Dance in Persian Dramatic Storytelling

Elnaz Sheshgelani

This article describes the pedagogical application of a novel reconstruction of ancient Persian dramatic storytelling (*Pre-Islamic Naghali*). Although a subset of Naghali survives today, it was severely constrained after the Islamic conquest of Persia (c. 651 A.D.) and is now critically endangered (UNESCO 2011). The loss of its body movement vocabulary was particularly significant and so the reconstruction initially used ancient illustrations from the Shahnameh to creatively derive how Naghali might have looked in pre-Islamic times. This body movement vocabulary (essentially, a form of dance to be used in storytelling) was developed as a means for practitioners to acquire an intuitive feel for ancient Persian dramatic movement, enabling its intercultural application to performing arts.

The practical application of this approach illustrates how the reconstructed dramatic movement vocabulary of one culture can come alive in the context of another. This performative methodology has been workshopped pedagogically with participants from various cultures, ranging from novice to experienced. It reveals that such an embodied learning approach can help practitioners develop novel and distinctive performances that meld dramatic forms from different cultures or even from different historical periods within one culture.

Introduction

Naghali is one of the most ancient surviving forms of Persian dramatic performance and focuses on storytelling. Severe restrictions were imposed after the Islamic conquest of Persia (c. 651 AD) and Naghali has been placed on UNESCO's *"List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding"*. Only scant information remains about its pre-Islamic form. However, the subsequent changes were substantial because Islam proscribes many of the aspects that are believed to have been a part of pre-Islamic Naghali, such as dance, female performers, puppets, masks and music.

This work was motivated by Naghali's critically endangered status (UNESCO 2011) and my conviction that, as an ancient Persian art form, its stylistic attributes and approach to

performance are worthy of preservation. My approach was to help preserve Naghali by reintroducing gestural and body movement aspects that were removed after the Islamisation of Persia. To creatively reconstruct these body movement aspects, I adopted a practice-led approach using ancient illustrations from the Shahnameh (Persian Book of Kings) to develop a vocabulary and applied it to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo and Juliet was chosen because it is well known and, being a love story that ends in tragedy and the death of one or both lovers, it matches one of the major genres of Naghali, namely "Ghanayee".

The figurative style I developed is called *"Adamak"*, and each gesture/movement in the vocabulary is termed an *"Adamaktion"*. The expression of an Adamaktion vocabulary through a series of movements in 2D space is termed *"Dance-cription"* (Sheshgelani and Naghshbandi 2022). I use Adamaktion and Dance-cription as a pedagogical tool to communicate with others.

Due to the limited historical record on pre-Islamic Naghali, I employed an inductive process to creatively reconstruct a version of Naghali that plausibly could have existed before the Islamic conquest of Persia. For that reconstruction, I chose the illustrations from the Shahnameh as the principal source of data, as found in the 2013 illustrated version *"Shahnameh: The Epic of the Persian Kings"* (Ferdowsi and Rahmanian 2013). It is the most extensive and accessible collection of illustrations available today and is itself a creative reconstruction based on diverse and often faded ancient illustrations dating from the 13th to 19th centuries. The Shahnameh is central to Persian historical national identity and its illustrations embody important ethno-symbolic (Smith 2009) features, and so could well be indicative of the postures, gestures and facial expressions that characterised the style of pre-Islamic Naghali. My approach to the creative reconstruction of pre-Islamic Naghali is based upon this assumption and this underpinned the development of the Adamaktion vocabulary for Romeo and Juliet. However, the application of this vocabulary in performance is a wholly creative process as there is no data on how performers moved and used gesture in pre-Islamic Persia.

Overview of Pre-Islamic Naghal

Naghali is an adaptive and creative form of dramatic storytelling that has changed over the centuries to remain culturally relevant to the Iranian people (Beyzaie 1965, 65; Najm

2011, 43). This motivates my practice and I see myself as a contemporary *Naghal* (a person who practises Naghali).

Following the Islamic conquest of Persia, circa 651 AD, governmental interpretations of Islam saw a number of restrictions imposed upon Naghali, for example, the removal of female performance (Razi 2011, 10), dance (Beyzaie 1965, 45), shamanic acting style (Ibid., 29), puppets/masks (Ibid., 29) and music (Ibid., 65). These restrictions were instituted in an attempt to diminish the popularity of what was seen as a powerful influencer of public opinion.

