



# EN TRANSIT

## INTERVIEW WITH AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI

**Although they are not at all autobiographical, your creations are often rooted in a personal experience you use to drive the drama. What led to the idea for this show, freely inspired by Anna Seghers's *Transit*?**

**Amir Reza Koohestani:** In 2018, as I was on my way to Santiago de Chile, my journey ended in Munich! I'd overstayed my Schengen visa by five days over the past six months, because I'd actually been delivered two different visas. My passport was confiscated and I was led to a sort of "waiting room" where I was to stay until I was sent back to Tehran. At the time, I was reading Anna Seghers's *Transit*, which I wanted to adapt for the stage. In the novel, I found characters subjected to things very similar to what I was experiencing. Just as I was working on the idea of exile and thinking about the condition of refugees, I found myself stuck in a situation similar to those of the protagonists of the novel and of the people sitting in this holding room with me. Unlike them, I had nothing to lose. As I say in the play, I knew that that very same night I would be back in my bed in Tehran, while others were risking everything, including their lives. As for me, I found myself having to face my greatest fear, a visceral terror: to lose my passport in an airport. But when that fear became reality, I felt freed. There was no reason for me to be afraid anymore. It had happened. When it happened, I told myself I could theoretically be anyone, have any job. My identity was in a transitory situation as well. In a way, it forced me to question the very reason why I create shows. Theatre has no impact on the lawmakers who write immigration laws. Not even on the agents tasked with enforcing those same laws. I asked myself why I dedicated all my time to this futile endeavour. What could I hope to accomplish? What is the point of artistic creation when it changes nothing, has no influence whatsoever on reality, on bureaucracy? What meaning is there to this kind of talk if it is completely disconnected from the reality of those transitory spaces?

**As in some of your other plays, including *Hearing*, which you presented in 2016 in Avignon, the question of proof, of justification, is key.**

The idea is to show the impossibility for bureaucracy to understand the experience of refugees and migrants, to look for the source of their terror, to understand their flight as a vital necessity. They all face this normative grid which defines criteria according to which the door will or won't open, the individual will or won't be let in. After World War II, many German prisoners asked to stay in France. As they were Germans, the French authorities decided they wouldn't be in danger in their own countries, even if they'd been close to the Nazis during the war. In Anna Seghers's novel, one character embodies the absurdity of the situation. To gain America, she needs a "morality certificate," she has to prove she's not a communist, that she doesn't entertain men in her room, that she has always led a respectable life and always will... There are still today commissions tasked with listening to the stories of refugees and deciding whether they are trustworthy, whether they fit some morality criterion, just like Samaneh in *Hearing* had to go through a similar ordeal before her university's disciplinary commission.

**The protagonists of the novel all live within the same timeframe: the Second World War. As for the characters of the play, they move between the world of yesterday and that of today. Why this double timeline?**

As someone who spends a lot of time waiting in line in embassies to obtain visas, or who is always subjected to advanced police checks in airports, what struck me the most when I read the novel was how easy it was to forget the historical context. The characters of the novel, like those of the play, all live in a sort of suspended time. That's why the play has this back-and-forth between the past and the present and has temporalities intertwine. It also comes from this absurd observation: in 1940, Europeans fled Europe to escape death. I'm thinking of the Poles, Germans, and French people who tried to flee to Iran or to South America. Nowadays, migrants are fleeing towards Europe and are subjected to the same trials. I let those poetic connections guide me to create a flow between the two timeframes of the show. Take, for instance, the character of the lawyer, who tries to help refugees stuck in an airport in 2018 but also those trying to get on a ship in 1940. That one figure leads to another, the connection between the two timeframes becomes ever tighter, to show that what's at play here is always the same story.

### **It seems to be what the syntactic change in the title implies...**

To call the play *In Transit* and not just *Transit* gives an idea of movement, of repetition. It implies a temporal proposition which repeats forever. That means I didn't see the novel as a study of a particular time, but as the sign of endless cycles tied to the rules of bureaucracy, to a rigid and immutable system which never considers the particularity and the subjective dimension of the people facing this very system.

### **For the first time in one of your plays, the characters speak several languages: Farsi, French, English, Portuguese. Similarly, the character of the director—who's supposed to be a stand-in for you—is a woman. You usually write for a reality, but you seem to have cast this play differently...**

I kept a few characters from the novel who, on stage, belong to the past. Like Seidler, Marie, the woman with the two dogs, the secretary of the Brazilian consul, the teller, and the American consul. The others belong to our time. You have the director Amir, played by an actress, a policewoman, a female refugee, and a pro bono lawyer who helps the migrants and crosses over from one time period to the other while keeping her identity. I used a range of narrative techniques: realistic dialogue, stories, monologues, direct addresses to the audience, all while interweaving the timeframes... Compared to my previous plays, here everything is more intertwined. It's chaos right from the start. The first few weeks of work were dedicated entirely to reading the text. As I always tell the actors, there's nothing sacred about it! I don't ask them to stick to it exactly. On the contrary, working with the actors allows me to see how we could reconfigure it. For *In Transit*, I worked with my co-author Keyvan Sarresteh to get rid of everything superfluous and get to the very essence of the text. I always try to reach the heart of what's at stake in a text in spite of its narrative, dramatic, or philosophical matter. In my theatre, I try to use as little text and direction, as few scenes as possible, to get to the bones of the text. The actresses, just like the characters of the play, don't all speak the same language because without a shared language, they have to find other ways to understand each other. As for my own character, the idea of having an actress portray me came very simply. I tried in vain to find someone around me who could play this very thankless role! I realized the actor who knew me best was an actress, Mahin Sadri, who's been my accomplice forever. So I decided the other male characters would also be played by women. It's got nothing to do with gender, more with theatrical convention!

### ***In Transit* isn't only an approach of the socio-political tragedy that is the question of population movement and migration. There's also a more general dimension, that of a space of transit where identities are under watch and start to become blurry. How did you try to show that on stage?**

For this creation, Éric Soyer, our scenographer and lighting designer, managed to create an atmosphere borrowed straight from that of airports using glass and metal. A space which claims to be transparent but can also be very opaque. The space is also delimited by the video work by Phillip Hohenwarter. There are four cameras on stage. They add a dimension at once objective and subjective. It's important not to forget that a transit zone is a world constantly under watch. This interweaving, to which is added the sound design by Benjamin Vicq, allowed me to sketch a space that seems to be at once the past and the present, the port of Marseille and the Munich airport, a space that shows the emptiness of the powerful and well-oiled machine of border control. A machine that produces only division, that is incapable of understanding the challenges of humanity embodied by the characters.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu and translated from Farsi into French by Massoumeh Lahidji