[CREATION 2015]

HEARING

text & direction Amir Reza Koohestani
assistant director Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh
with Mona Ahmadi, Ainz Azarhoush, Elham Korda, Mahin Sadri

video Ali Shirkhodaei
music Ankido Darash and Kasra Paashaie // sound Ankido Darash
light design Saba Kasmaei
stage design Amir Reza Koohestani assisted by Golnaz Bashiri
costumes & props Negar Nemati

second assistant Mohammad Khaksari
stage manager Mohammad Reza Najafi
costumes assistant Negar Bagheri

show in Farsi with supertitles // running time 70 minutes

production Mehr Theatre Group
coproduction La Bâtie - Festival de Genève, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt am Main, BOZAR - Centre for Fine Arts Brussels
production managers Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh and Pierre Reis
company & tour manager Pierre Reis

Hearing was written during a residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude (October 2014 - March 2015) in Stuttgart, Germany.
### TOUR DATES

**2015**

- **15th July to 14th August 2015**: City Hall, Tehran — Iran
- **19th, 20th and 21st August 2015**: Zürcher Theater Spektakel, Zurich — Switzerland
- **25th and 26th August 2015**: Noorderzon Festival, Groningen — Netherlands
- **29th, 30th and 31st August 2015**: La Bâtie - Festival de Genève — Switzerland
- **22nd and 23rd September 2015**: Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt am Main — Germany
- **26th and 27th September 2015**: Festival actoral, Théâtre de la Joliette, Marseille — France

**2016**

- **22nd and 23rd January 2016**: Festival Les Vagamondes, La Filature - scène nationale de Mulhouse — France
- **17th and 18th March 2016**: Black Box Teater, Oslo — Norway
- **13th and 14th April 2016**: Festival of International New Drama (FIND), Schaubühne, Berlin — Germany
- **23rd to 26th May 2016**: Kunstenfestivaldesarts, BOZAR, Centre for Fine Arts Brussels — Belgium
- **15th and 16th July 2016**: Festival della Colline Torinesi, Torino — Italy
- **21st to 24th July 2016**: Festival Santarcangelo dei Teatri, Santarcangelo di Romagna — Italy
- **22nd and 23rd October 2016**: Festival d’Avignon, Théâtre de la Vignette, Montpellier — France
- **15th and 16th November 2016**: Théâtre de la Comédie de Caen, Centre dramatique national de Normandie — France

**2017**

- **9th and 10th March 2017**: TANDEM - scène nationale, Théâtre d’Arras — France
- **16th and 17th March 2017**: Le Théâtre d’Arles — France
- **21st to 24th March 2017**: Scène nationale and Centre dramatique national de Besançon — France
- **28th and 29th March 2017**: TAP, Poitiers — France
- **1st April 2017**: CSS Udine — Italy
- **4th and 7th April 2017**: Le Lieu Unique and Le Grand T, Nantes — France
- **28th, 29th and 30th April 2017**: Onassis Cultural Center, Athens — Greece

*With support of l’ONDA
ABOUT HEARING

Where I found my inspiration
Mahin often told me about life in her dorm. I myself spent a year living in a dorm, but it sounded very different for girls – even if bringing a girl into the boys’ dorm was every bit as forbidden as the other way around. So I had to admit that I’d need to talk to a few people with firsthand experience to be able to describe life in a girls’ dorm with any accuracy.

Hamed Nejabat, the stage manager of my shows, had written a play that was to be shown in a girls’ high school. It was called We 15 and was about 15 students who get good grades in a chemistry exam and whose teacher suspects them of seeing the questions beforehand and who interrogates them. But unlike the girls in Hearing, they stick together and don’t denounce anyone.

I read that a Swedish court asked asylum seekers to provide video evidence of taking part in demonstrations to prove they’d been politically active in their country.

