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PERSIAN STORYTELLING & EUROPEAN STORYTELLING  
(A JOURNEY TO FIND A DIRECTOR'S INNER VOICE)

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## **D e c l a r a t i o n**

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

Persian Storytelling & European Storytelling  
(A Journey to Find A Director's Inner Voice)

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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## **Abstract**

The main goal of this thesis is to describe and define my journey from acting and having no experience in directing to not only directing plays which was the main purpose of my study at DAMU but also to find my inner voice and personal approaches as a theater director.

I describe my learning process and realizations to use the theatrical techniques and ways of communication with deferent elements in any theatre production. In the introduction I explain about my background.

This thesis has five chapters including chronological survey on my approaches to each individual production I have worked on since my first day at DAMU till today. And at the end there is a conclusion to what I experienced as a theatre director so far.

## **Abstrakt**

Hlavním cílem mé práce je popsat a definovat mou cestu od herectví, od doby kdy jsem neměla žádné zkušenosti s režii, k režirování divadelních her, což byl můj hlavní důvod pro studium na DAMU, ale také mou cestu objevování vlastního vnitřního hlasu a režijního přístupu.

Popisuji svůj studijní proces a získávání vědomostí, jak používat divadelní techniky a způsoby komunikace s různými složkami divadelní inscenace. V úvodu popisuji své předchozí zkušenosti.

Moje diplomová práce má pět kapitol včetně chronologického přehledu mého přístupu ke každé jednotlivé inscenaci, na které jsem pracovala od prvního dne na DAMU dodnes. Závěrečná kapitola shrnuje mé dosavadní přístupy divadelní režisérky

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It feels that it rains here in Prague; but it doesn't rain. It's just how it sounds on the spot I am now. And it's very different from Tehran my hometown.

I wish I could simply bring them into words. I just know these cities whisper different poems in my ears and I love them both.

Azadeh Mohammadi

## **Introduction**

My home country is Iran, which used to be called Persia. My language is Persian or in other term Farsi that is "an Arabic adaptation of the word Parsi"<sup>1</sup> and became more common after 1979 when Islamic Republic took the power in Iran. I'd personally rather to use Persian in my thesis and just wanted to clarify it to avoid any confusion for my readers.

I was raised in Tehran and got my bachelor degree in dramaturgy (writing and reading plays) from Soore University in 2004. From the very beginning of my studies I had more interest in acting therefore my main focus was more on acting from the second year of my studies in 1999. I built my career in the field of Theater and TV and acted in one Cinema project. But also I worked as a voice over in some TV productions.

In 2008 I decided to get out of Iran to travel and see the world as much as I could. The first destination was Dubai, United Arab of Emirates. In Dubai because of the circumstances I couldn't be active in the field of acting as much as I wanted but the positive side of it was that I could act my first role as Poppy in an English production which was the Noises off by Michael Frayn, directed by Sanjeev Dixit at DUCTAC Theatre & Art Centre in Dubai.

I did run few theatre workshops for children at a summer camp in Dubai Called Modhesh.

Those experiences and lack of theatre groups of theatre in Dubai was a motivation for me to apply for an English acting school in Europe. I found Prague Film School and that caused me to move to Prague in 2012.

After finishing one-year program of acting at Prague Film School, I had to face how difficult it is to rely only on acting jobs as a non- native Czech or English speaker. Thus I decided to develop my career in a wider range, which became my new goal; to practice directing. I do not want to generalize and simplify the idea but establishing one in the field of acting is different from directing. And I believed it could be more useful to me to establish my career as a director and continue acting when I get offers from others or I make productions that I, myself would act in. In that time Jarka Šiktancova was one of my teachers at Prague Film School who was one of my

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.payvand.com/news/05/dec/1063.html>

motivations to apply at DAMU. And the other reason was presenting international departments for MA at DAMU.

Before I applied for directing I never had the courage to direct plays, even though I had little experience at film directing or directing group of children in some theatre workshops. I wouldn't dare to say that I lead a group of actors, designers and technicians. But I started to build the foundation of this courage to tell my self that I can be the source and engine of productions to happen.

The main subject I would like to highlight in this thesis is how I as a student of theatre directing tried to find a way to clarify my personal desires, wishes, dreams and self. To realize what is it that I personally want to tell my audience.

As any foreigner who moves to a new country I had my own ideas about Czech Republic. My first year, I had my certain approach to especially Czech people I was meeting in the town or the Czech language I was hearing in public places out of school. Practically it was like living in two different worlds when I was at school or was out side.

Since I started my studies at DAMU in theatre directing, my opinions about Czech nation has changed a lot. The reason was simply because of reading the history of the theatre in this country and of course that is not separated from the history of the country. The other reason was more engagement with Czech people.

One of the realizations was once I got to know what has passed to Czechs in the history when it comes to language. The time when German language was the priority till "with the national revival movement of the 19th century, Czech rapidly gained ground in most areas of education and public life."<sup>2</sup> Before this movement for about 250 years Czech was spoken in villages and countrysides and it is adorable how intellectuals and theater practitioners helped to replace the original language as the first spoken language of the country. By knowing this factor I got to understand the resistance of some people in speaking English with foreigners. This way of development, from a primitive language to its fame in terms of literature such as novels and plays by famous authors like Topol, Čapek brothers, Havel and etc. fascinated me.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/language/a-quick-history-of-the-czech-language>

As I was consciously and unconsciously trying to adjust myself and understand the society I live in including my school, students, pedagogues or even outside, passersby on the street, I realized that as much as I tried to understand people around me I needed them to have an understanding of me, my culture my region and all in different aspects. If only it's me who is supposed to do all the understanding it would turn out to be an unfair relation between me and the society I live in, a one way tunnel which leads huge amount of information towards me as an individual; all would be an input but how about my input to this society?

Since my entry to DAMU my observation of the Czech society grew more and more by reading the history of Czech theatre I've got a better understanding of people, their cultural, political condition. But it's not only about books; I had tutors who were real people and artists of this country. People lived in different eras in the Czech Republic. Means historical wise and artistic wise they are great examples for any student at DAMU to learn about the context and concept of the society.

Now I'd like to address another important matter in my studies that at last led me to do what I did so far since I started my studies at DAMU:

There came times when I was going through the history books of theatre. Especially the World Theatre, which I could hardly find any info about Persian theatre or art!

I notices that the most information Western people have about Iran is about the news released about Iran's Politics. But I cannot expresses my artistic language by just discussions about nuclear program of Iran or Islamic statement issued by the government. Therefore I needed to find a way to introduce myself, who I am and where I am coming from. And I think theater and directing became such a useful tool of communication for me.

To me studying at DAMU was not only two or three years of studying at a Drama Faculty. It was the beginning of a new phase in my life; start of a journey, which helped me to find my own voice even though I should say the journey is not finished yet and will continue to the end of my life.



## Chapter I

### A Respectable Wedding by Bertolt Brecht

Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.

Bertolt Brecht<sup>3</sup>

It was October 2013, my first semester of Theatre directing in MA international program at Drama department.

Brecht “A Respectable Wedding”<sup>4</sup> which was written in 1919 gave me one of the earliest plays. I had to direct this full play with nine Czech actors on their third year of acting course. I was asked to direct the play in Czech even though my knowledge of Czech language was zero.

Sylvia Rubenová who I always admire her scenes of responsibility, was a student of dramaturgy department and was helping me as a dramaturge.

In that time I couldn't call myself a director yet. I wished to have more simple steps to take rather than having Brecht plus nine actors on the stage during the whole play and worst of all having all the actors speaking in Czech which I had no clue about.

That caused me constant fear from what would happen before me.

There were a lot of barriers on the way of making this production to happen. I didn't have enough experience of directing and no knowledge of the language. I divided the play into smaller situations, and broke down the scenes. Sylvia who was trying to be a help in any aspect of the play also divided the scenes in her own way and after we compared them together I realized the way she divided the situations was much more detailed than mine. Which is one of the first steps in directing - at pre production-and how important it is to analyze every single situation in a play. How each simple change of any situation or character can change the direction of the play. And

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<sup>3</sup> <http://rfqk.com/things-change.html>

<sup>4</sup> Brecht. *Collected Plays One*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Great Britain: Methuen Drama World Classics. 1994. 269-297 p. ISBN 9780413685704

how important it is to break down the scenes before starting the rehearsals. In that time I didn't know that necessary steps in directing and in a right order. The other main issue I had during the process of working with actors was that I didn't know how to guide the actor to get to a point, which is supposed to be my expected result.

Sometimes I was giving them the final result even if I had a clear image of what I wanted which now I know it's one of the most prohibited attitudes of a director to approach her actors! What happened through this way of working with actors was that I didn't let the actors to process what they were supposed to represent on the stage.

I realized that my relationship with actors on the production of *A Respectable Wedding* was like a one-way street. I didn't know how to invite actors to a challenge with what they are supposed to think, act and represent. Practically I wasn't able to help the actors to approach the characters and as the character to approach the situation and the conflict. During that semester I've got to learn that each character has to have a different approach to each situation but how to involve and support the actors to get there was my struggle. Especially in this play by Brecht I couldn't really explore the form of the production, in terms of the style of acting and the production as a whole.

On the other hand the language barrier as I mentioned before was another major problem. With having no experience in directing the language itself became an additional weight on the whole issue. The actors talk in Czech and I feel that I am in a different planet. To communicate in English as my second language was already a struggle; how could I imagine having nine actors on the stage at the same time talking in Czech! Once they were starting to talk I was mainly thinking that I don't understand what they talk about and I don't know where to take my focus and I needed to learn the theatre directing and not dealing with a foreigner language. I needed to bring all my focus to how I should direct the actors on the stage. But I'd like to mention what was the result of this experience with a production in a foreigner language. I started to like the language. Means the sound and melody of it and I realized that in general there are more elements to distinguish anything in the Czech language rather than English and it might even affect on the length of the production. Finally Towards the end of the rehearsal process, sometimes I could pick up on which word the actors' stress. And even I could tell them on which word to stress that that had more important information in that situation.

Unfortunately exactly two weeks before the presentation, one of my actresses broke her leg and was not able to perform; therefore I had to replace the actress and it was another additional issue for me but interesting to realize all such things might happen in any production and I just had to learn how to solve the issue.

I would say it made me open up myself to a language that I used to find very harsh and difficult. Now after three years that I'm writing my thesis I feel I would like to direct a play, which includes other languages too. But still it's too early to direct a play fully in different language.

On the day of my representation I couldn't present the finished version of performance and just showed almost half of the play to the tutors.

In the first semester I had no involvement with light and sound design.

“Intelligence is not to make no mistakes, but quickly to see how to make them good.”

Bertolt Brecht<sup>5</sup>

What I mainly learned during the first semester at DAMU was to find out what I want to say. How I want it to be said. How precise I can represent my production. What my voice is as an individual, as a director.

I learned to be patient about the circumstances I am in and try to find solutions and not to be passive when I face problems.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/26853.Bertolt\\_Brecht](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/26853.Bertolt_Brecht)

## Chapter II

### Someone Who'll Watch Over Me by Frank McGuinness

After my first production in the first semester, which I call it a disaster, I started to review what went wrong.

I found one of the most helpful books to direct a play, which was the book by Michael Bloom called Thinking like a Director. The book explains about ways a director can approach her production. Especially in terms of working with actors which was the main goal and expectation during my studies at DAMU. I am bringing few of its quotations in this chapter.

"Determining the character's action in a scene and communicating them effectively are two of the most critical practices- more intuitive visceral than intellectual- for a director to learn."

Michael Bloom<sup>6</sup>

"Actions are the internal mechanism or engine of a play, and identifying them is critical both to shaping an approach to the play and to directing the actors."

Michael Bloom<sup>7</sup>

Since I was studying an international program I wanted to work on a production in English. Even though it never happened at DAMU especially at Drama Department before that time. Because of my previous acting experience in Prague I knew most of the English-speaking actors in Prague. Therefore after informing my faculty about my will to direct a play in English with English speaking actors the question of finding actors was not difficult to solve.

My department agreed to my request although they couldn't provide actors. I was reading different plays to see what I would like to work on but still wasn't certain about any play till one day my tutor Julek Neumann who was mainly supervising me on dramaturgy, offered me a play to read: Someone who'll Watch Over Me by the Irish Playwright Frank McGuinness. Reading

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<sup>6</sup> Michal Bloom, Thinking Like a Director. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Faber and Faber. 2002. 34 p. ISBN 0-571-21456-8

<sup>7</sup> Michal Bloom, Thinking Like a Director. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Faber and Faber. 2002. 32 p. ISBN 0-571-21456-8

the play was an exciting roller coaster for me. What more interested me was the opposition of the characters and even different people, histories, backgrounds, languages or dialects and cultures.

Below I am bringing a brief summary of this play and my reasons to make this production on stage at DAMU:

An Irishman, an American and an Englishman are held as hostage by a terrorist organization in Lebanon in a cell. The American is eventually killed, and the Anglo-Irish uneasy dialogue develops to an unexpected ending.

The play narrates the story of tribulations, misunderstandings and overcoming conflicts.

Clash of cultures in the framework of hostage situation in the Middle East. It is the main theme of *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, a play based on a true story and written by one of the most important living Irish playwrights, Frank McGuinness in 1992.

The story refers to Lebanon Hostage Crisis, which the Hizbullah group of Lebanon had taken some American and Europeans as hostage.<sup>8</sup>

-DAMU production was the very first of Frank MacGuinness' works in the Czech Republic.

-It was a good size of production for the black box (K 332) in terms of the number of actors and the location, which was a cell in Beirut.

-It was an English speaking production for the first time at DAMU for the international program. It opened a new phase of this program at DAMU and the English speaking community in Prague.

What happens in this play- taking innocent people and condemn them as intrusive, the victims of political games-stimulates my compassion and sympathy for what's mainly happening in my country, and some other countries in the other parts of the world in different ways.

There is a clear contrast between the characters of the play, how they become either aggressive or advocate to prove their existence which shows great conflicts to reprint for audience.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.photius.com/countries/lebanon/national\\_security/lebanon\\_national\\_security\\_the\\_hostage\\_crisis.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/lebanon/national_security/lebanon_national_security_the_hostage_crisis.html)

The issue represented at *Someone Who'll Watch Over me* is a contemporary and universal issue to be performed. It raises the question of humanity much beyond the politics. Nevertheless this play has a fantastic humor in dialogues and the actions of the characters. It's a funny, touching and moving story.

The question of loneliness and the more important matter that how we deal with our loneliness in such kind of situation. How we analyze and define past, our existence and ourselves. We can't change the history, but we can change our view to make the future.

The play has lots of status transactions. To see these characters forced to live together in one cell, the way they treat or mistreat each other is fascinating to watch. How each character's status changes and turns to another, stimulates the audience response.

## Preproduction

Sometimes I relate working on a production with Persian cuisine. Time spent on a dish, makes a lot of difference rather than cooking a meal in a high pace and in rush. When one eats the meal can even taste the quality time, which was spent on it.

After I noticed the result at *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, I realized how important is the preparation part of a production for a director. As a director the more I prepare myself before starting the first rehearsal the more confident and clear I am during the rehearsals and everything goes further much smoother. In this production I had a fine preparation. But at the same time shouldn't forget that improvising in the rehearsals is one of the enjoyable parts of it.

I wrote the needs of the three characters, what they want to do, their obstacles and how they overcome that obstacle and blocking in each situation.

"You don't have to come up with the perfect analysis for the first rehearsal, but you should come prepared with a workable analysis. Explore different actions for the scene, and explore different tools for the action. "<sup>9</sup>

I found these points below the most important in preparation for a theatre production:

- To know about the author of the play and better to read some more of his plays.
- To know enough about the context and concept of the play.
- Dreaming about the play and trying to picture it in different ways to get closer to our final imagination of the play. And it's really important to let our self to dream about the production freely because we can explore more when our mind is free and then later we can think about it logically, thinking about the limits we have on the way of making the production in any aspect.
- Completing the directing book.

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<sup>9</sup> Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olnek, Nathaniel Pollack, Robert Previto, Scott Zigler. *A Practical Handbook For The Actor*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York; Random House; Toronto: Random House. 1986. 57 p. ISBN: 0- 394-744112-8

- Thinking about the venue and the technical facilities of that theatre venue.
- Knowing for what sort of audience we want to perform.
- Calculating the budget and Finding the financial support sources.
- Thinking of ways of promotion.



## Dramaturgy

The Play Someone Who'll Watch Over Me is a full-length play. My plan was having a production about one your to one hour and half. I started to cut the play. It was my second experience at DAMU for shortening the text of a play. It was after my first radio production and there I had to cut The Proposal by Chekhov, which I will explain in Chapter five. What I learned during the process of cutting the text was to be brave enough to cut the text and make it as close to the purpose of my production. I use the word brave because that's what a director has to be to have the venture to shape things the way she wants. I realized how with cutting some lines or even words the rhythm of the play raises up and how in a shorter time and smaller space for performance we can get to the main points of the play.

Some cuts might make lines to sound awkward but by giving a goal to actors to go through some actions, that gap would be filled in and it even makes lots of sense for the situation.

"Highlighting action exposes the subtext." <sup>10</sup>

I always read the play aloud after shortening the text. It's always better to do it with someone else and read the character's lines aloud to get the feeling of the whole play. Words by being said aloud make more sense. I found the cutting process like a game. It can give different choices to dramaturge or the director to imagine the production.

Also in terms of dramaturgy I realized that because of the small space (the black box we were supposed to perform in, K 332) it was much better to have fewer words than more. The amount of words being said by actors is related to what kind of space and venue the production would be represented. It makes a difference in how we effect on our audience.

