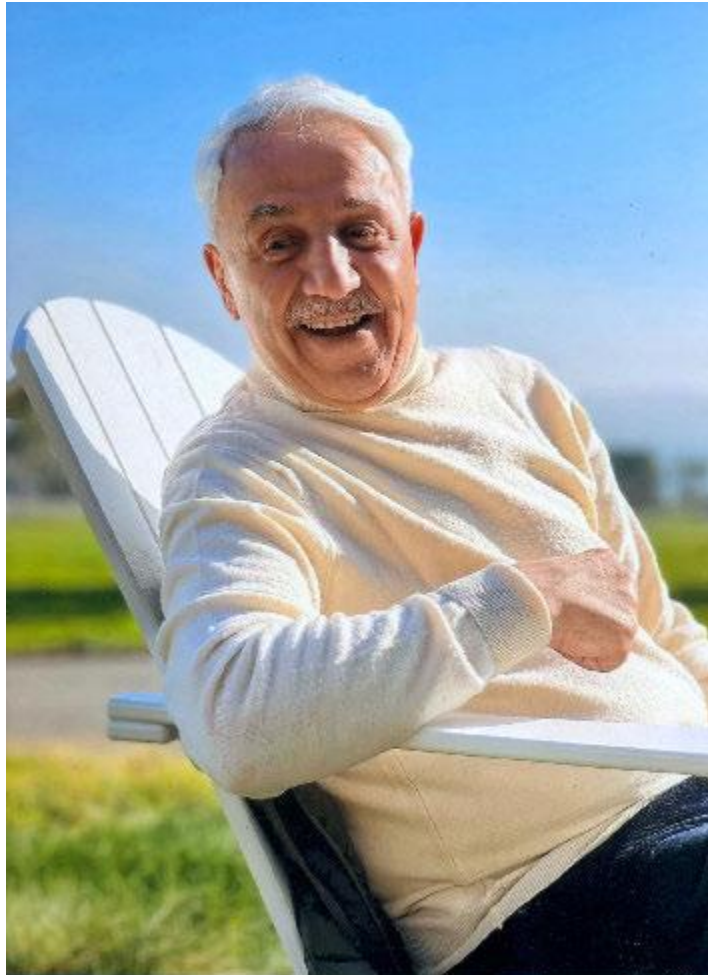


Interview with Nasser Rahmaninejad by Babak Rahimi



Nasser Rahmaninejad. Photo courtesy of the author.

The introduction of theatre under the Qajars (1789-1925) marked a new era in the cultural history of Iran. First, the theatre played a pivotal role in shaping new cosmopolitan spaces, mainly among the middle-class population who viewed the new art form as a civilizing means to become modern. Second, considering the complex ways in which theatre developed as an aesthetic medium for critical thought during the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), a political movement aimed to limit monarchical despotism by establishing a representative government, cities from Rasht to Tehran saw staged performances by growing independent theatre troupes and ensembles, who actively produced plays for political progress. As in the late

Qajar period, however, various new theatre groups performed plays mainly for an educated and elite audience, many of whom saw translated European performances in “Clubs” and small theatres with limited public access.¹

This was to change under the Pahlavi regime (1925-79) when theatre's popularity grew with the nationwide eruption of theatrical productions. Many productions, mostly translated American and European plays, were staged by an emerging generation of independent theatre makers who showed a deep intellectual interest in drama in a reflective search for the modern experience. The most significant development in the Pahlavi-era theatre productions took place between 1947 and 1949 when the Ferdowsi Theatre, under the directorship of Abdolhossein Nooshin (1906-71), staged European plays for a wider audience, who saw a brief period of openness after the forced abdication of Reza Shah by the Anglo-Soviet invasion in 1941. Earlier in 1939, Lalehzar Street in Tehran saw the opening of Honarestan-e Honarpishegi-e Tehran (The Tehran Acting School), where director and playwright Seyyed Ali Nasr (1894-1962) established the first permanent troupe and a school for acting. By the mid-twentieth century, theatre represented one of the most popular cultural practices in an increasingly modernizing Iran.