A while ago, when I was watching Kiarostami’s film Homework for the second or third time, I found the kids’ reactions to the filmmaker’s simple questions strange. They seemed stunned to be asked ‘What does being encouraged mean?’ or ‘Did you do your homework?’ and stared open-mouthed at the ceiling or the camera. I’m not one to judge these kids’ mental health, but it’s obvious that today, if a child was so terrorised at the simple thought of being left alone in a room with a film crew that they started to cry or asked to leave or for the door to be left open, you’d take them to see a psychiatrist or therapist. At the time though, in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war, people’s only worry was to survive and escape unscathed from the continuous bombing by Saddam Hussein’s army. Only a Kiarostami then could think about the mental and psychological well-being of the youngest. I learned later that one of the children was Kiarostami’s own son, Bahman. And I remember that the first time we met, when he learned that I was born in 1978, he pointed out that I was the same age as his son. So those kids could also have represented me. No doubt I was like them - if not worse. How could I now find myself in the pose of an intellectual with things to say about the state of his country and the world, having been such a lost and distraught child? I drew inspiration from Homework to try to discern beneath the adult Samaneh the terrorised adolescent fidgeting nonstop with her headscarf.

How I wrote the play
It took me far longer to build the structure of the play than to write the dialogues. During a writing residence of a few months I benefitted from in Stuttgart, rather than sitting at my desk writing, I spent my time walking in the Black Forest to think about the form the play could have, and the one thing I knew was that it would be about the ‘hearing’ of a male voice in a female dorm. Of course it would have been much simpler if everything took place in the interrogation room. The audience would no doubt have left the play happier, reassured to have understood everything and seen what they like: doctrinaire extremists persecuting defenceless young girls for something they didn’t do. Clear and simple, in line with the information broadcast.
continuously by public and private channels alike – including Arte. But it turns out that reality is different.

Contrary to what we might imagine, the interrogation isn’t carried out by some hairy-faced fundamentalist, but by a student who had been given the dorm key, simply because she’s a bit older. She isn’t interrogating the others out of any extremist religious or political conviction, but simply because she’s managed to keep her copybook clean up till then and doesn’t want any trouble.

If people only had to justify themselves to suspicious inspectors in countries like Iran, we could sleep safe in the knowledge that the methods and laws of ‘countries like that’ have to be changed, but that ‘we’ are irreproachable. It’s the discourse of all the right-wing parties these days. But in reality, the authorities all over the world who don’t question their legitimacy like to sit in front of you and ask you to prove you’re not lying.

Samaneh wrongly refuses to testify in Neda’s favour when she was expected to. Neda gets expelled from the university and commits suicide ten years later in Sweden because her demand for asylum is refused - and not because she was expelled from university. The question then is how much is Samaneh to blame for Neda’s death. In her place, would we feel guilty or would we wash our hands of the whole affair, arguing it’s all in the past? If by any chance we share Samaneh’s bad conscience, we have to ask ourselves why we don’t feel the same about the children killed in Syria or Iraq by bombs paid for by our taxes, or about future generations we’re leaving a fairly degraded environment to. A few likes or shares on Facebook, a few petitions signed in cyberspace and our sins seem to be forgiven.

When I got back from my last walk in the Black Forest, an outline like this came to mind: Attempt by Samaneh, twelve or thirteen years later, to give different answers to the questions asked, in the hope of changing the past.

Am I a feminist?

Hearing is my first play that isn’t mixed. The previous ones always featured the confrontation of the two sexes. Six of them were about couples. And this time, it’s women only. Does that make me a feminist? The answer is no. I don’t feel in a position to express an opinion about women’s condition. If I did that as a male writer, I’d feel like those tourists who go to India with a point and shoot camera and take some pictures of women in saris, cows, men hanging onto trains and buses, and then come home. I don’t know any more about women’s issues than those tourists do about India. The most I can do, through the presence of four actresses in this show, is to ask them to enlighten me about how close my outsider’s view is to reality.

