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Amid the Clouds

text, stage & direction **Amir Reza Koohestani**

music **Ali Bahrami**

light design **Farshid Mosadequ**

production manager, director's assistant & stage manager **Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh**

director's assistant **Mahin Sadri**

stage technician **Alireza Bagheri**

with **Baran Kosari** (*The Mother / The Girl*), **Hassan Madjoooni** (*Imour*)

show in Persian with surtitles

surtitles technician **Negar Nobakht Foghani**

translation from Persian to English **Vali Mahlouji**

running time **1h20** (no intermission)

Amid the Clouds was written in 2004 during a residency at the Royal Court Theatre in London in the frame of "The 2004 International Residency for Emerging Playwrights" and created at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts the 8th may 2005.

production **Mehr Theatre Group**

coproduction **Wiener Festwochen, Kunstenfestivaldesarts**

company and tour manager **Pierre Reis**



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◆ Overview

Two Iranians, Imour and Zina, meet on their journey to the promised land. The pregnant Zina wants to have her child on the other side of the English Channel and seek asylum there. For his part, Imour is trying to forget the fears that haunt him.

In *Amid the Clouds*, the young writer and director Amir Reza Koohestani has relocated the rhythmic of the Persian narrative tradition to the reality of refugee camps. His words soothe us and immerse us in the everyday life of two people who are cast adrift and on a quest to find out who they really are.

◆ Performances dates

NEXT SHOWS >> from 15th to 18th March 2012 / Onassis Cultural Centre, Athens, Greece

. 18 th and 19 th May 2008	/	Trafó, House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, Hungary
. 13 th and 14 th May 2008	/	Comédie de l'Est, Colmar, France
. 27 th to 29 th November 2007	/	Nouveau Théâtre de Besançon - CDN, France
. 25 th and 26 th October 2006	/	Festival Encounters, Warsaw, Poland
. 22 nd October 2006	/	Lugano, Switzerland
. 23 rd and 24 th August 2006	/	Göteborg Dance & Theatre Festival, Sweden
. 19 th August 2006	/	Bunker, Mladi Levi Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia
. 27 th and 28 th June 2006	/	Festival delle Colline, Torino, Italy
. 22 nd to 24 th June 2006	/	Theatre Bellevue, Holland Festival, Amsterdam, Holland
. 8 th to 10 th March 2006	/	Kampnagel, Festival Polyzentral, Hamburg, Germany
. November 2005	/	City Theatre, Tehran, Iran
. 3 rd to 5 th September 2005	/	Festival La Bâtie, Château Rouge, Annemasse, France
. 28 th to 30 th August 2005	/	Zuercher Theater Spektakel, Zurich, Switzerland
. 13 th to 23 rd July 2005	/	LIFT, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, England
. 7 th to 9 th July 2005	/	International Festival of the Arts, Santarcangelo, Italy
. 2 nd July 2005	/	Belluard Bollwerk International, Fribourg, Switzerland
. 26 th to 30 th May 2005	/	Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, Austria
. 14 th to 22 nd May 2005	/	Théâtre de la Bastille, Paris, France
. 8 th to 13 th May 2005	/	Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, Belgium



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◆ English Press reviews

Eveing Standard

When confronted with reports of refugees in this country, it is a salutary exercise to put names and faces to otherwise shadowy figures, to locate souls behind the statistics. This induction of empathy is something at which young Iranian playwright and director Amir Reza Koohestani proves singularly talented, although his characters never quite reach the promise land of England and, disturbingly, the women are given merely generic titles.

It is only when Imour and The Girl, heavily pregnant, begin their treacherous journey across the Balkans courtesy of people smugglers that Koohestani commands our full, nervous attention as we root for these resilient individuals who simply seek a life in a less censorious country.

