

## **Nothing is as it seems**

*The German Theater an der Ruhr, based in Mülheim, has been giving guest performances in Iran, since the end of the nineties. It is one of the few German theatres to do so. Roberto Ciulli, founder of the theatre, and Rolf C. Hemke, coordinator of its international work, tell us how this contact to Iran came about, what fascinates them about Iranian theatre, and how they dealt with the omnipresent censorship. An interview by Mehdi Moradpour*

**As part of its “Silk Route” project in 1999, Mülheim’s Theater an der Ruhr was the first European theatre to give a guest performance in Iran following the 1979 revolution. How did the idea come about?**

Roberto Ciulli: When I visited Iran for the first time in 1995, I met the then Minister of Culture and the people responsible for the Dramatic Arts Center in Teheran. These meetings took place as a result of our first guest performance. However, a few things happened beforehand that, when I look back, were more important than these meetings and which led to my fascination for Iran. For example, during my first visit to the country, I lost my companion in a bazaar in Isfahan and accidentally found myself in the middle of a religious procession. A man, who had been down on his knees weeping, all of a sudden came up to me and asked me in fluent German whether I wanted to buy a carpet. After Mohammad Khatami was elected President in 1997, the Dramatic Arts Center contacted us in order to open a door to exchange. We suggested to our Iranian colleagues that a cooperation agreement be concluded between the Theater an der Ruhr and the Iranian Ministry of Culture, with the purpose of bringing about a cultural exchange.

**You have been pursuing this cooperation intensively until today...**

Ciulli: For me, Iran is one of the most important countries in Asia in terms of culture and literature. In addition, although there is hardly any infrastructure for professional theatre in Iran, very high-quality theatre productions still take place there. In the nineties, that was not even the case in Turkey with its huge theatre machinery. After the revolution in 1979, it was no longer possible to address certain topics directly. This meant that those responsible for making theatre developed a very specific form of expression. Ultimately, all socially relevant topics are dealt with on stage, but in an ambiguous way. The statements made have a different meaning than originally assumed when you read between the lines. I found that exciting. And today, those in the theatre world still criticize the political and social problems – in their own way and in a specific language that the Iranian audience is very good at decoding.

**It seems to me as if the censorship in Iran is a kind of indefinable entity, without clearly recognisable properties or form.**

Ciulli: Yes, that's true! Sometimes you can get away with certain things and at other times not. The reason for this is that the censorship does not adhere to an intelligent principle as such. However, there are a few definite aspects that are not allowed, for example, physical contact between men and women, a woman on stage without her head covered or showing bare skin. However, that is something I don't see as censorship, because conduct of that kind is also banned in public. It has to do with the laws of the country and that is why I accept it.

Rolf Hemke: What you can get away with and what not also has to do with the person or people responsible for the censorship decisions in each case. In Mülheim in 2007, Hossein Pakdel performed a piece about torture in Iran – “Symphony of Pain” – and was not censored as a result. Last year, the debut of the Iranian play “Bahman-Baghdad” was performed in Krefeld, a piece by Shabnam Tolouei. It is a conversation piece which deals with a woman who wants to leave her husband. This fact alone was enough to lead to a ban of the play in Iran.

**What actual experiences did you have with the censorship and how did you deal with it?**

Ciulli: During the premiere of my staging of Büchner's “Danton's Death” as part of the Fadjr Festival in 2007, a few people suddenly came and wanted us to switch off the surtitles. They criticized some of the statements made in the Büchner text, which had caused some unease among members of the audience. Beforehand, when they had read the texts, they hadn't recognized the fact that there are considerable structural parallels between the radical tendencies following the French Revolution and those following the Islamic revolution in Iran. It was only when we threatened them with diplomatic consequences that we could prevent them from switching off the translation. The censors usually come and watch the production at the rehearsals. Most of them are theatre people who have been ordered to act as censors for a period and they try to make anything that obviously has to be censored possible in some other way. With one kissing scene, for example, the lips of the actors were allowed to come closer to one another until they were 5 millimetres apart, but they were not allowed to touch. This had a far stronger effect than a real kiss and the audience went wild. I always have fun dealing with this kind of censorship and I have learned a lot from it.

**The Iranian productions have been performed as guest appearances in Mülheim for ten years now. What criteria did you consider when choosing what pieces to present?**

Hemke: First of all, a reflective, critical or decidedly political attitude, which does not necessarily have to be an oppositional one, is an important aspect when choosing productions. For us, it is important that there is a kind of inner connection between the impetus from which the productions of the Theater an der Ruhr emerge and the performances that are invited here. This may have to do with the visual strength of the imagery in a staging, with strong and metaphoric visual theatre. It has to do with the idea of universality in the language of theatre, with an understanding of theatre that goes beyond the spoken language. This does not always have to do with theatre that works with strong imagery; it might also be a production that offers a very precisely developed and realistic spectacle, with facial expressions or gestures that might be a little over-exaggerated, and yet the piece contains cleverly elaborated theatrical elements and depicts the social interaction between the actors or their characters so precisely that the onlooker does not necessarily have to understand the language. Productions like this can be found in Arabic, Turkish and in Iranian theatre.

**The last time the Iranians were in Mülheim was in 2009, while your last trip to Iran was in 2007. It looks as if the contact has cooled off to some extent.**

Ciulli: That hasn't got anything to do with us. We haven't received an invitation to the international Fadjr theatre festival this year either. Officially there aren't any problems. However, reading between the lines, I think it may have to do with something I said. I once said that, in Iran, nothing is as it seems at first glance, something I have also said to you today. It is actually a compliment. Working together with Iranians is a very important fixed feature in our work and we would very much regret it if the contact was to cease after more than ten years.

Translation by Lindsay-Jane Munro.