Amir Reza Koohestani - May 2016

translation from Persian Massoumeh Lahidji
Amir Reza Koohestani was born in June 8th, 1978 in Shiraz, Iran. He was 16 when he began to publish short stories in local newspapers. Attracted to cinema, he took courses in directing and cinematography in 1995 and created two unfinished films. After a brief experience as performer, he devoted his time to write his first plays: *And The Day Never Came* (1999), which was never performed and *The Murmuring Tales* (2000) which received attracted critical acclaim in Tehran, during the 18th International Fadjr Theatre Festival.

With his third play, *Dance on Glasses* (2001), in tour for four years, Amir Reza Koohestani gained international notoriety and found the support of several European theatrical artistic directors and festivals. Then followed the plays *Recent Experiences* (from the original text by Canadian writers Nadia Ross and Jacob Wren, 2003); *Amid the Clouds* (2005); *Dry Blood & Fresh Vegetables* (2007); *Quartet: A Journey North* (2008); *Where Were You on January 8th?* (2009) and *Ivanov* (2011), all of them successfully welcomed in Europe.

Amir Reza Koohestani was also commissioned by the Schauspielhaus in Koln, where he wrote and staged *Einzelzimmer* (2006), and by the Nouveau Théâtre de Besançon, with Japanese director Oriza Hirata and French director Sylvain Maurice, to create the play *Des Utopies ?* (2009) on tour in France and Japan.

In 2012, the movie *Modest Reception*, which script was co-written by Koohestani and Mani Haghighi - actor and film director - wins the Netpac Award at the Berlin International Film Festival 2012. He also created the performance *The Fourth Wall*, adapted from the play *England* by Tim Crouch which was presented a hundred times in an art gallery in Tehran.

In 2013, Festival actoral in Marseille (France) has commissioned Koohestani to write and stage a new play, *Timeloss* (based on his previous play *Dance on Glasses*), successfully staged across Europe, New York and Los Angeles.

From October 2014 to March 2015, Amir Reza Koohestani was on a residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude, in Stuttgart, where he wrote his last play *Hearing*, premiered at the City Hall of Tehran on the 15th July 2015 and now on tour in Europe. He has been also commissionned to write and direct a play for the Theater Oberhausen, in Germany, premiered on the 30th October 2015.

Koohestani is now working on the adaptation of the french novel by Kamel Daoud - *Meursault, contre enquête* - which will be premiered at the Münchner Kammerspiele on the 29th September 2016.

Amir Reza Koohestani will also direct an opera which will be premiered on the 22nd April 2017 at the Staatstheater Darmstadt in Germany.
The Mehr Theatre Group was created in 1996. The aim was to create a new type of theater - far from the traditional Iranian theater - based on new stage direction and a new acting style influenced by film.

At first, Amir Reza Koohestani joined the Mehr Theatre Group to participate in their acting workshop, but after 6 months of the workshop they decided to produce theater productions based on their training. Since Amir Reza was the only one with writing background he dedicated his time to write for the theater.

In 1999, Koohestani’s new play, The Murmuring Tales, won several awards in the International Fadjr Festival in Tehran, which was a turning point for the company to present their works in the main theater festivals of Iran.

In 1999, at the age of 23, Amir Reza wrote and staged Dance on Glasses in Shiraz (Iran), his birth city. This very personal play was an attempt to get away from the pain after breaking up with his girlfriend. What he did not expect was to attract the attention of several theater curators who saw the work. The play went on tour for four years around the world, and thanks to the international tours, his following plays and tours were produced by international theater festivals such as the Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels), the Wiener Festwochen (Vienna), the Holland Festival, and the Theaterformen Festival in Germany.

In 2005, he started his collaboration with a French production office based in Paris (and met Pierre Reis) which carried his international tours (2005-2008).

In 2008, the Mehr Theatre Group became a French based association dealing with the major part of international tours of Koohestani’s productions.

In 2013, the Mehr Theatre Group produced Mahin Sadri’s new play, Belayer, to open a new window for other members of the company to develop the aesthetic of Mehr Theatre Group.