The practice of Naghali involved the analysis of the meaning behind a poem or story (Najm 2011, 291), culminating in the expression of its underlying social/political message. The didactic function of Naghali cannot be overemphasised (Ibid., 21). Customarily, the stories that nourished Naghali had a didactic function with an underlying moral message (Beyzaie 1965, 69). Having said that, a Naghali performance, above all, must be entertaining (Ibid., 65); without audience engagement, the underlying message is likely to be missed (Razi 2011, 53).

It has been argued that the first Persian storytellers were hunters and warriors, and that consequently the subject matter was likely to have been epic in nature. Certainly, contemporary Naghali has a major epic component, as found in Shanameh-Khani, which is the story of the pre-Islamic Persian kings and so incorporates performative gestures depicting the actions of warriors.

The earliest indications about pre-Islamic Naghali, perhaps, come from Zoroastrianism because of surviving texts such as the Avesta and especially the Gathas. However, this presupposes that Naghali was influenced by the performative aspects of Zoroastrian ritual. Major Naghali scholars agree that this was the case, e.g. (Agha-Abbasi 2012, 251) and (Boyce 1957, 31), but one cannot know for certain to what extent Naghali was affected by Zoroastrianism.

Images on ancient Persian pottery provide evidence for the use of animal masks in performance and Zoroaster is believed to have used dance (Agha-Abbasi 2012). Although none of these individual hypotheses about the precursors of Naghali can be corroborated,

taken as a whole, they provided me with guidance in my creative reconstruction of pre-Islamic Naghali.

What it Means to be a Naghal – Being a Portraitist

I follow Beyzaie (1965) in characterising the Naghal as a portraitist. Conventionally, a portraitist is understood to be one who creates a portrait, for example, a painting or photograph of a person. More generally, a portraitist can be understood to be someone who portrays, and this portrayal can take any number of forms, and is not limited to a static, visual presentation such as a drawing or painting. An important element of a portrait is that the artist intends for it to be identified as such (Gadamer 2000). For example, a photograph of a person is not a portrait unless the photographer (portraitist) takes it with the intention of creating a portrait of the subject.

The term "portraitist" is the closest that one can get in English to the meaning of the Persian word used by Beyzaie to describe the role and attitude of a Naghal. In making a portrait, the Naghal as portraitist is engaged in more than acting or impersonation; through her relationship with her own physical being, she somehow transforms herself into the person being portrayed. She in some sense becomes that person – she is both portraitist and portrait.

Making a portrait in Naghali is a relationship the Naghal has with her own physical being within the framework of the story. Her body, through its physical expressions, becomes the portrait, and through her understanding of its expressive potential, she is the master portrait maker. This concept of being a portraitist and becoming the other is a mind-set that fosters a heightened ability to convey the essence of another human being.

My Manifesto for Dance in Storytelling

Drama in poetry can be found in words and how they relate to each other.
Dance is a language.
Language constantly challenges itself to catch up with the phenomena in our lives.
My dance is how I catch up with life… my life.

I was born in Iran, my child was born in Australia; our mother tongues are different!
Or are they?!

Love is a language.

We speak with love, that is the key language.

My son knows I love him I didn't have to convince him.

My body holds his body and we know love.

Dance is the body.

Body is what we come with to this world and when body is gone, we disappear.

Body is language.

Dance writes for body and the body then tells stories.

Poetry is a dance of language.

To understand dance, I have been guided by poetry as the major influence of my culture on me.

Life is hidden in alchemical relationships and disasters. Not many reference points are left for human beings to refer to. As we speak, war kills people and creates hunger, homelessness and refugees…

I have no home, but I have a story and dance is the revisiting of my story in a poetic way.

Dance must signify its relevance to today's life… how to think about life, to survive and find connections. In that, dance liberates the body and mind.

Dance is the cure.

A primitive searching, where logic, rules and reason are poetic, spiritual and pure.

The Role of the Body in the Stylisation of Naghali

The use of the body is central to Naghali; the relationship between story and body is analogous to that between literature and drama. One of the key characteristics of Naghali is that it is a solo performance, in which the Naghal acts out all of the parts. As a solo performer, the Naghal uses her body to delineate each character in the story and this makes the choice of a gestural palette for each character important. This focus on the importance of gesture in dramatic arts has a long history in the East and some forms still exist today, such as Kabuki, Noh theatre and Katakali.

As my research into Naghali progressed, I came to the view that the general stylised gestures and body postures used by the Naghal are one of Naghali's most distinctive characteristics.