With the 1953 U.S.-led coup that toppled the government of Mohammad Mossadeq and brought back the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah, Iranian theatre, like other artistic spheres of activities, encountered increased state censorship. The mid-1950s and late 1970s marked more organized attempts to regulate theatre production as part of a broader campaign by the State Organization for Intelligence and Security (SAVAK) to stifle dissent across the country. While industrialization and, by extension, urbanization gave way to a robust middle class, a broader perception of social inequality implied a critical response to the growth of frivolous

¹ On Iranian theater of the Constitutional Revolution, see Babak Rahimi, ed, *Performing Iran: Culture, Performance, Theatre* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 12 and Willem Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran* (Washington D.C., Mage Publishers, 2005), 222-258.

consumerism and unfettered wealth. By the 1960s, a vibrant and politically conscious youth viewed the despotic regime of the Pahlavi dynasty as an impediment to an equal and just political order.

While the Pahlavi state continued to build artistic and cultural centers, the independent theatre offered an alternative medium for cultural life, particularly in its modernist manifestation. Inspired by the new European intellectual trends and global revolutionary movements, post-coup playwrights and theatre directors staged translated and original plays, displaying a mix of realist and surrealist genres as critical commentary on a rapidly changing society. The proliferation of independent theatre groups and the emergence of innovative playwrights such as Bahram Beyzaie (b.1938), Abbas Nalbandian (1947-1987), Akbar Radi (1939-2007), and Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi (1936-85) represent a vibrant Iran-based theatre culture that sought to carve out new cultural spaces while under increasing state censorship.

In this post-coup context, Nasser Rahmaninejad's contributions to Iranian theatre reflect this dynamic shift led by a new generation of dramatists. Rahmaninejad also represents a generation of theatre actors and directors whose interest in staging performances of varied theatrical genres not only challenged Pahlavi consumerism, especially the escapist theatres of Lalezar Street in Tehran, but offered a critical expression for political change among the masses. Rahmaninejad's theatre activities mirror the ideals of an era when experimentation and translation of theatre entailed the revolutionary conviction that to do theatre is to engage with the emancipatory possibility of performance. While the publication of his 2020 memoir, *A Man of the Theater: Survival as an Artist in Iran*, provides a detailed account of Rahmaninejad's professional and political experience, in this interview we aim to discuss a range of topics that reveal the complex relationship between politics and theatre in the Pahlavi period.²

² See Nasser Rahmaninejad, *A Man of The Theater* (New York: New Village Press, 2020).

The following interviews were conducted via email and Zoom on January 10, 2024. They have been edited for length and clarity.

Babak Rahimi: Our interview takes place just weeks before the forty-fifth anniversary of the 1979 Revolution in Iran. Before we discuss your views on the relationship between theatre and revolution, I'd like to ask you about your experience as a theatre producer, director, and actor in pre-revolutionary Iran. As you explain in detail in your *A Man of the Theater: Survival as an Artist in Iran* (2020), you began your life in theatre by attending the Anahita Acting School in Tehran in 1959. Established in 1958, the Anahita acting school was the first educational center where the Stanislavsky system was taught amid an emerging independent theatre culture that sharply contrasted with the escapism of what you call "commercial theatre." Could you expand on your early training at the school and the role of Konstantin Stanislavsky in modern Iranian theatre?

Nasser Rahmaninejad: As you mentioned, I began my theatre career and training at the Anahita Theatre School in 1959. The Anahita Acting School was the first training center to systematically teach Iran's Stanislavsky system. The training school was founded in 1958 by a couple named Mustafa and Mahin Oskui, both of whom were trained in Moscow under the supervision of Yuri Zavadsky. Of course, teaching this system in Iran was not comparable to what was taught by government-funded facilities in the Soviet Union. Still, the basis of the concept and philosophy of training, which mainly emphasized acting as experience, in contrast to mere representation, was the same. Before the Anahita Acting School, there was limited

understanding of the Stanislavsky system in Iran. It was taught for Iran's growing theatre when Anahita School enrolled students and trained new actors.

As for drama education, the first acting school in Iran, called Honarestan-e Honarpishegi-e Tehran [The Tehran Acting School], was established in 1939 and was active until 1958. The instructors of this school were trained in the French acting style. But before that, theatre actors in Iran had mainly been trained experimentally and almost spontaneously, mostly by Abdolhossein Nooshin, who studied theatre in France and taught his students in the French acting style.