The Mehr Theatre Group is one the most well know Iranian theater companies in Iran and has gained international acclaim with successful performances across the world.


www.mehrtheatregroup.com
AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI
WHAT WE DO NOT SAY BUT IS STILL HEARD

in THE TIME WE SHARE Reflecting on and through Performing Arts*

When I put on a play in my country, Iran, I know perfectly well that the first ones to see it will not be the playing public, but members of the self-styled 'Council for Surveillance and Evaluation' who will have slipped in through a side door. My actors and I know they are members of a censorship committee come to make sure my play does not threaten their society, and that they try to hide their true identity because they are ashamed of their job. In this context, when you are thinking about starting a new project, whatever it is, your first thought is always, yet again, how to avoid being stifled by this committee and still manage to deal with modern Iranian society and question it.

To Western eyes, this might look like an impossible challenge. When the government saddles you with a group that is supposed to vet the performance before it is seen by the public to make sure it will not have any harmful (in fact beneficial) effect on society, and to certify that it is harmless and acceptable, how can you possibly hope to ask out loud what Anton Chekhov called 'the unanswerable questions' for a society? People who defend total freedom of expression as prerequisite to creation would probably argue that the existence of censorship casts doubt on any work of art created in Iran. For them, censorship prevents a given work from achieving the fullness of expression it would achieve in a free society. I beg to differ and can think of hundreds of counter-examples. If it were true, the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, Andrei Tarkovsky or Abbas Kiarostami, just like Jerzy Grotowski’s theatre, for example, would lack all credibility and be stunted compared to what they might have been had they been created in a society like that of France. The failure of so many artists in exile shows that total freedom is not a necessary and sufficient condition for creation. What artists need above all is to know the society in which they are living and the audience they want to address.

Of course you have to ask how a work that has to pass the censor can deal with questions that are censored. Are some themes impossible to treat when there is censorship? In practice, some questions are out of bounds, but I must say that as an author and director, I do not pay much attention to this forbidden zone (I sometimes get the impression that it bothers Western journalists more than it does me!). It seems to me that the main areas where censorship is applied are information and media. But these days, thanks to development of social media, people in my country are just as well-informed as those elsewhere. It seems to be the case that when the audience is aware of the constraints and taboos to which the arts such as theatre are subject, then censorship is not infallible, or at least you can get around it.

Ten years ago, I put on a play at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts called Amid the Clouds that dealt with immigration. In the last scene of the play, a migrant couple spend the night in a refugee camp. The man has to take a boat across the English Channel at dawn the next day. The woman knows this might be the last time she sees him, so she asks him to make her pregnant. It is the only way she can stay in France, and there is no way he can refuse. Anybody who knows about the laws of censorship in Iranian theatre understands that physical contact between a man and a woman is forbidden. So,
logically, this scene seems impossible to stage. And yet, six months after its world premiere in Brussels, Amid the Clouds was presented in Tehran City Theatre. I found a solution to show this situation on stage. I realised that since the audience were just as aware of me of the taboo, it was relatively straightforward. I put the two characters on bunk beds, but reduced the space between them to a minimum. So when they turned over to speak to each other, the implied sexual relationship was patently obvious.

In reality, I used the representation a spectator has of sexual relations to create the representation on stage. Most directors do the same. The images are not necessarily those that are presented to public view on stage, but the ones the spectators see in their mind’s eye, hidden from any censorship committee you care to name.

That said, I have to admit that no politically or socially sensitive issue can be tackled by any art form whatsoever in Iran. For example, during the crisis following the 2009 presidential election when the police clubbed and tear gassed the young people who took to the streets, you could not expect actors to take up the demonstrators’ slogan ‘Where is my vote?’ on stage. Or if they did, you could not expect the play to be still on after opening night. This is question artists always have to face: is it better to adopt a radical, in your face stance and have your performance banned immediately after it opens, or play cat and mouse games with the Council for Surveillance and Evaluation? In any case, that year, even if you wanted to avoid direct confrontation, it was hard to resign yourself to putting on Shakespeare or Chekhov. When the air you breathe is laden with the smell of burning tyres and tear gas, the simple fact of standing still for ten minutes can be seen as political gesture.

