

## Perspectives on Iranian Theatre

**Amir Reza Koohestani, Vahid Rahbani**

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*Two award-winning Iranian directors met up with Tony Fegan of LIFT and Rosemary Bechler of openDemocracy a couple of days after the 'International debate: The Rights and Roles of Young People as Artsmakers' to discuss making theatre in Iran and what should be cherished from the exchange between young artsmakers.*

**Tony Fegan:** Over the last few days, we have found that we all have values we believe are universal, but that when we start talking about them from each of our perspectives, they are slightly different, because of how we live, work, and where we have grown up. What emerges is the sense of a truth which is inevitably shaded and textured by our own experience. At its best, international theatre explores this in the stories it engages with. It is not interested in UN global-speak, but spends a lot of time looking at precisely those differentiations...

So, for example, Göse from Turkey was saying yesterday that one of the big problems artists have is governments and media constantly pushing them back into an exploration of what is peculiar to the nation, to the tribe: what is 'authentic' for 'Us' in opposition to some 'Other'? But the problem is – who decides what is authentic? Does it mean young people being forced to wear national dress, for example? Can you do it if you want to do it? Can you have the choice not to do it? Who decides?

**Amir Reza Koohestani:** When I wrote my play two years ago, I thought it so very personal, to do with my particular character traits, that nobody else could possibly find it relevant, and that it would put all my audiences to sleep. Usually I direct myself. And it was very stressful. But once I had selected an actor and actress, and showed it to the audience, the Iranian audience seemed to understand it perfectly. So it was all over and I forgot about it.

Two months later however, I was worrying about something else, because I performed my play in an International Festival in Tehran, to foreign guests from Cuba, England, Russia, Germany. Afterwards, still in their seats, we had a discussion, and each one began to say – you know this relationship between this actor and actress – 'That's my problem'. I said – 'No, it's mine!' But someone else piped up – 'It's exactly like that where I come from!' and so on. Three months later we took it to Germany, then Russia and the same thing happened everywhere. So when nowadays, postmodernists say that you can think local and act global – I think this is correct.

Maybe our clothes, our dialects, how we cook is different – but in our societies, our minds' problems seem to be very similar underneath this. People can make contact with each other. We should not let governments or media build walls between us. It is a pity that, in conversation, Russians and Germans sometimes imagine we go to university on horseback! We are a global country – we can surf the net – we don't have to park a camel in the car park to go and study...

**Rosemary Bechler:** It's a good example, because Europeans are inclined to think – going to university on horseback – how exotic and lovely, and at the same time, how stupid and backward! It's probably better to check your facts first...

What do you think would surprise young visitors from distant parts about the art scene in Iran? What would you like to show people, if they came?

**Vahid Rahbani:** First of all, it is important for people to know that there are plenty of reasons for people from the west to visit Iran. There are many fine activities planned for children and adults. But simply walking in the streets is an experience: because it is very different walking in Iran. The amount of traffic; the temperature!

**Amir Reza Koohestani:** Every year, we have an International Theatre Festival in Iran. In the last one five months ago, a Scottish theatre group performing Shakespeare visited us alongside companies from fourteen other countries. I don't have to go out of my way to show them anything. Once people enter my hometown, Shiraz – they will immediately see the reality in Iran.

**Vahid Rahbani:** We don't hide our reality away behind the facades of houses or underground – it is there in the streets for everyone to see.

What I wanted to say is that the young people are very different – they are really hungry and thirsty to learn. The last play I directed was by Ionescu and I wanted four actors – a small group. I did absolutely nothing to advertise these acting jobs – not television, not radio, not the papers – but over 150 youngsters turned up through word of mouth, to be tested because they wanted to be in a theatre group.

**Tony Fegan:** We were struck by the same thing when we took a group of youngsters over to South Africa,

where they met people the same age as themselves who were so eager to be educated and to be involved in something, even though they had to struggle every inch of the way to be able to participate at all. The same thing emerges when we work alongside young refugees in London.

Here, some provision is made, and it need not be much good, but it exists, and on the surface kids are often very complacent about it. They don't have any experience of having to struggle for their opportunities. And they don't realise how easy they have it.