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<sup>10</sup> Michal Bloom, Thinking Like a Director. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Faber and Faber. 2002. 33 p. ISBN 0-571-21456-8

## Casting

I personally invited some actors I knew for the audition and explained that it's a part of my studies at DAMU and where I am going to stage it. I mentioned the summary of the play. And after that I sent the play to them to read and to make sure they are interested in being a part of my production.

Finally I've got eight actors on the day of audition. Their ages were between 28 to 64 year old. I had to choose actors for an American role, an Irish and a British role. The other very important matter for this casting was the English dialect of each actor and their ability to switch their dialect, because there were American, Canadian, English and Scottish actors in the audition.

I provided two scenes for the actors to read and chose three of them, asking them to read the roles and rotate the roles for the same group of actors. Some of them were making nice choices noticing what was mentioned as stage direction for the characters which I think is always a pleasant moment for a director to enjoy the actor's involvement with audition.

And this was my final decision about the casting:



Figure 1. Michael Pittman

**Michael Pittman (Edward):** He is originally German but rose up in England; He could nicely take the Irish accent. He had boldness in his attitude that I was suiting the role of Edward the Irish man in the play. I could feel he strongly has the will to get the role of Edward but it wasn't only a simple desire of an actor; he was really committing in what he was doing during the scene at the audition.



Figure 2. Curt Matthew

**Curt Matthew (Adam):** He is originally American and I chose him because he was also committing into what he did. His feature and body language was good for a moderated character since Adam the American man was the moderated character in this play and of course that his American accent was working perfectly.



Figure 3. Gordon Truefitt

**Gordon Truefitt (Michael):** He is originally Scottish but could also talk with British dialect. He was giving lots of energy during the audition.

## **Budget**

Someone who'll watch over me was my first experience for writing about the budget for a production, for this purpose I wrote a summary of the play, my personal reason for choosing the play, which venue I wanted to perform in at DAMU. Requires such as set design, props, costume, makeup, posters and programs. At this stage the problem was since DAMU could not provide me English speaking actors and I was getting actors from out of DAMU who are active in English speaking community, I didn't have this chance to ask some financial support as wage for actors, which was very important to me as a director or better to say as a producer too. I knew it would take a lot of time of the actors for rehearsal and wouldn't be fair that I won't pay them anything. And since this was my first real production I decided to donate money for my actors through our audience.

I do appreciate the understanding of my actors that even though they didn't know how much I could pay them at all they were willing to be a part of my production.

## Rehearsal Process

Before I started the rehearsals for *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, I ask them to send me their conflict days for rehearsals. According to their conflicts I created the chart for our rehearsal schedule. Even though there were some changes during the rehearsal period with canceling or adding some rehearsals but basically I tried to stick with the plan.

Starting my first rehearsal talking about the author Frank McGuinness who is an Irish born in Buncrana, Co Donegal. Lives in Dublin and lectures in Renaissance Studies at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. '*Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*' opened at Hampstead Theatre, London in July 1992 and was awarded at New York Drama Critics' Circle award for best foreign play in 1993.<sup>11</sup> Or the theme of some of his works such as war or child abasement, homosexuality which was some of his other themes to explore.

The context of the play which McGuinness was inspired by the event in 1986 when Brian Keenan the Irish writer, John McCarthy the British journalist and Terry Waite an English humanitarian and author were taken as hostages in Lebanon. For about 5 years.

But it doesn't mean that it's their personal story. McGuinness was just inspired by that event.

Also I talked about myself my background and how I relate myself to the issues and questions of the play and in a bigger picture the similar issues in the world and why I like to make this production on the stage at all. Why it is important to me to show it to the audience, which I explained in the subchapter about preproduction in this chapter.

I made sure my actors understood my approach to the context and concept of play. I asked them to read the play from the beginning to the end. A cold reading I didn't expect them to use any logic or any emotion during the first reading. Of course some of the actors become involved with emotions but what I mainly asked them from the very beginning for the first time was that let's

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2015/frank-mcguinness-want-make-money-dont-become-playwright/>  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interview-three-hostages-to-fortune-frank-mcguinness-the-award-winning-irish-playwright-talks-to-1532293.html>

just read the play aloud from the beginning to the end of it. After the first reading we had discussions, questions and answers about the play.

In second semester Jarka Šiktancová was also my tutor for working on *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. One of her good advices to me was engaging the actors with their own role as much as I could and I did it from the very first steps.

I found my way to make especially the first rehearsals more interactive with actors to bring them in the path of the production. I asked the actors to write a background about their characters and send them to me to discuss them together at the rehearsal.

The other way of engagement of actors was asking questions from the actor what they personally think about approaching their character or as the character in a particular situation. How they think they would overcome the conflict and struggles they have before them.

This way of working helps the director and actor to build a coherent structure from the aspect of acting. Other advantage of this sort of collaboration is that the actor would get involved directly and doesn't function as a puppet in a theatre production that is given orders to fulfill. The more the actor would be engaged the better result comes out for the actual performance.

"For Vsevolod Meyerhold, one the great directors of the last century, words were merely decoration on the skirt of actions."<sup>12</sup>

After I'm done with the theory part of the play - of course there are discussions and discoveries during the whole process of rehearsals- I spent few rehearsals to do some improvisations with my actors.

The whole action was in a cell; an experience that not every ordinary person experiences in life. Therefore I was trying to offer them kind of given circumstances which are closer to a normal life and they can relate to it better and then I would use the result of that experience in that improvisation in the actual rehearsal.

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<sup>12</sup> Michal Bloom, *Thinking Like a Director*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Faber and Faber. 2002. 34 p. ISBN 0-571-21456-8

"Attempting to define a single action for each character in each beat is one of the best ways for a director to prepare for rehearsal."<sup>13</sup>

There were times I used exercises related to Meisner technique, which I found helpful in some of my productions.

The Meisner technique is one of the major American techniques, which is based on truthful acting. One of his first steps in working with actors was asking the actor to pay fully attention to their co-actor and what the partner says the other has to repeat the same line. For instance one tells the other the 'you have a white shirt' and the other repeats the same line. Later on, one says a line and the other repeats it from his point of view.

Actors have to repeat the lines of their co-actor without any intellectual analytic behavior. The reason of repetition is to draw the attention fully on the partner. But what I explained here is only the first steps of his technique. It goes mu further but I don't see the necessary to bring it in details here.

Stanislavsky also inspired Meisner as he mentioned in his book:

*“ Stanislavsky, no slouch, had a phrase, which he called 'public solitude'. He said that when you're alone in your room and nobody's watching you- you're just standing in front of the mirror combing your hair- the relaxation, the completeness with which you do it is poetic. He calls it relaxed behavior on the stage 'public solitude 'on stage 'public solitude is what we want. ”<sup>14</sup>*

I learned and practiced this technique for a year at Prague Film School But then later I learned this based on Meisner technique at Jerry Coil's workshop at FAMU, which I attended few times since he comes from Unites States, twice a year to hold workshops at FAMU.

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<sup>13</sup> Michal Bloom, *Thinking Like a Director*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Faber and Faber. 2002. 34 p. ISBN 0-571-21456-8

<sup>14</sup> Stanford Meisner, Dennis Longwell, intro by Sydney Pollack. *Stanford Meisner on Acting*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed: Inc, New York: Random House; Toronto: Random House. 1987. 43, 44 p, ISBN 0-394-75059-4 9 (pbk.)

Below I mentioned couple of my examples:

In the scene four the characters of Irish man and British man argue constantly and break the tolerance of the American (Adam). Adam is the one who is the most moderated person amongst the three. But this time Adam's patience is over. The actor who was playing Adam's role couldn't show an immediate strong reaction to the other actors to bring the contrast in the behavior of the characters. We had to break Adam's settled attitude from the beginning of the play. The contrast had to be very clear at this point of the play.

I gave them an exercise, which was based on Meisner method. I gave a specific line to Edward the Irish man and another specific line to the British man and I ask them to stand and look at each other and say them to each other constantly. The lines were evoking their emotion.

There weren't lines from the text. For instance one of the lines was: It's your fault. By repeating this line, which was actually connected directly to the subtext of the lines in that specific situation. The actor evokes the real emotions at the very moment of his co-actor. Means they influence on each other for real in that moment although they know they are in an exercise but they allow themselves to mean what they say to each, as if it's a real experience in that very moment. And in such an exercises I do not give the same lines to different actors. According to the subtext of their lines I would give them a new line, which just makes very much sense for their character.

The British and Irish man kept on repeating their lines and later I gave a line to them which addressed the third person, the American, because I wanted to evoke his emotions as well to get the right reaction. Adam the American hold his emotions all the time till suddenly showed a reaction, which is a sudden surprise for the other, two. Therefore they had a better reaction to American's frustration.

The next situation was with a very different pace and rhythm and mode in the scene six. I used a similar way of exercise, which I couldn't get the reaction I was getting from one of the actors and again I gave them this repetition practice and when they finished the exercise everyone could feel certain energy in the room.



It's one of my favorite exercises when emotionally I want the actor reach to a level that he can't but by this method I can help them to get there. Most of the time I have a good result for the actual performance. I think what helps the actor in this process is when he understands which level of his inner experience is touched he can get there on the day of the show. I do not mean that actors should memorize the external experience but when they know where it hurts inside them they would have a right reaction for the actual show.

Finally I had a satisfying pre production. I divided the whole play into very small situations, as much as I could. And I mentioned before I used what I learned from the book. I mentioned in the subchapter about preproduction how I prepared my directing book

But of course there were scenes that I really couldn't clearly see what is my approach to that situation or even that particular scene. There could be two different issues. Sometimes I struggle with the subtext and answering the questions I have from myself to build the whole picture of that situation in details. Or I had some of the answers to the question but I couldn't still imagine the action and the blocking of that particular situation. The latter situation for me was better than the first one. Because I realized when I know exactly what is going on and I am aware of my answers to the questions, the general blocking of that situation does happen naturally, which is amazing because the actors move in the space according their right motivations, needs and struggles so the whole picture makes very much sense. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. If it doesn't work we try different approaches and of course sometimes actors' ideas work better for the situation because they are inside the situation and can come with very good solutions according to the material they have as actors of the play.

One of my main struggles in this production was the three-chained character in the room. The idea of chain itself was already a barrier especially for the actors, but also for me as the director. The general question was how to deal with this element at my production. How I can advantage something, which might seems to be a disadvantage.

Then questions in more details about the chains: From which point of the room they should be chained? Could it be to the ceiling with long hanging chain? How does it affect the play in this case? Should it be from the middle of the wall? Or should it be to the floor? And how all these decisions effects on blockings and movements of the actors? If they are chained in the room

could they reach each other? Could they touch each other? At the beginning I didn't want them to reach each other but after some practice and especially talking to Jakub Korčák I realized if I let them reach each other, then I can have more advantage of having more interaction.

After all these thought I decided all the characters would be chain to the floor and to build a triangle because they were chained in three sides of the room. Naturally the shape of the triangle itself was giving me some ideas about the relationship amongst these characters. I imagined the three characters, as the three heads of a triangle in that room the characters exist. And so after that I thought of the size e sides or edges of the triangle. To me these were all related to the relationship between these three actors.

At one of the rehearsals I tied the three of them by a long elastic band and connected them to each other through this one elastic band. I ask them to try constantly avoiding the elastic band falling down, it means that whole time the band had to be stretched between them. This exercise gave all of us interesting visions. The actors were trying to keep the tension between them all the time. This exercise even helped me to imagine the spot of the chains on the floor. It helped me to realize how far and close they can get together also how long the size of the chains could be. Of course this exercise wasn't the whole inspiration but it was an interesting part of it. For me the realization came out of the collection of my observations from the very beginning of preproduction to the time during the rehearsals that I made my mind where the actors should be chained and how long each chain should be.

Other important technique I learned during this time was how especially Europeans read the stage. From left to write the same way they write or read books.

" The obvious reason is that we are naturally inclined to look from left to right in reading and that we carry this inclination to all phases of observation. In looking at a painting the first glance is in the left direction; and in the theatre, as the curtain rises at the beginning of the act, the audience can be seen to look to their left first in talking in immediate impress of the stage setting. "<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Dean & Lawrence Carra, *Fundamentals of Play Directing*. New York; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.1947. 103-104 p

Since my native language is Persian, our alphabet letters are also Persian and we read and write from right to left, thus for me it would be much fluid to follow the direction of the actions from right to left. It is still one of my constant challenges to read the stage from left to write, means I should write the dominant actions from left to write.

Eventually by gaining more experience it would be easier but still I can catch myself reading the stage in Persian and not in Western way.

According to this matter I located the actors in different heads of the triangle. The three characters are important in this play. Each of them has his own weight on the play. I put Adam, the American Character in the middle upstage. He is the most wise and moderated character in the play. Edward the Irish man is on the stage left (from the point of view of audience).

His approaches to the other characters are very dominant and powerful in the play. And finality I put the Englishman- Michael- in the right side of the space. His character's presence in the play is later than the other two characters. His presence made lots of changes in the mode of the cell. Of course these are brief and view on the characters but were playing roles in my decision.

A Breath during the lines and in-between them. Live the moments of a real life.

Since the style of this production was completely realistic I had to make sure that what the audience sees would be believable for them.

“The most profound experience of life tend to be wordless moments; the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, or the departure of a dear friend are emotionally loaded moments which often leaves us speechless. To be struck speechless is not necessarily to be struck incommunicative. Silence in such situations may still be able successfully to express the awe, respect, reverence, joy, loss, or love that demanded of the moment. “<sup>16</sup>

At one of the initial rehearsals I asked them to think what animal they imagine for their characters. They thought about it and came with an idea to the next rehearsal and we discussed each animal. It happened that we had some disagreement but finally we would come up with a

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<sup>16</sup> Terry John Converse. *Directing For The Stage*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Colorado: Meriwether Publishing. 1945. 25p ISBN1-55608-014-2

final decision about the animal. After that I asked them to play the animal in their roles. First to play a mild feature of that animal and the next step was to exaggerate the action and feature of that animal in their roles. By doing it we all discovered new features in each character that were noticeable, either physical or in their behavior.

One of the great lessons I learned in this production was how to make the actors live the life of each moment of the play. Means that at least I did my best for this matter to happen. There is an existing struggle for the actors most of the time that they have the fear and anxiety while performing on stage that they look boring to their audience, I noticed that even with the best actors I personally had the chance to work with. Especially when there is a long monologue. Therefore they start to rush their lines and not really living the situation in that very moment of their acting. I as a director have to support the actors to believe that they are not boring. And if they become boring I would tell them because I switch my role between the audience and director.

I think this is what naturally happens to a director. Switching her role between a director and audience. But going back to the 'breath' in the situations in each play I would like to mention that how I could get to this point. The actors naturally need to know what is going on in the scene we work on. Therefore in the first rounds that we work on any scene I must let the actors to discover themselves through the hints I give them in terms of the subtext, what are the needs, requirements, struggles, conflict of a character and how they overcome their conflicts. How they avoid different matters during the scene. Where are higher and lower stakes. Who has the higher status in the very moment of the situation and how the status might change for a character for example gradual or sudden change of the status.

I have tried the game of status as an actor in the past and I developed my experience on the matter of status with actors. I do believe it's one of the useful techniques to ask the actors to think about their status and to present it since the level of their status can appear in their physical gesture, pitch of voice, the rhythm of their lines and movements.

## Space and Set

Vasylyna Kharchevka was the set designer of this production. She was one of the students of scenography in then Czech Program at DAMU. After she read the play we discussed about space and set I wanted to have it as simple as possible. Therefore we ended up with the idea of . creating a simple bench, a small and short stool and the chains. In terms of time, space, this play happens in different times of the year but in one location, A room or a cell with no window. As I mentioned before the black box was a good option with not having a specific character. I could turn it in to any kind of place. Vasylyna designed a very simple and practical looking bench out of metal. One of the reasons I wanted to have a bench was not to have three chairs for three characters. If I wanted to have two actors sitting next to each other, the concept of bench could be very practical in some situations. The other very important matter was that since there was no bed in this cell for these characters, they could take turns to have the bench and this movement of the bench in different scenes was giving interesting effect to the whole play in terms of visual and also it was related to the concept of the play.



**Figure 4. Someone Who'll Watch Over Me.** Festival Nad Prahou pŭlměsíc, Švandovo theatre, November 2014. From left to right: Michael Pitthan, Curt Matthew, Gordon Truefitt

Once we had the chains at rehearsal I realized while actors walk and talk it's not easy to follow what happens on stage or what they say. Chains became very distractive for me as the audience. I had some discussion about the type, material and weight of the chains with Vasylyna. We searched for the most suitable type of chain the production.

I asked the actors to notice they have to compromise the way they move with the chains and when and how they deliver their lines. Finally it worked very well because the sound of the chains was not a barrier anymore and even had an interesting effect and was adding to the horror or even comic parts of the play and We all learned how to deal with the chains.

What was effective for actors was about timing. As actors having awareness of chains and as characters being unaware of chains to act the surprising situations during the play were the good result of working with chains.

### **Light design**

The light design of this production was very simple since the characters were in a cell all the time with more or less the same condition. I also added few florescent lamps to the ceiling of the room, which was a good effect when their light was going on and off. So this was also adding some effect to the atmosphere of the cell the characters were in.

### **Sound Effects**

Sound effect of this production was very simple. I used the famous song of Someone To Watch Over me, the version sang by Ella Fitzgerald, which was referred in the play itself, as the opening song. Also sound effects of foot steps getting closer and further to a metal sliding door, opening and closing it which was giving the impression of someone with more power outside of the cell and to create a sense of unsafe to the characters. I also added sound of one of the verses of Quran called Al-Bagharah- a short part of it- when the three men are in an argument with each other especially the Irish man and the British man and suddenly they hear the sound of Quran from outside. Once they hear it, there is a silence between them and then Edward the Irish man apologizes to Michael the British man. That's a moment of realization for the characters to

remind themselves they are in the hands of others that these three men have no clue that they are out of this cell. I think by adding this sound effect I added another value to their relationship. They'd better get along in this high stake situation!

