

AND...

NAVE OF IMAGES

Excerpt of *Hearing* by Amir Reza Koohestani (2016),
July 10 at 14:30, église des Célestins

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- July 30 to August 14, 2018, Iranshahr Theatre, Tehran (Iran)
- September 6 to 8, La Bâtie Festival de Genève (Suisse)
- September 26 and 27, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt (Germany)
- November 22 to 24, Théâtre national de Bretagne, Rennes
- November 28 and 29, deSingel, Anvers (Belgium)
- January 11 and 12, 2019, Festival Les Vagamondes, Thann
- January 16 and 17, Kaserne, Bâle (Swiss)
- January 19 and 20, Théâtre populaire romand, La Chaux-de-Fonds (Swiss)

SUMMERLESS

The supervisor of a primary school calls on her ex-husband, a painter longing for recognition, to renovate the school's façade. His mission is to cover the revolutionary slogans written on the walls of the playground with a large fresco. The task is daunting and he is lacking in motivation, until he meets a young mother who has come to wait for her child. Every day, she arrives early, seemingly to escape the boredom and anxiety caused by her social isolation. They strike up a conversation, and the particular rhythm of summer creates a unique atmosphere. This is where *Summerless* finds its theme: the collapse, of the walls, of education, of desire... Although familiar with documentary theatre, which he studied in Manchester, director Amir Reza Koohestani never speaks of politics directly in his work. His plays use the metaphoric approach dear to Persian poetry to evoke a system bent on controlling the private lives of the anonymous individuals it oppresses...

AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI

Born in Shiraz, the capital of the Fars Province in Southwest Iran, Amir Reza Koohestani lives and works in Tehran. His early passion for cinema and writing (articles, short stories, screenplays), led to his directing his first play at age 21, though he was denied authorisation to perform by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. Since then, he has refined his style in successive creations, a poetical and critical renewal which breaks away from the naturalism of traditional Iranian theatre. Amir Reza Koohestani directed *Hearing* for the 70th edition of the Festival d'Avignon.

72th
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.

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INTERVIEW WITH AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI

Where did the idea for this show come from? What are its sources?

Amir Reza Koohestani: The idea came to me one day as I was passing my old school in Shiraz. The once-huge playground was now tiny, and the games had been replaced by a football goal and a volleyball net which couldn't be used at the same time, as there wasn't enough room. What surprised me the most was to see all the mothers standing in front of the school. It wasn't eleven yet, and students wouldn't be coming out for a while. Yet the mothers had gathered there to talk, which seemed to be a long daily ritual for them. They brought their children to school in the morning, then came back a good hour before they were let out to talk. The meeting of two generations in a unique place, school, with the mothers outside and the children in their classrooms, was what gave me the idea for *Summerless*. For the stage, I only pictured a roundabout at first. When people asked me about my future play, I used to tell them that it revolved around a roundabout. Probably because it's the one element I immediately noticed had disappeared from the playground. The roundabout, like the swing, had been removed to cover the ground in asphalt, seemingly to make it safer for children. The title came from a conversation with a friend who works as a supervisor in a private school. She told me that those schools paid no heed to school holidays and offered classes throughout the summer. Teachers have to teach them to supplement their meager income, and the students have to follow them to prepare for the entrance exam for university. School directors make that period extra profitable by offering a number of extracurricular activities, which makes parents who don't know what to do with their idle children happy. Summer holidays aren't what they used to be...

At the heart of the play is the erasure of the slogans which, since the Revolution, have been painted on the walls of the school. What can you tell us about education, which serves as the play's backdrop?

According to the constitution, all Iranian children are entitled to free education. But a few years ago, parliament approved the creation of private schools. In principle, attending a private school should come with advantages to justify giving up free education, but in actuality, the main advantage of those schools is to be attended by fewer students than public schools, in which overwhelmed teachers can't spend time on the needs of every single student. But private schools also accept a large number of students in order to pay their bills, even though they're most often located in old, cramped buildings. Competition between those schools has increased, which has had a positive impact on the education level of the children, whose results have been better, but it has come at the price of a higher pressure on them to focus on school work over leisure and games. Moreover, those schools have been offering the parents/customers conditions or services that directly contradict the rules drawn up by the Ministry.

For instance, you have co-ed primary schools where they teach English and computer science (whereas those are normally taught starting in secondary school), and some of them offer art workshops taught by prestigious theatre and cinema directors. The State therefore faces a dilemma. Privatising education led to massive savings, which is always appreciated in times of economic crisis and sanctions, but it has also led to the State losing control over the question of education. The tension between a revolutionary ideal for education and a liberal, "pay-to-play" approach is one of the key ideas of *Summerless*.

Video, often recorded live, is an essential part of your dramaturgy. It reveals what the characters don't say, or a space the audience can't see. What effects are you trying to create by using it?

In *Summerless*, video replaces painting. When I used to go to school, the walls were covered in pointless drawings praising the ideals of the Revolution. Today, in private schools, those walls have become advertising surfaces to attract customers. Video here gives us a glimpse into the pictorial evolution of those spaces in Iranian schools. Moreover, as in *Timeloss* and *Hearing*, video replaces memory. What once was, the past, as we remember it and as we're sure others remember it, when in actuality their memories are dramatically different. Memory is subjective and personal. The final scene of *Summerless* is a fusion between the past and present thanks to video, as was the case in my two previous shows. Neither the audience nor the characters are able to tell apart the reality of life and the illusion of theatre, the past and the present. How to represent the passing of time has always been one of my main preoccupations. I think it's interesting to highlight the gap between the time of fiction and the time of reality, since the audience and the actors seem to occupy the same space-time unit. The challenge for me in this show was to show the passing of time without cutting to black, without music, and without the actors ever leaving the stage. The play doesn't last much more than an hour whereas the story unfolds over nine months. The passing of days and months is only perceivable through what the characters tell each other. Fall gives way to winter without warning.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu,
translated from Persian by Massoumeh Lahidji
and to English by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach