/ EN

HEARING

Every time she rides her bike, Samaneh thinks of Neda. Neda who, in her freedom, would hurtle down the still-deserted streets of Tehran; Neda who won't come back from her exile in Sweden. She thinks back on that New Year's Eve when, stuck in the girls' dorm at her university, she thought she heard a man's laughter coming from Neda's room. Was it a real voice, there alongside her friend she thought was alone, or one conjured by her own adolescent fantasies? Too late. The rumour of what was an absolute transgression spread like wildfire. A report was made to the dorm's prefect. For the past twelve years, Samaneh has relived over and over again the interrogation to which she was subjected, has dwelt on those answers she can no longer change, and relived this "nightmare of a woman trapped by guilt." A subconscious sanction that Amir Reza Koohestani, in this chiaroscuro work, highlights with a blue line that refuses to go away. That voice is also the dramatic engine of the play. It's the subjective camera of the Iranian director that explodes the spatial limitations of the theatre and the sensory ones of the representation; a subtle journey through the elliptic but universal waters of the unsaid, where private and social currents meet, and the dull violence of a life defined by taboos gushes out.

AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI

Amir Reza Koohestani is sixteen when he meets writer Amin Faghiri, who makes him read Céline and Dostoyevsky. A member of the Iranian *Youth Cinema Society*, he thus discovers his passion for writing, which leads to the publication of his first short stories in newspapers in his hometown of Shiraz. At age eighteen, while attending a show about the trauma of the Iran-Iraq war, he becomes fascinated by the actors who, performing in a park, don't hesitate to engage the audience. He joins the Mehr Theatre Groupe and soon starts writing. His first play, *And the Day Never Came*, was never performed, not having been approved by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Breaking away from the naturalistic and declamatory style popular in Iran, his following plays are noticed for their poetic style that explores, with a critical symbolism, the everyday life of characters caught up in the turmoil of their environment. After a stay in Manchester, where he studied documentary theatre, Amir Reza Koohestani returned to Tehran, where his creations have made him a major actor of the resurgence of theatre in his country, but also in Europe, where he is regularly celebrated.

INTERVIEW WITH AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI

What was the starting point of this play, which you wrote and directed?

Amir Reza Koohestani: There were several elements. First, there was Abbas Kiarostami's *Homework*, released in 1989, a documentary for which the director interviewed young students about their relationship to their homework in order to highlight the flaws of the Iranian education system. I remember that one of them was terrified at the thought of speaking because the door of the classroom was closed. There was an obvious anxiety in that movie, that of a generation afraid of a particular power, namely, that of their teachers. *Homework* inspired me the series of questions Neda and Samaneh are subjected to, for instance: a way of doing away with entrances and exits at the very beginning of the play. I was also inspired by the work of Iranian visual artist Shohreh Mehran, in particular a painting from a series about "objects that cover," like tarp on scaffolding, the cloth that covers the faces of prisoners in Iran, or the headscarves women wear. As is often the case when I create a play, my own life was also an influence. When I was 18, I remember talking with my girlfriend Mahin—who plays the supervisor in the play—of our respective experiences of university dorms. In girls' dorms, there was one recurring topic: boys! Their dorms are like impregnable fortresses. Mahin told me that if a technician was to come to fix an AC unit, an announcement was made over the PA system: "*Young ladies, please, observe propriety, check your headscarves, a man is coming to your floor.*" Years later, I wondered what would happen if a student said she'd heard a man's voice in a room of her dorm. Which became the starting point of *Hearing*.

An anecdote which mixes your personal life with social reality, a constant in your work. Does that come from your interest in documentary theatre, which you studied in Manchester?

If I've long been interested in documentary theatre, I have to say that a shift happened in 2007 after the creation of *Quartet: A Journey North*, a play inspired by the story of two Iranian murderers for which I delved deep into the human mind. *Hearing* isn't exactly a political play about women's rights. Of course, such a reading of the play is latent both in Europe and Iran, but it is more implicit than you'd think. You may have noticed how the actresses often fiddle with their hijabs, often discreetly. Beyond mere vanity, it isn't an insignificant gesture. It allows me to remind the audience that this veil they sometimes forget about always brings them back to reality by creating a real discomfort. We look at the place and status of women, but I wouldn't call it a feminist play per se. I'm not creating an opposition between men and women. By the way, the supervisor who questions Neda and Samaneh is a student who considers that the dorm is under her responsibility during the holidays, and not a civil servant, as one might expect. Because the problem isn't men, but a power that creates a situation of anxiety and disturb consciences.

Faced with those disturbances, the protagonists defend their truths in very different ways, especially since there is no tangible evidence that a man was indeed present in the dorm on New Year's Eve.

They're caught in different situations, but they go through the same loss of trust, and both are threatened with appearing in front of a disciplinary committee. The supervisor is furious because her results for the year could be invalidated. Strong-willed Neda refuses to feel guilty, while Samaneh, more subdued, is deeply upset by what is happening to her close friends. If there's no evidence, it's because in Iran like in Sweden, evidence isn't always necessary. What matters here is one's strength of persuasion. In the time of ancient tragedies, truth was either accepted or rejected. Nowadays, we're constantly trying to understand who's telling the truth. That's more or less the situation they experience during that interview, in which I try to show the multiplicity of truths at play.