I was operating the sound effect during the actual performance days.

### Venue

I proposed the venue of Studio Řetízek at DAMU for *Someone Who'll watch over me* but for some reasons I haven't got the chance to perform there and they offered me to perform it in a black box at DAMU, K 332, which actually I found that space even better. Especially the black floor was a better choice than the wooden floor at studio Řetízek. As I mentioned before since a black box doesn't have a dominant character we can turn it to whatever we want.



**Figure 5. *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. From left to right: Michael Pitthan. Curt Matthew. Gordon Truefitt. DAMU. K332. June 2014.**

But Later when I attended the festival of Nad Prahou půlměsíc, we performed at the studio of Švandovo divadlo, which was much better of a great choice for this production.

## **Production Team**

Generally I had the courage to work with international and local students at DAMU. Czech students, because they know the Czech language, they are more experienced in terms of the rules of DAMU and things happening in town, also it's always important to work with people of the country we live in as a foreigner. Because generally each nation has a common sense of approaching to matters they work on. And it is very helpful and is better than any book or guideline to learn about that country and its nation.

By working with the students of Czech program at DAMU and international students I was feeling I'm gaining more knowledge in terms of where I live and study and how I build my networks in my environment. Therefore I had Vasylyna Kharchevka who was studying at Czech Program of Scenography at DAMU and Kevin Chio who is from Macao and used to study MA in Arts Management at DAMU. Kevin and I had a very nice and simple collaboration in production. I asked Kevin to read the play and come to see the rehearsals for few time so he would have clear idea what happens in the play. He also came to the general rehearsal to help and handle the sound effect. On the days of the performance he prepared the props for the actors before we start the performance. I was handling the light while our general and dress rehearsal and our actual performances. The experience was that I couldn't follow the acting as much as I wanted but on the other hand I managed to learn the lighting system for that particular production. How to advertise the production is one of the important factors. How we seek our production. My main target beside the students at DAMU was approaching the English speaking community in Prague.



## Poster

I asked Kiro Nuseva graphic designer to design a poster for this play. I explained him the summary of the play and the highlight points of it. Also I wrote him some important lines of the characters and asked him to come and see one of the rehearsals to feel the mode of the play.

I could imagine some detailed information on the poster. Therefore I am quoting a small part of our communication via email:

"I would like to give you some idea about the poster. Because I want to have their faces, we can take photos from the three of them from front with the same angle and make one face out of the 3 of the three faces. Imagine if we divide a face to three parts. Each part of this face includes a part of the three characters, but there are borders in between the faces, I mean some distance, because they are distanced and closed at the same time. Tell me please what you think about it.

The background, we can talk about. I need your idea about it."<sup>17</sup>

We both agreed on what I asked. Kiro started to make some etudes and show them to me till finally the idea of the face became what I wanted. From the very beginning I had the idea of triangle in this play and I shared it with him and after some etudes kiro used the background wall in that black box (K332) and used them as the pattern of the triangles. After finalizing and printing the posters we spread different sizes of the poster to the places we would know are potential to hang them. We hang them at different venues, cafes, and faculties. I also asked my actors to take and spread some of the flyers and talk about the production and invite people as much as possible.

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<sup>17</sup> My Email to Kiro about poster. 5<sup>th</sup> May 2014

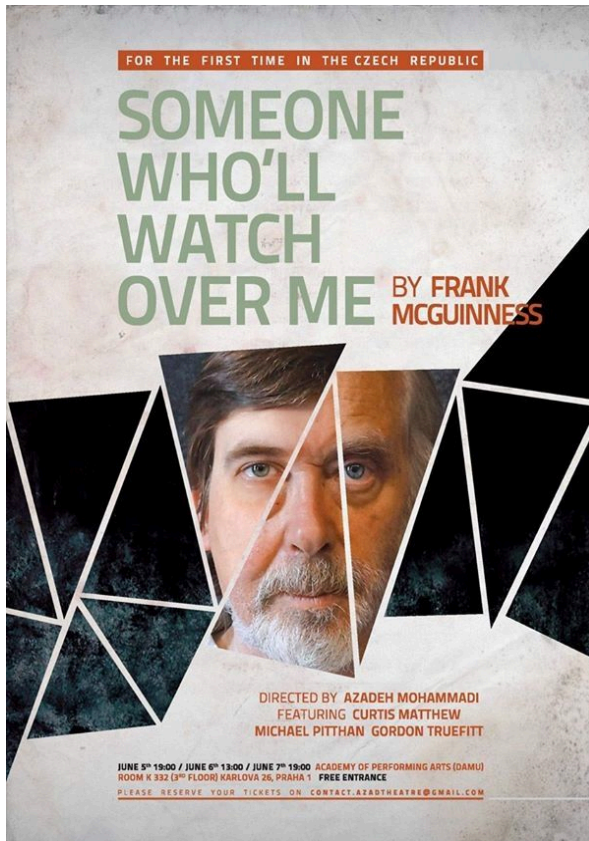


Figure 6. Poster, *Someone Who'll watch Over Me* by Kiro Nushev. 2014

## Trailer

A filmmaker Kaveh Daneshmand made a short trailer on the play so we released it some time before the opening night.<sup>18</sup>I also sent invitations on Facebook and email. One thing, which is again very important for advertising, is the personal messages. For any production we should send as many as personal messages to people who we know. That's the most practical way of approaching the audience and seeks the production. Other way of presenting the production is social media was Radio Free Europe and Expats.cz which was good reportage about the production.

<sup>18</sup> <https://vimeo.com/108279076>

## **Festival of Nad Prahou pŭlměsíc**

I invited The Organizer of the festival Nad Prahou pŭlměsíc, Lucie Němečková to see someone Who'll Watch Over Me. Fortunately she liked the production and she invited us to attend her festival on 6<sup>th</sup> of November at Švandovo theatre in November 2014. It was an important step for me to gain some self-confidence as a theatre director.



**Figure 7. Someone Who'll Watch Over Me. Švandovo Theatre. 2014**



Figure 8. Someone Who'll Watch Over Me. Švandovo Theatre. 2014



Figure 9. Someone Who'll Watch Over Me. Švandovo Theatre. 2014





Figure 10. *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. Švandovo theatre. 2014

## **My Approach To Someone Who'll Watch Over Me**

-My approach in *Someone Who'll Watch Over me* was mainly based on working with actors. I did try the most learning how to communicate with my actors and to find my way of making dialogue between my actors and myself. To realize how I can approach them and how to define what I am looking for.

-I learned both theoretically and practically how to approach a production from the first approach to the text to the opening night and subsequent performances.

-Sometimes some ideas are very strong from the very begging at working on a play they are either useful or right for the production or not. What we have to do is to keep the idea but at the same time to be open to what comes before us during our journey to complete the production. Ideas might stay the same or might get stronger and more powerful but also might change completely and turn into an opposite direction. The openness of a director is one of the key points to develop her ideas and learn from her environment.

- After the opening the leader of my course Jakub Korčak at the faculty mentioned this production could be accepted as my graduation production. But I knew I was just at the beginning of my journey and I needed to learn much more since I was a student of MA at theatre directing.

## Chapter III

### A Moment of Silence

" Watching the play by Azadeh had another consequence for me. I really liked one of her ideas and I was inspired by that idea at my recent direction of A Minute of Silence<sup>19</sup> in Toronto. This idea that the calls of threatening people once interrupt the characters of the play of Sohrab writes, the characters can't function any more. Shirin and Sheida the characters of Sohrab's play need their creator Sohrab (the author in the play) writes and continues the play. Sohrab and those characters stare at each other and once Sohrab starts to write the characters would function. I knew I would use this idea in Toronto. This was a memorable picture in my mind. I'm writing this note after the forth night of our performance of A Minute of Silence at the Summer WorksFestival. The audience communicated with the play very well and I'm thanking Azadeh for inspiring me for one my best scenes in my play. "

Mohammad Yaghoubi <sup>20</sup>

This was part of Yaghoubi's email to me on 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2016 about his experience as an audience at DISK theatre for watching his own play A Moment of Silence at Nad Prahou pŭlměsíc festival in November 2015. He was invited to the festival to see the play and have some lectures at Charles University. My second production at DAMU was my graduation production of A Moment of Silence by Mohammad Yaghoubi one of the most controversial playwrights and theatre directors in Iran. For my graduation production I wanted to work on a play, which is very connected to me. A play that represents my psychological, ideological, social and cultural aspects. A play, which I can stand for it and defend it. A play that would communicate with my audience in a way that they can say what my concern is as a director. To raise questions in the mind of my audience

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<sup>19</sup> A Minute of Silence by Mohammad Yaghoubi. Translation from Persian to English by Tprange Yaghiazarian

<sup>20</sup> Email from Mohammad Yaghoubi. August , 2016

What I especially realized about myself, as a director was that I don't want to give an only pure entertainment to the audience, to me as an artist and theatre practitioner theatre is entertainment and a way of social and cultural communication.

The play is very connected to what I have seen and experienced in my country. What comes from my direct experience is to rise up 8 years in Iran during the war between Iran and Iraq. On the last year of the war when Tehran had the missile attacks I was in Turkey with my family. We wanted to go to Canada but couldn't get the visa; therefore we stayed in Turkey for one year and when the war finished we went back to Tehran my home city.

This play shows slices of some parts of current history of Iran; what happened in 1990's after 134 authors, signed a letter for freedom of speech and during few years more than 80 of the authors and intellectuals in Iran were killed. This event is famous to Chain Murderer.

My personal experience in those years was hearing the news about these people who got killed without a clear reason. The play is about a young woman who falls asleep for three years at a time and sees a different world each time she wakes up. It presents parallel stories of two families; the stories become more and more intertwined towards the end of the play. There is an author, Sohrab Yekta and his wife, Hasti. Sohrab Yekta is writing a play called Goodbye Until I Don't Know When, which I will explain more below. But since Sohrab Yekta is one of the intellectuals of the society of Iran (In the period that Chain murderers happened in Iran), by time he feels pressure from outside to his life. Sohrab and Hasti receive anonymous death threats, people calling their home and give threatening messages. All these pressures and threats effects Sohrab Yekta's play "Goodbye Until I don't Know When), which we can notice clearly during the whole play. Sohrab's play is about a family including three sisters Shirin (oldest sister), Shiva (the middle one) and Sheida (the youngest) and Jimmy who is Shirin's husband. They all live together in one house. And Shiva is the one character that repeatedly falls asleep and each time after few years, when she wakes up, faces lots of changes in her society, history (Turning Pahlavi monarchy to Islamic Republic of Iran) and also in her family affairs such as her husband, Iraj divorcing her while she was asleep and marrying her younger sister Sheida. In her situation home, which is supposed to be the safest place in her life loses its meaning. At the end the



author of the play Sohrab Yekta gets assassinated, like many other authors and intellectuals. He can't finish his play. An announcement asking the audience to observe a minute of silence in the memory of the author interrupts the performance of his unfinished play. I used much of my personal experience in this production.

We are the best source for our artistic work, the more we gain experience in our lives the more we have to offer. But indeed what is important to find the ability to transform our experience into a media, which can connect to people. The experience on its own is not enough; but to look, observe and feel deep inside are what helps us to get inspired and reflect those experiences in our artistic work. We can make our roots grow deeper by the way we grow with our personal experience.

### **Choosing a Play to Direct**

A Moment of Silence built a strong desire for me to work on it as my graduation production. But before I get to the point of making decision about choosing this play let me get back to Prague and A Moment of Silence. I knew people here in Prague are not so familiar with the recent Iranian history and culture and I knew it would be a challenge to make that project happen but the idea of this challenge was making the project sound more exciting to me. I wanted to introduce a part of Iran's contemporary history, to work on a production that the context, concept and theme of it was based on reality of Iran and had a direct connection with me from the aspect of an Iranian citizen.

- To work with English speaking actors (Czech, American, Australian, in this production) on an English translation of a Persian play.
- To Work with a bigger cast than my previous experience of directing Someone Who'll Watch Over Me.

- To get more involvement with a production which I would like to engage myself with more sound and light effects since I haven't experienced it that much in my previous production and during the time of my study at DAMU.
- To build slightly a different style of acting in the play to compare with my previous production.
- Since my focus was fusing different cultures in theatre, I had a wider range of audience to approach for this time: International, Iranians.

## **Historical Context of The Play**

I was never a political activist but as a citizen could feel the fear and horror in the society.

This play has been produced in Iran and directed by Mohammad Yaghoubi in 2001 and later by his wife Aida Keykhani. I had seen the play in Tehran but I couldn't recall any moment of the play except the last moment of the play that a recorded voice played back asking us to stand up and observe a minute of silence. I remember that it was one of the hardest minutes of the play for me to experience. Eventually I mean the last part of the play was enough for me to build a very strong connection with the whole play. I can't explain much more about my own experience of seeing the production but can say it had a strong effect on me.

Once it came to make a decision about the play I wanted to work on, I felt the urge that I should make this production. The reality- Serial Murders- had a very important role in our contemporary history. Therefore there was a strong desire for me to make it happen on stage and show the audience a part of what has happened in the recent decades in Iran. The play is based on some real events in the contemporary history of Iran called **Serial (Chain) Murders**, which was a series of murders and disappearances from 1988 to 1998 by Iranian government operatives of Iranian dissident intellectuals, who had been critical of the Islamic Republic system in some way.

The victims included more than 80 writers, translators, poets, political activists, and ordinary citizens, and were killed by a variety of means—car crashes, stabbings, shootings in staged

robberies, injections with potassium to simulate a heart attack—in what some believe was an attempt to avoid connection between them. The pattern of murders did not come to light until late 1998 when Dariush Forouhar who was a founder and leader of the Hezb-e Mellat-e Iran (Nation of Iran Party) and his wife Parvaneh Eskandari Forouhar, who was an Iranian dissident and activist and three dissident writers, were murdered in the span of two months.

Responsibility for the murders is disputed. After the murders were publicized Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini denied the government was at all responsible and blamed "Iran's enemies". In mid-1999, after great public outcry and journalistic investigation in Iran and publicity abroad, Iranian prosecutors announced they had found the perpetrator.

Many Iranians and foreigners believe the killings were at least in part an attempt to resist "cultural and political openness" being attempted by reformist Iranian president Mohammad Khatami and his supporters, and that those convicted of the killings were actually "scapegoats acting on orders from higher" up, with the ultimate perpetrators including "a few well known clerics."

The murders are said to be "still shrouded in secrecy, and an indication that the authorities may not have uncovered all perpetrators of the chain murders was the attempted assassination of Saeed Hajjarian, a newspaper editor who is thought to have played a "key role" in uncovering the killings. On 12 March 2000, Hajjarian was shot in the head and left paralyzed for life.

Here is the main theme Yaghoubi was inspired from. But what he showed in the play in terms of changes in society is the very clear and obvious changes after the revolution. For instance wearing scarf for women. During Mohammad Reza Shah monarchy wearing Islamic clothing wasn't any force to people and after the revolution between 2-3 years it must a must to wear scarf but slowly it became a very strict rule for every women and even for every girl who was older than nine years old. That's the age duty bound for girls in Islam.

From the aspect of freedom of speech, which is one the main motif in the play; during Mohammad Reza Shah time it wasn't the best shape of freedom of speech. "In either of the regimes of Pahlavi or Islamic Republic (with the exception of the two year period before and after the revolution, when there was, indeed, an element of freedom within Iran) there has never

really been any freedom to speak out against the government in the country." But practically during the last almost four decades the situation got worse and worse.

## Dramaturgy

If we translate the meaning of the play's title, it would be A Minute of Silence, which Toranaje Yaghiazarian translated the same. But when I started to work on the text one of the first matters, which took my attention, was the title of the play. I searched a lot and talked to different native English speakers such as Americans, British and Australians- including my actors such as Peter Hosking who is Australian- To some of them A Moment of Silence was making more sense and to some of them A Minute of Silence! The result of my research was that it's just the matter of my choice. Finally I decided to go with this translation: A Moment of Silence. My reason was that the feeling of A Moment is different from A Minute. A Moment might feel less in terms of counting the second; I feel there is no mathematic in A Moment. At the end of the original play it is asked people to stand up and observe a minute of silence as a memorial of the author. It was few weeks before the opening night and Jakub Korčak came to see the play. When he saw the play, one of his notes was that it's too much to ask the audience to raise and stand up at the end of this play and I could understand what he means because it's not the experience that especially the Western audience went through. It would be better if I ask them to respect this author in a less direct way. Meaning not forcing them and leave it up to them. And that's why I changed the ending to:

Ladies, Gentlemen, the author of the play "Goodbye Until I don't know when" was not finished. Because the author, Sohrab Yekta assassinated. Please let's remember him with a moment of Silence.

But Yaghoubi thinks differently about the ending of the play and I'm bringing a part of his quote about the matter below:

"At the end of Azadeh's production it ant asked the audience to stand up and observe a minute of silence. The actors were telling me that it would be a force on audience if we ask them to stand up. They said we shouldn't force them. But I disagreed them. In my play I ask the audience to

stand up and observe a minute of silence. This is not a force. Anyone who disagrees and remains seated, it's that simple. End of my play there is an opportunity to change the situation of the audience. From a observer to a participant and active situation. This is a very important scene in my play as if the theatre stage is a bigger stage now and the auditorium and places of the audience are a part of that production.

