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## *Ivanov*

original play by **Anton Chekhov**

text and direction by **Amir Reza Koohestani**

director's assistants **Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh & Roxna Bahram**

set designers **Amir Hossein Ghodsi & Amir Reza Koohestani**

music **Hooshyar Khayam**

sound design **Kave Abedin**

costume designer **Negar Nemati**

video & technical direction **Hessam Nourani**

stage manager **Mohammadhossein Nafariazad**

with **Vahid Aghapour, Ali Bagheri, Reza Behboodi, Saeid Changizian, Fatemeh Fakhraee, Negar Javaherian, Fariba Kamram, Hassan Madjooi, Mahin Sadri** *Anna*

show in persian with surtitles

running time **2h30 (with 10 minutes intermission)**

production **Mehr Theatre Group**

creation in Tehran, Iranshahr Hall, October – November 2011

production manager **Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh**

company & tour manager **Pierre Reis**



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## ◆ Tour dates

. 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2014

. 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> June 2013

. 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013

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**Theater Basel, Theaterfestival Basel – Switzerland**

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Bozar - Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, Belgium

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Festival Theaterformen, Hanover, Germany

## ◆ About the play

### **We are all Ivanov**

“We are all Ivanov” recently posted an Iranian actress on her Facebook profile. This young thirty-year old woman, living in Tehran, evokes *Ivanov*, an adaptation of Chekhov’s eponymous play that has been rewritten and directed by the Iranian director, Amir Reza Koohestani.

If Ivanov was considered as the Anti-hero of modern times, this Iranian Ivanov seems to embody the melancholia of a worrying postmodernity. “We are all Ivanov”... What a strange and paradoxical declaration. The memory of Iranians’ rebellion during the summer of 2009 is still fresh in our memory. Through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, the post-revolutionary heroes loudly expressed their refusal of the presidential elections’ results. Disregarding people’s protests, the Islamic government proclaimed the candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the President for a second mandate, and brutally suffocated the voice of the opposition.

Two years have passed since this fraudulent election. The Arab Spring announced the awakening of the people in Tunisia, Egypt, Lybia, followed by the continuous rebellion in Syria, Qatar, and Yemen. Such massive uprising is the indication of a moving world in which Arabs try to change their destiny whether for the worst or for the best. What about Iran? What happened to the protestation of Iranian youth demanding freedom and democracy, to the outcry of the women seeking justice and equality, to the demurral of the intellectuals, and the disenchanting voice of the middle class families?

In *Prometheus Landscape II*, a dance production performed in Paris City theater last Spring, the choreographer Jan Fabre questioned the Western men’s goals and asked us, the spectators, where are gone our heroes, the ones that would have the ability to change our world today. While facing the audience, a dancer repeatedly asked: “Where is the new Prometheus of our times?” Fabre proclaims that the incessant search for security, the disastrous results of individualism, and the deep feeling of fear, have extinct the spark – the fire that would destroy the ancient order and create a new harmony. The flame in our soul has been put out. Needless to say, Prometheus’s myth remains persistent in the Western culture. Despite the rising of a new anti-promethean way of thinking, despite the reconsideration of the idea of a hero and of a self-overtaking,



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the West is still looking for a mythical — if not Christian — savior that would bring salvation and hope.

Meanwhile, in Tehran, *Letters to Thebes*, a performance based on an adaptation of Sophocles' play, *Oedipus in Colonus*, was staging a dethroned and tyrannical Oedipus, surrounded by his children, all traumatized by the suffering of their dictatorial father. One hopes that, at the end of the play, children would feel liberated and would build a new system far from an archaic patriarchy. But not such act happened: once Oedipus passes away, his children full of lassitude, lie on the ground, put an eye patch on their eyes, and vanish into the darkness of a devastated stage. However, this final gesture, this collective renunciation has nothing to do with suicide; this shared melancholia is not related to a tragic fatality. Not only it seemed to be the result of a deliberate choice but also, it expressed the absolute pessimism of the youth who believes in nothing anymore.

« We have all *become* Ivanov». This is what one should understand in Amir Reza's Koohestani's play.

