

Presenting Ethnic Dance on the Stage

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As a choreographer and dancer who also does field research, I find myself wanting to bring to the stage the beauty and excitement of the dancing I have experienced in the field. I realize, of course, that a great part of the fascination with ethnic dance comes from its context – the village, tribe, or family home. To bring to an audience the thrill of “being there” is my hope as I plan my choreographies.

In presenting ethnic dance, we must somehow balance the competing demands of authenticity (in the form of an accurate re-creation of the tribe or village setting), and a presentation that is both entertaining and aesthetically pleasing. Over the years, I have developed a two-step process for transferring ethnic dance from its original context to the concert stage; the purpose of this article is to describe this process.

First, I summarize my criteria for determining when a dance form is suitable for staging. I then propose some guidelines for reconciling the requirements of the original dance form with the limitations of the staging process. I then discuss, as both a scholar and an artist, how I apply this process in my own choreographic work, using as an example my staging of dances of the Qashqa’i, a Turkic-speaking tribe who live in southwest Iran.

1. Should it be attempted?

Before considering how one might stage a particular ethnic dance, it is important first to determine whether or not the particular dance form is suitable for staging, by considering questions such as the following:

- **Will the whole effect – dance, music, and costume – be of interest to the intended audience?**

For the choreographer who has also done field research, a major attraction of ethnic dance comes from the recollection of the experience of being in the tribe or village. Not all of this experience can be brought to the stage, so it is important to separate out what can be staged from what can be experienced only in context. Then an evaluation can be made of how interesting the material as whole might be to the intended audience. The external attractions of the dance – the music, costume, and the dance itself – must be sufficient to hold an audience’s interest.

- **Can it be faithfully represented within the limitations of the staging process?**

- *Compression of performance time.* Rituals, court dances, and participatory dances usually take much longer than the average Western audience will sit still for. Can the length of the dance be compressed into a reasonable performance length?
- *Purchase or reproduction of costumes.* Part of the thrill of ethnic dance is in the costumes. Can these be purchased, or can reasonably accurate or representative copies be made?
- *Availability of musical instruments and instrumentalists, or availability of suitable recorded music.* Can the musical contribution to the ambiance be recreated, either via live performance, or by suitable recordings?

- **Can both music and dance be reasonably performed by the available performers?**

Not all forms of dance, however well-loved, are accessible to all dancers. Some techniques or styling are simply too difficult for a given dancer or musician, however skilled they may be in other styles of dance and music.

2. Guidelines for reconciling the requirements of the original dance form with the limitations of the staging process

Having determined that a dance is indeed suitable for the stage, I employ guidelines such as the following for translating a dance from its original context to the concert stage:

- **Aesthetics**

A good choreography should reflect both the aesthetic ideal of the original practitioners, and of the choreographer. In the original context, it may be that all who *can* participate, *may*, and therefore a wide spectrum of dance skills may be present. For a stage performance, however, I believe that one should strive to present what is considered the *best* of the dance styles within the range of what is considered authentic. I have found that people within an ethnic group have a strong sense that some dancers are better than others, and can point to those whom they consider exemplars; this is true even if there is not agreement on which particular individuals are the best. Of course, what an outsider may consider beautiful may not be the same as what is considered beautiful by the original practitioners in the tribe or village. While trying to make the most beautiful dancing, I prefer not to stray far from the original aesthetic.

In my view, it is not necessary to have dancers who all look alike, are the same size and shape, and who move alike. An interesting aspect of ethnic dance in its original setting is the variety of participants, their different ways of dancing the same step, and their profusion of ideas concerning what it means to “dance together”. I believe in presenting a certain amount of such “diversity” in my stage choreographies, as I believe that it can be aesthetically very interesting.