In our last performances of our group in Iran there was a chance for audience and with observing a minute of silence to protest against the current situation. One minute of silence was a political reaction. I know observing a minute of silence might not have a function in Prague nowadays. But still standing and observing a minute of silence could be a political behavior and has the meaning of empathy of other people to the ones who were killed because of thinking differently.

The experience of watching A Moment of Silence in Prague thought me how to prepare myself to convince actors in Toronto and fortunately there was no complication with this matter. The actors of the production were even more sure than me that that the audience would stand up at the end of the play. The result is every night the audience at the Factory theatre of Toronto stands up and observes a minute of silence. "

*Mohammad Yaghoubi* <sup>21</sup>

But now I would like to back to the first steps of Dramaturgy.

For this production I asked Julek Neumann to be the dramaturge of this English Production of A Moment of Silence. We were working together closely during the whole way of dramaturgy. Julek Neumann is coming from a Western culture and he knew a lot about the Middle Eastern culture. In the first place when Julek Neumann read the play he liked it but his first suggestion was to cut some parts of the play and visualize them as much as possible. Here in practical world of theater I realized some differences of Persian and Western. I do not want to label all Persian plays because that is not the case. But some of the authors like Yaghoubi believe so much of the role of the words in theatre plays. And sometimes we might feel there is too much said. And here

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<sup>21</sup> Email from Mohammad Yaghoubi. 10 of August 2016

I realized it strongly after the discussions I had with Julek Neumann. Many words could be cut and turned to be action. And as I mentioned before in the chapter of Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, instead of some words I could ask the actors to bring some action to feel the gap of the words. Some cuts were like to bring one part of a scene and another part of another scene, joint them together and it would be a new scene but with the main motifs of the both shortened scenes. One of the main cuts was Sohrab and Hasti's child in the play. I was sure that I do not want to have a child on the stage but there was a child in the play already. We decided to have the sense of a child in this family however not with a real child but having Hasti pregnant could be one of the best alternatives for showing the hope to the future between the couple. In the directing of these scenes I had to change the attitude of the actors to talk to an unborn child talking to the child Sohrab's wife, Hasti. The other information, which we decided to cut, was the info about Sohrab Yekta's mother. We never see her in the play and it seemed the information given about his mother was not an element, which moved the story forward so we decided to cut that part. In this play there were a lot of characters that we just could hear their voices. People threatening Sohrab ; Iraj, Shiva's X husband and current husband of Sheida; Ramin who Shiva was in love with before marring Iraj, Ramin's wife and some random people who talk on the phone during the play. The final decision was to show all these characters that we could hear. Because in the main play there were mentioned as voices. But I was just trying to visualize everything as much as possible.

## Casting

Casting of eight actors in Prague is not the easiest thing to do. The English community is not such a big one and gathering eight actors that one want to collect for a production is rather challenging. I was imagining the age range of the actors in A Moment of Silence around 30-40 years old. That's how I could imagine them. I think one of the first steps to move to the practical part of directing is a right casting because as a director I can save my time and energy and think more about practical matters in my production. So I wanted to be sure I make right steps in this path.

Since I couldn't get the actors for the role of Shirin (Shiva's older sister), Jimmy (Shirin's husband), Sohrab (The author), I said to myself: Let's see what would happen if I change the range of the age of the actors. So I chose Curt Mathew- who was as the American in my other production Someone Who'll Watch Over Me. He was playing Jimmy in this production. And I asked Peter Hosking, to act as Sohrab Yekta . Also Julie Gibson Josephson as Shirin the older sister in Shiva's family. These three actors are above sixty years old. I knew these them from before and I could imagine them in those roles and I didn't want to audition these actors. In this production I did the audition for some of the roles but not all of them.

There was one issue about Sohrab and Hasti (His wife) that I was considering in my casting decision. Especially since I decided to have Hasti pregnant at some point at the play. She had to be young enough to get pregnant! And according to how Yaghoubi has written this role, it sounded to me a young and even young and less experienced than Sohrab. Therefore it made perfect sense to me to choose a young actress for this role. And when I saw the production I was so glad of this decision.

Here I am introducing the actors of this production with their images:



Figure 11. Peter Hoskig as Sohrab Yekta



Figure 12. Kateřina Veckerová as Hasti





Figure 13. Veronika Belová as Shiva



Figure 14. Julie Gibson Josephson as Shirin



Figure 15. Rebecca Riisness as Sheida



Figure 16. Curt Matthew as Jimmy



Figure 17. Karel Heřmánek as Iraj, Ramin, characters on the phone



Figure 18. Dagmar Spain as Ramin's wife, characters on the phone

A Moment of Silence was invited to festival of Nad Prahou půlměsíc (November 2015) and Festival of Iranian Films (January 2016). Three of my actors couldn't attend the performance therefore I had to replace them:

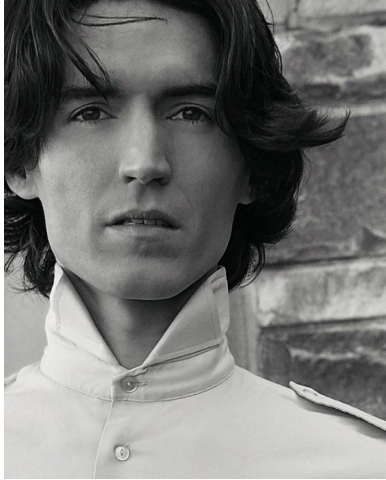


Figure 19. Jared Doreck as Iraj, Ramin, characters on the phone



Figure 20. Nicole Adelman as Ramin's wife, characters on the phone



Figure 21. Azadeh Mohammadi as Sheida

### Set Design

The set design of this production was one of the most exciting parts of the production for me. The set designer was Jan Tereba, one of the brilliant students at the scenography department at DAMU. I gave him the play to read and seemed that he liked the play too. From the beginning when I talked to Jan about my ideas and approach to the set of this play, I explained it this way:

In this play, we have two different portions of time, one is the life of Shiva's family, which is the play that Sohrab Yekta writes during the whole play. So it's a play within a play. The periods are different from each other. Shiva's story starts from 1980 to 1998. But we can imagine that we just show 6 months of the life of Sohrab Yekta and Hasti, his wife, which happens in the same year of 1998. The scenes are intertwined but at the same time each family has its own space. One of the matters that was very important to me, which I wanted Jan to consider, was the situation that life is getting tighter and tighter, closer and closer to Sohrab and Shiva's family life. How we can see it happen on stage physically, either from the ceiling, on the floor or the walls.

I wanted to project some Sohrab and Hasti's scenes and project it during the show. And Jan came with this design of having Shiva's family in an elevated space, which basically I call it, box, and another area for Sohrab and Hasti, which is a path right in front of the box. And the back wall of the box was a screen which practically we projected all the recorded parts of Sohrab and Hasti on it. Two walls on the sides of the box were made of two thick curtains, which were manipulated by the people who were a threat to Sohrab's life. Both of us believed that the set must be as simple

and practical as possible, which I think it, was the case for the actual performance.



**Figure 22. A Moment of Silence. Technical Rehearsal**



**Figure 23. A Moment of Silence. Dress Rehearsal**





Figure 24. A Moment of Silence. Dress Rehearsal



Figure 25. A Moment of Silence at Film Festival of Iranian Films. 2016

## Costume Design

The costume designer of the production was Olga Ermakova, a Russian student at scenography department in the Czech program at DAMU. She is a kind, responsible and creative designer. She is such a good-hearted professional.

I explained Olga how it is the way we wear clothes in Iran. And what sort of costume I wanted the characters to wear. I had to explain the class of these characters who were mainly middle class. She of course searched on her own as well and was coming with some ideas.

I wanted people who were talking on the phone especially when they are threatening people; having a different sort of costume to compare to the rest of the cast and we came with the idea of black suits for two actors who were playing all the characters who were speaking on the phone, which I think was a good choice. Also adding layers to the characters of Shiva's family was important to me, because by time the pressure on this family was just getting worse and worse. Therefore one of the other elements to show it visually was adding layers to their clothes.



Figure 26. A Moment of Silence. Shiva's Family





Figure 27. A Moment of Silence. Hasti, The threatening man on the phone



**Figure 28. A Moment of Silence. Sohrab Yekta. The threatening woman on the phone**

The additional costume on the characters during the performance was also showing the passage of time but Shiva the character who was sleeping long during these years did not have any change on her costume. And this was making an additional difference between her and others. Since Sohrab Yekta was writing the play *Goodbye Until I don't Know When*, has pictured Shiva in the same costume that his x- wife Simin had once before. It was a gift that Sohrab bought for his wife but she never wore it.

### **Sound Effects**

The process of making the sound effects was also a very good experience in this production. There were two people as the sound designers. One of them did the main work of the sound that was Zuzana Petráková from Czech Republic and the other one was Payman Abdali an Iranian music composer who lives in Iran. The reason I preferred to have someone from Iran as well was to have someone who knows Persian music and culture, which would make the progress of composing some music tracks easier. But Zuzana did the main sound design work.

I was so glad that Zuzana liked the play. I knew she is a sound designer and a theatre director at JAMU and what I adored in her was her broad way of thinking. She had such a good understanding of different aspects of a production.

We had lots of sound effects of different kinds of explosion, siren and things, which already had made the whole atmosphere heavy. So we needed some elements to lighten the feeling and mode of the sound effects. I must mention here that during my work with Veronika Bellova who was playing Shiva the character who was falling asleep during the play, I discovered a nice melody from Veronika. It's the opening of the second half of the play when Shiva does the scene opening and sings a poem by Forough Farrokhzad a very controversial Iranian poet who died in an accident in 1967 when she was only thirty-two years old.

I had a private rehearsal with Veronika about this opening of the scene and basically the poem. It was a bit difficult for her how to make it happen and was struggling with it. I asked her to lie down next to me and look at the ceiling and to imagine there are some birds in the sky and she wants her voice to be reached to them. When she made her voice louder naturally she started to make the whole part of the poetry in a kind of melody and I did love her voice so I asked her to make a melody for what she sang or whatever melody she finds more suitable for singing. Next time when I met her she had a melody ready and I decided that she has to sing that part definitely.

But why I mention it here in the middle of my explanation about sound effects is that I took her melody and sent it to Zuzana. Actually I recorded her voice with the melody, Veronika wrote the notes of that melody and I sent it to Zuzana. I wanted to keep one motif for the whole play. Zuzana came up with a very nice idea, which was the same melody, but as if it is a baby crib bell, a melody that just reminds us of sweet childhood. And I really liked to keep this contrast. It made a big sense to me in other aspect that we who lived during the war (between Iran & Iraq) was not only in horrible situations, of course each of us have had lots of good memories from those days. I explain this matter more in the part I have written about my approach to the production. It was both way collaboration between Zuzana and I. I was choosing some sound effects and she was picking some and then after the final agreement she was mixing them for the final version.

There were sounds of airplanes flying above the town in a scene that Shiva's family are in the situation of missile attacks in Tehran and the way I wanted the audience feel the airplane moving from left of the stage to the right so I asked sound technicians to do that.

Since we had too many phone calls in the play, to prevent confusion for the audience I picked two different sound effects for telephones at Sohrab's home and Shiva's home. And the one at Shiva's home even sounded older type of ring since that story starts from 1980.

About the selection of some music tracks, which I did myself, I must mention that I feel I haven't done my best choices. After I saw the whole production together I noticed that the musics are not of the same texture. I wanted to show different mode or atmosphere in different parts of the play according to what the scene was about but despite of the differences I had to consider a better connection between my whole music selections.

I could realize it more when the production was already done. Because when I'm inside a situation I might have not awareness of the whole thing in details because I'm too much involved with every thing. But when I have some distance from the production then I can realize some of the issue. I think for foreigners there was not a problem with my choices of music but some of Iranians who saw the production mentioned it.

## Venue

The venue for this production was DISK theatre at DAMU, which I quite liked it for the production of A Moment of Silence, because the stage was not elevated. It was the best stage for our set. We already had a big box (space of Shiva's home), which was an elevated stage. The Box Which was built as the space of Shiva's family.

It was beginning of June in one of the hottest summers in Prague. And before the opening I didn't think about how physical condition of any venue could affect the audience that much. It's all coming by experience. Now if I have the option to choose venue for my production. I would consider these things for the audience, because it would effect on the process of their connection to the play.

## **Budget**

I heard from my department that I just got 3500 CZK means about 130 Euros for my graduation production. Drama department at DAMU tried to help and support the production and to add some amount to the financial support. But still with the amount they offered I really couldn't cover all my expenses considering that I was paying 4000 Euros (105000 CZK) per semester.

I tried to find the budget as a student, from sources out of DAMU. Not only the production itself in terms of set and costume but I had other costs to compare to the students at DAMU and because I have used the actors who were not students and even some of them live through acting in Prague, I felt responsible to pay them. Therefore I started to search and use my networks in Prague and find sponsors.

Finally I had to become the producer, which took a lot of my time and creative energy. I got the main sponsorship from Radio Free Europe in Prague.

## **Rehearsals**

Before starting the rehearsals I sent the full edited version of text to the actors. On the First day of rehearsal again I did some introduction first introducing the actors to each other and people who were involved with the production. We read the play once and then had some discussion about Mohammad Yaghoubi and his works and about the event of Chain Murderer in Iran and why it was important to me to make this production. I do not mention it here since I explained it earlier.

The first few rehearsals I had all the actors together and talked about the current history of Iran and mainly about some cultural differences of my country and nation with Western world. It was a big challenge for me to make them understand some details of my cultures and also it was challenge to them to understand the culture but also to realize and feel what I explain to them.

Explaining the context and concept of an Islamic country and how it was before 1979 when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was the king of Iran how it was open in terms of religion and of course the changes after the Islamic revolution of Iran when Khomeini took over the power and transition of the country to an Islamic state happened.

Some definitions in Persian culture like girlfriend and boy friend relationships, especially in the last decades were very different from how it is or was common in the Western world, in terms of type of socializing, physical or sexual relationship.

Definition of typical Iranian families how we usually treat each other in the family even simple things like using the phrase "My Dear" which we use for not only our dearest people in our lives but it's a part of culture that is in our conversations when we even talk to people who might not be our closest people.

I showed them some video materials of women before and after Islamic revolution in Iran. How wearing a headscarf became a must few years after the Islamic revolution. What were the changes in the society? And some more details about the concept of this society.

"Sketch chronologies for the events between each act or scene (if the time that has passed is more than 24 hours)"<sup>22</sup>

At this play the gap between the scenes were so important since Shiva was sleeping for least three or four years.

"Simpson gathered the actors together for a first rehearsal. In addition to having the cast read through the script through the script, she discussed with them her approach to the play and she talked briefly about the process of rehearsal. As she explained it, rehearsals would be held seven

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<sup>22</sup> Katie Michell. *The Director's Craft*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Routledge. 2009. 43 p. ISBN 10: 0-415-40439-6. ISBN 13: 978-0-415-40439-6

days a week, but most actors have to attend only three times, as called, because she had divided the play into small rehearsal units of scenes between different characters. "<sup>23</sup>

After little session I divided the rehearsals in two different parts, rehearsals with Shiva's family and Rehearsal's with Sohrab and Hasti. After a while when I developed the structure of these two families, then I brought the other actors who were acting as people on the phone such as threatening people, Iraj, Ramin, Ramin's wife and other random people on the phone.

And after some rehearsals when the scenes had the main structure I made the rehearsals with all the actors again. But of course they had to come at certain hour because I still didn't want all of them at once. Slowly slowly when the structure of the whole production became clearer I had the run through. This was the time tat Jakub Korčak saw it too.

He had a remark that my production seemed like a production in Ibsen time. The theme is already and sad and the way I directed it added to this depression and sadness So I realized that I duplicated the theme with the way of my direction. And the whole thing is simply boring!

I could see it myself when I saw the run through. Well I couldn't expect a complete work with some details but of course I could feel there is a basic problem with the way I directed the play. After that rehearsal I completely changed the way of my direction with the whole play and the actors. I tried to find out how I can build grotesque situations out of the terrifying situation written in the play. Where I could find the humor, which actually saved my production and not only this, how I could build real comic moment in the play. I realized that there was a difference between this production and my approach to it, comparing with my first production *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. when I recall the production of *Someone Who'll Watch Over me*, I can also recall very funny moment that I could enjoy them audience and myself too.

I had distance to my first production and I think I could have a wiser directorial look to it. But because *A Moment of Silence* was based on a true event in my country that was so attached to my personal emotions that I couldn't distance from it.

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<sup>23</sup> j. Robert wills. *Directing in the theatre*. Chapter IV. Working with actors in process of Carol Sompson in *Only Ten Minutes To Buffalo*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London. The Scarecrow Press. 1994. 107 p. ISBN 0-8108-2735-2

It was such a serious and painful matter that I was too emotional about it. And it didn't let me think wise enough to realize how much comic moment the play offers! The main thing I started to work on after that very first run through, was finding the comedy in the whole play and of course in the characters and the higher the pace. The rhythm and tempo was like a key to shape the production.

“Any feature that strays from conventional expectations has the potential of becoming a style feature. The testament of time is no exception.”<sup>24</sup>

I had another challenge during these rehearsals and that was the style of acting for the actors playing as people on the phone. I wanted to have slightly a different type of acting for those characters. I knew that I didn't want them to be as realistic as the main characters in the story, meaning Sohrab and Hasti and Shiva's family. It was really difficult for me. I knew I didn't know that much the vocabulary of this sort of communication with my actors. But at the same time I didn't know how much unrealistic I wanted it to be. Sometimes I was imagining them having strong expressions and gestures but there was another thought on the contrary that it shouldn't go very much beyond the main concept of the work. Therefore at the end what happened was that these two actors were just slightly different from the other characters? So it wouldn't feel false.

