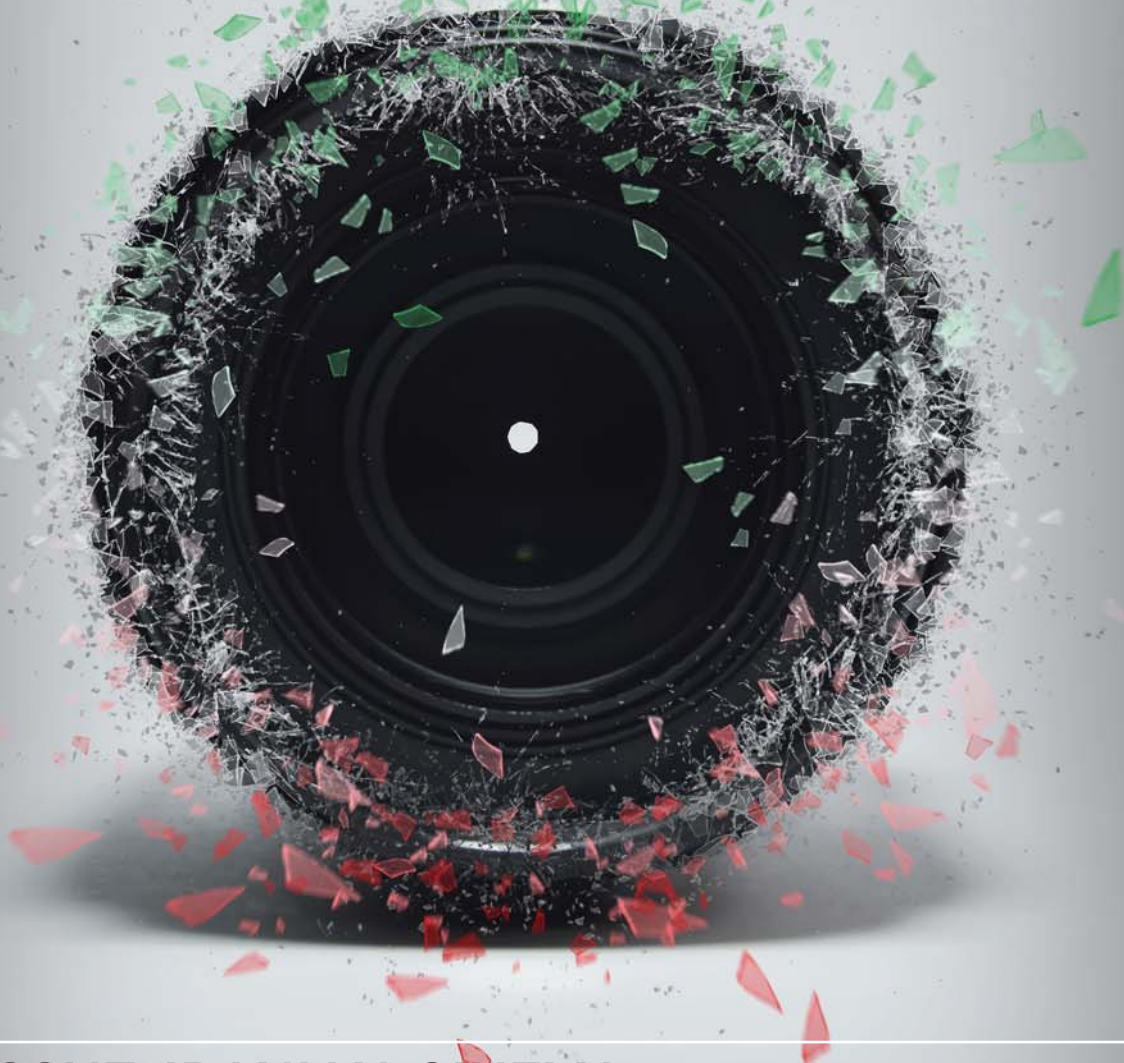


The Middle East in London

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THIS ISSUE: IRANIAN CINEMA • Indian camera, Iranian heart • The literary and dramatic roots of the Iranian New Wave • Dystopic Tehran in 'Film Farsi' popular cinema • Parviz Sayyad: socio-political commentator dressed as village fool • The noir world of Masud Kimiai • The resurgence of Iranian 'Sacred Defence' Cinema • Asghar Farhadi's cinema • New diasporic visions of Iran • PLUS Reviews and events in London



Sam Beklik, *The Eye*. Specially designed for the 'Iranian Cinema' issue of *The Middle East in London*
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The Middle East in London