There were attempts to initiate a modern theatre in the mid-1930s. But the dictatorship of Reza Shah, despite his apparent efforts to modernize Iran, severely suppressed such attempts, and other progressive artistic, cultural, and social activities. It was after World War II, that is, with the removal of Reza Shah from the throne and the end of his dictatorship, coupled with the anti-fascist atmosphere around the world, that Iran's social and political atmosphere opened, albeit briefly. Many talents dormant under the dictatorship, including in the theatre field, emerged during this period. Nooshin's activities appeared during this time, as he established his theatre group and trained his actors, as I mentioned, according to the modern French method.

So, Iran's modern theatre was influenced by the French theatre school from the beginning and continued to be so for many years into the Pahlavi period. After the CIA-led coup of 1953, commercial theatre grew in popularity. There are two reasons for this development. First, the new censorship policies, which primarily involved the suppression of leftist activists, limited the development of intellectual and progressive theatre. Second, the sponsorship of escapist and

reactionary theatre performances became a dominant form of theatrical production after the coup.

This situation continued until the early 1960s, when the Shah was forced to make economic and social reforms, known as the “White Revolution,” primarily because of the Kennedy administration’s policy to limit Soviet influence in Iran. During this era, Lalezar Street, which was the center of a robust leftist and progressive theatre, and also the central meeting place for intellectuals at cafes before the 1953 coup, gradually changed into a cultural space of entertainment. After the coup, Lalezar Street became the symbol of superficial theatre, staging vulgar and worthless comedies. Connected with this development, the audience of these theatres also changed, as owners and producers of such theatre venues introduced a range of Turkish and Arab belly dancing and juggling. Theatre became a small part of the performances. Meanwhile, the Administration of Fine Arts established a branch of theatre called the Office of Dramatic Arts in 1957, which supported apolitical performances while censoring leftist theatre.

BR: Your first professional experience with theatre came six years after the 1953 U.S.-led coup that toppled the government of Mohammad Mossadeq and restored Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as the country’s monarch. Could you describe the burgeoning independent theatre groups during the post-coup period as Iran experienced heightened Pahlavi state repression and an increasing regime of censorship?

Rahmaninejad: After the CIA-led coup of 1953, the theatre groups that had emerged and matured during the 1940s, mainly under the influence of the progressive and leftist movements, were destroyed by state crackdowns. Even those groups that could potentially be formed into political organizations were quickly suppressed one by one by the security forces, preventing their activities from forming and hence making them disappear. On the day of the coup d'état, Saadi Theatre, for example, which was the most influential theatre at the time and had inspired a new generation of progressive theatre makers, was burned down by thugs and lumpen, who were recruited by the police. They destroyed the buildings and offices of the Tudeh party, the Iranian Communist party, nationalist organizations, progressive publishing houses, and bookstores, beating people who resisted and so on.

After the restoration of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's monarchy, brutal repression, and insular censorship ensued, and for several years, no one dared to raise their voices in opposition. Cultural and intellectual meeting places were closed. Even gathering five or six people for poetry reading or storytelling became impossible. Society came to a standstill.

However, in the second half of the 1950s, we see limited signs of opening. After the 1953 coup and the political suppression that followed, groups that formed in the relative freedom of the 1940s, or that were inspired by the theatre of that period, disappeared. One of these groups, for example, was the Oscar Theatre group, which was forced to disband in 1956 after only two years of activity. Many of its actors later joined the Anahita Theatre School. During the 1950s, after the coup, we faced a contradiction in the field of artistic, cultural, and political activities. On the one hand, the Tudeh Party was dismantled as the only well-organized and influential political

organization and the most crucial oppositional force. The Party's many members were arrested, while all branches of the Party were destroyed. All other cultural and political activities with nationalist orientation and critical of the regime were also shut down. The worker unions also refrained from activism. A reign of fear permeated throughout the country. But, on the other hand, a few years after the coup, there were theatre groups here and there, including at the University of Tehran, which started to take shape. For example, Mohammad Ali Jafari, an actor who was a member of the Tudeh Party, worked with Saadi Theatre, most of whose actors were also members of the Party. The theatre was burned down on the day of the coup by thugs who were supported by the Pahlavi regime. Jafari was released from prison in 1956. Later, he established his theatre called "Jafari Theatre Troupe." Despite the repression, the theatre continued to be alive.