One of the other interesting new experiences and challenge in terms of working with actors was working differently when it was getting closer to the ending of the play. The threatening people had more affected on Sohrab Yekta's private life and of course his writing towards the end of the play. I had the will to show it in action how beside the affects on Sohrab's private life, the threat effect on his play *Goodbye Until I don'y Know When*.

There is a scene starting with explosion sound effect. Sheida and Shirin are on the stage in the "Box" and Sheida is there to say good-bye to Shirin since she is leaving with Iraj to France and she pushes Shirin to ask Shiva to apply for her passport and join them in France. From the beginning of the scene we have Sohrab at his desk writing the scene between Shirin and Sheida and the telephone rings. We can see the threatening people calling Sohrab few times while he is

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<sup>24</sup> James Thomas. *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors and Designer*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Boston, London: Focal Press. 1992 p. 147.



writing. Every time because Sohrab is distracted by the phone ring and the voice behind the phone, there is a phase for actors in the box (Shirin and Sheida) in which they get frozen in movement and conversation- and every time he wants to sit and get back to his writing his distraction effects the way characters of his play talk and behave. And there was where I made the most change, even there was some distortion in the way the actors were saying lines. They would repeat some important such as passport, visa, few times or the characters weren't able to deliver the worlds with normal pace they were talking a moment before. Towards the end of that scene Sohrab actually lost his concentration and the characters were saying the words emotionless. There was mainly just saying the words that their author, Sohrab Yekta was dictating them.

Towards the end of the play I did play more with the sense of time. Since Sohrab was dead in the last few scenes of the actual play, the rest of the play to me was some random paper leaves that I was imagining left in the room that Sohrab Yekta was writing. But that was my personal feeling towards it. To me after Sohrab disappears in the play the dimension of time changed.

At the very end of the play Shirin talks to Jimmy who had the brain stroke and wishes one day everything is getting better and all of them will be together. I bringer back the entire member's of Shiva's family on stage. I wanted to have all the family being visible in the box with very tightened walls, and to remind the audience that this dream will never come true. In the actual text of the play Yaghoubi has written, the line of Shirin never finishes, because the assassination of Sohrab happens in the middle of his play. To me it feels like a picture of member of a family wishing to be together happily, but this can just join the memories of a small part of the history of human being and perhaps being disappeared amongst another sad and disappointing events in the world.

## **Technical Rehearsal**

Technical consideration in A Moment of Silence was an absolute new package of experience for me at DAMU.

We had to do the technical at DISK in three days and what worse was to set up the whole set, assemble all the lights and take them down again every day we were doing technical and it means that most of the time was spending on setting up and striking the set.

It was really difficult for me first to call my actors three days during the week only for technical. It was annoying to the actors of course. And it was unpleasant for the technicians to do it as well, because we had to spread our time and energy on things which I definitely call unnecessary and unfair complications for a student of directing at DAMU, especially one who pays for her studies. But since this was the only way to do the work and the decision was made from DAMU, I just realized that I have to find a way to deal with the issue. The important matter was to get the most positive lesson from what lays on my way towards the opening night. I would say it's always better to take the positive side in our professional world, because we never know what might happen in the future. I think a director has to upraise her capacity in situations that she might feel really desperate. Because feeling desperate or stressed and showing it to others or reacting to it aggressively wouldn't help in my opinion. That is very important for a director when she faces troubles tries to keep her own control. I should find a solution in any way possible.

I was glad that we had good technicians but still since they had to work in different shifts, therefore not all the time we had the same technicians for the same work and they had to hand over the work to a person who had to take over he shift. It was one of the other issues during tecs because how ever they were smart and were trying to do their best to update each other. But still there were some complications and issues, which were time consuming.

One of my own issues as a director during the technical rehearsal was that I wanted to make sure every thing would go perfectly forward. But sometime during the technical rehearsal I shouldn't be picky about some details of work. The issue was that I couldn't exactly calculate how much time I need for working with technicians before the actors come to the rehearsal so we were

ending up having the actors waiting for a long time to get on stage and go through the technical rehearsal. I know that people suffered during those days and one reason was me being not experienced in technical rehearsal. It was very difficult for me to predict how much I should spend time to first work with technicians and when exactly the actors would be better to come to the rehearsal. Because I know how tiring the process of technical for the actors is. Normally they really don't like it but of course that is a part of the job and they must do it.

In this production dealing with light was one of the other challenges for me as the director. I couldn't feel comfortable with exploring the light with the light technicians. The same way I have learned the way of my conversation with my actors, which I believe I am still in the process of learning, I needed to explore and learn how to make dialogue with the light designer and technicians.

I was clear about few things in light, I knew I want to use spotlights for any character that is speaking on the phone. To have a specific light for the space of Sohrab and Hasti and another light for the Box (Space of Shiva's family). What happened was that the technicians were suggesting some lights and we were completing it together. I think by understanding more understanding of light, a director can have much better sense of her production.

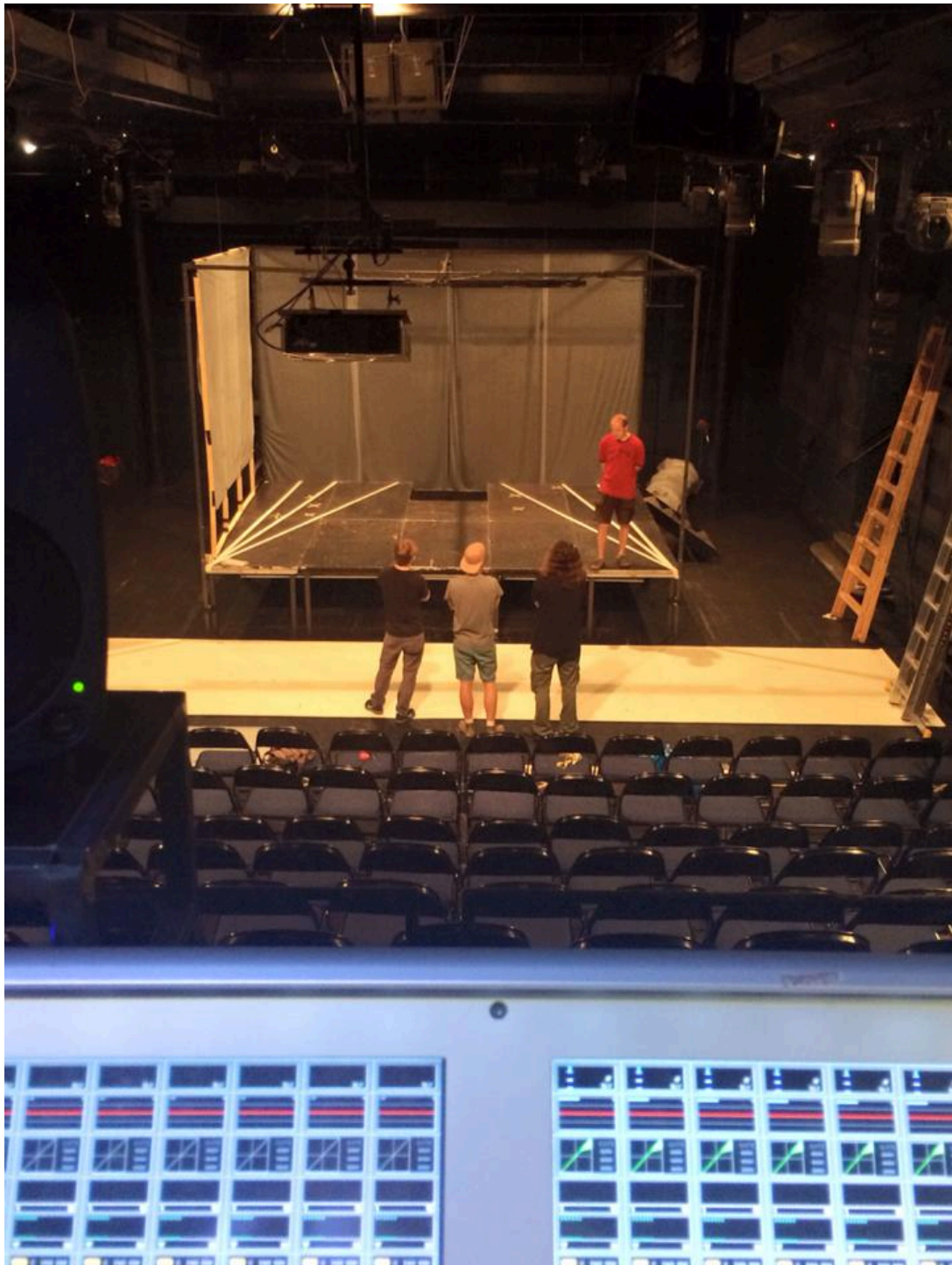


Figure 29. A Moment of Silence. Technical Rehearsal

## **Who are the audience?**

This time it was a bigger challenge for me to approach my audience, and not only Czechs and other nationalities but also Iranians. Obviously the play was Iranian and from one of the controversial playwrights and directors in Iran, I really had to be careful of my approaches to Iranian audience. Since my aim is fusing the cultures through practicing theater my challenge was be even more. Because I had to make sure that my production communicates with both Iranian and Western audience. One of my main goals was to achieve a wider range of audience in that time.

But generally I must say it's an important consideration for which we want to perform.

## **My Personal Approach to the Play**

The play was a combination of truth, documentary, drama, comedy and plays within plays for me. At the very end of the play I personally went on stage and mentioned the last line written by the author of the play, Mohammad Yaghoubi. I announce to people that the author of the play Goodbye Until I Don't Know When was assassinated. Therefore the play remained unfinished. And I ask the audience to observe a moment of silence for the author. I quite liked to do this ending myself as a person who produced and directed the play.

## **Opening Night & What Went Wrong**

I must say it again that sometime I do believe in magic. I did feel it strongly on the opening night of A Moment of Silence.

With that sort of technical and dress rehearsals I had for this production, until the last day we never could arrange to run the whole play in a proper way.

I should confess the night before the opening I was just trying to calm myself down but it was really difficult. I had actors who were not students; I had sponsorship from Radio Free Europe. And I didn't want to have a failure. I was feeling horribly responsible. And I was not sure if everything could go right on the opening night.

The next day we went earlier to fix some other details with the actors and technicians. At 19:30 we started the play and the magic happened! Everything went fine! Of course there were some errors, but they were natural for the opening night. It was the first night of the performance, few issues happened but we did it. I would say it was a huge relief for me after I have seen it on the first night.

Super important for a director not only a director but for any artist even for any professional in any other field! What went wrong?

We have to learn from our mistakes and the beauty of theatre is since it's all about the practice, we do learn in the process of our work and of course after we open the play. That's the time we have to be alert. Even to hear the opinion of different people about the production, and take what we, as directors want to fix. To think which of the critics of the audience would make sense to us and apply it for the next show. Of course not to listen to whatever the audience says but to collect what we feel is helping the production. Certainly we can feel the audience's reaction as the play runs. We even read their connection through their body language.

Most of the time we as directors are so much in the bottom of the work, being too involved with everything from inside and we lose the sense of the eye, which should stand outside of the production. Therefore the first night audience is the best friend and critic of a production. For

instance I learned about the comfort of the audience especially after the opening night of this production, also about the light, acting, rhythm, dramaturgy and every other aspect of the play.

What took my attention was that some of the audience didn't recognize that the three female actors in Shiva's family were sisters. I got the logic immediately. Even though the older sister mentions at the very beginning of the play that Shiva is her younger sister but the audience couldn't catch it. Because age difference between the actor who plays the older sister (Shirin) and actor who plays the youngest sister (Sheida) was about twenty years or more and was very obvious. Even though to me personally it could make sense this amount of age difference because in my own family my older sister is twenty years older than our youngest brother. But if we experience something in life it doesn't mean that every single person can make sense out of it in a production. Therefore at the end people were a bit confused about the relationships and then by time most of them got to know that these three women were sisters and we never have shown their mother but I suppose some of the audience were confused until the end of the play.

Then I decided to add another line to the text that we mention somehow in a different way they are sisters and Shirin is not their mother.

After the opening night I noticed that there are two parts of the play, which are long, and they could be modified but at the same time I had to be careful for my actors. I didn't want to stress them right during the first nights of performance, therefore I thought it would be better to keep the changes for the next time I wanted to take the production on stage again. Since I had to perform three days in a row I decided not to make big changes because the actors had to go through them again and it could be stressful for them.

But I will explain in the next chapter how in my other production, which was out of DAMU, Troilus and Cressida; I took the notes from the audience and applied them for the second and third night of our performance.

An important lesson I've got after this production that I shouldn't ever make a production without having a stage manager. This was one of the issues at my work. Unfortunately I couldn't find anyone who was available as a stage manager for A Moment of Silence and I had to do the producing, stage-managing and directing at the same time. It took a lot of my energy. It made my

actors sometimes really frustrated at me because I was losing the control of the work and the pressure was getting more and more.

## Poster & Trailer<sup>25</sup>

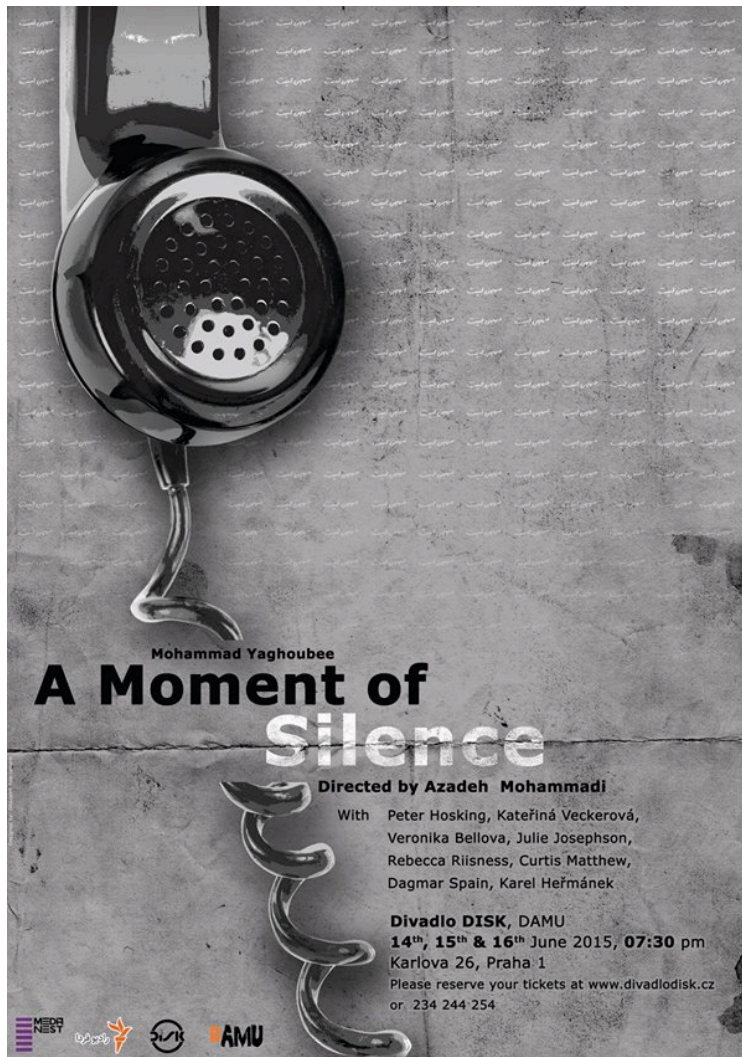


Figure 30. Poster by Ghazaleh Avarzamani. 2015

<sup>25</sup> <https://vimeo.com/129642493>



## **Chapter IV**

### **Post Graduation Production**

In this chapter I would like to explain about my theatre experience after I finished my credits and classes at DAMU and I gave myself a year to defend my thesis.

#### **Working With Erasmus Students of Acting**

After I made the production of A Moment of Silence I worked with Erasmus students of acting at DAMU for two semesters. Both semesters there were three students of acting in erasmus program. Therefore in both semesters I directed the play Art by Yasmina Reza.

A brief Summary about the play:

A big white painting raises major questions for three long-term friendships, concerns Serge, Marc and Yvan .A big surprise when Serge buys a piece of modern art for 200,000 Francs, which we can compare with 600000 Euros today. Doubts and questions: Why are they friends for fifteen years?

I took this play to work with Erasmus students because I found the story and the theme of it very connected to the young generation or I would better to say to any generation which experienced a long term relationship.

In the first semester there were three female students of acting. And I could imagine the play for three female characters as well. Some times some of the conflicts between the characters in the play were so recognizable for me. I could imagine myself in such situations and I'm sure any one who reads the play or sees the production of ART could be affected by how the conflicts appear between the friends.

I decided to change the genders of characters to female.

The first thing I had to do was changing some concepts of dramaturgy of the play. Sometimes I had to change the lines of the characters as if a woman says those words. There were different issues in the play such as character talking about a fiancé and mother-in-law.

And then going beyond the words and see how the approach of characters change according to their gender and their age.

The next step was make changes on the approaches of the characters in their behavior and action. As a director surely I have a different imagination if a female or a male actor plays a line. And I was mainly discussing with actors how the differences would be if a male says a line or a female. Simple example is how the jealousy of men and women are different and shown differently. How the expression of a conflict or sharing the issues are unlike each other in deferent genders. This play was a sort of play that for it's realization I could get the reference from myself or to ask the actors to get back to their own life experience since the play can make scenes to anyone. And I had to make the play shorter to make a one-hour version of it which required lots of cuts. Almost through the half of the way I realized that practically I haven't paid enough attention to what the genre of the play was. It is an absurd comedy but what I did was so heavy for the whole play. I made close to a psychological play but once more Jakub Korčák reminded me of what I'm doing with my production and here was when I really realized I have to learn how to implement, to see, feel and present a comic situation on stage especially as director; because I believe when I'm an actor my approach would be different. It means the tempo and rhythm was much slower than it was supposed to be, there were some long pauses, which I noticed they were not right for this type of play. This play needs much higher pace and more showing the problematic situations and not the psychology of the troubles between the friends.

