

From Dostoevsky to Shakespeare

Mehdi Persis tests language, moral climate in cross-border performance

Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian actor and director Mohammad-Mehdi Nassiri known as Mehdi Persis has turned his postgraduate dissertation into a touring one-man play that probes how language and culture reshape guilt, crime and audience judgment, staging 'Ice Cream Man' in both London and Tehran and finding that the same character is read through sharply different moral lenses.

The production, a free adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment,' originated at East 15 Acting School in Britain, where Persis completed his MA in acting, and later transferred to Tehran. Built around direct address and sustained audience engagement, the piece tracks a man who commits a crime and lives with its psychological consequences, resisting clear moral diagnosis in favor of moment-to-moment self-justification.

Persis, who trained in Iran and Britain and has appeared in more than 30 theater, television and film projects, said the work was designed to remain porous to its surroundings rather than fixed in meaning.

Language, he argued, does not merely translate performance but actively rewrites it. Persian, he said, carries emotional weight differently from English, altering rhythm, silence and even the way

guilt registers physically on stage. That shift produced divergent responses. In Tehran, audiences often framed the crime through social and political readings, while in London the focus tilted toward isolation and inner conflict. The character remained the same man, Persis said, but emerged within two distinct ethical climates. Allowing cultural context to shape interpretation, rather than imposing a single reading, became a core principle of the project.

The play also foregrounds proximity. Persis insists theater offers a form of closeness cinema cannot replicate, with spectators effectively sharing breath with the performer. In 'Ice Cream Man,' the audience is positioned not as passive observers but as witnesses, a choice that heightens moral tension and intensifies the psychological charge. Ignoring that immediacy, he said, would waste theater's central advantage.

To sustain that live exchange, Persis relies heavily on Meisner technique, adapting it beyond its conventional classroom framework. The emphasis on repetition, listening and spontaneous reaction, he said, trained him to stay responsive rather than controlled. Even in a solo performance, he noted, the actor is never alone. The audience becomes an active partner, demanding attention in real time. That responsiveness, he added, proved essen-

tial to avoiding sensationalism and familiar tropes often attached to criminal characters.

Rather than labeling or explaining the protagonist, Persis focused on how the man continually justifies himself, inviting spectators to approach his thinking without being guided toward sympathy or condemnation. By steering clear of overt emotionalism, the performance sustains ambiguity and allows discomfort to arise from recognition rather than spectacle.

'Ice Cream Man' also reflect Persis's broader transnational practice. Educated in Tehran and Britain, he has worked concurrently inside and outside Iran and has earned recognition at major Iranian theater festivals, including a best director award at the 21st Iran International University Theater Festival and nominations at the Fajr International Theater Festival. He is currently running two productions in England.

Alongside the continued development of 'Ice Cream Man,' Persis is preparing to appear in a London staging of William Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing' in March, in an adaptation titled 'About Ado Much,' marking a move from self-devised work to classical repertoire.

He plans to extend 'Ice Cream Man' with longer runs in London, test it in different theater spaces and then take it to other cities, arguing that each venue reshapes



the actor-audience relationship and should be allowed to leave its mark on the work.

For Persis, the goal is evolution rather than closure. He wants the piece to grow through repeated encounters, not settle

into a definitive form. In doing so, he is positioning his practice at the intersection of language, psychology and live ethics, demonstrating how performance can travel across borders without flattening its complexities.

Excavations resume at Vigol Site in central Iran to unlock secrets of lost Sasanian city

Arts & Culture Desk

Archaeologists in central Iran are launching the third season of excavations at Vigol, an ancient archaeological site in the northern Isfahan province (Aran and Bidgol), believed by some experts to be the long-lost Sasanian city of Harascan.

The campaign, resuming four years after the last digs, aims to uncover the layout and ancillary structures of a central fire temple that once dominated the settlement, IRNA reported.

The Vigol site, located roughly 215 kilometers north of Isfahan and 10 kilometers from Kashan, has drawn scholarly attention for its Sasanian-era fire temple, partially active until the 9th century AH (15th century CE), which may have been abandoned following the spread of Islam.

Earlier excavations revealed both the temple's main hall and transitional structures showing the period between the Sasanian and early Islamic eras. "Identifying and mapping the sur-



rounding spaces of the fire temple to understand the full functional complex is a primary objective of this season," said Raheleh Yousefian, director of the Vigol Cultural Heritage Base.