Alternating monologue and dialogue, Shiva Fallahi¹ and Hassan Madjoooni are compelling performers, one animated by fear, the other rendering his character silently stoic because of the abysmal hand he has been dealt. Fallahi's delicate, vulnerable face expresses a kaleidoscope of emotions, whereas Madjoooni's Imour has the washed-out nihilism that comes from literally owning nothing in the world except the clothes he stands up in.

The tender intimacy of the pair's whispered talk between the slats of the bunk bed at the refugee camp in Calais- a place where, as Imour remarks, you can sleep endlessly as there is nothing else to do- is the evening's undoubted highlight. Here, Koohestani the director brings to his own script almost unbearable poignancy.

Fiona Mountford - 15th July 2005

¹ Shiva Fallahi was the first actress of the play.

The Guardian

I wouldn't pretend to fully understand this Iranian play written and directed by Amir Reza Koohestani. Not because it is played in Farsi, with English surtitles, but because it is puzzlingly structured. But what moved me was its portrait of the grit, faith and dedication of two "illegal travellers" determined to reach England. It's a play that turns asylum seekers from cold statistics into human beings.

It starts with a series of dream like monologues about drowning. Gradually, we realise this refers to the capsizing of a boat carrying 15 illegal Iranian travellers from Bosnia to Croatia. And the dream-like mood is sustained when the mother of the hero, Imour, rises from a water tank to describe how she was impregnated by a river; since the myth of virgin birth is later repeated, I assume that Koohestani is suggesting that it underlies Islam as well as Christianity.

But the play really gets under way when we see Imour, by now working in a café on the Croatian-Slovenian border, helping a pregnant Iranian woman escape to the west. They trek arduously across mountains, make it to the Milan-Paris express and end up in a refugee camp in Calais. Imour is determined to brave the Channel alone on a home-made boat. But a bond has grown between him and the girl.

What is impressive is how much Koohestani leaves unsaid. He doesn't need to spell out the oppressive religious conservatism that drives young Iranians to escape. Even the growing tenderness between Imour and his fellow traveller is Brechtianly conveyed through actions rather than words. Behind the play lurks a quasi-incestuous reverence for motherhood that may puzzle western spectators. But it is performed by Hassan Madjoooni and Shiva Fallahi in a cool, unemphatic style that is deeply affecting; their near-love scene in a Calais detention centre is a high point. And, even if the play is awkwardly constructed, it reminds us that England is still a demi-paradise for those fleeing fundamentalism.

Michael Billington - 18th July 2005

Independent

At the start of *Amid the Clouds*, a two-hander by Amir Reza Koohestani, Imour, the 26-year-old male protagonist, is fighting for his life in the river Sava in Bosnia. The boat taking his family and other illegal travellers to Croatia has capsized, leaving him the only survivor. At the end of the piece at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in Farsi with English surtitles Imour (Hassan Madjoooni) is venturing across the English Channel in a handmade boat, having escaped from a refugee camp in Calais.

In between, the play charts his unsentimental, but touching relationship with another migrant, known as The Girl (Shiva Fallahi) whom he encounters while working in a bar near the Croatian-Slovenian frontier. She is pregnant and alone, and needs someone to cross the border with her to deflect gossip and suspicion. Imour finds himself carrying the girl across the mountainous terrain.

Amid the Clouds feelingly records the tribulations faced by asylum seekers from the untrustworthiness of smugglers to the insensitive treatment at refugee camps. While it has a political edge, it is not a full-on issue piece like Kay Adshhead's *The Bogus Woman* or Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness*. And its mode is far from documentary realism.

Instead, in a poetically heightened narrative style, it tells a story that fuses contemporary reality and psychological myth.

Fallahi's sad, beautiful Girl and Madjoooni's glum, undemonstrative Imour conjure up a haunting sense of the deep loneliness of these two individuals who have suffered complementary fates. His mother was shunned and driven to suicide for claiming she has been made pregnant by the waters of the river Ghara Ghaj. The Girl believes her baby was immaculately conceived as a gift from God while she was visiting a holy shrine. Will Imour be able to exorcise his fixation with his dead mother by acceding to the Girl's plea that, before he leaves for Calais, he gives her a baby to replace the one she has cruelly lost? There are times when the piece threatens to fall between two stools, but objections are swept aside by the absorbing, unforced dignity of its presentation.