But I must say there it was a positive matter with the way I worked. I believe the actors got a good understanding of the characters and the logic behind what was going on in the play and characters' actions and reactions. From that point I started to use some technique, which were very helpful to change the direction. I honestly told my actors that my approach to the production was not in its right way and they had such a good understanding and sympathy with what I shared with them. Then I asked them to run the play in few different versions.

One was speed run the whole play. And then the Italian Run that in we run the whole play a higher rate of speed and exaggeration in actions and emotions. After that we realized a big difference in our approach to the play. I mean from two different point of views- directing and acting- our approaches changed completely. Many comic situations appeared that they never were shown in the previous runs. It also helped the moments actors might forget their lines. It connected the situations to each other much better than before. And brought much lighter feeling to the production.

One thing, which was also helpful in the whole process of this production, was the union ship between the actors and me. There was such a strong sense of collaboration between us and I think, underneath of everything this matter helped the foundation of my production.



Figure 31. ART by Yasmina Reza, Erasmus students, Řetízek Studio. 2015



Figure 32. ART by Yasmina Reza. Erasmus students, Řetízek Studio. 2015



Figure 33. ART by Yasmina Reza, Erasmus Students, Řetízek Studio, 2015

The spring semester I worked with three other different actors. I decided to work on ART again one of the reasons was that it could be a good practice for me to see with changes of the genders how my approach would get different to the production. Not only the genders of the characters but the actors' genders and also with working different actors and personalities. .

This time there were one male and two female actors and according to the actors' genders and my option of casting for the roles I made some changes in terms of dramaturgy and directing and my approach to the play.

For instance when in the first production I changed the male character who was suppose to get married to a female character then her approach to her marriage became different, her approach to her friends was different too. But in the next production of ART when I changed the same character to a male character and kept the two other characters female, then his approach to his marriage was different because according to his lines and his relationships with his friends, wife and family his status changed completely. And he had a different position to compare to the female character in the previous production. Even though most of the lines were the same but changing of few lines according to their gender could make a visible change in the status and approaches of the character to her/his environment.

What changed was also the definition of friendship when it came to different genders. The sort of friendship or naturally the quality of three girls having friendship for fifteen years were different than a male with two other female. And here I can even compare it with the original text, having three male characters, which would carry a different quality in friendship.

And still with all these changes of genders I was following my concern appears in all my productions I did so far which is meeting of different cultures.

It is obviously mentioned in the text that these friends are different; they are coming from different roots. Even though they think they have a lot in common but by time they receive some adventitious life experience. They meet many other people and these are all factors which can affect their personal culture and life style and that could be for many reasons.

"Separate your thoughts. Especially when an actor has a speech and he things it's one thing.  
Have him treat the monologue like a dialogue."

Bill Rauch<sup>26</sup>

When I was working on ART I noticed one of my actors has problem to approach his monologue. In that scene the character enters his friend's home, suddenly and immediately starts to complain about everything in his life. I asked him to share some part of his story with his friends but since they pay not enough attention then he shares the rest of his talk with the audience. But he was treating the whole lines of that monologue as one single thing, which wouldn't let the audience follow the whole monologue and stay focused. Therefore one time, which I was only rehearsing with him on his monologues, I asked him to say the monologue but this time as if he explains it for a five-year-old child. He was rushing at the beginning of this exercise but I told him that a 5 year old kid doesn't understand him and he needs to make sure she would understand what he tells her. And the result was that the actor was not rushing his lines anymore and he actually understood better what he talks about because he had to make sure that the kid understood him and the result was that he communicated better with the audience on the actual performance day.



**ART by Yasmina Reza, Řetízek Studio, Erasmus students, 2016**

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<sup>26</sup> Mandy Rees. John Staniunas. Between director and actor. ??? ed. Portsmouth, Heinemann publishing. 2002. 26 p. ISBN 0-325-00432-3

Elisa Galluzzo and Nitish Jain, MA students at scenography department at DAMU were the set and costume designer. And especially design of the wooden frame was very practical and beautiful in this production.

Maureen Béguin did light design in the first semester and by Jalil Fotouhinia on the second semester. Morvarid Ramezani did the sound and music mix.

## Adaptation on Troilus and Cressida

In 2015 when I finished my graduation production of *A Moment of Silence*, Guy Roberts who is the director of Prague Shakespeare Company at Kolowrat theatre asked me to do a production for 400 anniversaries of Shakespeare. He said it's absolutely upon me what to do. I started to think what would be for me the most interesting way of working with Shakespeare's text. Still when I think of Shakespeare I have huge struggle how to direct it. But there is an important fact that I learned during these years of my study, which I remember from the first day of me being in the class with my tutors: What do I want to express? So technically and practically I started to expand that dimension of myself and to take things go through my personal filter. Now that I think of Shakespeare how do I want to make it mine? My interpretation or actually in this case, my adaptation.

I chose the play “Troilus and Cressida”<sup>27</sup>. The play wasn't that popular until the end of World War II. The horrors of War change the perception towards this play.

Persian story telling offers unique material to open this topic for discussion and I decided to tell the story of Shakespeare in Persian Style, which I will explain why I chose this way to tell my story to the audience further in the text.

Again the idea of fusing cultures, but before I explain about it I would like to write briefly about the History of story telling in Iran and different sorts of Persian performance and story telling. Iranian dramatic story telling or Naghali is the forefather of Iranian traditional theatre, that Naghal or reciter narrates either historical or none historical tail in prose or poetry to his audience. Structurally, Naghali is of two major forms that accompanied by music instrument and the other is without musical instrument.

Naghali or Pardekhani was kinds of story telling in traditional and folklore cultures of Iran, which mainly happened on the streets or in coffee and teahouses.

Yet it is based on of mastery in acting and command vocal variation usage of Master. Ever since the ancient time Naghali has been practiced in various forms, in different places and in different genres of epic, mythical and legendary.

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<sup>27</sup> William Shakespeare. *Troilus and Cressida*. New York: Modern Library. 2007. ISBN 978-0-8129-6931-3



Naghals normally pick their stories from classical Persian literature. However since the Persian poet Ferdousi made the masterpiece of Persian Literature " Shahnameh" or "King letter" in 11<sup>th</sup> century, tales from Shahnameh became one of the main themes of storytelling. Naghali is one of the many ways of performing and Naghal mostly single handedly presents each element of the performance. He acts for all characters of the story.

“There are many kinds of Naghali. Since I talked about King letters by Ferdousi, there are two different ways of saying the tales of Shahnameh by Naghal one was mainly for less or non educated people and Naghal was just reciting the tales in poetry and people would listen to him and learn the story or that Naghal would recite and then tell their interpretation of that story and this was more for more educated people because those people had more interest into interpretation and analysis of what they hear and not only to memorize the story they listen to.”<sup>28</sup>

In my production I was inspired from this matter and sometimes I explained the reason of what was happening in the story of Troilus and Cressida, such as explaining the reason why Greeks send Ajax to fight with Hector rather than Achilles who had the fame for being a strong warrior in fighting. The character of Master Explained it to the character of Black or Diamond- in my adaptation- who was confused why the Greeks sent Ajax instead of Achilles to fight to the battle field.

A Naghal takes certain tone for each character. Naghals are also talented in producing the sound effects, which in my adaptation the Master and Naghal (Narrator) were producing the sound effect of horse steps running towards either Greeks or Trojans.

Masters in Naghali are called Morshed and they normally wear like dervishes but yet they have their own clothes on. Also most of them have their own rings-agate, turquoise, jade, ruby & etc.- on their hands, which is a part of their identity in their profession. This is an Islamic tradition and the reason behind it is that these specific stones have their own energy and function and each person should find out which stone is more suitable to his own energy.

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<sup>28</sup> Translation from Persian source: Sadegh Ashourpour. Iranian Plays. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Tehran.Soureh Mehr. 334-335 p. 2010. ISBN 978-964-506-911-5

Since the clothes is directly related to the culture of Iran in this case I prepared some Iranian costume for actors but at the same time especially I asked the actor (Curt Matthew) who was playing as Master to wear his own vest, which is very common for Naghals, also to wear his own agate ring, which was similar to the ones Masters normally wear.

If one wants to become a Naghal, he must go through a long process of master apprenticeship, once the Morshed or Master thinks apprentice is ready to perform, gives him the permission to do so. Most of the time Morsheds are men but also there are female Morsheds who perform for both men and women role.

I was inspired from this point as well and sometimes when Narrator wanted to narrate the story after Master he was saying: "With your permission Master." Also when at the end of the play Master gives his cane- the most precious tool for narrators-to Black, she asks for the permission of Master to narrate rest of the story and that's actually when Master feels Black is ready to narrate the story.

One of the most well known sorts of Naghali is "Pardehkhani " which came to life during Safavi time in Persia in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. "Pardeh khan" or " Master" starts the story and explain it from the painting on one or several curtains. He draws the attention of the audience to the specifics points of the curtain. Master or Naghal uses his cane to point at different parts of the story. The curtain is painted in a coffeehouse or teahouse style, which is exclusively, is the Persian one.

Naghali and Pardehkhani are both unique and age old, deserve to safeguard for generations to come.

In the Persian storytelling, the Master enlightens the audience through stories that he narrates. The character of Black which is also one of the characters of another sort of Persian traditional theatre -" Rou Hozhi" - which was based on comic situations.

Black which has his face covered with Black makeup, looks stupid and naïf but actually he is clever and raises important questions and criticizes the situations, which are shown in the play- there are mainly criticizing some issues in society. About the background of the black character in Rouhozi plays, theatre theoreticians and practitioners like Bahram Beyza'i one of the living Iranian Directors who teaches Persian Studies at Stanford University, have some ideas about

black character that a root in the time "Portuguese had occupied Hormoz And some other islands in South of Iran which took from 1507-1622. During this time some traders, hacks came from banks of African countries to those islands in south of Iran. Even the Portuguese brought some slaves and serfs from banks of Ethiopia and some other African countries.

“And the other theory is that years ago when some Asian especially Indian homeless gypsies or hobos came to Iran and they were spread all over the country. What they were doing mainly was dancing, singing and imitating.”<sup>29</sup>

Comic character of Black also appeared in many folkloric theatre traditions throughout Europe.

Most of the time Black character in Iranian comedies criticizes in a way, which raises the sympathy of the audience toward him. Here I combined two different traditional Persian styles of performing to make a new concept for my adaptation on Troilus and Cressida.

Persian story telling plus having the character of Black helped me to be able to tell Shakespeare's complicated story, the story of the two lovers Troilus and Cressida and the issue of War in a more simple way to the audience. And also by bringing the audience to the teahouse, we prepared an intimate atmosphere for the audience to feel much closer to the characters of the story. Another aim for choosing Troilus and Cressida was the theme of the war, which I myself lived through 8 years of my childhood. (The war between Iran and Iraq) therefore had a desire to talk about it.

By the memory of those years I wanted just to remind the audience that how over none convincing reasons the world wears complicated layers of it's history. "And the War continues" was a line, which repeated few times in the play. We continue the war in the world for different reasons but when we question ourselves the reason of it, at the end of each war and what ever the answer would be the next question is if the reason was worth it to destroy people's life, time, money, energy and many other damages that naturally is forced to human being in any kind of war.

The other story in this play is the love story between Troilus and Cressida, which again it's a universal theme, and we always have enough material to talk about love. So my main focus was

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<sup>29</sup> A Study on Iranian Theatre. Bahram Beizai. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Tehran: Roshangaran and Motaleat zanan, 2013. 65p ISBN 978-964-6751-09-1

to show how war could effect and change the face of love or any other aspect of life. In my personal life war effected on it in different ways I had so many bitter, terrifying but at the same time sweet and memorable memories from those days.

What I want to mention here is when I get the best result out of a work as a director when I make any thing goes through my personal filter. That's when my production becomes more interesting for the audience.

I chose styles of Naghali and Pardekhani .

I tried to pursue my favorite theme: meeting of different artistic cultures. Seamlessly fusing Shakespeare's blank verse with Persian folk storytelling, I tried to both tell the story of *Troilus and Cressida* and to tell my own personal view of people confronted by a war and made a minimalist treatment, with only three characters of the traditional figures of the storytelling and thought some original characters from traditional theatre would raise the curiosity of the audience, means the Master, the Narrator and Black, made a crisp cast for the production. My aim was not purely telling detailed stories of Troilus and Cressida but was borrowing what could be helpful to me to create my own adaptation and use other layers to tell a new and original story.

Regarding my approach to the audience I should mention that this time my target in terms of reaching audience from different nationalities went higher than before. Just about two weeks before the opening I spent some time to do a photography session with actors. And since our female character was the Black character of our story I made her face in black and took some photos of them. When I sent the photos for promotion to Prague Shakespeare Company, immediately Guy Roberts called me and said if I want to present the actor who plays as Black character with her face colored in black, he has to cancel our production! Then I realized that it's coming from the definition of a white person's face colored in Black especially in nowadays definition in United States.

In that time I got more aware of the historical context of Black face character in theatre and in society of USA. The progress of blackface in Minstrelsy the American theatrical makeup which was used by white person to represent a black person on stage which existed roughly around 100

years beginning from 1830. And that aspect of Minstrelsy, which was changed during the time and finally by U.S Civil rights Movements lost its popularity.

From the very beginning I had Black (Diamond) character with almost with blacked face. Therefore I had to make a fast decision and I chose to make the face of the black character partially black which could remind especially the Americans of the character in the movie "Chimney Sweep" who most of the American and even non Americans are familiar with. Practically I had to reach a wider range of audience.

In this production I also considered ways women are treated in Iran. Unfortunately still there is discrimination between men and women in Iran and of course other parts of the world.

At the beginning of the play the look towards Black is from above but gradually she increases her values and shows her abilities that she can do more than only assisting the Master, therefore Master gives her the chance to narrate the rest of the story at the very end of the play.

By creating a clear progression for black from the beginning to the end of the play and choosing female gender for the role I made my own statement about this sort of discrimination.

There were three layers in that adaptation:

1. Parts of story of Troilus and Cressida
2. Story and relationship between the characters of Master, Narrator and Black.
3. The Persian style of story telling, Naghali and Pardehkhani.

Scenes from Shakespeare were a challenge for all of us who were involved with the production, especially for Czech actors. It was difficult to deal with Shakespeare verses and language.

To understand what is going on in the play was the first challenge in this play since there are many stories intertwined into each other and the main layer which is the story telling structure based on the curtain hung on the wall with some scenes painted on it, was another challenge. It was a new concept for some of the actors to be several characters one after each other or let's say at the same time such as how to break one character and switch to the other character, which has

to be presented in a different way to clarify it for the audience. This border had to be clear, fast enough to keep the rhythm of the production.

The actors playing the Narrator and Master had to make this division in their action and delivering lines. For instance Master was becoming Thersites and suddenly he had to switch to his own character and even comment on it and again switch back to Thersites.

In traditional Naghali and Pardekhani one of the ideas are to educate people or giving them some moral lessons. There is always an advise or information to the audience. According to this idea I decided to explain the connections between Iliad by Homer and Troilus & Cressida by Shakespeare. Obviously most the people know about Homer and his Iliad but less people know about “the story of Troilus and Cressida and I thought it might be interesting for the audience to know how Shakespeare was inspired by the story of this war between Greeks and Trojans in homer and the additional story of Troilus and Cressida to it which was written in interwoven episodes, in a long French poem of the mid-twelfth century, the *Roman de Troie* of by Benoît de Sainte-Maure.”<sup>30</sup> And later from 1381-1386 Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* was a source to Shakespeare.

And these differences were somehow addressed by Black character in my adaptation. She was raising questions and wanted to do the comparison between the stories. And through her questions the Narrator and especially the Master were unfolding the layers of the idea.

I had a very smooth collaboration with the set designer of this production, Jalil Fotouhinia after we both agreed on the general look of the curtain he started to design all the details, but I had some Struggle wit Costume and set designer in using the amount of props for the actors. At the very begging of the process I could imagine some props to give to one actor who was playing different warriors coming from the battle field having different parts of their fighting uniforms such as helmet, Armor and some other details in Military clothing but by times I realized the more simple I'll take them the more interesting they look. And finally the only and the most important tool of the actor (Karel Heřmánek) who was representing the Trojans warriors was his cane. And again to mention that here I used that technique in Naghali that the Narrator uses his cane as different objects and here was such as sword, spears or even horse that he was riding.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.librarius.com/troicris.htm>

"A good way to find out how well the actors understand the thoughts of a speech, is to have them in their own words paraphrase the lines in the lines of the text." <sup>31</sup>

I asked Narrator and especially the Master, to make the lines I had written for story telling, into their own words. That the lines get out of their own filter. This especially happened at the opening of the play that Master starts to welcome the audience.

I wanted to have some intimacy between the actors and the audience and I believed that would be helpful in different ways. The actor could map the lines better in his mind. Also it would give more opportunity to the actor to improvise. When we were performing *Troilus and Cressida* at International School of Prague in June 2016, the opening scene of the play was much more interactive because the Master knew he was talking to the high school students and his way was different to approach the teenagers. He started to raise more questions from the students at the beginning, and students were responding him very well.

Here I would like to bring a good example about the importance of knowing the audience. As a performer, director, producer, who ever is involved with the production.

