

No Way To Go No Way To Stay

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Abstract

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No Way To Go No Way To Stay is a solo performance inspired by my life about staying true to my identity despite obstacles. It focuses on artists in Iran who are forced immigrate to other countries to pursue theater without censorship. The process of getting scripts approved often takes years and they are sometimes rejected completely. This performance invites the audience to connect with these hardships. This show is about my life as an Iranian actor, struggling for years to get approval for my scripts and my master's thesis, which I ultimately could never defend because of censorship. Because of this, I was forced to immigrate, where I faced different challenges in the process of manifesting my identity.

Mozhdeh Rahmanzaei

Graduate Thesis — No way to go, no way to stay .

Jeffrey Fracé

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Creating a solo performance is always hard. There are many questions one needs to answer: What do I want from the audience? What do I want to say? And what is my goal? Why do I need to create this performance?

The idea of my solo show started with Chekhov's play *The Seagull*. When I think about this play, I see connections to my own life, especially in the character of Nina. In a passage where Chekhov says in his play [Nina: That in our kind of work, whether we're writers or actors, the important thing is not fame, or glory, not what I used to dream about, but learning how to endure. I must bear my cross and have faith. If I have faith, it doesn't hurt so much, and I'm not afraid of life].

However, the solo show isn't just about Chekhov. It's about all the struggles I've faced in acting, both in Iran and America. It's about how as an Iranian immigrant with a thick accent and a limited knowledge of English, I continued my acting journey in this country without giving in.

The story of my solo show began when I was a student in Iran. I was working on my master's thesis about the human body of an actor on stage and the relationship between our body and society. Society imposes constraints on our bodies, particularly women, which greatly influences physical formation. When I started university and began acting exercises, I realized how

much my body had changed under the condition's society had imposed on me. I was uncomfortable on stage; I was unsure what to do with my body. Everything felt embarrassing.

During my study, I realized how much other actors struggled as well. When I asked them to use their bodies, it seemed to have a negative effect and they stiffened rather than becoming more physically expressive. Despite studying techniques like Chekhov and Stanislavski, I believed we needed something more, something new in terms of techniques and exercises. This led to numerous questions in my mind. While we were familiar with body and expression exercises from books, including viewpoints and Suzuki, unfortunately, practical exercises were lacking due to censorship for actors in university. Another question that arose for me was what factors influence actors to have such rigid bodies, especially female actors, a struggle I myself experienced. I believed it was due to societal and governmental censorship imposed on actors. Are we unconsciously performing with stiff and tense bodies under societal influence? It seemed that actors' bodies were controlled by government power and censorship. We could never freely express ourselves physically on stage.

My question was, how can we start new exercises, despite prohibitions and censorship, that would lead to greater freedom of bodily expression? This led me to begin writing and working on my thesis about actors' bodies and conducting research on the subject for my thesis in Tehran.

Unfortunately, because of censorship, I could not defend my thesis. My focus on the body, especially of women, was seen as too provocative. Many questions arose in my mind. How could I have changed the topic of my thesis? How could I have forgotten myself and my identity? After all, some actors give in and forget their identity and what they truly want. My question was, what is my identity as an actor in my country? I didn't want to forget who I was. I

decided to immigrate and continue my research on actors' bodies where I could do so without censorship.

No artist is willing to leave their country unless forced. After facing all the challenges in Iran, I was looking for a place where I could work and perform my shows on stage without fear. After immigrating to this country, I faced many challenges: a new educational environment, a new language, and a kind of difficulty in connecting with new people with different cultures. I also struggled with how to express my concerns as an Iranian actor in a country that is not my own. The concerns of artists in each country are completely different depending on the society they live in. How can I as an Iranian artist represent my own culture while maintaining respect for the new one that I am living in? I found it difficult to play characters in university that were completely new to me. This great challenge in a way led to my progress and deeper knowledge in acting. All these things made me choose this solo show with this theme. I believe that a part of theater reflects the lives and stories of people in the society they live in. The subjects are what people in society are experiencing, and this is part of the beauty of theater. Theater means connecting with the audience, and this connection with the audience is formed when they are familiar with the show's topics.