- **Composition**

- Performance time must usually be collapsed and events compressed, relative to the original setting. Some ways of doing that are effective, and some are not. I think of this as analogous to the treatment of time in motion pictures.
- Most dancing has “organic” notions of movement and spatial relationships of multiple dancers. I believe that the most successful and distinctive choreographies of ethnic dancing are those that primarily exploit those notions as the basis for choreographic formations, rather than imposing our own ideas of geometric patterns which, while pleasant, reveal nothing about the original context. To design floor patterns that reflect what is done in the original context requires a deep knowledge of the culture and its context for dancing, but the result is well worth the effort.

- **Costuming**

- Costuming should be accurate, but must also be beautiful. Appropriate and authentic fabrics and cut should be used to the greatest extent possible, keeping in mind that considerations of color are important for the overall stage picture. I also believe that the cut of the fabric can be slightly modified, so as to improve the dancer’s

- appearance on stage; e.g., darts and gussets can be employed in moderation, in order to give more attractive lines to the costumes.
- In many cultures, men (more often than women) have given up their traditional dress for more European-style clothing; yet some do still retain these garments and wear them for special occasions, or dress small boys in them. Where it makes sense to do so, I prefer to put male dancers in my choreographies in traditional dress.
- **Chronological and geographic integrity**
 - I believe that – within reason – chronological and geographic integrity should be maintained; i.e., the choreography should represent a single ethnic group, a single location, and a single time period, rather than a mixture of time periods or locations or ethnic groups in a single choreography in a way that is not done in the original setting (an exception might be a grand finish to a series of choreographies). I place particular emphasis on the correct matching of music, costume, and dance; one often finds that, having evolved together, there are subtle linkages that contribute to the distinct aesthetic of an area, which becomes degraded by “mismatching”. The most common offender is music; many performers choose music that represents a time-period much more recent (either in terms of instruments, instrumental style and technique, or simply more recent composition) than that depicted by their costumes; the result is that the costumes do not “move” correctly to the selected music. Another common offender is fabric, which can have the same result.
- **Music**
 - My preference is always for live music on original instruments, but this is not always possible. At least the recordings should be of good quality, a suitable length, perhaps with a variety of rhythms and tempi, where appropriate, to increase the interest for the audience.

3. **An example**

Having presented some criteria for determining whether a dance form is suitable for stage presentation, and establishing some guidelines for staging ethnic dance, I would now like to illustrate these through a specific example from my field work: a choreography depicting dances of the Qashqa’i tribe of southwestern Iran.

I selected this example for the following reasons:

- I had significant access to the original material in its original context, and have actually gone through the process described above.
- Everything for the production was built “from scratch”, including costumes (using both original and locally-acquired fabrics), blocked felt hats, and musical instruments.
- **Background on the Qashqa’i**

The Qashqa’i are a Turkish-speaking group of tribal nomads in southwest Iran. They herd animals (mostly sheep and goats) and in order to provide adequate pasturage for their animals, they move back and forth between two sets of quarters – one for summer and one for winter. This is an extremely difficult life; they are at the mercy of the weather, and have long had trouble

with the government officials, who prefer to deal with people who stay in one place and can be taxed. The book Nomad¹ describes this life.

The context in which I observed dancing among the Qashqa'i was at weddings during the summer, when the weather is good and it is possible for them to travel the long distances that separate families' camp-sites.

Qashqa'i women's dances are deceptively simple-looking in execution. There are two main types, *aghor haley*, or "heavy dance", and *lakke haley*, or "light dance". All are done to a 6/8 rhythm, the *aghor haley* being slower than the *lakke haley*. The women carry two scarves, one in each hand; the arm movements of the dance incorporate these scarves with wrist flicks that accentuate the arm movements. Footwork is simple, and not emphasized; the key element of the dance is the movement of the skirts and scarves, which varies significantly between different dances; see figure 1.