It was in such a precarious situation that I grew up. I was lucky to know a few survivors of the previous generation who described to me good stories of life before the coup and terrible stories that followed the coup. So, with these historical events in mind, when I started my involvement with theatre, I had an idea of the theatre in my imagination that I wanted to do. And I was not alone, as others like me formed theatre groups. This is how independent and progressive theatre, or I should say *opposition theatre*, was born.

In Iran, each generation had to begin afresh with a new experience, often with a tragic ending. If the harsh and bitter reality of that time is any indication, our growth has always been limited by repression, hardly ever simply handing over the flag to the next Iranian generation. For the most part, in Iran, not a single generation has tasted the stability to continue creating its art. Life and

the artistic career of our youth have always been interrupted midway. This is the sad fate of Iranian theatre.

Look at my life, for example. At the height of my artistic bloom, I was arrested and imprisoned several times, and my works were censored. Though I was released during the revolution (1979), I could not work for more than two years after the revolution. The atmosphere of terror forced me to flee my homeland and, once again, my life and career were interrupted. Even in exile, despite all my efforts, due to dispersion of Iranian compatriots because of ideological and political differences, the necessary connection between the artist and the audience never took form. Broadly speaking, the community support for continuity and coherence, which is essential for the growth of artists and their creative activity, never materialized.

BR: You founded The Mehr Theatre Group (1966). How did your theatre group contribute to Iran's independent theatre culture?

Rahmaninejad: When I founded Mehr Theatre Group in 1966, there were still a limited number of independent theatre groups. Of course, I must say that most of them did not influence the theatre nor did they establish a stable venue to stage performances, due to lack of financial support or producing a coherent mission statement. For the most part, the theatre of this period was primarily amateurish since theatre needs continuity of stage performances. This was one of the reasons why, after two years of working under the name of Mehr Theatre Group, I inevitably changed the group's composition and invited those friends who saw theatre as a serious activity and not just as a hobby. Those who saw theatre as a hobby had other ambitions in their lives than

theatre. With a clear mission statement and a reliable theatre group, the Iran Theatre Association was founded in 1968. So, to answer your question, I must say that the Iran Theatre Association truly identified as an independent theatre group and, at times, the only independent theatre group that aimed to make an effective contribution to the field of theatre in Iran.



We Can't Pay? We Won't Pay! by Dario Fo, directed by Nasser Rahmani-nejad, produced by Iran Theatre Association, 1980.

Photo courtesy of the Iran Theatre Association.

BR: What were some of the productions of note that were staged by your theatre group and how were they received?

Rahmaninejad: Our productions were generally well received. The problem is that we were limited in our activities because we didn't have venues to rent, long-term, for our performances. Even after the 1979 Revolution, when we staged Bertolt Brecht's epic parable *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, the provisional government gave us the prominent Sangelaj Hall for one month. Later, when the performance was moved to the larger Rudaki Hall, despite the agreement that the venue would be available to us for two months, we faced opposition from the management and, following several meetings and intense discussions, they finally agreed to lend us the hall for two weeks. We then only had sixteen performances. Mohsen Yalfani's *The Teachers* in 1970, directed by Saeed Soltanpour, was among the most notable productions. Bertolt Brecht's *The Visions of Simone Machard* in 1972, again directed by Saeed Soltanpour (I was in prison at the time), was also successful. Maxim Gorky's *The Petty Bourgeois*, the Persian translation of *The Philistines*, which was first staged in Rasht, capital city of Gilan, a progressive province in north of Iran, was received enthusiastically.

BR: In *A Man of the Theater*, you portray your experience with post-coup theatre as deeply political. Would you describe your theatre activities, as an actor and director, as revolutionary?

Rahmaninejad: This is a difficult question! First, let me say that I have never claimed to be a revolutionary. I have always considered myself an independent member of the left and in the revolutionary opposition. I did not imagine theatre could make a revolution, but I believed, and still do, that it could contribute to the idea of a revolution. In my opinion, art, literature, and, broadly, cultural activities do not lead to revolution by themselves but as mental factors that could help bring about a revolutionary moment. Revolutions require other, more important, and

necessary factors and conditions. In the first place, the chaotic economic condition of the working class and the poverty of the masses, the repression and violence of the government against the people, the irresponsibility of the government failing to protect the people, and many other objective and necessary, concrete factors lead to the disruption of the social order. Revolution occurs in a complex setting and a long process. We see the same factors in the revolutions that have occurred so far. These factors contribute to popular dissatisfaction and protests, demonstrations, strikes, and resistance as people organize themselves to change the status quo for something different. In such a situation, art, literature, and theatre can enrich and strengthen the idea of a revolution.