After my immigration, all these things changed for me. In order to become an artist, I had to learn things that were not my original concern. This was the biggest challenge. Should I change myself or try to be a bridge between my culture and the new culture. All of these things led me to write and perform this solo show. For example, at the end of the show, the character speaks in Persian and is looking for a way to establish communication, which is similar to the bridge that I, as an Iranian artist, want to create a show on stage between Iranian and American cultures.

Archetype and Chekhov:

At the beginning of my solo performance, I used the Innocent Child archetype based on what I have learned in Professor Connors's class. Archetypal child appears in mythology, dreams, art, and ballads. It is a harbinger of new beginnings. It highlights curiosity, innocence, a sense of play and openness, as well as inner beauty, stillness, strength, and calm. This archetype doesn't have words yet for everything. The archetype loves playing with voice and rhythmic patterns, using repetitive sounds. It has no past, no future, just living utterly in the present.

I was struggling with the beginning of my show. How could I perform those hard moments? I realized that this archetype is a good way to play childhood moments. Without using this archetype playing childhood moment would be hard for me. I found a connection with this archetype because during childhood our primary desires revolve around playing, laughing, and living in the moment, free from worries. Like my character, she does not know anything about serious things in her life, the only thing which she wants is to play with her doll and laugh. When she enters the classroom with her doll, all her concern is playing. Then, for the first time, she sees her teacher talking about a Hijab and religion, topics which she has never heard of. This Archetype helped me to perform freely in childhood moments of the show. I remember Professor Connors said play and take in everything around you with freshness, curiosity, and openness of the Archetypal Child, explore with all of your senses.

Chekhov:

Chekhov's technique always helped me to find my character based on gestures. I started learning his technique in Iran and I expanded my knowledge at the Chekhov's class about PG. A connection between the inner response evoked by a physical action and its outer expression. Gesture Chekhov gives us tools to turn into experience. PG is one of the tools. You remember the feeling. It gives you a cellular knowledge that goes past the intellect and into the body. It helps you turn the words on the page into a living experience. Stanislavski had an idea of objectives and units of action. Through the PG we can translate these active verbs into a statement of action: the gestures can generate impulses to serve the action. Action is about doing not about thinking.

This is exactly what I need, especially when I play different characters. I had different characters in my solo show. I started with gestures and action and asked these questions: What is my character's gesture? What is my action? I learned in class to trust my body first, and to explore the gesture and listen to my body. When you let go of the big outer motion, the outer form, you have an inner activity, which is the goal PG, listening for the inner activity. Keep it clear and strong, otherwise your body won't hear it. So, I used this technique and found my characters based on their gestures.

The viewpoints class:

Through the viewpoints training, I found freedom in my body. I struggled, however, with my voice on stage; I felt like my voice wasn't free. Viewpoints for me is a wonderful way to train. It activates my imagination and improvisation. My body feels free with viewpoints, without any tension. Definitely I want to use viewpoints for the rest of my career in acting. To me, this is the first and important lesson which I have learned in graduate school. I always asked

myself how I can use viewpoint in my performances. I remember professor Jeffrey Frace told me viewpoints is a training for actors. I was thinking how I can use it in my solo show besides just a warmup. I came up with several ways for my show.

One way was through repetition and tempo. When my character wants to go to the prayer room, I repeat the action of standing up and sitting down to show hesitation. I used repetition for emphasis in my conversation with my father to demonstrate how important that moment was for me. I also used repetition to illustrate parallel moments in the character's life. This appeared in the moment when I was practicing theater and my father appeared and I repeated the phrase, "I am seagull. I am a seagull."