As discussed above, I follow Beyzaie in viewing the Naghal as a portraitist. During performance, the Naghal uses her body to create portraits of the characters in the story and embodies an *aesthetic*[1] that is characteristic of Naghali. As part of this aesthetic, she will use *exaggeration* and *symbolism* to convey meaning (Beyzaie 1965, 29), and it should be noted that symbolism is commonplace in Persian literature and vernacular, with poetic devices such as simile and metaphor being commonly used in everyday conversation.

To acquire a deeper sense of the Persian perspective on drama, it is important to understand the concept of 'Bāzi'; a major goal of a Naghali performance is to manifest 'Bāzi'. The closest Persian word to 'drama' is 'Bāzi'. Unusually, the word has survived unchanged since pre-Islamic times. It is combined with other Persian words to describe different categories of dramatic performance, for example, 'Bāzi dar Avardan', which means to performatively imitate an event. A person who is able to skilfully execute Bāzi is termed a 'Bāzi-gar' (actor or Naghal). Because the only way to learn Bāzi is by doing it, 'Bāzi-gari' is the occupation, passion and obsession of a Naghal.

In practising Naghali, I become a Naghal, a Bāzi-gar, a Portraitist. The act of doing Bāzi is termed 'Bāzi kardan' (acting). Thus, as a Bāzi-gar, through Bāzi kardan, I manifest Bāzi and my passion is Bāzi-gari in the style of pre-Islamic Naghali. In Farsi, Naghali means *reciting*; بازی / Bāzi means *drama*.

In the tradition of Naghali, any space can become a performance space (Bāzi Ja); it is not restricted to theatres. This resonates with my own practice. While developing the Adamaktion vocabulary, I have created Bāzi in various public spaces, including on the street and in cafés and bars. Through Bāzi, at that time, the space becomes a performance one and the result is Naghali. Here, my body is my instrument, my vehicle for telling the story. The Adamaktion vocabulary is my palette of dramatic actions; it is a body-based language medium and, in my practice, is prioritised over verbal language. In the tradition of Naghali, these body-based dramatic actions are stylised, magnified and exaggerated. By developing an individual performance vocabulary, I created an individual style; having an individual style is very important to the Naghal's reputation and success (Beyzaie 1965, 29). Thus, I am not claiming

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[1] Here, the term *aesthetic* is used in its modern interpretation, meaning a sense of taste, or a judgment of beauty, as conceptualised by Baumgarten (1750).

that pre-Islamic Naghals used my particular vocabulary, rather, I am hypothesising that it is a stylistically appropriate set of gestures that provides me with an individual style of Bāzi.

An Adamaktion Vocabulary for Romeo and Juliet

The concept of Adamaktion was developed over a number of iterations within the context of Romeo and Juliet. Each Adamaktion represents the configuration of the body and limbs at the *end* of a gesture; the movement into the gesture is unspecified because it will vary depending on the context.

The *Tumar* is central in Naghali; it is the Naghal's personal rewrite of a story; a Tumar is an abbreviated version of the story that represents its *essence* for the Naghal. Thus, I began by writing my Tumar for Romeo and Juliet[2] and this resulted in 32 lines. For each line in the Tumar, I searched the Shahnameh for candidate illustrations that I considered express the meaning of the line. I then sorted the candidates, ending up with a single selection that I felt best captured the meaning of the associated line in the Tumar. Based on the chosen illustration, I developed a gesture that was faithful to the illustration and could be used in dramatic performance to express the meaning of the line in the Tumar.

I then engaged in several months of refining the vocabulary. Each gesture was trialled, and I videoed the exemplars so that I could assess how effective they were. If a gesture was not working well, I went back to the original candidate list to see if there was a better option. This trialling continued until I was satisfied that each gesture could be used to express the intended meaning of its associated Tumar line.

Although the meaning of each Tumar line was used to develop each gesture, in contrast to traditions such as Kathakali, each gesture does *not* have a specific meaning. The Adamaktion vocabulary is not meant to be a canonical set, to be applied in all performances; indeed (Beyzaie 1965, 29) states that Naghals prized their individuality and would establish their own set of gestures. The Adamaktion vocabulary is more akin to Meyerhold's biomechanical etudes; practice of the vocabulary enables the performer to develop an unconscious connection between her inner feelings and their corporeal expression in the style