One of the main skills of a Master who recites the story is recognizing what level of understanding his audience has. Mainly according where he does the story telling and the age and education of the audience. And as I mentioned before in other chapters it is so important for a director to know for whom she wants to make her production and to inform it to her actors and production team.

Having a Stage Manager, Michal Pochna, in this production helped me a lot to be able focus more on directing rather than arrangement issues.

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<sup>31</sup> Mandy Rees. John Staniunas. *Between director and actor*. 1st ed. Portsmouth, Heinemann publishing. 2002. 26 p. ISBN 0-325-00432-3

After the last day of our performance Guy Roberts asked me to perform it I repertoire program at Kolowrat theatre which will start from October 2016.



**Figure 34. Troilus & Cressida . Kolowrat Theatre. Swan Bar. May 2016. From left to right: . Karel Heřmánek, Curt Matthew and Kateřina Veckerová.**





Figure 35. Troilus & Cressida. Kolowrat Theatre. Swan Bar. May 2016



Figure 36. Troilus & Cressida. Kolowrat Theatre. Swan Bar. May 2016



Figure 37. Troilus & Cressida. Kolowrat Theatre. Swan Bar. May 2016

## **My Pink Labyrinth**

"A significant aspect of the plot is a conflict that affects the character now, giving the play a scene of the present., not past, and giving the character highly important vested emotional interest in the outcome." <sup>32</sup>

My Pink Labyrinth is a short 30-minute play, which I have written and performed at the Swan Festival in Prague.

SWAN Prague Festival is an international event designed to showcase the power and diversity of women's creativity. <sup>33</sup>

I was asked to define an artistic project in this festival, then I took it as a good opportunity to write an original piece, my first one woman show to perform. I started to think about female body and what comes in relation with it. Again I used myself as a source of my work. I had the desire to talk about women's issue in communicating about their sexual life and experiences. The themes also include mainly the issue in communication between mothers and daughters. Again getting back to my root how it was in my country and culture, the issues about the lack of sexual education in the family and at schools.

The story is about a girl living in Prague and she explains to the audience that on 21<sup>st</sup> of March she was back to her home country Iran to celebrate Iranian New Year. She is at the New Year traditional table that her mother maid who includes seven elements and each element has a meaning. One of the elements is grown wheat, which has the meaning of rebirth. From here the issue starts and mother tells her daughter that she wishes to see her daughter having a child. But the question is if the mother can accept her daughter having a child without being married and indeed the mother disagrees. The girl starts to question her mother why she never taught her

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<sup>32</sup> Louis E. Catron. *The Power of One*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Portsmouth, Heinemann. 00, 40 p. ISBN 0~325~00153~7

<sup>33</sup> <https://swanprague.wordpress.com/about-2/>

anything about women's sexual life and since the mother is not comfortable to talk about this matter, starts to bring excuses to run to the kitchen to escape that conversation. Either the rice is about to burn; she wants to bring sweets, tea and few other excuses to eventually escape answering the questions of her daughter about sexuality.

Anytime the mother escapes to the kitchen the daughter starts addressing the audience and sharing her sexual discoveries from her teenage time and raises her question about this issue of communication.

Finally when the daughter tells her mother how important this matter was to her to discuss with her mother, the fireworks sound is heard and her mother hugs her happily saying happy new year. And practically the daughter never gets the chance to talk to her mother.

Again here I tried to introduce a part of my culture. And I raised a question and after I performed there were women or teenage girls coming to me from different nationality that they had the same problem. It was very touching when a young Czech girl came to me saying her mother never had such conversation with her and she had to discover things on her own, and that they are not really comfortable to communicate about this matter. I did enjoy this very direct way of communication, which I could commit through practicing theatre.

In this production again as I did in the radio production of *Oh My Sweet Land*, which I will explain in the next chapter, I had to divide the characters of mother and daughter. The change had to be done in a fragile way. Again I realized that when one person does different characters how important it is to make that little beat, also changes in tempo and rhythm and ways of delivering the lines; also Changes in the body language, which are very important to separate the characters from each other.

## Chapter V

### Radio Productions

Radio course at DAMU was a good step to experience different sort of programs in Radio. I've got to experience dramaturgy, directing, writing, producing and acting which was under supervision of Lída Engelová a very active theater and radio director in the Czech Republic who also had a close collaboration with Royal Shakespeare Company in London including the period of Peter Brook in early 1970s.<sup>34</sup>

My first production was a fifteen-minute adaptation on the one act play “The Proposal by Anton Chekhov”<sup>35</sup>, which was my shortest production in English. The first step was dramatizing it for radio. Besides shortening the play, the main change at this adaptation was that I changed the character of Landowner Stepan Stepanovich Chubukov from Natalya Stepanovna's father to her brother.

In that particular time I didn't have that much options for the actors to cast but to compare to my choices I could have a fine cast especially the lead role of Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov which was acted by Lloyd Waldo who has experience in theater and radio plays.

One of the reasons I changed the father's character to a brother, was that the actor's voice for this role had young voice and I didn't want to fake his voice to sound older. And by changing his age the approach to the whole play changed too. We made a different background story for the sibling. His approach for keeping their property and wealth, which was left as heritage from their parents, would be definitely different from the approach of the father to his properties and wealth.

Working with actors in Radio as a new experience was attractive but at the same time complicated because the tool is only the voice and energy of the actor and there is no visual tool for the listeners. The vision must appear in the mind of the listeners like the definition of the space, blocking, or the quality of the space, if it's a big or small one. The definition of

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<sup>34</sup> Jan Petružela. Towards a Dream. (Based on Lída Engelová's rehearsal diaries). In "Divadelní revue". 27/2016. p 34-43

<sup>35</sup> Anton Chekhov. Five Comic One-Act Plays. Thrift ed. New York. Dover Publication. 24-36 p. ISBN 0-486-40887-6

relationships between the characters, the physical distance between the characters and many other details have to be visualized only through the way a director asks her actors to perform in front of a microphone at studio.

Deciding on making or having live sound effects or prerecorded ones and also the music was other parts of the work.

The next step after the recording was postproduction. I picked the music tracks I wanted and also explaining to the sound master what kind of flow we want the work to have and he would make it in a way I was looking for.

The sound master of all my works was Mr. Jiří Suchánek who is at studio DAMU.

After the first production Lída suggested doing something different in radio that what I did in the first semester. I was interested in something, which is connected to human rights. I decided to make a radio talk show.

I was studying about the ideas and some works of Vaclav Havel at the library of Vaclav Havel and by coincidence I found a Persian translated version of the letter by Vaclav Havel to Gustav Husák, while I was reading the letter I was recalling my own experiences or some people of my nation living in Iran. I am bringing this example because I realized how differently nations live in different countries with unlike circumstances but can go through similar living experiences and that's what fascinated me and then I started to come with some new ideas for a radio program.

I decided to work on the letter of Vaclav Havel to Gustav Husák.

The beginning:

Because the letter and content of it sounded familiar I naturally started to make a comparison on the attitude of two different nations: Iranian in current system of Islamic Republic of Iran and Czech nation in Czechoslovakia at Communist era.

Of course the systems are not the same at all. Iran is a country run by Islamic Republic, which is based on religion but Communism wasn't based on Religion, which is one of the very basic

differences. But both foundations function as totalitarian systems. The situation the nations live through is not the same but the result of reflecting these systems on people's life are similar.

The absurd way of their lives and they are expressed in Vaclav Havel's letter in a descriptive way.

Some of the themes which took my attention were :

- Strong effects of censorship on nations
- Crisis of human identity
- The result of acting outside the framework as a definition by the state.
- Change of truth, truth as the momentary needs of the government.
- Impact of censorship

And beyond the letter I wanted to discuss what the complications are after so-called freedom when a totalitarian system is over which in this case we could discuss about Czech Republic.

I invited three people to interview with:

Mrs. Barbra Day, MBE, PhD, who is the funder member of Prague Society for International Cooperation and from 60s in the last century she has been translating many text from Czech to English mainly about history, art and theatre.

Mrs. Viera Langerova who is a film critic in the Czech Republic and is also focused on Asian and Middle Eastern cinema such as Iran.

Mr. Omid Nikfarjam who is an Iranian Journalist at Radio Free Europe and literature translator.

I had few meetings with them to mention points I want to discuss in the talk show.

The length of the program was supposed to be 30 minutes. According the material I wanted to highlight in our talk show I arranged the questions in advance and discussed the way answers. Therefore I could time it and know how to include that information in the 30 min slot we had.

Eventually 30 minutes was not enough time to talk about such a big topic but at Least it was a very good practice for me as a student and luckily the year after making this program it was broadcast from Prague Radio the English division, for the celebration of 40<sup>th</sup> year of the letter of Vaclav Havel to Gustav Husàk.<sup>36</sup>

I believe I brought up a good example on how totalitarian system can reflect on any society even if the context is different. Following to that program after two years and celebrating Vaclav Havel'd death, I was invited to a gathering to talk about the letter of Vaclav Have at Alfred ve dvoře theatre. I also read some parts of the letter in Persian and explaining it in English, there was a person as a translator from English to Czech.

I brought the full version of this talk show at the end of this thesis for reference and information in details.<sup>37</sup>

And the link to the program, which is online, and broadcaster on 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2015

This work gave me e better chance to get involved more with the Czech society. What I did at the production was not definitely comparing political systems but only a report of common experiences of people around the world, which makes a dialogue and a way of communication between people. Strictly speaking it wasn't a radio play. It was a feature radio program.

### Oh My Sweet Land<sup>38</sup>

And my last radio production at DAMU was the radio adaptation of Oh My Sweet Land by Amir Nizar Zuabi who is a Palestinian Playwright, director and actor. Which was another good suggestion from Lida who found this play in London. And suggested to adapt it for radio and me acting in it as actress.

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<sup>36</sup> [http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=1\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=1_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML)

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/special/havels-letter-to-husak-still-an-inspiration-40-years-on>

<sup>38</sup> Amir Nizar Zuabi. Oh My Sweet Land. First ed. New York: Bloomsbury. 2014. ISBN 978-1-4725-8939-2



A woman who is of mixed Syrian-German parentage tells the story. As she stands in her Paris kitchen making kubah, a classic Syrian meat dish, she recalls her encounter with an exiled Damascene medical worker, Ashraf. She has helped the guilt-ridden Ashraf, with the aid of Skype, organise the escape of fellow Syrians. For three months the two of them become lovers. When Ashraf disappears, she goes on a labyrinthine journey in search of him that leads to encounters with some of Syria's two million refugees and stirs deep ancestral memories.

After some discussion Lida Engelová my Radio tutor at DAMU we decided that she directs me and I would act in this radio adaptation. We planned for a Forty-five minutes production.

People who were involved in this production are mentioned below:

Directed and adapted by Lída Engelová

Performed by Azadeh Mohammadi

Stage Directions read by Peter Hosking

Music and sound effects by Marwan Alsolaiman

Sound Mater by Jiří Suchánek

Being an actor in this radio adaptation was again a good opportunity to learn more about directing and acting. It is a one-woman play and the actor should represent various characters during the whole play. Practicing how to add different layers to a voice for showing the characters in different situations and how to make them different without changing or imitating voices, meaning to keep the nature of our voice. It was a good practice for working with rhythm of the play. Because with rhythm and tempo changes I could show if the character is running and talking to people around her, or sitting and eating food, if she is scared, delighted, motivated, engaged and many other colors which we can give to a character.

Pauses are essential in the radio, sometimes the silence is more than the text but sometimes-higher tempo is the case.

This production was invited as a live performance to Nad Prahou pŭlměšíc in November 2015 at Na Zabradli theatre and later in February 2016 at Reduta theatre in Brno. But eventually Lida Engelova suggested to have this performance as a radio on stage performance including me and Marwan Alsoleiman the musician on stage.



**Figure 38. Oh My Sweet Land by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Directed by Lída Engelová. Festivan Nad Prahou pŭlměšíc, Na Zabradli Theatre. November 2015. From Left to right: Azadeh Mohammadi, Lída Engelová. Marwan Marwan Alsolaiman.**



**Figure 39. Oh My Sweet land. Theatre Reduta. Brno. March 2016.**

## **A Discussion About the Freedom of Expression in Art Based on the Letter of Vaclav Havel to Gustav Husák**

### **Havel's Letter to Husák: still an inspiration 40 years on**

11-04-2015 02:01 | [Azadeh Mohammadi](#), [David Vaughan](#)

Forty years ago this week, on 8 April 1975, Václav Havel sent an open letter to Czechoslovakia's President Gustav Husák. The letter was to become one of the key documents of dissent during the period of "normalization". It outlined the creeping fear, apathy and humiliation faced by Czechs and Slovaks amid the cultural stagnation in the first years after the Soviet-led invasion of 1968. Today times are very different, but the warnings in the letter remain as relevant as ever. Azadeh Mohammadi is a Prague-based student from Iran, who came across the letter in Farsi translation and found many parallels with her own experiences growing up in Iran over three decades after it was written. She decided to find out more and part of that process was a radio discussion that she recorded about the letter's legacy with Barbara Day and Viera Langerová, who have both studied Havel's work closely, and Omid Nikfarjam, a Prague-based Iranian journalist and translator. In a few minutes we shall be hearing that discussion, but we'll start with Azadeh herself, talking to me about what Havel's Letter to Husák means to her personally.



[Azadeh Mohammadi, photo: archive of Azadeh Mohammadi](#)

"My name is Azadeh Mohammadi. At the moment I study theatre directing at the Drama Faculty in Prague."

**How did you come to be in the Czech Republic – and where are you from?**

"I'm from Iran. I was living in Dubai and I was looking for English-speaking schools for acting and that's why I ended up here."

**Having come here, I think you found a lot of parallels with your own country that you didn't expect to find.**

"I was surprised to see very different conditions from my country, but at the same time very similar experiences – in the history of the countries."

**And what you're talking about in particular is the experience that Czechoslovakia had of communism, especially in the 1970s and 80s, where you see similarities with the situation in Iran today.**

"We didn't experience the communists, but the Islamic Republic in Iran had an effect on the country and nation in a way that made me think about it. There are some similarities between the experiences of the nations."

**And that brings me to Václav Havel and his Letter to Gustav Husák in 1975. This was a time when Husák had just become president of Czechoslovakia. Havel's position was becoming increasingly difficult and he was pushed right onto the margins of society as a dissident. When you read the letter you found a lot of points that echoed things that you'd experienced yourself or you felt were very similar in Iran. Can you outline some of these things?**

"I would like to tell you about my first impulse when I read the letter. I read it here in the Václav Havel Library and I found the text translated into Farsi, which was so pleasant for me to read. And what was so pleasant again was that when I was reading the letter I was feeling an Iranian wrote it, which had a huge impact on me."

**What were the specific things that made you think of what you had experienced at home?**



Václav Havel, photo: archive of Czech Radio

"What was very interesting for me first was the life – how absurdly this nation had lived – the absurdity of the whole situation, which Václav Havel mentioned in his writings. It was just what I had experienced myself ever since I was a child, in the family and then in society and then in my school or anywhere outside."

**And this sense of absurdity – is it to a large extent because of the gap between the world that you're being told officially you live in and the real world that you actually are living in?**

"Simply I couldn't be what I was, as a person, as an individual in my society. I couldn't express myself as I was, because I was always feeling there is a danger if I show my real face. This experience happens automatically in your head – that you have to censor yourself when you open the door of your home and you walk into the street."

**Another thing that Havel talks about very eloquently in his Letter to Husák is how people – out of an instinct for self-preservation – play along with the regime. You become far more introverted, you no longer engage with public life.**

"It's funny, but it's exactly the same – the experience of our life in Iran, because you live in that society physically, but you feel that you are kept outside, as if they have their own party and you

are the neighbor who just can hear the sound of people having fun. So to me this is how it works. I can picture it for myself."

**Another thing that Havel talks about is the way that – because of this strange sort of detachment – history seems to stop. Society is no longer moving. It becomes very stagnant and you can't have a healthy and natural interaction of ideas – and the country cannot interact with its own reflection on its own history.**

"Yes, because it turns into a loop – a circle. However you try to improve, you come back to the zero point again. This is another similarity."

**I know that the field that interests you most is culture, because you are involved in theatre. Again Havel in his Letter to Husák warns of the impact of censorship in the arts. Ostensibly it only seems a minor inconvenience if a magazine that was only read by a few thousand people is forced to close down, but he points out that culture is the way that society can look at itself and reflect on itself, see itself in the mirror critically, and then move on. And a second point that Havel makes in the letter is that because of this degree of censorship and self-censorship the kind of culture you get – the kind of plays you get performed or the films that are made in that society – may be well made and quite good, but they're not actually engaging with reality. They are escapism and if anything they are reinforcing the status quo.**



Gustáv Husák, photo: Czech Television

"Yes. And I would also like to mention something I experienced as a foreigner here. I was watching a commercial film, which was made in Czechoslovakia during the communist time, and it was showing a grocery shop full of produce. All the products were so beautiful, attractive to your eyes, and it was the exact opposite of the reality."

**This is in the 1970s or 1980s...**

"Exactly. And if we go back to Iran, I can give you a few examples. If people were producing works of art or they were talking about some issues in society in the newspapers or magazines, they were shut down after a while. This is what we experienced a lot in our country, unfortunately. So what happens, because the artist wants to survive somehow, he tries to adjust himself or show that he has adapted to the need of the government. So what happens has a direct effect on the quality of the art."