There are distinct and specific situations where theatre can play a more prominent role. For example, in the revolutionary period, theatre played a role in strengthening the idea of revolutionary movements and the larger urban protests and strikes. This is the kind of theatre that politically and openly challenges the status quo in the spreading of political ideas, which is known as agitprop theatre. With other names such as guerilla theatre and street theatre, such forms of political performances take place among the people, on the streets, in the factories, universities, and at heart of a social movement. As I mentioned, this type of theatre appears in certain political situations, such as the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the student revolts of 1968 in England, France, and the United States. It played a role in the 1979 Revolution in Iran too. However, in the case of Iran, the presence of agitational theatre was very weak and mostly affiliated with political organizations, which lacked independence. All in all, to answer your question, art in general and theatre in particular can enrich the human aspect of a revolution, but

it cannot alone make revolution. So, theatre can be a creative force in a revolution, but it cannot create revolution on its own.

BR: In your book, you write about various censorship measures that you and your theatre group had to deal with. What was censorship like before and after the revolution? And how, if at all, did you circumvent censorship?

Rahmaninejad: The main difference between Pahlavi, a secular dictatorship, and the Islamic Republic, a religious despotism, lies in the type of censorship applied to shape public opinion. These forms of censorship can be shown, if not accurately and in detail, with specific examples. Let me expand on this.

During the Pahlavi period, a critic or a dissident of the regime was censored, threatened, and imprisoned. This was the general policy of the regime. Now there were cases that some were murdered, mostly under Reza Shah (1925-1941), and under the pretext of political activity deemed a threat to state power. Broadly speaking, under the Pahlavi regime, censorship had unwritten rules, which the artists and writers already knew. We could circumvent censorship by simply deleting or modifying certain content. We could then proceed to stage a performance mostly without the knowledge of the censors. We did this by first showing the work to our close friends, who discussed the content of a play, suggesting what could be included or edited. We had to be clever about what could be presented to the censors. For the most part, though, the criteria for censorship were clearer in the Pahlavi period, and because the monarchy was not a theocracy, we had more flexibility with our publications and staging a performance.

This was the case in 1970 with Mohsen Yalfani's play *Kenar zendegi* [By the Side of Life]. After a private performance for a group of friends, a discussion ensued that led to changes with the content of the play. With modification with the content, Yalfani then decided to change the title to *The Teachers*. In anticipation of the censors objecting to the revised version, I then submitted a letter to the Supervisory Council without presenting the new play but only explaining that due to change of the title, *The Teachers*, we kindly request to issue a new performance license. We then got the permission and staged the play.

The Pahlavi censorship bureaucracy was hardly meticulous or able to detect and understand the changes. But there were other times when censorship could not be avoided. For example, before appearing on stage in Tehran in 1974, *The Parasites* by Maxim Gorky was shut down, as all members and actors of the Iran Theatre Association were arrested and sentenced to nearly fifty years in prison. In this case, censorship included imprisonment to prevent critical art. Yet, despite censorship, in terms of production before the revolution, the Iran Theatre Association was successful in staging several plays.

Under the Islamic Republic, however, censorship of theatre became broader, prohibiting especially themes that may be deemed a threat to religion. Such a form of censorship has consisted of two important features: first, effective techniques in monitoring theatre production and, second, a consistent ideological campaign to clamp down on secular culture.

First, as an effective technique, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a government organ in charge of censorship, has adopted the extra procedure of viewing a performance before being staged. Sometimes, the censors would view a play several times, asking the director to change dialogue, words, content, and movement. The most effective way to censor has been to inhibit performances and make arrests to create an atmosphere of fear in the theatre community.

Second, since 1979 and mainly under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, repression against intellectuals, particularly secular leftists, became more effectively institutionalized. This anti-secular repression continues to operate under the Islamic Republic, with victims ranging from poets and songwriters to cinematographers, playwrights, and theatre directors. Regarding this aspect of censorship, the Islamic Republic is innovative with measures to regulate the language of the public sphere, especially of a secular kind. We could call it “lexical censorship,” or regulation of speech in what could be said and published in print or live production of plays. Censors have significantly impacted the meaning of artistic works, changing the author’s language, and sometimes rendering the language meaningless. All in all, censorship under the Islamic Republic, though complex, is inherently contradictory, which sometimes seems to be pointless or simply madness.