The most characteristic Qashqa'i men's dance type – called *čub bazi*² in Persian, and *how oynamak* in Qashqa'i Turkish – are rather more difficult to execute. When I was first learning about the Qashqa'i from the son of a Qashqa'i *khan* (tribal leader), he explained to me that he never danced, because it was too dangerous. "Dangerous!" I exclaimed, "How can dancing be dangerous?" He then described the dance to me as a contest between two men, one with a short stick who tries to hit the shin of the other, who uses a long pole to try and stop him. The attacker gets one hit; if he misses, someone else rushes in to take his place; see figure 2. And this is done completely in time with a 7/16 rhythm! It was a real challenge to choreograph a stick fight like this, so that it looked spontaneous, kept with the music, and looked dangerous at the same time as being perfectly safe!

- **Case study – Should Qashqa'i dance be attempted on the western stage? If so, how ought the requirements of the original dance form be reconciled with the limitations of the staging process?**

I will now examine Qashqa'i dance and my choreography, in light of the criteria and guidelines described above.

- **Will the whole effect be of interest to the intended audience?** I believed that the whole effect of a Qashqa'i wedding scene, the wailing of the *karana* (reed horn), the driving rhythms of the *naqqareh* (a pair of drums, played with sticks), and the gorgeous costumes, could indeed form a most interesting spectacle. The emphasis would be on the spectacle as a whole, rather than on the virtuosity of individual performers.
- **Can it be faithfully represented within the limitations of the staging process?**
 - *Compression of performance time.* Dancing at a Qashqa'i wedding goes on for many hours. But, since the dances are very repetitive, I believed that a representative portion of them could be presented in a very short time.
 - *Purchase or reproduction of costumes.* Qashqa'i clothing has for decades been made of modern fabrics with little or no handwork involved. The cuts are simple, and easily reproduced.

¹ Beck, Lois. *Nomad: a year in the life of a Qashqa'i tribesman in Iran*. University of California Press, 1991.

² See the entry "Čub Bazi" (written by Robyn Friend) in the *Encyclopedia Iranica*. The *Encyclopedia* is edited by Ehsan Yar-Shater.

- *Availability of musical instruments and instrumentalists, or availability of suitable recorded music.* The AMAN International Music and Dance Company, who had commissioned this choreography, performs only to live music, and has on staff many gifted and experienced musicians. With direction from my husband, a specialist in the music of Iran, they were able both to reproduce the instruments, which were unobtainable from Iran, and to perform the music.
- **Can both music and dance be reasonably performed by the available performers?** Because the dances involved no difficult techniques or movements, the greatest challenge in training the dancers was to get them to look like Qashqa'is while dancing, but I believe we did succeed to a satisfactory degree. The musicians also did an adequate job in reproducing the instruments and the music; their performance contributed to make the ambience as close to being in the tribe as the stage would allow.
- **Aesthetics.** Qashqa'i women's dances are executed in a simple open circle formation, uncomplicated footwork with improvised dance steps, and in many ways are "uninteresting" to the casual observer. It was a challenge to make them interesting, while remaining true to the aesthetic of the original. In addition to my fieldwork, which gave me a sense of the variety of dance styles possible, I consulted with several Qashqa'is regarding who they considered to be the best dancers. Thus, I was able to reproduce closely the ideal dancer, and to include a variety of acceptable styles of execution. I also wanted the dances to appear improvised while maintaining enough uniformity so that they didn't look chaotic. I achieved this in the women's dances by having groups of women, spaced throughout the line, doing the same movements, while a second and third group, also evenly spaced throughout the line, did their own sets of movements. In other sections of the choreography the women dance in unison, as sometimes occurs among the Qashqa'i. The men's dances were more or less completely improvised, both music and dance, with some ground rules about which men danced together and in what order, what their approximate movements would be, and what would be the cue for beginning the next segment in the dance. In the finale, I diverged the farthest from the original by having the men dance together with the women, which is not often done by the Qashqa'i, and by breaking the circle into staged formations, ending with all the dancers facing downstage. This is not a traditional feature of Qashqa'i dance, but I believe it worked well on the stage for a few seconds of finale.
- **Composition.** I felt that by presenting at least some of the many different Qashqa'i rhythms and dances in short segments a representative slice of Qashqa'i wedding dances could be adequately portrayed in a compressed time period, without either tiring the audience or doing an injustice to the original dance and music. Thus, in order to make the suite of a reasonable length, I shortened each dance, which at a Qashqa'i wedding could go on for 30 minutes each or more, to just one or two minutes each.
- **Costuming.** I believe that Qashqa'i costumes are especially suitable for staging, because of their fantastic appearance and broad range of colors, and also because the originals have long been made from modern fabrics, with little handwork, making accurate reproductions possible. The costumes, both originals, and my designs reproduced by the AMAN costumers, are depicted in the accompanying photos. As you can see, the women's costume consists of layers of skirts, an over-shirt, and various headgear and accessories; see figure 3. All are cut in straight lines with no