When I first talked to my company about the idea for Where Were You on January 8th?, I noticed that the conversation quickly turned to what was happening on the streets of Tehran at the time. On the surface though, the story of the play had nothing to do with what people were protesting about: a group of young people steal a gun for a few hours and each one hopes to use it to escape from an impossible situation. There was absolutely no direct reference to the crisis the country was going through. But the simple idea that democracy and the rule of law no longer guaranteed our rights (or our vote) and that you had to use force and violence was enough to open the way to thoroughly political interpretations. The dramaturgy and the staging did have echoes of the context of the demonstrations: the presence of a member of the police force in the house: practically all the narrative delivered over the phone, and the fear of speaking freely in the case the phone was tapped; the blood-spattered ground in one scene: Tehran University; and finally the gun itself. Each of these elements took on a particular role in the play. But at the same time, I hoped that, at another level of interpretation, the spectators would reforge the chain that united them, supplying the missing links and the things unsaid using information they had from elsewhere. In this way, they would have access to an understanding of the play that was different from that the members of the Council who had given their permission for the play to be staged.

thus, Iranian theatre, like any form of art subjected to censorship, cannot expect to inform the way the media do. The information discourse is highly objective and does not lend itself to a variety of perceptions and interpretations. The day after the demonstrations, there were deaths or not. It is no middle ground. Censorship can therefore be particularly effective against this discourse. Today though, we can hope that, thanks to access to the Internet and social media, the public can overcome the obstacles to the free flow of information. The theatre is then freed from that function. The spectator is fed by a constant stream of information coming from the envioning world and has the wherewithal to read between the lines of the play’s dialogues and have access to different levels of interpretation of the work.

In conceiving a play, as an author and director, you always have to be aware of this balancing act for both the text and your directing: suggest enough to encourage the spectator to complete the puzzle despite the missing pieces, but not so much as to make the censor’s antennae twitch. Remember as well that the audience we are talking about here is not the simple theatregoer of the classical theatre, discreetly sinking into this seat in the dark. I noticed recently that when we do the play for the censorship committee, the performances are always cold, insipid, even dull. For these initial ‘public’ performances could be very dispiriting: our first ‘spectators’ have the best seats in the house but spend their time fidgeting with their watches and whispering among themselves. But we take advantage of a weakness in the censors. These people feel they are so superior to works of this kind that in the phone conversations, they are not in the presence of a ‘real’ audience that prompted them to take such an attitude. Unfortunately, when their friends from the fundamentalist press came to see the same play along with a ‘normal’ audience, their perception was very different, but also to the intentions of the company. They were not in the presence of a ‘real’ audience that prompted them to take such an attitude. Unfortunately, when their friends from the fundamentalist press came to see the same play along with a ‘normal’ audience, their perception was very different, but also to the intentions of the company. They used the play to criticise the functioning of the Council of Surveillance and the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in internal publications, which, of course made life more difficult for us later.

They were convinced that I tricked them during the meeting I had with them after Where Were You on January 8th? They accused me of not telling them the truth about the meaning of my play. The fact of the matter is, they did not see the meaning because, luckily, they refused to become involved in the exchange with the play, the staging, the actors on stage. They were expecting to see a play that said things in a straightforward fashion. They were not in the presence of a ‘real’ audience that prompted them to take such an attitude. Unfortunately, when their friends from the fundamentalist press came to see the same play along with a ‘normal’ audience, their perception was very different, but also to the intentions of the company. They used the play to criticise the functioning of the Council of Surveillance and the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in internal publications, which, of course made life more difficult for us later.

It is worth pointing out a strategic error of the Committee for Surveillance, which imagines that by controlling the texts and the staging, it can produce an aseptic, harmless theatre. Maybe such an approach could work in non-live arts like literature or cinema. But even the most trivial words, when pronounced in front of an audience that is numerous, well-informed, angry and enthusiastic, can give rise to interpretations of the work that can go way beyond even the will of its creators.

Translation from Farsi Massoumeh Lahidji

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