

## TCG Interview on Immigrant Theatre

### 1. What do you love about theatre in the U.S. for yourself and in general?

Like everything else in this country it is the variety that attracts me. The fact that there are so many styles, genre, methods, ...of presenting theatre excites me. Also the freedom to produce the kind of productions one is interested in draws many of us who come from more oppressive societies to the American (and European) stage. Having said that one must also keep in mind that approaching theatre as "business" does not allow for much variety of artistic expression. What I mean is when one has to rely on the box office for his/her work to continue that creates a dependency, which limits artistic creativity, especially in a society where theatre is viewed as entertainment by a majority of its people. I am in theatre because I believe in its power to educate. I believe artists have a responsibility to enlighten their society, to present to the audience "what is" and "what could/should be." I have decided to remain within the academic arena where presentation of the work is less dependent on box office returns and where the audiences are youth; the future. And where I could use my art to help the future generation see what my generation did not achieve, and think in creative ways to facilitate its achievement for/in the future!

### 2. What do you miss about working in your homeland?

The audience! In Iran, my audience presented a challenge to my art. That is to say, the majority of the people who came to see my work were informed and educated, about social and political issues and about literature and the art, all of which are questions I address in theatre. Therefore, the performance became a dialogue between the stage and the house, where, even though one side remained respectful and quiet while the other side presented its case, once the performance was over the house became the stage and the audience, the actors. As a person who believes in responsibility of artist as change agent, I welcome a challenging dialogue with an informed audience. I feel it is the audience that paves the path of growth for the performance. In Iran we almost always faced a lively discussion after performances and in talkbacks, a debate that helped my company and I learn what could improve in our work. That I miss here.

### 3. How have you combined, in your work, both country's theatre training and culture?

Yes, always. I am the product of both cultures, and my work is the product of me. Therefore what I do comes from and combines both my experiences and trainings in Iran as well as my experiences and trainings in the U.S. My work in theatre has been categorized as Contemporizing Classics, which may be defined as bridging the issues of the past to the events of the present. Every play I have directed is either based on, or interpreted in light of the culture I was born in. Most my productions are bilingual (and often multi-lingual) and all my productions are bi-cultural. Few examples are *Seven Stages* (Edinburgh Fringe 1991) created as a dialogue between late Iranian woman poet, Forough Farrokhzad and the American youth, *Rumi's Mathnavi* (LaMaMa 2000) based on Rumi's

poetry, where seven languages were spoken on stage simultaneously, and *Persians* (Siena 2008) presented in the style of Iranian Taziye, and most recently the 2011 production of *Hamlet/IRAN*, where the Danish prince took the character of an Iranian youth within the Green Movement who was born three decades ago at the dawn of the 1979 revolution.

#### 4. How do you see yourself/identify yourself as an artist in terms of being an immigrant? Does it matter to you?

As an individual who has been driven out of his birth country, where he can no longer live and work, I try to adjust to the life in diaspora, and there is much to learn and much to adapt to. But as an artist I don't consider myself an immigrant. I think artists do not belong to a certain society or country. The work of an artist in my view is universal, and if honest and true, it will touch humanity wherever it is presented. Therefore I can neither claim success, nor failure on the account that I am an immigrant artist. In another word, there has been no exception made for my arts, and no additional support is given to my work because it is the work of an immigrant artist. Having said that, I must admit that I have had to work much harder than many of my American artist friends to gain the same recognition and respect as them. But I don't like to attribute that to my status as an immigrant, rather I feel that is simply because of the kind of theatre I have chosen to produce, both in content and style.

#### 5. How does it affect your getting work? (accent, ethnicity, etc.)

I presently teach at a college where my work is judged with the same measure as my American colleagues, and I am treated equally. However, I have taught at some very reputable institutions where I was repeatedly judged as an outsider, and indirectly blamed for what/how the Iranian government and/or its agents say/act. Again, I blame this on the ignorance and witlessness of those administrators and colleagues who did not have the decency to treat individuals by the content of their character or their ability to perform their duties, nor did they have the foresight to distinguish between one's nationality, one's country, and those who rule that country even at the cost of suppressing their own people. Nonetheless we all have witnessed, and still do, such discriminations against the citizens of this country as well. Therefore, once again, I have a hard time contributing these behaviors to my status as an immigrant. In fact, facing such biases have strengthened my determination both as artist and educator to actively help raise consciousness among my audience and students, as well as attempts to educate my friends and colleagues about such prejudices. To this end, I have developed and teach a "Peacebuilding Through the Arts" course at Siena College, where participants include other colleagues and community members as well as undergraduate students, thus providing for a lively cross-generational discussions of this age old dilemma. As mentioned before, I also try to challenge these behavioral patterns in my theatre and film productions as well.

#### 6. Can you tell me a theatre short story/anecdote about when you first came here? A more recent story?

Well, there are many. But let me tell you one that testifies to my own ignorance,

and one that affirms the intelligence of audiences.

I arrived in the U.S. in January 1976, landed in the small town of Tarkio, at the corner of Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri. Why there? That is an interesting story in itself that exceeds the endurance of this short interview. I attended Tarkio College where I had planned to finish my undergraduate studies within one year. During that summer, in order to accumulate enough credits to achieve my goal, I agreed to work on their summer season, presented by the college's theatre program at a venue called Mule Barn Theatre. I was overexcited when I heard that the actors and directors were all selected through a scrutinizing audition and interview process from New York City. Having heard/read so much about theatre in NYC, I was ecstatic to be able to witness first hand, and from such close distance, the work of these master theatre artists, and to be part of plays they produce. Well, the summer was a huge disappointment. The five plays we worked on included *1776*, *No No Nanette*, *Carousel*, and *Funny Girl*. All insufficiently directed and badly acted. Thinking that THIS is what the New York theatre, and the American theatre, is about, I made a decision that I should immediately return to Iran where I had worked on and seen much better plays and productions. Needless to say, I realized how wrong I was shortly after graduation, thus remained here and continued my education.

The more recent story involves my 2011 production of *HamletIRAN*, where we assumed Hamlet as an Iranian youth, born three decades ago, who experiences all the turmoil the country has faced since the revolution of 1979. Dedicated to promoting democracy and human rights within his country, he joins a movement that argued against the official results of the 2009 Presidential Election when Mr. AhmadiNejad was declared the winner by a landslide. At his deathbed Hamlet tells his friend Horatio,

“I cannot live to hear the word of the people;  
But I do prophesy that election shall be theirs.  
So speak this to those who need to see what comes:  
Each vote, each citizen, has my dying voice.”

My colleagues and I had long discussions regarding the communicability of this message to the rural American audience who, by and large, are not informed, nor interested in the affairs of other countries. We were pleasantly surprised when during talkbacks we learned how effectively the message had been received by our audience.

Experiencing this, I was pleased about my decision to not leave the U.S. after my summer 1776 experience!

## 7. Anything else you want to add?

Given the fact that America is in fact a nation of immigrants, I would like to thank my American friends for having received me openly within their community and their lives, and urge all of us to allow for the continuation of this openness. I sincerely believe that we have but to gain from close, respectful and fair exchange of ideas and cultures with all with whom we differ.

(8. VERY OPTIONAL QUESTION): What is your residency/citizenship/visa status? How does it affect your life as an artist?)

I am presently a U.S. citizen, and that in itself has had no bearing in my life as artist and/or educator one way or another.