At the same time, what they do is simply not valued. If they are lucky, many young people in Britain now with good, cohesive families have a strong value-system

about relationships between people. But the world outside seems to have no value system that anybody can fathom or agree with, apart from a vague and general 'TV approach' to life. When they meet kids from very different parts of the world, with clear and articulate values – it is very confusing indeed! Here, everything has been privatised. One is even meant to keep one's values to oneself – whatever they may be...

This week, we saw how it took a really long time for the British kids to feel as comfortable as many of our guests about the whole idea of just talking about themselves and what they really care about. It has been fascinating...

**Rosemary Bechler:** But international festivals perhaps can only show a part of reality as well. Tell us more about your work and how you would like to see such international exchanges taken forward in the future?

**Vahid Rahbani:** I have made two films so far. I'm returning to Iran today! – to begin work on my first long film with a Canadian producer. My last film could not be shown in Iranian cinemas because my actress, the biggest super-star in Iran – Hedyeh Tehrani – did not wear the *hejab* inside the house. So we were not given the right to show it.

On the other hand, of the Iranian film-makers, my admiration is reserved for artists such as Naser Taghvai, or Bahram Beizai. But not Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, or Bahman Ghobadi – precisely because they make films for the film festivals. *Ten* is simply not the reality in Iran. I'm sorry to be difficult about this – I have that trait I'm afraid. My favourite filmmaker internationally, by the way, is Kieslowski.

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This week's young artists' forum was certainly a good thing – a good beginning. But, in my opinion, it is vital to take it forward now, and to continue and deepen this discussion between children and adults and artists about children's rights. It would be good to develop some of this discussion online – but I would also like to see a magazine produced from this week's activities, in which every participant has the chance to put on record the way they work in the arts in their own country.

Then for the future – what I would really like is to continue the debate, but without all this talk – through dance, through music, through the way that the arts make people think. What we need more than anything else is something which makes the public think – 'Yes, what are we going to do for the young people? Me, as well? What can I do?' Because it is very good to have a festival week, but even better to produce an artwork which makes someone say, 'Oh oh! This is me they are talking to! I'm part of this!' That's what we should do next!

**Amir Reza Koohestani:** I am 24 years old, having spent six years working in the Iranian theatre in Shiraz, where I am a playwright and a director. I had not seen a play until seven years ago! This is the only art form I have had any success with, having tried quite a few, so it is a kind of obligation ...

My last play was translated into five languages. I have participated in two international festivals before this, in Germany and Moscow. It was a good experience. I was worried that the audience might not understand

my work or walk out of the theatre, because they knew nothing about Iran. But it didn't happen! My play was quite static. A girl and boy sat either side of the table and made no movement at all. Some of the critics said there was not enough movement in my play. But the public stayed for 90 minutes to see it. So I was happy. Subsequently, the critics gave it very good reviews. When I talk about theatre festivals, in Iran I think theatre is more honest, simpler than cinema – so I don't have the same reservations about international festivals as Vahid.

The Lift (London International Festival of theatre) week was a good start indeed, because it was understood to be targeted towards the idea of 'family' – truly a family occasion. I don't know how to express this, but I think that we need to try hard to preserve this smallest social cell. In the west, the family seems in great danger of fragmentation and disintegration. Attempts to save it, through this kind of process perhaps, are very welcome.

If I was director of this festival...well...it is important to involve children in the festival. I had forgotten what it was like to be a child, and I was glad to be reminded. But it is just as important to have their parents – and not just their parents – but people of every generation, young and old, talking together about how they want to change things for the future.

**Vahid Rahbani:** Once we started to participate in debate, I think what shocked me most was the fact that everyone started to remind me of little children!

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*Amir Reza Koohestani, was born in 1978 in Shiraz. He is an Iranian playwright/director and has won Iran's Theatre Prize for Writing for his play Tales Been Told, While Murmuring Delirium in 2001. Vahid Rahbani is from Iran's capital Teheran. Both a stage and film director, his productions include 'Kargadan', an interpretation of Ionescu's 'Rhinoceros' with the Compagnie Naqshineh premiered in the Municipal Theatre in Teheran on 31 July 2001.*

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