Paul Taylor - 18th July 2005

Metro

Amir Reza Koohestani's play has a disorientating start. In almost total darkness, a voice describes taking a journey across the River Sava from Bosnia to Croatia by 15 illegal travellers which ended in disaster when the boat capsized. The narrator tells of losing his family, then moves on to describe the fear of another journey, this one by train.

A woman erupts from a tank of water. She too has lost her family in a water accident, this time in Iran; she waits vainly by the river for her cousin to emerge. By immaculate conception she becomes pregnant. If she can give birth across the border, she can claim residency. As the stories merge, there's a sense that they've become the same.

Amid the Clouds slowly crystallises from this myth-laden beginning into the very real story of two young Iranians trying to claim asylum. Imour (Hassan Madjoooni) and a pregnant girl who is never named (Shiva Fallahi), meet on their paid-for journey through the Balkans to England. Imour lost everything, including his family, trying to cross the Sava and is uncertain whether he wants to continue: the girl just wants someone to travel with. Both are terrifyingly alone. Mixing some rich dramatic symbolism (the recurring image of bodies encased in tanks of water) with gentle, naturalistic dialogue (the tentative relationship between Imour and the girl), Koohestani's wryly witty script and slick production convey the danger, the loneliness and the boredom of being an illegal traveller.

Claire Allfree - 18th July 2005

Time out

In a tank filled with water, it looks for a second as if a large exotic fish, with trailing blue and red fins, is struggling to escape. Only one aspect of the picture distorts this conclusion: two unmistakably human hands are pressed against the glass, and after a few surreal seconds the fish emerges from the water and reveals itself as a gasping young woman.

This is just one arresting image in a play that moves between the heightened imagery of magical realism and the down-to-earth details of two asylum seekers' odyssey from Iran to England. Written and directed by Amir Reza Koohestani - a 27 year old playwright who has already stirred up excitement with his drama *Murmuring Tales* - it follows Imour, a young man who has lost his entire family while fleeing Iran, and The Girl who believes she has had an immaculate conception.

Koohestani initially wanted to be a filmmaker, but through his visually poetic use of water he proves himself to be a master of the coup de theatre. This play's settings range from Asia, through the Balkans, and to a refugee camp at Calais, yet this is all expressed on a dark set, with three transparent tanks two, cube shaped, towards the back, and one, the length of a coffin, centre-stage where both actors submerge themselves to illustrate stories of birth, death and psychological isolation.

Performing in Farsi, actors Shiva Fallahi and Hassan Madjoooni potently evoke the exhaustion and confusion of the dispossessed, yet the play's dream-like momentum rarely shifts, and their dialogue can become worryingly hypnotic. It is the drama's visual magic that sustains you to its poignantly anguished conclusion.

Rachel Halliburton - 19th July 2005



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◆ Amir Reza Koohestani

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 follows the plays *Recent Experiences* (from the original text by Canadians writers **Nadia Ross** and **Jacob Wren**, 2003); *Amid the Clouds* (first European co-production with Kunstenfestivaldesarts and Wiener Festwochen, 2005); *Dry Blood and Fresh Vegetables* (a twenty minutes performance, 2007) and *Quartet: A Journey North* (European co-production, 2008), 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.

After some years of study in Manchester, Amir Reza Koohestani has returned back to Tehran since July 2009 and created the play *Where were you on January 8th?* recently performed in La Colline - national theatre, as part of Festival d'Automne à Paris, and after a European tour.

In October 2011, despite finishing his military service, Amir Reza Koohestani created the adaptation of *Ivanov* by **Anton Chekhov**, succesfully staged in Tehran for more than one month.

◆ **Contact & infos**

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