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Roya Arab describes the indelible mark Parviz Sayyad left on Iranian cinema

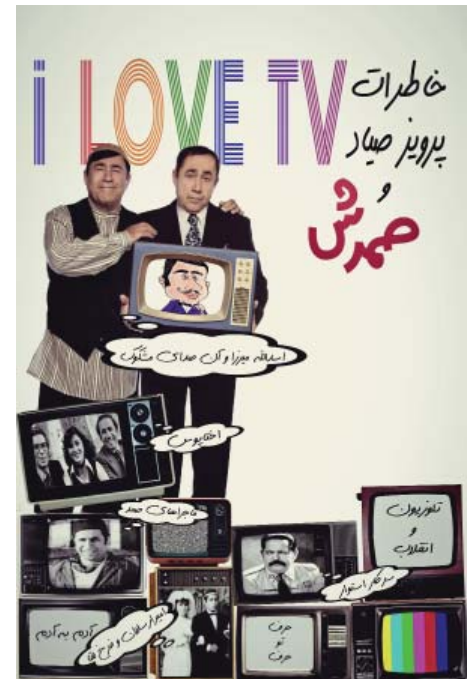
Parviz Sayyad: socio-political commentator dressed as village fool

Samad is arguably Iran's favourite comic character, born out of a nameless village fool played by Parviz Sayyad on the Iranian Television series *Sarkar Ostovar* (1964). Hilarious, somewhat foolhardy and lovable, Samad made his way through eight highly successful films laced with social observations and critique, as he moved from village to city, attended school, returned from war, became homeless, fell in love and turned into an artist amongst other transformative tales. Samad proved to be Sayyad's most efficacious body of work and evoked film character.

Sayyad was born in Lahijan in 1939. He began his career writing and acting in the theatre before performing alongside other theatrical luminaries in Iran's first television series *Amir Arsalan*. His film career began with the role of Hassan in Iran's first musical, *Hassan Kachal* (1970), written/directed by Ali Hatami. The lengthy opening credits with rhythmic underscoring and unusual pauses pace the scene of Hassan's mother enticing him out of the house with apples. Bald Hassan meets Chelgis, who has been kidnapped by an ogre, and sets off on an odyssey as a romantic hero. Infused with varied musical vignettes paying homage to performance traditions from around the globe, the sung

dialogues are largely accompanied with Persian drumming.

Besides a successful commercial film career, Sayyad was a persistent supporter of 'Cinemaye Motefavet' ('alternative cinema'), which sought to go beyond commercial cinema, now largely grouped as 'New Wave' and, post-1979, associated with the likes of Kiarostami, Panahi & Farhadi. *Cinemaye Motefavet* was initiated and developed by Farrokh Ghaffari (film intellectual who opened an influential film club 1949, and set up the 'National film archive'), Farrokhzad (poet and realist filmmaker), Bahram Beyzai (literary, theatrically nuanced and considered sonic landscapes), and the singular vision of Shahid Saless; other contributors include film-directors Parviz Kimiavi, Bahman Farmanara and Kamran Shirdel. Dariush Mehrjui's remarkable film *Gav* (*The Cow*, 1968), with Hormoz Farhat writing minimal amounts of music for the score using only a handful of instruments and Masud Kimiai's memorable *Qaysar* (1968), with its melodic



Poster advertising Parviz Sayyad's *One Man Show* (2018)

and highly orchestrated, influential score by Esfandiar Monfaredzadeh, provided, respectively, the high art and artful commercial vistas of *Motefavet* films.

Sayyad first became involved in *Motefavet* films in 1965. In 1972 he produced and acted in two Ali Hatami films. *Khastegar* (*The Suitor*, 1972), written and directed by Hatami and scored by Monfaredzadeh, utilises Western art and Iranian classical instruments. It follows a man's lifelong pursuit of a feckless, selfish woman who lets him down time and again, at one point leaving him for her singing teacher; the film concludes with a tragic, poignant scene. Sayyad then produced and acted in Hatami's *Sattar Khan* (1972) about an important revolutionary leader in Tabriz during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, which eventually led to the overthrow of the Qajar Dynasty. Fereydoun Naseri's score employs solely Western art instruments, with one musical celebratory scene showcasing an array of Persian instruments.

Besides a successful commercial film career, Sayyad was a persistent supporter of 'Cinemaye Motefavet' ('alternative cinema'), which sought to go beyond commercial cinema

I mentioned to Sayyad that the themes – urban/rural, rich/poor, modernity/tradition – represented by arthouse and some commercial films had helped nurture the Revolution. He responded ‘I wanted change not revolution...’

