were notorious for their wild and unscrupulous behaviour. When owner of the house came back and tried to expel them, they threatened his children at their schools and he saw he could not win so he gave up trying.

But the big break came to this band of urchins when they took control of one of the main theatres on Kūcha Mellī by way of a ruse. In the theatre, they staged popular entertainment featuring dancing girls which turned out to be a great financial success. For the first time in Iran, performances with scantily clothed dancers and racy burlesque types of entertainment were introduced. Many of the other theatres, which were struggling financially, eventually followed suit.



Add for Moulin Rouge Nightclub



Tavus, a Nightclub Dancer

Within eight years Muḥammad Khūshgela had transformed himself into Muḥammad Karīm Arbāb. He now owned 60% of Kūcha Mellī, plus three cinemas and two cabarets on Lālehzār street. Furthermore, he had a monopoly on bootleg whisky imports into Tehran. He had become virtually the godfather of Lālehzār.

In my interview with Masoud Behnoud, he described how early in his career as a young journalist, he had gone to interview Muḥammad Karīm Arbāb. Since at this time the house at the end had been torn down, Kūcha Mellī was no longer a dead-end street, there being an entrance to Firdawsī street on one end and Lālehzār street on the other. All of Kūcha Mellī was occupied by cafes, cinemas, cabarets and liquor stores, such that it seemed that no houses on the street existed at all. Mas‘ūd Bihnūd related how when he found the number of the address on the Kūcha Mellī alleyway that he had been given, he arrived at a doorway that opened on to a house with a large courtyard where cases of whisky were stacked high. He was taken up a staircase, went through a passageway into another house. He was then escorted along another passageway into a third house. All along the way were rooms in which people were sitting at desks, counting money and putting it in safes. Finally they came to a doorway, before which, standing on either side, were two burly armed guards who frisked him. He entered the room to find Muḥammad Karīm Arbāb sitting behind a huge desk dressed in a white suit. The entire scenario was something out of an Al Capone film, as Masoud Behnoud related. He described Arbāb as a kind-hearted and warm man who wouldn’t hurt anyone. Behnoud and Arbāb got on very well, and the young journalist and the godfather of Lālehzār soon struck up a friendship that lasted several decades. Arbāb’s business activities, Behnoud relates, were not solely confined to Iran. He went into partnership

with a theatrical agency in the U.K. and used to supply dancers and entertainers from the U.K. to all over the Middle East.

In the early 1960s, the American blockbuster film *Pocketful of Miracles* came out. It was immediately dubbed into Persian and played in the cinemas all over Iran. The film portrayed a rags-to-riches success story, and tells how a wealthy business man periodically bought an apple from a local street peddler to bring him good luck. Then when he finds out she needs help, he goes to great lengths to help her. Arbāb saw this film as the story of his life and decided to finance a Persian version of the film.

The film that Muḥammad Karīm Arbāb financed—paying ten times the going rate—was entitled ‘The Beggars of Tehran’ (*Gidāyān-e Tīhrān*) and featured some of the most famous stars of the day such as the actor Fardīn, singers Pūrān and Gūgūsh, the dancer Jamīla, music by the acclaimed composer and violinist Parvīz Yāḥaqqī, and lyrics sung by the great vocalist Īraj. Arbāb closed down his famous nightclub Moulin Rouge for an entire week to film its nightclub scenes. In the beginning there is a short speech on the ethics of beggars that is reportedly played by Arbāb himself. Arbab finally achieved everything he had wanted in life and died at the young age of 43.



Nadia, Cabaret Dancer

By the early 1970s, Lālehzār street had become transformed into the main district in Tehran for Film Farsī cinemas, burlesque dance shows, cabarets and liquor shops. All the fancy, high class shops had either closed down or moved uptown, and had been replaced by stores selling phonograph records and gadgets. The intellectuals who frequented Lālehzār’s cafes and

theatres had departed to other parts of the city; others had left Tehran or gone abroad. Bruno Nettl described the situation on Lālehzār street in 1969 as follows,

Popular music in the various Persian styles . . . is most typically heard in large music halls which in Tehran are concentrated in one district whose center is Lalezar Avenue. These music halls, in contrast to the modern night clubs, are patronized almost exclusively by men and each of them has a clientele by an occupation. (Nettl 1972, 220)

VII. Conclusion: Lalezar Today (1979 and After)

The question here arises: How was it that Lālehzār street became transformed from the most fashionable, chic, influential and high-class street in Tehran into a district notorious for Film Farsī cinemas, burlesque dance shows, cabarets, liquor shops and working men's cafes? At least five different theories have been advanced in this respect:

1. It was all the fault of the dire influence of Muḥammad Karīm Arbāb's pioneering of popular and burlesque types of entertainment.
2. It was all the fault of crass, hard-drinking, womanizing – mostly American of course – soldiers.
3. It was a purposely and secretly executed plan by the Pahlavi government to marginalize a neighbourhood that the state regarded as home to political and social troublemakers.
4. Its transformation was prompted by the disappearance of the artists, writers and playwrights who were the intellectual forces behind its flourishing and success as a cultural centre of Iran during the mid-twentieth century.
5. The decline of Lālehzār street as the centre for the 'high' performing arts in Iran was simply due to rival organizations and centres that opened up in Tehran and other cities at this time such as the City Theatre (*Tā'atir-e shahr*), the Centre for the Preservation and Promotion of Iranian Music (*Markaz-e ḥifẓ va 'asha'a-ye mūsīqī*), the Centre for the Promotion of Thought for Youth (*Markaz-e pavriš-e fikr javānān*), the annual Shiraz Arts Festival, the National Iranian Radio, or the merging of the National Iranian Radio with the Television (NIRT) in 1967.

Although in my opinion I think it is safe to say that it was all of the above factors combined, I should like to emphasize that the Iranian revolution had little or nothing to do with the decline of Lālehzār street as a cultural centre, since from nearly a decade before 1979 the street had already been utterly transformed. Nonetheless, despite those transformations, in the collective memory of early modern Iran, Lālehzār street has left many fond memorable moments behind for Iranians hailing from every strata of society.



After the revolution of 1979, all of the cabarets and liquor stalls, most of the cinemas and some of the theatres were all burned or trashed. The *Tā'atir-e Pars* (Pars Theatre) continued to function after the revolution down to recent years. However, directly after the revolution the only performances staged there were stories of the revolution, and after that primarily Blackface Comedy (*Siyāh-bāzī*). However, as the audiences dwindled and the buildings were not kept up, the Pars Theatre in 2005 was finally closed and the Naṣr Theatre shut down in 2011. (Behnoud 2005)



Nasr Theatre, 1970's and 1980's

Today on Lālehzār street, one is bombarded by the hustle and bustle of a busy wholesale market for everything electrical, with motorcycles and hand-pulled carts navigating the streets and the pavement and flashing and blinking lights that everywhere advertise electrical equipment.



Kūcha Mellī and Passage and Sīhrāh-e Lālehzār 2014

All the famous theatres, fancy hotels and popular cinemas have vanished and been transformed into commercial passages, warehouses and parking lots. Amid all this noise and clatter, however, one may occasionally see a sign or billboard or crumbling façade that reminds one of what a fascinating and influential place Lālehzār street once was.



“Passage” Grand Hotel and the Gateway to the Etehadiyya House 2014

The end

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