She added that modern protective measures will be implemented post-excavation to safeguard structures against environmental threats.

The campaign, slated to begin later this year or early next year, will be led by Mohsen Javeri, who also supervised the first two excavation seasons.

Javeri described Vigol as "one of the most exceptional Sasanian sites in central Iran," highlighting its intricate

inscriptions, plaster decorations, and symbolic motifs, including a heart-shaped design recurring on ceramics and within the fire temple.

Past digs have unearthed a 38-pronged inverted palm-shaped altar, plastered peripheral halls, and inscribed bases for ritual offerings.

A recent exhibition showcased these finds, including Sasanian-era pottery, early Islamic ceramics, and a stone inscription detailing the ceremonial lighting of the "Atash Bahram" or "Victorious Fire," a sacred flame fueled by combined fires from households, guilds, and nature, central to Zoroastrian civic life.

Concerns have emerged over the construction of a road to support a nearby industrial town, which could impact the site. The Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Ministry's technical council is set to assess the project. Authorities have allocated national funds to ensure the new excavation season proceeds while protecting the site's integrity.

University of Tehran maps targeted academic partnerships with Czech institutions

Social Desk

University of Tehran moved on January 4 to frame a targeted roadmap for academic and cultural cooperation with Czech higher education institutions, as the Czech Republic's ambassador met the university's international affairs chief in Tehran to scope priority fields for joint work.

Vítězslav Grepl, the Czech ambassador to Iran, held talks with Elham Aminzadeh, vice-president for international affairs at the University of Tehran, focusing on identifying concrete disciplines where collaboration could move quickly from dialogue to formal agreements, ILNA reported.

The meeting took place in Tehran and centered on academic, technological and cultural programs rather than broad political or diplomatic engagement.

Aminzadeh stressed the need to map overlapping strengths before launching joint initiatives, signaling a preference for focused partnerships over open-ended memoranda.

She pointed to the university's established capacity across physics, engineering, agriculture, astronomy, foreign languages and literature, as well as its science and technology park, as platforms capable of supporting structured exchanges and joint projects.

Grepl highlighted sustained interest among Czech students and academics in Iranian cultural output, notably books and cinema, and said Prague was keen to develop cooperation in philosophy, engineering, architecture, agriculture and technical disciplines.

He also flagged joint publishing ventures as a practical avenue for early collaboration, showing demand within Czech academic circles for Iranian scholarship and cultural material.



Czech Ambassador to Iran Vitezslav Grepl (r.) meets with vice president for international affairs at the University of Tehran Elham Aminzadeh during talks in Tehran January 4, 2025.

● ILNA

The discussions outlined potential mechanisms including faculty and student exchanges, co-authored research, shared academic programs and collaborative cultural initiatives. Both sides indicated that formal cooperation agreements could follow once priority areas are defined and matched with partner institutions in the Czech Republic.

The engagement fits within Tehran University's broader push to recalibrate its international partnerships towards discipline-driven cooperation, leveraging existing research infrastructure rather than symbolic agreements. For Prague, the talks underscored interest in diversifying academic links beyond Western Europe and deepening engagement with established universities in the Middle East.

No timeline was announced for signing agreements, but officials indicated follow-up technical consultations would determine scope, institutional counterparts and funding structures before any formal documents are concluded.

'Behind the Night' picked for Hamburg's unDependence festival

Arts & Culture Desk

An Iranian short film, 'Behind the Night,' will screen in January at the fifth unDependence Film Festival in Hamburg, marking another international outing for Iran's independent cinema on the European circuit. Directed by Amir Pirveisi, 'Behind the Night' centers on a father pushed to desperate measures to cover the medical costs of his young daughter, who suffers from

epidermolysis bullosa, a rare and debilitating genetic condition commonly known as butterfly disease. The film traces the moral and emotional toll of poverty and parental obligation through a tightly framed, character-driven narrative, ILNA wrote.

The screenplay was co-written by Mahsa Yazdani Olfat and Zahra Zare' Rafie, whose script anchors the story in everyday realism while building towards a stark ethical dilemma.



The cast features Amin Miri, Yasna Azizi and Mahdieh Sarlak, whose performances carry the film's restrained tone and social urgency.