**I'd like to ask you about the radio discussion that you have made and why you chose to make it – as a very interesting reflection on the parallels between Czechoslovakia and Iran.**

"Well, it was part of my studies. I wanted to make a radio production and my supervisor, Lída Engelová, who is a very active director in the theatre and also radio, asked me – having already experienced radio drama – what else I would like to experience in the field of radio. And I realized that what I wanted to do was to find common points between myself as a foreigner here and the people of this country. Since I left my country I have felt it strongly – how can I communicate with people? The way that I feel close to people who lived through the communist era here comes from my direct experience, even though I didn't see what happened in this country in those days. I just heard about it. But because of my experience in my country, I can connect with this matter."

**So you find yourself identifying with people here who are a generation older than yourself.**

"Exactly. I have many more things to talk about with them!"

**So, Azadeh, let's listen to the program that you made, which starts with you introducing your three guests. But before we start, I'd like you to say a bit about the music that you have mixed into this discussion.**

"I chose Mohsen Namjoo, who is an Iranian musician. He's really great. He's living out of the country right now. And I chose the Czech Karel Kryl who wrote protest songs. He was against the system and even when he got back to the country, he was also criticizing Václav Havel even though they were friends. So that was an interesting thing about him as well!"

### **The Aesthetics of Banality**

*A discussion about the freedom of expression in art based on the Letter of Václav Havel to Gustav Husák*

*by Azadeh Mohammadi*



Barbara Day, photo: David Vaughan

AZADEH: "I have three guests, Barbara Day, who is a founder member of the Prague Society for International Cooperation. She also translates from Czech to English, mainly about history, theatre and art, and leads courses on Czech theatre and Czechoslovak life and culture under the Communist regime. Viera Langerová is a reviewer of cinema and in the Czech Republic is also focused on Asian and Middle Eastern cinema including Iran. Our Iranian guest is Omid Nikfarjam, a journalist & literary translator at Radio Free Europe.

**„Barbara, could you tell us briefly about Václav Havel and the way he was using his thoughts in his artistic work?"**



BARBARA DAY: "Havel was clear-sighted from boyhood about the regime; unlike some other Czech intellectuals, he had no illusions. Because he experienced persecution in his own skin, he could see through the lies and hypocrisy and had great sympathy for those similarly suffering discrimination. He knew that the system was absurd, and that was how he presented it in his plays. But he believed it had to be resisted. Straight after the invasion in 1968 he warned against sentimental patriotism, saying: 'Freedom isn't something we sit around waiting for, some gift, but our task. We initiate freedom by working and thinking freely; we create it, by providing as something concrete the results of our creation.'

**AZADEH: "Why did Václav Havel write this letter to Gustav Husák, back in 1975?"**

BARBARA DAY: "Havel wanted to draw attention to how society had changed over the previous eight years, from being open and eager to participate, to being a closed society, everyone only interested in their own private world. And he wanted to do this freely and openly, in accordance with the principle I quoted just now."

**AZADEH: "How did Václav Havel see the effect of censorship on truth?"**

BARBARA DAY: "He gave the example of a literary work, in his case naturally he would think of the theatre, a play. The play might be quite good, well-written, well-constructed, audiences would enjoy it. But in this society it would never rise above banality, it would actually present a fraudulent picture of the world - one in which all the deeper levels of meaning had been removed, although the author would pretend to present them. And the reason would be censorship, which takes different forms – it could be the censor or it could be the writer him/herself, i.e. self-censorship, either deliberate, because the writer knows what is acceptable and what is not, or subconscious, because he/she doesn't even dare to think in any other way. So what he/she writes is just a shallow imitation with no real knowledge or understanding. But Havel goes on to say that some audiences will take it at face value, and this sort of triviality becomes a cult, what he calls 'the aesthetics of banality'. And this is much more dangerous than works of political propaganda, because it is much more digestible; people are perfectly content to accept lies in this form."

**AZADEH: "Viera, Václav Havel talked about the crisis of human identity in a system that requires a man to be something other than he is. How do you see the situation then compared with nowadays when society has more freedom?"**



Viera Langerová, photo: Jan Sklenář

VIERA LANGEROVÁ: "It is very interesting to read Havel's letter to Husák today. Paradoxically it looks like the situation in communism was easier, because there was a system we could blame for our moral failures. This doesn't mean I want to defend the totality we lived in. We know today that to recover morally after the fall of totality is extremely difficult because the 'paternal' state decides about everything in your life and will never give you a chance to become 'adult' – responsible for everything you perform in your life. As it was possible to blame everything on the inhuman state and its brutal methods, with the state asking only for 'agreement' and silence, there wasn't an urgent need to intimate questions posed to ourselves about the morality of our deeds. The sinner was versatile and omnipresent.

"The clear line between 'them' and 'us' has disappeared and we have a free choice to look for the sources of our morality. If it is not a religion what is it? Universal humanism, which can tell us 'all people are the same and deserve to live in this and that condition' but cannot tell you that leaving your family, is a sin? If we are all free and have a right to make a choice what is moral and what is not? A pregnant woman can go to abort and kill her child because she is the one who can decide about her body. Does an ambitious man who feels responsibility for his own life and is fully aware that his career demands some sacrifices, know where the lines are between helping the quality of work and reporting on his colleagues? There are thousands of questions dealing with morality we can never cease to ask, facing the immense corruption and moral immunity of

state representatives. Communism was like an anesthetic; it made you calm and immobile in an inner but also an outer sense. Its collective character expressed as 'working masses' diminished your individuality to a minimum as it was ideologically demanded and enemies were accused of 'bourgeois individualism'. The challenge for any people leaving the totalitarian way of life is not only how to be resuscitated by the oxygen of freedom and democracy but also to learn to be responsible for his/her newly regained identity as a free and sovereign individual."

**AZADEH: "Havel mentioned that some truths were the momentary needs of the government. What was happening to the artists who were acting outside the framework as defined by the state?"**

VIERA LANGEROVÁ: "Of course, to be an artist in a totalitarian state you have to be in an approximate accordance with the ideological role of art. In the last decade of communist Czechoslovakia when I lived, there were certain people writing books, shooting films etc. serving to ideological and political needs of the state. All other strata around the 'center' demonstrated degrees of distance from the ideology. The situation was strictly different in 70s after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops when everybody had to declare agreement or disagreement with the 'brotherly help' as the invasion was renamed. This was the time of many forced and unforced departures, emigration to the West.



[Photo: archive of Radio Prague](#)

"I was very surprised when I was reading the memoirs of Miloš Forman, the worldwide known Czech film director, author of the unforgettable Amadeus. He was comparing the Hollywood bosses and their methods to the communists, especially in clear 'power language'. In communism we didn't want to hear things like that, but today we have a chance to compare. Here I can quote

Forman's words I like very much, because they illustrate the realistic image of both societies: Freedom is where you can freely say there is no freedom... He is a person who went through the paradoxes of life in all three systems: Nazism, communist and capitalism. The next world wide famous emigrant is Milan Kundera. He in his books was able to convert the feelings, thoughts and memories of Czech and Slovak people to fascinating stories. He, as well as Karel Kryl, a very famous singer whose songs became hits loved by of all generations, was not happy with the post-revolutionary Czechoslovakia. They were able to perceive all the flops of newly installed democracy in the phase of 'wild capitalism' in the early 90s. But unfortunately there was no social willingness to listen to the criticism. Kryl has died and Kundera estranged himself from his native country. As I have lived almost 15 years abroad, I can understand the mixed feelings of many people trying to come back after the system has changed. There is a very strong disgust here to anything that comes from outside with other views, other opinions etc. Sometimes it looks like old communist paternalism has survived in many splinters everywhere in institutions, companies etc."

**AZADEH: "Omid what are the similarities between this letter by Havel to Husák and the current situation in Iran? What is the function of censorship in Iran, especially in art?"**

OMID NIKFARJAM: "You know, the last 10 years, especially the period after the 2009 disputed election in Iran, is the period that in my opinion much more resembles the situation that Václav Havel wrote about in his letter to Gustav Husák. The shadow of censorship has always been over the heads of the Iranian artists, filmmakers, or writers. But after the 2009 election, the state tried hard and succeeded to a great extent to widen the scope of censorship and, as a result, self-censorship because of the fear it created among people. Not that it was all created out of the blue the day after the election. Since Ahmadinejad came to power, he pushed the society toward this atmosphere, so what happened after the election was only the continuation of what was going on before, albeit more forcefully. What happened? We can sum it up exactly with the expression that Havel uses in his letter: the aesthetics of banality. And this happened most in the Iranian cinema, as it has always been the more popular art form to which people have more access. Now the works, in his words, by imitating the real world, just falsify it, give a false picture of reality; they are hackneyed and trivial and just reassure people with lies. I won't be exaggerating if I say that almost 99 percent of the films produced in Iran now are the kind that Havel had in mind 50

years ago, and as he predicted this kind of film was encouraged in the eight years that Ahmadinejad was in power. They're shallow and stupid stories that only scratch the surface. They're not the kind of film like the typical Jafar Panahi or Asghar Farhadi film that most of the time is an effort to go deeper and show a more truthful picture of life in Iran. Maybe that's why Panahi and Farhadi and other filmmakers like them have been censured and censored inside the country; because they have consciously tried to put a big distance between themselves and the so-called aesthetics of banality that Havel is so critical of."

**AZADEH: "Sometimes because of the limitation, artists have to find other ways to express what they believe in, which might be very creative. How do you see this kind of creativity?"**



[Omid Nikfarjam, photo: archive of Omid Nikfarjam](#)

OMID NIKFARJAM: "Well, I don't believe that limitations and censorship necessarily make artists and writers more creative in a general way. Maybe yes, in the beginning, I give you that. But in the long run, based on what I see in the Iranian art community, it just suffocates the creative people. You know, when the extreme censorship was beginning to take hold in Iran, the artists tried to adapt themselves to the atmosphere and come up with new ways of expressing themselves. Not surprisingly, many artworks tended to use metaphors and symbols as opposed to a more direct way of showing things, because you can say a lot through symbolism without offending the state officials or censors. But after a while, a couple of years, the walls get closer to the artist, his world starts shrinking, he doesn't know what's happening outside those walls, or

when he sees what's happening (especially in this age of the internet), he doesn't get the context and the atmosphere. Because he's been cut off from the world for too long, he's missed the events, he's missed a part of history, just like a prisoner who sees the world through the tiny window in his cell."

**AZADEH: "Can you picture Iranian society in a situation where there will be freedom in our social interactions, speech and arts? How truthful can we be if there is no fear of exile or punishment for what we say?"**

OMID NIKFARJAM: "I don't think it's going to be that easy, because censorship lives on in our minds, especially in the minds of a people like the Iranians who are usually bound by traditions and customs inside the family and society; there are many kinds of inhibitions on the level of family and society. So I don't think we're going to start expressing ourselves with no inhibitions as soon as the censorship agents are removed. You know, I've lived outside Iran for years now and I still catch myself self-censoring from time to time, not because someone or something forces me to, but because of the force of habit, because I was born and raised in a society so used to self-censorship, so used to hiding the true emotions, feelings and opinions. Freedom, I think, needs some getting used to, and this takes a long while. We need time to learn the rules of freedom, to learn to respect the freedom of others. To learn that we should want for others what we want for ourselves. However, I – rather optimistically maybe – also think that when democracy and freedom come to our society, there will be a flourishing of creativity, a surge of new works in all areas of art. And I'm saying this because I know of many works of art hidden at homes and drawers, waiting for the right moment to come out."

**AZADEH: "Viera, How do you value the effect of freedom on artistic works since 1989?"**

VIERA LANGEROVÁ: "I have to say, I expected more in our society. I think the best today is documentary film. For example a couple of years ago there was a best European documentary by a Czech film director Helena Třeštíková. The situation in feature film is much worse and this is a very interesting crisis of story telling. It looks like we have lost courage, because we have to map the new reality and this is very difficult. Freedom of expression doesn't mean that freedom of expression comes automatically. We have to learn to be free not only as human beings in the new

situation but also to be free from any kind of schemes and stereotypes that do not allow the flow of new ideas or their critical selection."

**AZADEH: "Barbara, what is your suggestion, how should we act in such a society? It had its effect on generations. How should we help with the healing process?"**

BARBARA DAY: "I think you're partly answering it yourself, because in my eyes the priority is education. Omid is right that over a long period of unfreedom, people are psychologically manipulated without even realizing it's happening. And it's very difficult to unlearn this. In this country it was more than forty years, so you had teachers who were taught by teachers who had been taught under the communist system. It's really difficult, I have seen this, but I've also seen some very promising initiatives I've seen people really starting ideas, being creative, getting students to think. It's also important to travel, to get contact with the outside world and see that things can be done differently, that there's more than one way of doing it. But I'm really encouraged. I know there are bad times really often, but when I compare the situation with how it used to be, I really think it's come a long way in this country."

**AZADEH: "Omid, as an Iranian journalist how do you think we can have more freedom, what should we do to improve the quality of the arts in Iran and sustain this quality?"**

OMID NIKFARJAM: "As I said before, it takes time to get used to freedom. And I agree with Barbara on this. It'll happen through education among other things. I think we should expect a period of trial and error, which may be short or long, but will prepare the artists and writers for what they like to express and what they want to leave out of their works. You know, Iran has been under the rule of censorship for too long, and maybe it will be for some years to come. So many artists don't even know what freedom will bring with it. And even if they get rid of the outside forces, they are still going to have to fight the inside inhibitions and illusions in their minds. They're going have to try different forms, ideas and whatnot to get to the right idea that will show what they have in mind. So it'll be a process of trial and error in my mind."

**AZADEH: "Thanks for being with us in this program."**

## Conclusion

In this cosmopolitan city of Prague, which can be called a crossroad of different cultures, there are many sorts of cultures meeting each other.

In terms of theatre what I personally have seen more is the effect of western art or philosophy, which is more tangible to people of this part of the world.

As an individual who has been living on this spot of the world, I miss a different taste of being, behaving, pretending, performing which is more connected to area I'm coming from.

What makes me wonder more is that how we can amplify the sense of understanding and empathizing when we live in such a cosmopolitan spot on the earth.

Best way of making different cultures tangible to each other is starting from the culture point itself, which one of them is through Theatre Practice.

For me theatre is a community institution, represents and establishes relationships, which fulfills social functions. Theatre historians regularly acknowledge that theatre and society are closely related.

Nowadays under domination of the world globalization which leads itself to fast pace cultural, economical, political exchanges we can not be abandoned or isolated anymore even though if some political or ideological systems try to keep nations limited and abandoned, but yet it is inevitable to stop people to be exposed by information and exchanges to and from other cultures, countries and societies.

In recent time ways of networking seems to be much easier, faster and accessible rather than decades ago. But not through all these tools of networking people would get through an understanding of another kind. It seems the more we communicate through these networking tools our communication is still questionable.



Theatre as a strong tool is one of the least filtered ways of communication between human beings and when it comes to different cultures what could be better than a direct way of facing each other than theatre.

I would like to summarize some of my experience with actors here. Sometimes while directing a play it would be better to be patient about some differences in our analysis with actors, description of how a character is or behaves and what is the background. I realized when I leave the actor to imagine what he or she wants about the character he plays and not forcing my own ideas. By not forcing the idea I don't mean not to discuss and open the matter for them.

After sometime the actor's definition of the character might meet my idea about the character. When as a director I behave so, I satisfy myself that I haven't forced my own ideas from the beginning of the rehearsals but finally I get what I want from them for the sake of production. And also it is beneficial for the actors since they feel they had progressed a journey on their own and shaped the character and their circumstances.

Depending on how big or small the cast is, working with actors is different. The smaller the group is the director should make more intimate atmosphere at the rehearsals. It helps a lot when the cast and the crew are smaller. In my case at DAMU it was important if I was working with amateur or professional actors out of DAMU or students from DAMU. A director wants her actors to be completely engaged with the production when especially they are at the rehearsal but the way of approaching this goal is different in bigger cast than smaller cast.

Working on radio programs either play or other types of productions would be very helpful for a director to have a better understanding of timing in theater. How to control the pauses and beats and control the whole tempo of the production is essential to a director.

Since the beginning of this thesis I mentioned the most important function of theatre for me is to fuse different cultures and I noticed that since I've started theatre directing in Prague my productions mainly focused on meeting of the different cultures.

In these three years that I was a student at DAMU I felt and realized my own gradual improvement and I'm glad my productions such as *Someone who'll watch over me*, *A Moment of Silence* been to festivals such as, *My Pink Labyrinth* were invited to *Nad Prahou pŭlměsíc* ,

Festival of Iranian Films and Swan Festival in Prague. It's all because of my will to improve and the support of my dearest tutors at DAMU. I'd like to thank Jan Burian, Juhana Kudlačková, Jakub Korčák, Julek Neumann, Lida Engelova, Barbara Day, Ondrej Sramek, Jitka Goriaux , (Dramaturgy teacher) Marie Pejrimovska, Eva Kučerova and many other that I might haven't mentioned here who helped and supported me during this journey.

*“The only sure-fire thing to be said about directing is that the rules change not just from director to director, but from play to play, actor to actor, production to production. Directing for me is largely the art of responding to the needs of others. Directing is about creating an atmosphere in which others can create.”<sup>39</sup>*

This quotation from Alan Ayckbourn is a good example of how director-to-director differences appear in productions. But manner and style of a director is also relative or better to say it's comparable to her. It's a feature of human being, being relative.

Even though I keep my own extract but there are always layers to be added to me on my next journeys to direct more plays. My final observation to the years I studied at DAMU is that it was a period, which helped me to improve my personality as a woman. End of this period of my life would be a start point of another period and other ideas to fulfill as theatre productions.

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<sup>39</sup> Alan Ayckbourn. *The Craft of Playmaking*. First ed. London: Faber and Faber. 99 p. ISBN 0-571-21509-2

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