Samaneh heard a voice in the literal sense, but she may also have "heard a voice," metaphorically-speaking…

Voice has a particular status for the audience as well. At the beginning of the show, they don't hear the questions the supervisor is asking the students. They have to imagine them. It's a little like trying to picture the face of someone you don't know, but with whom you're talking on the phone. In the play, voices come from the stage, from the room, from out of frame, they're inaudible, scrambled, in life, in memory, in the mind, dead. By separating the questions from the person asking them at the beginning of the show, I'm questioning the status of that voice. But by multiplying the voices, I'm also questioning the reality of what we're hearing. Our imagination remains fixated on what the voices suggest. That's what happens to Samaneh, who adapts her imagination to what she hears.

Thanks to the way you use temporal ellipses, we understand that the dramatic engine of the play is Samaneh's sense of guilt.

Samaneh relives that day over and over again like a nightmare that haunts her, a state I marked on her with the colour blue, a reference to Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine*. She wishes she could change her answers, but she can't because the interview already took place. She embodies the gap between what we see and what we hear. That life stuck between the real and the imaginary. The dramatic engine of the play isn't only that ellipsis, but also the fact that one voice can tell several stories.

Light, music, and video are as important as the text in this play; how did you write it?

I started by writing a dozen pages, a sort of outline. And I immediately started working with the actresses, because the starting point is their way of saying their lines—which they read with me up to five times a day—in order to continue writing the story organically. I watch as the actresses make the characters theirs, with their own temperaments, and I work from there. I try to create a textual link between them and their roles, using their personalities to make their performance and words seem natural. The music is a particular creation, which caused real arguments in Iran when we first created the play, because it's a mix between popular religious music and electronic music from the West that parasites it. Often, video is an extension of the light. However, here, since I wanted to create a larger space, to blur the spatial and temporal borders to speak of those two worlds, real and imaginary, that coexist at the same time, I included it in the writing process. It allowed me to imagine two spaces, that of the play and that of the actresses. And two temporalities, Samaneh's youth and her life as a woman. It also allowed me to use colours or black and white as symbols, especially in the scene with the bikes. It's an important metaphorical moment for Neda and Samaneh, as riding bikes is the only space of freedom they have.

In *The Time We Share Reflecting on and through Performing Arts*, you explain that you have to deal with a double censorship, on both the text and the performance. How do you work in Iran?

Before the Green Movement of 2009, artists could still find ways and spaces to work. Since then, it's become more difficult. But the system evolved, thanks to popular support. Now, audiences pre-buy tickets, and to that contribution are added funds provided by small-investors-turned-producers who noticed culture is profitable. It allows us, for instance, to rent a room in an apartment where the cast and crew can get together to work. As for censorship, it's still there. But I have to say that in my particular case, it isn't an obstacle. I'm not saying it's acceptable, because there is no freedom of expression in Iran, but since as a director, I'm not interested in the explicit, I've always more or less managed to work around it…

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Interview conducted by Francis Cossu

AND...

FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE EAST
While I was waiting by Omar Abusaada, from July 8 to 14 at 18:30, gymnase Paul Giéra
Yitzhak Rabin: Chronicle of an Assassination Foretold by Amos Gitai, July 10 at 22:00 at the Cour d'honneur du Palais des papes
Fatmeh and *Leila's Death* by Ali Chahrour, July 16 to 18 at 22:00 and July 21 to 23 at 22:00, cloître des Célestins
99 by Marc Nammour, July 22 at 22:00, Musée Calvet
A Share of the orient, read by the Comédiens-Français, July 11, 12, 13 at 11:30, Maison Jean Vilar

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TERRITORIES
Focus on the Middle East / Utopia-Manutention, July 6 to 24
A separation by Asghar Farhadi, meet Amir Reza Koohestani, July 23 at 11:00, Utopia-Manutention

TOUR DATES OF *HEARING* AFTER THE FESTIVAL

– October 6 and 7, 2016 at Festival des Arts de Bordeaux at Carré-Les Colonnes in Saint-Médard-en-Jalles
– October 11 to 19 at Festival d'Automne à Paris at Théâtre de la Bastille in Paris
– October 22 to 23 at TPR - Théâtre populaire romand at La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland)
– November 15 and 16 at Théâtre la Vignette in Montpellier
– November 17 and 18 at Espaces Pluriels in Pau
– November 25 and 26 at Bonlieu Scène nationale d'Annecy
– December 1st and 2 at Trident Scène nationale de Cherbourg
– December 6 to 10 at Centre dramatique national de Normandie in Rouen
– December 13 et 14 at La Comédie de Caen
– March 9 and 10, 2017 at Tandem Scène nationale, Théâtre d'Arras
– March 16 et 17 at Théâtre d'Arles
– March 21 to 24 at Centre dramatique national Besançon Franche-Comté
– March 28 and 29 at TAP in Poitiers
– April 1st at CSS in Udine (Italy)
– April 4 to 7 avril at Lieu Unique in Nantes co-hosted by Grand T
– April 27 to 29 at Onassis Cultural Center in Athens (Greece)

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