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[2] Based on the Oxford School Shakespeare version of Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare 2008). This version has pedagogical annotations, which I used to inform the development of my Tumar.
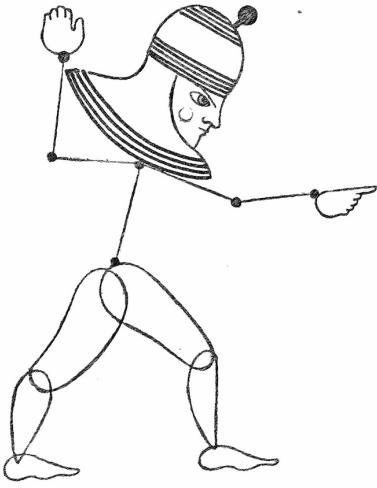
of pre-Islamic Naghali. Thus, the vocabulary is meant to be used to train the body in how to move in a stylistically appropriate manner. It is a formal attempt to codify the physical performative characteristics of pre-Islamic Naghali into practice.

This pedagogical function is very important and so I evaluated each gesture in terms of how easy it was for practitioners to learn and apply. This was a fairly informal process, in which I invited performers that I knew to come to my studio and workshop the vocabulary. Nevertheless, though informal, this process was very instructive, and I continued to refine the vocabulary over a number of iterations with different actors.

An Adamaktion example is presented diagrammatically below, showing the Shahnameh illustration upon which it is based, a two-dimensional Adamak line drawing illustrating the gesture's morphology and a photograph that portrays a more three-dimensional representation. The Adamak style of line-drawing was developed over several iterations. My goal was to arrive at a minimal representation, in other words a representation that sufficed to communicate the key features of the gesture/posture. I found that its pedagogical value was enhanced by simplifying the illustrations and having them all in the same style.

The Adamaktion is shown from the perspective of the student who is learning to enact the gesture. Consequently, the textual description is phrased from the student's point of view, as if looking into a mirror. So, for example, although the figure's head is turned to the right, the textual description instructs the viewer to turn her head to the left, much as one might teach the gesture in a class. Note that all gestures relate to the body's sagittal plane, which means that, during their application, the gestures can be mirrored to either side, depending on context.

The Adamaktion is described in terms of (i) the key characteristics of its morphology (divided into four regions of the body: the head, neck/torso, upper limbs and lower limbs); (ii) its context within Romeo and Juliet and how it expresses the intent of the Tumar line; and (iii) its potential performance applications.

Shahnameh Source Image, p.422	Adamaktion Line Drawing (Capulet)

❖ **Morphology – Adamaktion-22**

- **Head.** With your back to the viewer in three quarter profile, your head is in full profile, facing to your left, with head tilted downwards and eyes looking ahead, following a line parallel to the chin.

- **Neck and Torso.** Your spine is straight and inclined slightly forwards.

- **Upper Limbs.** Your left arm is extended to your left, slightly bent at the elbow, palm

closed, index finger pointing straight ahead. Your right arm is in line with the collarbone but bent upwards 90° at the elbow, with the palm closed and facing away from the body.

- **Lower Limbs.** Open stance, facing to your left. Left foot in front of right, slightly bent.

❖ **Context within Romeo and Juliet – Adamaktion-22**

- **Section.** Act 3 [Capulet].

- **Tumar Line.** "You be mine, I'll give you to my friend" (Ibid., 87).

- **Interpretation.** Here, the character confronts the other with a threatening glare. The threat is amplified by the posture which is poised, ready to thrust forwards.

❖ **Potential Performance Applications – Adamaktion-22**

- A form for hostility.

- Vengeful, losing control of rational behaviour.

- A form for betraying someone's belief in you.

Dance-cription — Transitioning Between Adamaktions

In applying an Adamaktion vocabulary, it became clear that, although each gesture may be aesthetically pleasing to me, developing a story-driven flow between them is not necessarily straightforward. In my practice, I understood that the Adamaktions, as Bahram Beyzaie (Beyzaie 1965) said, are generally improvised and in the moment. Thus, the gestures themselves are generally modified dynamically during the performance, in an unplanned manner. Rhythm is vital; the flow in and out of gestures must be fluid. Though exaggerated, the gestures should not be stilted; in the terminology of music, *legato* rather than *staccato*.

In teaching the Adamaktions, it became clear that it is important for students to understand what gestures go together and how to transition between them. My current research objective is to develop a visual formalism to help students understand how to transition between Adamaktions in performance. This formalism is termed *"Dance-cription"*.