significant tailoring. The beauty comes from the clash of color and texture, and the sheer volume of the skirts. I had brought home a complete woman's costume from Iran in 1975, and used that, together with photographs and a book about Iranian folkloric costumes³, in order to reproduce a complete set for AMAN. Using color photographs and my field notes, we selected a simple palette of colors: pink, saffron, turquoise, purple, green, and red. Each woman's costume was made using a unique combination of these colors, so that all the costumes were different, while appearing similar. All of the material was purchased in the Los Angeles area, except for the "crown" scarves, Azerbaijani block-printed rayon scarves which I had purchased in Tehran.

The men's costumes – consisting of loose pants, a collarless shirt, a long-sleeved coat with a sash, and a hat – were built on patterns found in the same costume book, on photographs, and on consultations with a Qashqa'i *khan* who lives near Los Angeles. The coats were all unique, while the shirts, hats, pants and shoes were mostly the same. The hats were the biggest problem; they had to be hand blocked, in order to reproduce the characteristic Qashqa'i man's hat; see figures 2 and 4.

- **Chronological and geographic integrity.** Integrity was maintained by depicting one tribe's dances for a single time period (the 1970's), including music and costumes exactly as I had seen them in Iran in 1975. The only divergence from this was in placing the men in their traditional dress, which, as you can see in figure 2, is no longer worn much. I felt, however, that because of the spectacle of the women's costumes, which would far overshadow men in jeans and simple shirts, and because of the beauty of the men's costumes, it would be preferable to include them. This is only a slight divergence from reality, since Qashqa'i men were regularly wearing their traditional clothing until earlier in the 20th century, and were still wearing them during the 1970's on special occasions.
- **Music.** Perhaps the most difficult part of mounting the suite was reproducing the musical instruments. The drums were not so hard; photographs of actual Qashqa'i drums, *naqqareh*, were used as a basis for designing large clay pots commissioned from a ceramicist. The horn, *karana*, was made using part of a decorative brass horn made in India for the bell; an instrument maker turned a wooden section for the main tube of the instrument. The reed, composed of one reed inside the other, was designed based on similar instruments from the Persian Gulf area. One of the most difficult aspects of the music was that I wanted it to sound improvised, as it is performed in the tribe, while also requiring specific musical cues to signal changes in the dances. This was achieved by arranging a score based on my field recordings; that is, my husband transcribed actual Qashqa'i musicians' improvisations, and pieced these together into sections of the appropriate length. He then taught the instrumental technique to the AMAN musicians, and I choreographed to this score.

4. **Conclusion**

I believe we succeeded in our goal of reproducing Qashqa'i tribal dances on the stage, both from the point of view of aesthetics and authenticity. The choreography received good reviews from the press, and my Qashqa'i friends were so pleased that they sent videotapes of one of AMAN's performances all over the world! A video of my Qashqa'i choreography is available on my web site (robynfriend.com); you can judge for yourself if the results met the criteria.

³ Siyahpour, Jalil. *Pushak-e il-ha* ("Clothing of the Tribes"). Publishing House of the Ministry of Culture and Arts. Tehran. Not dated.



