

Frederick present era bearing striking resemblance

Balancing classics, adaptation in Iranian theater



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INTERVIEW

IRAN DAILY: According to directors, free theatrical adaptation makes it easier to present a more audience-friendly performance. What is your view?

HAMIDREZA NAIMI: I disagree with this conclusion. Why should we limit or expand plays like 'Enemy of the People,' 'Doll's House,' 'A View from the Bridge,' 'A Streetcar Named Desire,' 'Life of Galileo,' and numerous other beautiful plays that are actually audience-friendly with their excellent concepts? This approach does not apply to all plays and productions. When Hamid Samandarian attended my theatrical adaptation of William Shakespeare's 'King Lear,' he said that classical and neo-classical works have no choice but to be adapted or dramatized for contemporary life.

Sometimes, in contemporary plays, due to political, and ideological reasons, and the challenges that may reflect a part of a play with the situation of our society and the censorship, or in terms of the duration of the performance, the director may be forced to delete certain parts of the work in the performance, which, in my opinion, should not be criticized as inherently non-audience-friendly. While being audience-friendly can enhance the power of a work rather than being a weakness or a sign of triviality.

I remember Claus Peymann's direction of 'Richard II,' performed at Vahdat Hall in 230 minutes, and Iranian audiences, including myself, were thrilled by watching it. This can truly be an example of audience-friendliness. For all intents and purposes, do we create a work to please the general audience or to get them away from the stage. In the works I have directed, I try to pay attention to both the "unspecialized audience," referring to the general viewer, and the "specialized audience," whom we call the astute viewer. And this makes the theatrical production more challenging.

How do you compare the Iranian audience's interest in adaptations and local works?

Basically, the monitoring, evaluation, and governmental systems hinder the growth of Iranian playwrights. They show no mercy or compassion in giving permits to works by Iranian authors. They don't allow playwrights to freely write about political and social crises or adapt from classical Persian literary works or historical events.

In these circumstances, many local plays that are staged are either neutral, superficial, or have a significant gap in understanding the audience's awareness of the society's conditions. Iranian directors have no choice but to turn to staging translated or adapted foreign plays, classical and neo-classical works, or foreign novels and stories. This is due to the necessity imposed on Iranian directors. Although there are various sources for adaptation, there is no hope of obtaining a permit. I consider Iranian audience's enthusiasm for the works of Bahram Beizaei, Qotbeddin Sadeqi, Mohammad Rahmanian, Mohammad Yaqoubi, and others, who have written and worked on Iranian pieces, to be on par with the works of figures like Samandarian, Ali Rafiei, and Rokned-

din Khosravi, who have staged foreign plays.

Audiences seek to watch brilliant performances, whether Iranian or foreign. Personally, I may not be a supporter of Western or Eastern plays. Just as Ferdowsi, Hafez, Khayyam, Saadi, and Rumi belong to Western audiences, Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Goethe belong to Eastern people.

Given your experience in historical works, what is the reason for your interest towards Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's 'Frederick or the Crime Boulevard'? Why did you choose a philosophical theater?

The very first interest of any director in staging an emotional play. Directing a work give you the feeling that you are unique, you feel delighted. This stems from the writer's power in storytelling, dialogue writing, language, creating vibrant and dynamic characters, and the last but not least the genre of the work. The next step in selecting a piece is the form and the playwright's idea and concept. A director reads hundreds of plays, but through thought of a few works he undergo a paradigm shift in his thinking. Likewise, reading the play 'Frederick,' I was emotionally and intellectually preoccupied. Its tone and the atmosphere of comedic sections, which brightened the exhausted spirits of our current days, convinced me that its performance is a "necessity." By all means, this melodramatic play is not as philosophical as the works of Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus or Samuel Beckett, but undoubtedly, the characters in this play have their own philosophies. Another aspect I appreciated was that, this time, I wanted the audience would become acquainted with the behind-the-scenes, the production process, rehearsals and performance of the play.

Discuss the challenges of staging theaters like 'Frederick'. Is it more difficult compared to Iranian plays?

Producing an Iranian play doesn't differ much from staging a foreign one. Undoubtedly, the most significant challenge is the lack of financial resources and government support for state theaters. The majority of a director's creativity, energy, ability, and time are devoted to find sponsorship and funding for the production. Approximately 70% of my energy and mental focus were dedicated to borrowing the required \$20,000 for this production. This work is the result of

30% of my creativity and focus. Looking back, I see that our 30% effort as Iranian directors is equivalent to 100% effort by foreign directors who, without any stress or worry, focus on creating their works. Theater artists are the forgotten people of Iran. Their challenging profession and beautiful art seem to have no value in the eyes of art authorities. We and our art matter only to ourselves and the audience we have.

I don't know how far we can continue this situation, but undoubtedly, we are in the darkest period of Iranian theater. A time when no official cares about culture, literature, arts, and education. A time when all the resources of this country are plundered without ensuring the basic necessities of life, such as genetic health, proper breathing, safe drinking and eating, proper sleep, reading, and thinking. Now that we are left to ourselves, I wish we had the freedom of thought and expression to raise our voices. Hopelessness about the future, job insecurity, unemployment, and lack of income are the biggest obstacles facing theater families.

The idea for this project dates back to 2019 and experienced years old hiatus before coming to fruition. What were the reasons, and what distinguishes the initial work from the one that eventually hit the stage on November 28, 2023?

In 2019, everything was ready for performance. We were preparing for mise-en-scène, costumes, and advertising, that the spread of the COVID-19 stopped the performance on March 26, 2020. In the following three years, despite officials' insistence, I did not find the conditions suitable for staging this work. During this five-year hiatus, the script remained unchanged, but as a director, I underwent changes in terms of age, literacy, and artistic taste. Set design, costumes, music, actors movement, creating characters for stage workers, changing some actors, adding singers and dancers to the performance, and of course, my own role as "Frederick," are among the significant changes.

In the initial week of Frederick's ticket sales, the play managed to achieve a revenue of \$4,300. What's behind this warm reception in this short period?

I never consider the sales of a play as the only criterion for its value. The opinions of critics and experts matter, and audience reception is crucial for the life of a theatrical work. Shaya