BR: The following question is sensitive since it involves your imprisonment experience under the Pahlavi regime. In recent months, a revisionist discourse, led primarily by monarchists, has depicted the notorious intelligence and security force, SAVAK, as a patriotic institution heroically defending Iran against domestic and foreign foes. In a recent documentary, *Parviz Sabeti*, the former director of SAVAK, Parviz Sabeti, who now resides in the U.S., has denied

that his security force committed torture. He has also broadly described the use of force necessary for protecting national security. You were arrested for your political activities during a period when Sabeti played an integral role in consolidating SAVAK as an intelligent institution, implementing security measures that clearly included torture. If possible, could you explain why you were arrested? Were you tortured? Also, what is your response to Sabeti?

Rahmaninejad: Our arrest occurred during a critical period when the armed struggle had spread in response to growing repression. Armed struggle was ultimately viewed as a vital threat to the regime's existence. So, SAVAK decided to adopt harsh measures against armed organizations. The security campaign implemented by SAVAK was as follows: first, extending confinement of prisoners whose sentences had ended and were expected to be legally released; second, the arbitrary imprisonment of anyone deemed suspicious, which included those who appeared leftists or intellectuals. This might sound odd, but decisions to arrest people included how a person wore a particular mustache, a pair of glasses, jeans or velvet pants, sports shoes or boots, long hair, or simply a stylish or patterned t-shirt or shorts. The securitized atmosphere advanced a view that if one leftist or dissident was arrested out of a hundred, the government had made a significant accomplishment. The campaign also included the detainment of young people who entered Iran from abroad or students who came to visit their families during the summer. The objective was to determine if they were affiliated with the Confederation of Iranian Students or political groups abroad. At universities, anyone who questioned or engaged in suspicious discussions could be identified and arrested by SAVAK informants operating among the students. In prison, torture was done to the point of death. After arrest, the prisoner would be taken directly to the torture chamber without any investigation or interrogation, and to crush the will to resist, the

interrogator or torturer would first beat up the victim, punch, kick, and then use electric cables. While torture had been used before, its intensity and extent changed.

In such a situation, we were among the first suspicious individuals with the potential to be arrested. Obviously, not all members of the Iranian theatre community were Communists or members of a leftist political organization. But the government viewed artists with suspicion. As for our relations with intellectual circles, such as the Iranian Writers' Association, and the production of critical art, the government saw us as a threat. Such perception of threat was essentially because of our independence. At that time, there was no independent organization in any field, artistic or otherwise. The only independent organizations were the Iranian Writers' Association, which was not allowed to be active, and the Iran Theatre Association, which staged only one play a year.

Moreover, we were not members of a political organization and had no political activity other than doing theatre from a political perspective. Our work in theatre followed the regimes' legal procedure, albeit our subversive attempts to bypass censorship. That is, the plays we staged had proper license by an official censorship commission. None of the actors or directors in the Iranian Writers' Association were political activists, and, in fact, the state did not convict them on political charges. But the sad truth is that SAVAK fabricated lies about us. For example, in my case, if the agency needed evidence, they would come up with fabricated documents so as to accuse me of "forming a communist group under the guise of theatre." And this was applied to theatre actors who faced imprisonment.

Such accusations implied that we were members of a Communist organization and therefore acted against national security. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly 80 to 90 percent of Iran's political prisoners during the Shah's era were not political activists in the true sense of the word. Now, one should ask Mr. Sabeti, in defense of which national security did he execute all those innocent young people and turn the existence of thousands of families into ashes? As the head of the third department within SAVAK, Sabeti was directly responsible not only for killing and torturing many prominent and talented young people of Iran, but also for the death of hundreds of innocent people during demonstrations during the revolution. Mr. Sabeti should be handed over to the International Court of Justice for his crimes against humanity! Moreover, the government of the United States had no compunction about hiding its own complicity with crimes that occurred during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was supported by Washington.

It is a legitimate question to ask. Give me one example, just one example, of a politician who has committed crimes during his or her career and has freely confessed to those crimes. Sabeti is no exception. For the moment, the extremist right-wing government of Israel continues to massacre the Palestinian people while the United States along with other Western countries defend such atrocities with all their might. Do you think the perpetrators of such gruesome crimes, particularly Netanyahu, will be brought to justice? I doubt it. We live in an upside-down world.