Note that it is not practical to specify all permutations of transitions between gestures. Even if we have just one type of transition per pair of gestures, with the 32 gestures used for Romeo and Juliet, there are 992 possible transitions (31 x 32). This is clearly intractable to teach. To ensure that Dance-cription is accessible, I am currently developing sets of typical examples of how Adamaktions fit together. By analogy with language, an Adamaktion is like a *word*, and a performance is composed of a vocabulary of such words that are assembled into *sentences*.

A toddler learns natural language by hearing sentences uttered by their parents, who generally structure and simplify their utterances so that the child can acquire a vocabulary and grammar in easy stages (Elmlinger et al. 2019). Toddlers are not explicitly taught the rules of grammar, but rather learn them implicitly after hearing many example sentences. This is the approach taken with Dance-cription. Rather than try to specify a restrictive grammar that determines which Adamaktions can follow one another, I teach example *"sentences"* (i.e. Dance-criptions) that are associated with the performance of a particular piece. Through the performative application of Dance-criptions, the performer develops an intuitive understanding of how the vocabulary of Adamaktions can be strung together to form performative *"sentences"*.

A Dance-cription Example

My Adamaktions were originally based on ancient Persian illustrations. Similarly, to help ground Dance-cription in Persian culture, I have based the movements on Persian calligraphy. Although Persian handwriting does not comprise icons, in contrast to, say, Egyptian hieroglyphics, the flow of the letters speaks to me emotionally as movement — the flow of the handwriting literally *emotes*. Dance-cription is a work in progress, and so I have created an illustrative example of how the calligraphy in a work of Persian poetry can translate to movement.

I am currently working with 21 archetypes from a Persian poem by Nur Alishah Isfehani and, based on the inscriptions, have created a visual movement representation that, in combination with Adamaktion, conveys a set of sequential movements through 2D space; each a Dance-cription. There are seven connected dance pieces each containing three archetypes (making a total of 21 archetypes). Due to space limitations, I will only present the

Dance-criptions for the first piece. The first three archetypes are taken directly from the poem below (highlighted).
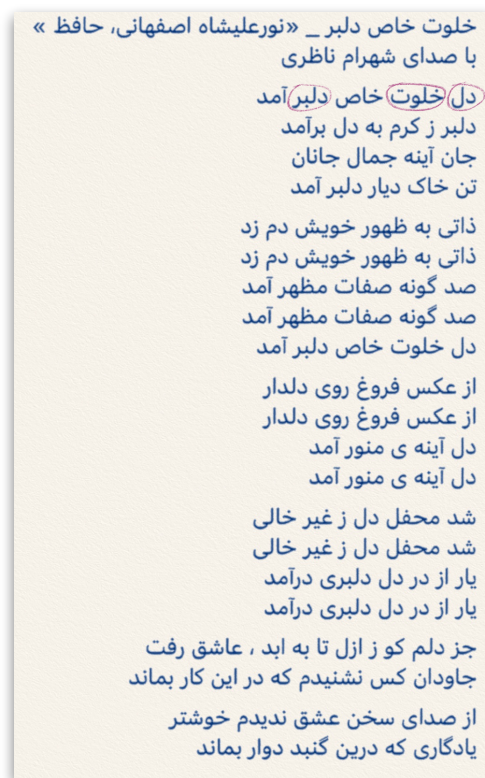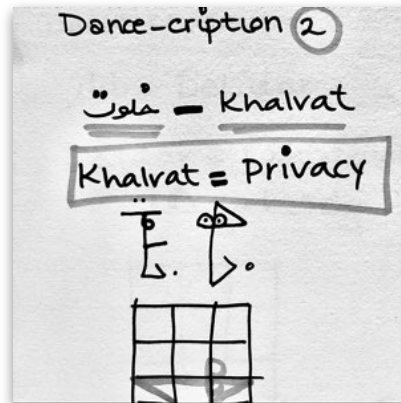

Poem by Nur Alishah Isfehani

1. دل Del (means "Heart"). The inscription of *"del"* in Farsi is دل. Del is a Persian poetry archetype that means the 'true heart' or consciousness one can have.
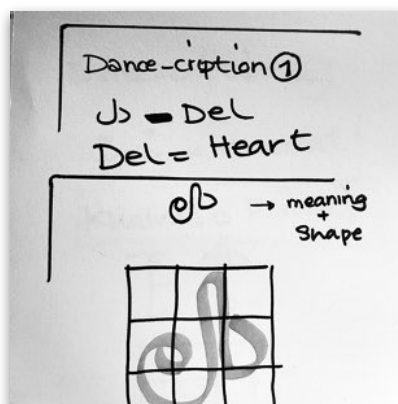

دل

2. خلوت Khalvat (means "Privacy"). The inscription of *"khalvat"* in Farsi is خلوت.
Khalvat is a Persian poetry archetype that means the privacy one has with the self.