Sayyad then acted in *Asrar ganj dareheye jenni* (*The Ghost Valley’s Treasure Mysteries*, 1974), one of only two feature films made by Ebrahim Golestan. In it he played an arrogant villager whose financial gains – from treasure he discovers and sells – bring much woe. A French horn appears in the village, amidst other exotic objects, showcasing his fall from grace. The film has a sparse score using Western and Iranian instruments by Farhad Meshkat and contains a surreal celebratory scene with a motley crew atop a hill with song and dance. A highly allegorical film about buried artefactual treasure leading to ruin, the film could be read as referring to Iran’s wealth of natural resources and their misuse, with some commenting that the character stood for Mohammad Reza Shah. In the same year Sayyad produced *Still Life* (1974), written and co-directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. In 1977 he co-produced *Dayereh Mina* (*The Cycle*) by Mehrjui, with Farhat’s minimal musical touch, unapologetic and acerbic social commentary focussing on a blood bank harvesting and selling the blood of drug addicts and street lowlifes to hospitals with relevance beyond Iran, for at the time of writing this essay, the USA finally admitted to supplying bad blood to the UK in the 1980s.

During the last few years before the 1979 Revolution, Sayyad wrote, directed and produced *Bon Bast* (*Dead End*, 1977), in which a girl presumes the man appearing regularly at the end of her street is a suitor and fantasises endlessly about love, only realising in the final scene that he was in pursuit of her politically active brother. The film has no score, in the vein of Iran’s ‘New Wave’. However, *Bon Bast* contains a spate of pre-composed Western songs emanating from electronic devices in private and public settings. Sparingly and intentionally placed, these, along with posters of musicians including Beethoven and Eno, provide narrative and cultural underpinning. He followed this up with directing and co-producing the highest-grossing pre-revolution film, *Dar Emtehad Shab* (*Along The Night*, 1978) in which Googoosh – a successful singer and actress since the 1960s – plays a popular

singer pursued by a young handsome fan. Arguably risqué in subject matter and its portrayal of scenes of a sexual nature, the film implied the existence of a corrupt power circle of elites operating in Iran. One of a few dozen Iranian films made in colour pre-1979, it is scored by Mojtaba Mirzadeh and infused with musical scenes set in night clubs where Googoosh performs a selection of her popular songs.

Sayyad left Iran shortly after 1979. His film, *The Mission* (1983) was one of the first films made by an Iranian outside Iran about the exilic condition post-1979. It depicts death squads deployed by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to assassinate oppositional agitators and follows an assassin in pursuit of a former official in the Shah’s regime. By chance he saves his target from a mugging in the NY subway and realises he now works as a cleaner and not what the IRI’s regime made him out to be. The film has no score but is punctuated with a live musical scene eliciting heated debate about music in Iranian society. In 1984 he made *Trial of Cinema Rex* as an attempt to make sense of the tragedy of the Rex Cinema fire (August 1978) which took many lives and was a major turning point in the lead up to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime. Sayyad has since made and appeared in various films, more recently providing the voice of Amir for the animated film *Roxanna* (2018).

Sayyad has had a multi-dimensional career; he is an extraordinarily talented man who made us laugh, cry and contemplate through writing, directing, producing and acting in a wide range of films and television series. Today, aged 80, he is still touring his one-man theatre show. Watching Iranian films with a focus on film

music, Sayyad initially piqued my interest when I saw him in Iran’s first musical. After viewing more of his films, the nuanced use and portrayal of music – from his depiction of an Iranian pop star’s world in 1978 to discussions of music, its validity and place in Iranian society in 1983 – a lot of his films echo the ongoing dialogue and dialectic between music and the socio-political context. As an artist who has collaborated on art and commercial films, I mentioned to Sayyad that the themes – urban/rural, rich/poor, modernity/tradition – represented by arthouse and some commercial films had helped nurture the Revolution. He responded ‘I wanted change not revolution...these were concerns expressed in films anywhere in the world where the process of agriculture to industry was taking place’. Whilst Sayyad is somewhat remiss in acknowledging the talents of post-Revolution Iranian filmmakers, we should not overlook his valuable contributions to Iranian cinema.

Roya Arab recorded music with various artists in the 1990s before undertaking an Archaeology BA and MA (IoA, UCL). She is currently a PhD candidate at City, University of London studying Iranian film music and what it reveals about ongoing dialogue and dialectic between society and music/musicians



Roya Arab (left) and Parviz Sayyad (right) at ‘Three films from Parviz Sayyad’, Ealing Green Met (Theatre room) in London, United Kingdom, July 2018. Photograph by Ali Akbar Arab.