



Hassan Madjooi (*Shamsollab*) / on screen: Attila Pessyani (*Fatbollab*) © Pedram Harby

## *Quartet: A Journey North*

text **Amir Reza Koohestani & Mahin Sadri**

direction, stage, costumes & light design **Amir Reza Koohestani**

sound creation **Ankido Darash**

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

video & technical director **Hessam Nourani**

with **Baran Kosari** (*Negar*), **Hassan Madjooi** (*Shamsollab*), **Attila Pessyani** (*Fatbollab*), **Mahin Sadri** (*Sbideb*)

show in Persian with surtitles

surtitles technician **Negar Nobakht Foghani**

production **Mehr Theatre Group**

coproduction **Wiener Festwochen, Theaterformen, Holland Festival, Kunstenfestivaldesarts**

creation in Tehran, November 2007

with the support of the **Dramatic Arts Centre (Tehran)**

company & tour manager **Pierre Reis**

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



Baran Kosari (*Negar*) © DR

## ◆ About the play

*Quartet: A Journey North*, written by Amir Koohestani and myself, is based on the interviews conducted over a year ago for a documentary movie that I made about a middle-aged Iranian man named Fathollah who murdered three members of his family.

The first step of the project was to find qualified people to transcribe 12 hours of movie rushes, a task that proved to be more difficult than expected. In order to facilitate the initial selection process, we asked two groups of people with different professional backgrounds to do the first 60 minutes for us, but there were considerable discrepancies between the two drafts produced.

Although the story in Group A's version was quit clear and coherent, the original and unique language of the characters, especially the murderer, was missing. We discovered that the two people who worked in this group were professional journalists who had learned in the course of their professional careers to delete extraneous details and repetitious sentences and to focus on the gist of the story.

In contrast, the second draft was prepared by a group of theatre students who understood dramatic writing and – apart from of some parts where the story became difficult to follow – the parlance and language of characters was quit convincing. They did not ignore any sentence or word, whether grammatically right or relevant to the main story, and included every additional detail, including the psychological pauses, every “hmmm”, “ehhhh”, “ohhhhh” and the corrections the interviewee would make to his statements during the interview.

A month before the first rehearsal, we had 110 pages of transcribed interviews that encouraged us to keep working in the same vein. Although we began work on the first draft of the play, Amir and I were still not convinced of the impact of the story. I mean, everything was quite clear, but probably too clear.

We decided to add another story that would serve to contrast Fathollah's, about a rich teenage girl who commits a crime. She would share none of the motivations that drove Fathollah to his act; she would not be a victim of poverty or emotional neglect. We started to search for cases that would fit the character that we had in mind. Although we found two girls who had committed a crime, one who murdered her boyfriend and another who attempted to but just succeeding in injuring hers, we could not convince them or their families to agree to an interview. Although we agreed not to mention any names of people or places that would attract attention to the women or their families, they rejected our requests. The first rehearsal day was approaching, and we had not written a word for the second part.

Then, Amir came to my company with a new idea: we would research one of those cases or even take some parts from each, and combine them to create a fictitious character. We would then write the monologue, pretending it was based on an original interview. In other words, we simulated the real situation for the actors/playwrights, as if our characters had agreed to a video interview. Under these circumstances, half of the truth in Fathollah's story would validate the truthfulness of the second part as a "documentary" story.

**Mahin Sadri - May 2008**

## ◆ Previous performances

. 11 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> December 2008	/	Divine Comedy Festival, Krakow, Poland
. 2 <sup>nd</sup> to 6 <sup>th</sup> December 2008	/	Barbican Pit Theatre, London, England
. 20 <sup>th</sup> to 22 <sup>nd</sup> November 2008	/	Maison des Arts de Créteil, France
. 17 <sup>th</sup> and 18 <sup>th</sup> November 2008	/	Le Manège, Maubeuge, France
. 29 <sup>th</sup> to 31 <sup>st</sup> October 2008	/	International Stanislavsky Foundation, Moscow, Russia
. 7 <sup>th</sup> to 10 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	/	Theaterformen, Hanover, Germany
. 1 <sup>st</sup> to 3 <sup>rd</sup> June 2008	/	Holland Festival, Amsterdam, Holland
. 22 <sup>nd</sup> to 25 <sup>th</sup> May 2008	/	Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, Austria
. 11 <sup>th</sup> to 17 <sup>th</sup> May 2008	/	Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, Belgium
. November 2007	/	Creation in Tehran, Iran



Mahin Sadri (*Shideh*) © Shokoofeh Hashemian

## ◆ **Amir Reza Koohestani and *Quartet: A Journey North***

### **Working technique**

Artistic collaborations with Amir Reza Koohestani are defined by constant flux. It is precisely this trait that threatens to reduce anyone who is participating in the performance – producers, actors and technicians – to despair. At any time during the creation of a piece, Koohestani may destroy the entire composition and begin anew.