In Koohestani's play, Ivanov's character embodies the disenchanting Iranian youth. A profound depression has transformed him into a passive and silent person. Closed in a solitary world, separated from the external reality by the use of a headphone, he spends his time learning English (who knows? maybe this foreign language would help him to get away from his cursed land). By hearing this foreign language in his headphone, Ivanov slowly confuses this voice with the one of his own schizophrenic psyche, as he is lost in the fantasies of a lost revolution and a diverted rebellion.

If black color refers to mourning procession and sacrifice which are the predominant themes of the Iranian Chi'ism, white in this production is an omnipresent color. But it would be useless to look after this grayish white, this creamy white, or even this greenish white, any reference to the naïve dove of peace. For the persistent white of a household linen hang on a rope, the haunting white of a light veil moving in the air, or the morbid white of a sheet destined to a dying Anna Petrovna, refers to nothing but the emptiness of a meaningless life.

What to do? Nothing. There is nothing to be done. A sofa. A bed.

All body movements tend to a neutral immobility. Nothing announces the hope of a change.

However, something strange happens: there are some fugitive sequences of luminous scenes, just before the curtain closes, at the end of the acts. During these fragile instants, one can perceive the loneliness of a contemplative character. These visions don't last because the possibility of dreaming is gone. But who knows, this spark of a dream, this unexpected search for a richer inner life, will, maybe, bring back the hope of a better future.

**Leyli Daryoush, dramaturge**



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## ◆ Interview with Amir Reza Koohestani

Tehran, November 2011

**There are two versions of the play *Ivanov*: one was written in 1886 and is considered a comedy, and the other one, written in 1888-89 and considered “drama in four acts”, is a rewriting of the first version. What has been your choice between these two versions? How did you proceed?**

Instead of making a deep investigation on the play *Ivanov* and its context, I preferred focusing on these two versions and tried to understand why changes were considered necessary by Chekhov himself. Actually, this is where my comprehension of this author comes from: I looked for the difficulties as well as his dissatisfaction from a dramatic point of view. Without a doubt, this helped me to decide on the ending of the play.

Indeed, the major difference is to be found in the dramatic outcome. In the first version, Ivanov marries Sasha and finds a certain satisfaction while in the second version, Ivanov renounces his marriage and commits suicide. I found this difference crucial and considered it as the core of my dramaturgy.

In the middle of the fourth act, Sasha talks to her father and expresses her doubts concerning her love for Ivanov. Her father suggests that she cancels the wedding. His daughter gets scared and decides to get married despite of everything. She sees Ivanov who also wants to cancel the wedding and succeeds in convincing him to get married. In the first version, the comedy, she tells him: “Listen to me and you will be happy” and Ivanov accepts. In the second version, the drama, she says the same thing but Ivanov’s response is: “Nobody can make me happy”.

Sasha’s character is very important for me. She represents a contemporary young woman who believes in the future. She has her own voice, she believes she can change everything and refuses her family’s conservatism. She even has the audacity to visit Ivanov in secret. How far can she go? Why does she refuse to cancel the wedding in the first version? What is she afraid of? Rumours? Gossip? Sasha in Iran refers to all Iranian women, whether students – who represent more than sixty percent in the universities –, film makers, business women, hard-working women, all of them were in frontline of the riots of the summer 2009. They have all become Sasha to me and I couldn’t show a pessimistic Sasha who easily accepts her fate and her family’s decisions. In my version, she gives up everything and leaves for Europe.

In the second version of the play, Ivanov can commit suicide because he finally finds himself. I believe suicide is an act that requires a great deal of strength and I, personally, couldn’t imagine such an act in my country. Contrary to Chekhov,



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I think that *Ivanov* in Iran would be unable to find his way, not even the path to death. All *Ivanovs* in my country observe the situation, they suffer but remain static. Even intellectuals do not have the courage to react: they remain in life to suffer more.