Figure 1. Qashqa'i women dancing.
From the photo archive of the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Arts, Tehran.



Figure 2. Qashqa'i men dancing *how oynamak* at a wedding, Bonrud, Iran, 1978.
From the book "The Qashqa'i people of Southern Iran", UCLA Museum of Cultural History pamphlet series, #14, 1981.



Figure 3. The AMAN women dancers rehearsing the author's Qashqa'i choreography, 1989, in a high-school auditorium near Los Angeles.
Photo by the author.

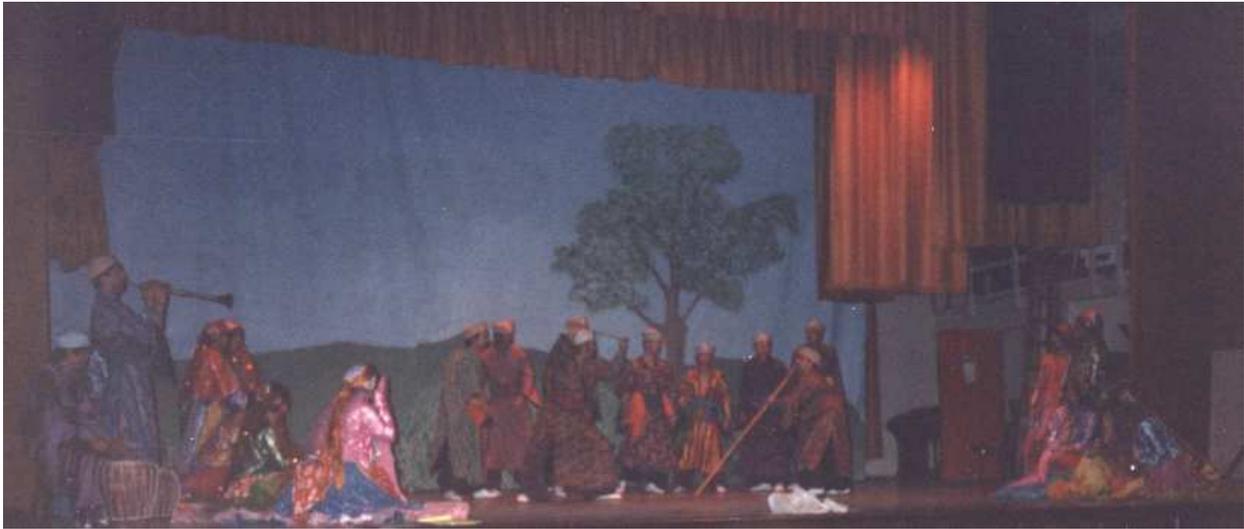


Figure 4. The AMAN men dancers rehearsing the author's Qashqa'i choreography, 1989, in a high-school auditorium near Los Angeles.
Photo by the author.



The author in Qashqa'i dress, Tehran, Iran, 1975.

Photo by Carrol Klatter, an American who traveled with the author for a portion of this trip.

About the author: A first-generation Bulgarian-American, Dr. Robyn Friend is a singer, dancer, choreographer, and linguist who specializes in Iranian and Turkic folklore. Dr. Friend has studied dance and music with noted teachers in Iran, Turkey, and in the U.S. Her dance repertoire includes traditional dances of Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia; her singing repertoire includes the classical *radif* of Iran, Sufi and folk songs from Turkey, and Gypsy songs. She has a Ph.D. in Iranian languages from UCLA, and has authored numerous papers in both scholarly and popular publications on many subjects, including Iranian traditional dance and music, Iranian linguistics, and the exploration of Mars by balloon. She has performed as a soloist throughout North America, in Europe, and in the Middle East. She teaches and performs -- mostly to the Iranian community -- in Los Angeles. She spent the summer of 1975 in Iran doing dance research among the Qashqa'i, and has also worked with members of the Qashqa'i tribe in the United States.