BR: These two broad questions follow your experience with dissident politics. What was the shared view, if at all, amongst theatre practitioners about the role of theatre in political

transformation in the 1970s? Broadly speaking, how do you see theatre's contribution to the 1979 revolution?

Rahmaninejad: Before the revolution, most theatre practitioners in Iran were employed by the Theatre Programs Administration, a Ministry of Culture and Arts section. As a government employee, a person in a theatre production played an important role in following state laws and regulations, including, of course, censorship. When you are employed by the government, you inevitably must comply with the imposed regulations, including censorship, and especially when in need of a job, you are completely at the disposal of the government. In this way, artistic, creative work becomes a job like any other governmental profession. And since the nature of the regime was dictatorial, censorship was widely and severely implemented within the press, publications, cinema, literary, cultural, intellectual fields, and theatre. This explains why conservative approaches in art and culture were widespread during this period. The plays that had a critical aspect were, first, limited in terms of production and, secondly, involved shallow and superficial content. If a play included a severe criticism of the regime, SAVAK would immediately react. As I mentioned earlier, this was the case with Mohsen Yalfani's 1970 *The Teachers*. The show was closed after ten nights of performances, followed by the arrest of its author, Yalfani, and its director, Saeed Sultanpour. In the 1970s, the Iranian theatre saw an increase in the number of productions but not in political change. For the most part, theatre had become more and more conservative, primarily because of censorship.

As for the rest of your question, I must say that, unfortunately, the theatre's contribution to the 1979 revolution in Iran was very limited. Only in the final months leading up to February 1979,

when the insurrectionary phase saw its completion with the regime's collapse, a small segment of the theatre community openly supported the revolution.

BR: In 1983, you left Iran for the U.S. Could you briefly discuss your theatre activities in the diaspora?

Rahmaninejad: Yes, in early 1983, I escaped Iran and traveled through Kurdistan to Turkey, then to Paris, France, where I became a political refugee. I was in France for almost four years, and during this time, I produced four plays. Then, I migrated to the United States to join my family. Working in the diaspora involves many problems, especially in the beginning. Apart from the basic problems of living in a new country, a new culture, a new language, and a new set of laws, being unfamiliar with everything, it is a major challenge to resolve everyday problems and requires a lot of effort.

As for theatre in the diaspora, the first problem is finding the right play for an audience no longer in the homeland. This audience now lives in a different environment and deals with different problems, so it demands different subjects. The second is the financial problem. As an artist, how do you meet your financial needs? Then there is the problem of finding a place for performance. Where do you go to rehearse and meet with your group? Then there is the problem of finding people who are willing to devote their time to theatre without expectation of financial reward. The reality is that theatre in exile does not facilitate financial support. I have never been able to support myself through theatre during all the years that I have been active in theatre outside of

Iran. In many instances, I have even paid from my own pocket to produce theatre. But in some European countries, Iranian diasporic theatre has thrived due to the financial support of the state.

For example, two annual theatre festivals are held in Germany (“Iranian Theatre Festival”) in which Iranians and, most recently, Afghani theatre groups have participated. The continuation of these festivals is only due to the financial support of the local municipalities; otherwise, like many other theatre groups, they would disappear. In general, the theatre activities of the Iranian diaspora have decreased compared to the early waves of exile following the 1979 revolution. And especially since Covid-19, the number of theatrical productions has decreased even more.

BR: What do you plan to do next?

Rahmaninejad: In terms of producing plays, I must say that there is no clear perspective. When I imagine working on a play and the exhausting process of rehearsals along with the problems that come with it, such as the actors being late for rehearsals, sometimes the absence of some, providing the budget of the show, determining a suitable performance date that is acceptable to everyone, finding the right venue, and dozens of other problems, I can only describe it as a nightmare. In recent years, I have focused on writing and translating, and I am satisfied with this work. Writing usually needs considerable research, which is a learning and enjoyable process for me.

BR: A final rather broad question: How do you see the future of theatre in Iran?

Rahmaninejad: As long as the Islamic regime is ruling, theatre has no future in Iran, nor anything nor anyone. Iranian theatre has a high capacity for creative transformation and development, but it must be provided with suitable conditions for it to grow.

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