I also used architecture and spatial relationship. At one point in my show, I sit in the front row amongst the audience. This action showed a connection with the viewers in a way that architecture illustrates. Also, I had many books spread in a circle on the floor. I asked myself what is my relationship with all the characters inside the circle? Definitely spatial relationship helped me a lot and when I was thinking about my stage design I asked myself how can I show the power of the people. I decided to make a circle with books and put all the characters who has a power inside the circle and I was talking to them from outside of the circle. For me inside the circle was a dark place. Outside the circle represented an area of freedom.

Also, I used tempo when my character moves to different cities. This is illustrated when the character of the show wants to go to a bigger city for the first time when she's younger versus when she wants to go to Tehran and study secretly as an adult. The difference is demonstrated in the pace at which she moves. At first the character moves quickly at first and slowly at second.

With this solo performance I want to show all the challenges faced by artists, especially women, in Iran and their efforts to keep theater alive in Iran. The existence of theater in Iran, if it still exists, is solely due to the efforts and resilience of Iranian artists. As an Iranian artist, I aspire to bring to the stage the stories of different women in Iran involved in theater. What I have learned is that each of us Iranian artists carries our own stories and hardships within the realm of theater, and it is important to tell these stories on stage. Due to censorship, Iranian artists are unable to share their stories in Iran, so I aim to showcase Iranian theater and the stories of Iranian artists to audiences elsewhere, increasing people's awareness of Iranian women, theater, and culture. I can say that this solo show marks the beginning of my career in acting in this country, and I aspire to stage the stories of Iranian women in the future. Furthermore, this solo show has inspired me to take my plans for establishing my own theater company more seriously, allowing me to stage all Iranian plays that are banned in Iran in this country.

No Way To Go No Way To Stay

A solo play

By Mozhdeh Rahmanzaei

Times and place: 2004, 2021, Iran.

Places: School, University, home.

Characters:

Head of the art school of Azad University of Tehran, 55 years old.

Father, 44.

Art Teacher, 30 years old.

Girls, 9 years old, 30 years old.

Note: All characters are played by the same actor.

[The beginning of the show starts with the first day of school with famous Iranian music for kids. The character is 9 years old. She has a doll in her hand. She is wearing her hijab to go to school. The girl is playing with her doll. She is going to school, and She is already running late on the first day of school. She enters the class and sits among the audience. Everything is in the girl's imagination; there are no real objects on the stage, only books and a canvas. When she talks to other characters, we do not see anyone, they are in her imagination.]

At the school / 2004/ Iran

Girl: *[She enters the class and sits among the audience and talks to her teacher]*. Sorry I was late. I was playing with my doll, but I am very excited about the first day of school. *[She starts writing and looking at the blackboard]* First lesson on the first day of school. All women must wear hijab when they turn 9 years old according to Islam, otherwise God will punish us and burn our hair in the fire of hell. *[She's scared and covered her hair]* oh my hijab. *[To her teacher]* ok, I will go to the prayer room and ask God for forgiveness.

[She tries to get up from the seat in the audience and go to the stage, into the circle surrounded by books, she gets scared every time she wants to enter the circle]

Ok I will go to the prayer room and ask God for forgiveness.

Ok I will go to the prayer room and ask God for forgiveness.

[suddenly she enters and there is a prayer room, and it is dark]

Ok I will go to the prayer room and ask God for forgiveness.

[She is sitting in the circle and trying to figure out what this place is and suddenly she notices someone is coming to prayer room and wondering who this person is]

Girl: *[Talks to art teacher]* I was praying, who are you? My teacher? How can you be a teacher? You are smiling and you look kind. An art teacher? I haven't had an art class before.

Teacher: *[she gives her a canvas]* look at this, this canvas is yours, do not cry, instead of crying paint and learn the meaning of colors. This is my first and most important lesson to you.

Girl: *[She grabs canvas and with canvas talks to an audience member]* She said to me that day, the first day of school...if the world around us is dark, you can write or paint. After that you can see how beautiful the world is. In a world full of darkness, sadness, and war, you can use art to show the beauty of human connection.

Girl: *[Ask the audience]* Colors? What is my color?