خــلــوت

3. دلبر Delbar (means "Spiritual Companion"). Delbar means spiritual companion or a
true lover. The inscription of *"delbar"* in Farsi is دلبر. Delbar is a Persian poetry archetype
meaning one who is willingly coming to the journey of life with someone else.
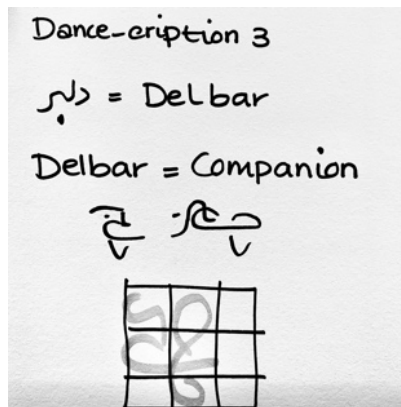

دلــبــر

Sequentially combining the figures in the grid yields the following dance movement:
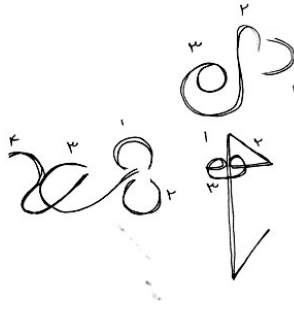
Here, Adamaktion portrays the meaning of a word as an embodiment. The combination of these movements and archetypes reflects the meaning of each section of the poem, and this is in effect a mini story within a greater story (note that having a story within a story is one of the key attributes of Naghali).

The Adamaktions for this dance are shown below:

1.   Dance 1-1

Del

دل
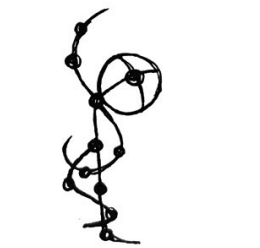
2.   Dance 1-2

Khalvat

خلوت

3.   Dance 1-3

Delbar1

دلبر۱

4. Dance 1-3
Delbar2
دلبر۲

5. Dance 1-3
Delbar3
دلبر۳

Discussion

Motivated by the critically endangered status of Naghali, the goal of this research was to creatively reconstruct a gestural vocabulary for the pre-Islamic version of Naghali and apply it to Western dramatic arts. Only time will tell if this work will be taken on by theatre practitioners and if this approach will contribute to the preservation of Naghali in the long term.

According to the literature, many features were lost from Naghali after the Islamic conquest of Persia, for example, female performance (Razi 2011, 10) and dance (Beyzaie 1965, 45). Naghali is fundamentally about dramatic storytelling and so the loss of body movement aspects from pre-Islamic times was particularly significant. This was one reason for choosing to focus on the reconstruction of body movement, specifically, posture and gesture. Thanks to the availability of illustrations from the Shahnameh, which provide an indication of dramatic gesture in pre-Islamic Persia, the most promising prospect for reconstructing what has been lost was to focus on the gesturo-postural dimension of Naghali.

The application of Adamaktion in practice is an important research output of this work. The Adamaktion drawings on their own are only part of the story; the drawings represent the potential expression of pre-Islamic Naghali gestures, but one needs to observe actual practice to understand how the demands of performance can affect the selection and modification of gestures and how the gestures can flow together. My focus on body-based dramatic expression is what distinguishes my reconstruction of pre-Islamic Naghali from contemporary practice of Naghali.

Adamaktion visually represents performative gesture, but does not provide an indication of how to sequence movement together in a performance. I am currently developing a visual approach rooted in Persian poetry and calligraphy. This representation is deeply meaningful and poignant for Persians and it is my hope that this will allow Persian performers to connect viscerally to the dance movements, in a way that would be less likely to occur were I to adopt standard dance notation such as Benesh or Laban notation.

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Elnaz Sheshgelani is a storyteller, theatre maker, puppeteer and educator. She holds a PhD in Performing Arts where she explored pre-Islamic Naghali (a lost form of Persian dramatic storytelling) and reconstructed a Naghali gestural vocabulary. Elnaz is deeply interested in the performative aspects of communication and has focused on the design and creation of body forms, developing body movement vocabularies for storytelling. She has applied/workshopped vocabularies in her various performances and workshops at La Mama Theatre (Melbourne, Australia) and at international festivals in Armenia, Malaysia and Indonesia.

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