He begins his rehearsals with two or three monologues, and additional text is written for the first time during the rehearsals. Following completion of the text, he returns to the initial monologues and rewrites the original scenes. The actors know the first part of the play, but they don't know which direction the play is heading in. Consequently, their initial conceptions of the characters must be adjusted based on later developments.

The rehearsals for Koohestani's plays are carried out in absolute silence. He never interrupts the rehearsals; the actors are allowed to complete entire scenes without interruption. Koohestani writes down any critical points that he might have and discusses these in private with each of the actors after the rehearsal. Consequently, his rehearsals are so quiet and focussed that they can be likened to a religious ceremony.

### **Historical background on contemporary theatre in Iran**

Today, the political system dominates the cultural and artistic conditions in Iran more than it does in other countries. During his years in power, Mohammad Reza Shah financed the Shiraz Art Festivals with a large portion of the national income. At these festivals, a good number of internationally well-known theatre directors like Brook, Grotowski and Wilson staged plays whose high production costs were covered by the Persian State. The Shah did this because he wanted to transform Iran's image into that of a modern, developed society. However, up to this point only traditional forms of theatre, like Taazieh and Siah Bazi, were accepted and well-liked by the Iranian public.

Most performances of works by Western playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov and Ibsen were based on texts that were poorly translated by Iranian foreign students, and these lacklustre texts were staged by theatre groups with little knowledge of contemporary trends in theatre.

By order of the Persian court, avant-garde theatre of the late sixties was forced upon the local artistic community. This brand of performance was incomprehensible to the general public and was incapable of surviving without public funding. Consequently, theatre developed into an art form that narrowly targeted a specific stratum of intellectuals. The State supported numerous avant-garde and experimental plays, while independent Marxist and anti-Shah groups

worked, in defiance of the strict censorship, without State support on plays with strong political content.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 brought with it numerous artistic prohibitions. Amidst the chaos of the revolution, there were, on the one hand, those artists who had been supported by the State in the time of the Shah and who were labelled royalists and, on the other hand, a group of embattled artists who, as a result of their Marxist beliefs, were considered communists and atheists by the new ruling class. Those who were not thrown in jail either fled the country or committed suicide as a result of war-induced depression and psychological pressure.

As a country embroiled with a war with Iraq and suffering from an American economic embargo, Iran could not provide adequate funding for cultural activities. At the beginning of the 1980s, Iranian theatre was first and foremost a propaganda tool for religious themes. The State funded performances that were designed to attract as large an audience as possible. To avoid censorship, the few independent writers and directors worked on plays with mythological and symbolic content, which was light years away from the everyday experiences of Iranians living through an eight-year war. The population was too preoccupied with its own livelihood to find time for the theatre, and theatre performers turned their attention to film work, which could at least satisfy their financial needs.

In 1997, nine years after the war ended, Mohammad Khatami was elected president. He stepped onto the political stage beneath a banner of “cultural development and democracy” and – for the first time since the revolution – spoke about ancient Persian culture and civilisation. The State had previously considered Persian civilisation, based on its pre-revolutionary use by the Shah, merely a legacy of past regimes and suppressed it. When Khatami came into power, theatre performers returned to the halls again. Censorship dropped dramatically and the everyday problems of the population replaced symbolic and mythological content. Many new theatre groups formed, including the **Mehr Theatre Group** from Shiraz.

The Mehr Theatre Group’s vision differed markedly from the notion of performance held by most critics and theatre people in the town of Shiraz, located 900 km south of Tehran. Concentration, silence and analysis of Western movie actors from the 60s and 70s dominated this group’s rehearsals. (In light of the various political and economic embargoes, the only sources of inspiration at this time were illegal copies of films by European and American filmmakers like Scorsese, Bergmann and Wajda.) Mehr’s self-willed performance style, which stemmed from its actors’ youth, lack of experience and distance from the prevalent theatrical trends in the capital city, manifested itself strongly in the first plays that it staged. The group also benefited from the use of a well-equipped theatre in Shiraz for one year at no cost.

### **Theatrical work**

Like many of Mehr’s early performances, the staging of Amir Reza Koohestani’s first play, *The Murmuring Tales* (1999), had a realistic setting. (Members of the group would come to distance themselves from theatrical realism). The realistic action in Koohestani’s later plays contrasts sharply with the surrealism of the stage design and the texts.