**Many playwrights in Iran tend to adapt the classic drama repertory. An explanation of such an attitude is to be found in the censorship imposed by the government. Indeed, directors and playwrights feel the need to find new narrative strategies. But at the same time, the use of the adaptation technique can be the best way possible for those artists to talk about contemporary Iran. In such a context, what was the meaning of an adaptation of *Ivanov's* play?**

What interested me in *Ivanov's* character was his despair. Let's consider the situation in Iran, the question Iranians ask themselves every day is the following: "What should we do now?" News are catastrophic, whether it is the nuclear policy, the disastrous economic situation, or the UN sanctions to name but a few. And we keep sitting in our chairs wondering what to do. I realized this depression was the point on which I had to focus on in my adaptation. When my actors read my new version of the play, I also decided that they should not move, because nothing would be changed by moving. *Ivanov* looks at the events and lets them happen. Just like us. As if the Iranian people had decided that, in order to protect themselves, there was no other issue than an absolute passivity, which means not requiring help and being mortally injured. As a result, we have started to get used to the tragic dimension of our existences, as if all of this was nothing but a routine, with some events detached from any kind of subjectivity or personal reaction.

But we know what is going on around us. We are fully aware of our situation, we understand it very well, we even have different points of views on the events by watching western TV channels such as CNN, Al-Jazeera or even BBC World, or by surfing online. Our passivity does not come from a lack of knowledge but from a deep pessimism. We observe the consequences of the Arab Spring and we think that they, at least, have been able to change the rules of their country. We have been the first to protest but we are still at the same place... Nobody in Iran has the strength to envision a war, a protest or to make a simple claim. And we don't even have the power to defend ourselves. I think the unexpected success of this play comes from the fact that people identified themselves with *Ivanov*, a familiar character who looked like them.

**The language used in *Ivanov* is a very ordinary one. This spoken Persian language is not always present in the contemporary Iranian theater. You are one of the few authors to use it. How did you work on it in your *Ivanov's* adaptation?**

It is true that the use of a simple, realistic, and ordinary Persian language motivates me as a playwright. In *Quartet: A*



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*Journey North* or *Where were you on January 8<sup>th</sup>?* for instance, I was still under the influence of the documentary theater in which dialogues or even words don't always have a dramatic value. Most of the time, I was dealing with extremely detailed sentences all turning around expectation and indecision, and by writing this way, I was looking for the violence of the word, as well as the violence of the Tehran's streets, with its pollution, its dirtiness and dust.

But *Ivanov* is a classic and I wanted to preserve this dimension of the play. I wanted both realistic and highly-precise dialogues. For this, I reduced the sentences as much as possible. I wanted to have as few as conversations possible and bring as much as information. For instance, in the fourth act, when Ivanov asks Sasha where she wants to go since the wedding has been cancelled, she responds: "I want to go elsewhere, far from you". All Sasha's reality is contained in those two sentences.

To obtain such a result, I had to clarify as much as possible all dramatic situations. Characters are clearly defined and can even be identified with the Iranian reality. Borkin is a social climber that capitalizes all situations to make money. He embodies the new merchants of Tehran's market who spend their time buying products in order to sell them at a higher price to other merchants who will do the same and so forth. It is all about money that circulates, that increases prices but produces strictly nothing except filling the pockets of a minority.

Ivanov represents the Iranian liberal intellectual who is victim of a deep depression. Martha is a woman who doesn't trust herself and is desperately looking for a man. It is extremely difficult to be a single woman in Iran. She needs to have a husband in order to succeed even though she is an emancipated business woman.

But the use of a minimal language also needs to be linked to the audience's patience. *Ivanov* is a very long play that lasts almost three hours. The Iranian audience is not used to remain focused for such a long time and I had to reach the core of the drama in every scene by using less word as possible.

**Interview made by Leyli Daryoush**



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## ◆ Amir Reza Koohestani

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

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

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

After two years of studies in Manchester, Amir Reza Koohestani returned back to Tehran in July 2009 and created the play *Where Were You On January 8<sup>th</sup>?*, which has been on tour in Europe, Brazil, Japan...

In October 2011, despite finishing his military service, Amir Reza Koohestani created the adaptation of *Ivanov* by **Anton Chekhov**, successfully staged in Tehran for several weeks.

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

For 2013, **Festival actoral** in Marseille (France) has commissioned Koohestani to write and stage a new play, *Timeloss*.

Amir Reza Koohestani is the first director to won two consecutive award for the “Best theatre production of the year” in Iran (*Ivanov*, 2011 and *The Fourth Wall*, 2012).

## ◆ **Contact & infos**

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