[She starts to paint] One year, two years, three years, four years, five years, six years, seven years, eight years , nine years , ten years . *[she suddenly sees her father and stops drawing, sacred and hides the canvas]* yes father?

[*She stands outside of the circle*] YES father? You asked me to come here. yes? What do I want to study? I am trying to say to you that I want to be an artist. I have been begging you for ten years. You asked me to come here, but I don't want to look into your eyes. I don't want to look into your eyes because I miss you, dad... Do you remember the song you used to play for me when I was a child? I miss you holding my hand, telling me staying at home isn't great, let's go to the park together and buy my favorite chocolate. When you come home and you are tired from work, I don't even want to hug you. Are you Tired? Are you tired for years? I'm tired too. We're both tired. You said to choose between you and acting. I don't know which one to choose, but I can't forget about acting dad. [*The character wants to leave the room suddenly her father says*]

Father: go to a bigger city but not acting, I won't support you for acting. Study something like engineering, nursing, or at least foreign languages.

[*Sound of train and she starts running around the circle*] Un , Deux ,trois , quatre, what is five ? It does not matter, I do not know what is five.

[*She sees a book and grabs the book and reads the book*] Oh my dear Stanislavski. I wished that the stage was like a narrow rope, so no incompetent person would dare to walk on it. My dear Chekhov. [*she starts rehearsing the monologue of Nina*] Yes, the stage. I have changed now. Now I am a real actress. I act with joy, I am intoxicated by it, and feel that I am superb. I have been walking and walking, and thinking and thinking, ever since I have been here, and I feel the strength of my spirit growing in me every day. [Nina / Seagull]

I am a seagull. [*She sees her father and is scared*] Yes dad?

I am a seagull. Yes dad?

I am a seagull. Yes dad?

[*she is pretending to be reading and practicing French, tries to hide the book and practices with her father*]

Dad? Let's practice. Un, deux, trois, repeat after me. You see how good I am at acting? I know you are tired. Good night.

[*talk to an audience member*] I do not want to be a translator; I want to be an actress. After I got my degree in French translation, I started studying secretly in Tehran and my parents did not know that.

At the University /2020 / Iran

[*Sound of train and she runs around the circle and looking at different books and say different words*] One year, two years, three years. Body, movement, women. Finally, I found it, the semiotics of the body in directing contemporary actors with an emphasis on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the body without organs in sociological philosophy theories.

[*She grabs many books and stands in front of the head of art school and talks to him about her thesis*] This is my thesis.

Head of the art school: I will listen, tell me more about body without organs? movement? dance? women? body? explain to me? Also, you are banned from acting for one year, how do you want to defend your thesis? also you were arrested at the university because of your inappropriate hijab.

Girl: I am just saying this is not body, no, this is body but not body, [She asks from the audience member] how can I explain? Could you please point to your body? No, this is not a body at all.

Oh, how can I move on stage? [*She walks very slow*]

Head of the art school: You know as a head of the art school at the Azad university of Tehran I am not able to approve your slutty and promiscuous thesis, but you can come to my house and talk about your body and your thesis in my bed?

Girl: What? What exactly did you say?

[*She has two papers and one of them is her thesis and one of them is from the University of Washington*] Yes, I will go, I know they support me. I will leave this country. I am not going to change myself; I am not going to change my thesis.

[*She enters the stage with a big luggage and start asking question and talking to audience in Farsi*]

میشه لطفا این نمایشنامه ای که ما نمیتونیم تو ایران کار کنیم اینجا تو دانشگاه واشنگتن کار کنم؟ میشه به من این اجازه رو بدین؟ یا این یکی نمایش میشه به عنوان یک پروداکشن بزرگ کار کنیم؟ ما نمیتونیم تو ایران این نمایشو اجرا کنیم. نمیتونم.

Can we please work on this script together? We cannot perform it in Iran. Can we do a big production about Iran, here at the University of Washington? Can you give me permission? We cannot perform this show in Iran. I cannot!

[*She exits the stage with all her books and suitcase*]

Blackout