Stage design is a major element in Koohestani’s work. In general, he develops the stage design first and then writes the play. In *Dance on Glasses* (2001), a play about the relationship between a girl and a boy, the actors face each other at a four-metre-long table. In arranging the actors this way, Koohestani demonstrates the impossibility of true communication and attempts to produce characters and dialogues that correspond to the motionlessness and silence on the stage. During the performance, the members of the audience sit like the characters on the stage, in two groups divided according to gender. Though the two groups might appear complementary, they are incapable of communicating with each other. In his plays, audience members sit close enough to the stage that they can hear the actors whispering; they become voyeurs secretly observing the loneliness of the characters. This is especially noticeable in the plays *Dance on Glasses*, *Recent Experiences* and *Quartet: A Journey North*.

The impossibility of communicating is addressed differently in his later plays. In *Einzelzimmer* (2006), a mother and her dead son talk about their problematic relationship, but neither can hear the other. When the characters in *Amid the Clouds* (2005) want to talk about their secret feelings and views, they turn away from the seated actors and speak to the audience. In *Dry Blood & Fresh Vegetables* (2007), which consists of a single, long, uninterrupted telephone conversation between a mother and her daughter, the characters pass by without seeing one another. While the characters in most of Koohestani’s plays sit quietly, the characters in *Dry Blood & Fresh Vegetables* are always moving. In *Dance on Glasses* and *Quartet: A Journey North*, their lack of movement hints at their shared shame. They do not ask to sit, they presumably lack the strength to stand.

Koohestani’s texts are extremely realistic. He does not try to impress the audience with his verbal acumen; rather, he uses everyday language and even purposely writes incorrect sentences. During the creation of *Quartet: A Journey North*, for example, he occasionally changed dialogue that he felt was too complete, correct or clean.

**Mahin Sadri - May 2008**



Mahin Sadri (*Shideh*) © Shokoofeh Hashemian

## ◆ Press reviews

### **Grinding engines. News of the world as it goes wrong: in Brussels, two directors choreograph the world in dark gray, between confusion and apocalypse.**

(...) If it operates in a different register, Amir Reza Koohestani also evokes in *Quartet: A Journey North* an oppressive universe, which eventually drove ones crazy. It is at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts with *Dance on Glasses*, that the European public has seen for the first time a creation of this playwright and director from Iran. This new show with his obsessions, including the small difference between reality and hallucination, considered almost like two sides of the same universe. Constructed from interviews conducted for television where a man tells how he killed three members of his family, the play in fact mix two stories. This is reflected on stage with a four side audience set design that installs the four characters, two men and two women sitting back to back, each facing a camera like an interrogation. When a character speaks, his face appears on a screen.

The stories blend together and echo. There is every time the subject of crime and knife. By a curious arrangement of the narrative, Koohestani almost suggests that this object would be the perpetrator. The actors do not move from their chairs, but it is captivated by their story. The man who killed several members of his family and then tries to assassinate his brother feels no remorse. The girl who killed her lover deaf acted on impulse. Cut the throats of a human being is like slaughtering a goat, they evoke. A sacrificial death instinct may perhaps refer to the bewilderment of a society disoriented by the contradictions in which the religious authorities forced him to live with.

**Hugues Le Tanneur - Les Inrockuptibles (France) - May 2008**

## **Intimate confessions**

The Kunstenfestivaldesarts definitely likes sobriety. With *Quartet: A Journey North*, Amir Reza Koohestani made the gamble of simplicity, with four stories in total privacy. The author and director from Iran - familiar with the festival in Brussels, where he has already proven itself with *Dance on Glasses* or *Amid the Clouds* - installs his latest creation between drama and documentary with pregnant minimalism.

On stage, four actors each seated at their table in front of a camera, simply go to confession. Two murderers and two relatives of victims pour out their story, based on fact and real characters: a customs official who killed several members of his family including his son and a teenage girl who has taken the life of his fiancé.

Despite the stagnation stage device and a text with accents very daily, the actors give a real passion for their story. The game is tenuous and yet fiercely excited. Never any splinters in his voice, they inflame their stories with a look of fire, a weary hand over his face, a tear in his eye, muted notes of Iran. As a result, our attention knows no respite.

As always, the theme of incommunicability is on the centre of Koohestani's play, symbolized by a stage design that places the actors back to back. The audience, divided into a square of four groups, also sees a single protagonist, the testimony of three other reach it via monitor screens.

No dramatic effects, or messages revolutionaries. Just a few pieces of life murmured, humbly, jealousy, madness, doubt, shame and tradition. With speed and precision.

**Catherine Makereel - Le Soir (Belgium) - 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008**



Amir Reza Koohestani © Pedram Harby

## ◆ Amir Reza Koohestani

Amir Reza Koohestani was born in June 8<sup>th</sup>, 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 Fajr 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 & 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 8<sup>th</sup>?* 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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