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“This Is a Political Play”: Making *Coriolanus* Relevant in Contemporary Iran

Ema Vyroubalová, Shauna O’Brien, and Mohammadreza Hassanzadeh Javanian

This article traces the performance history of Shakespeare’s Coriolanus in Iran, focusing on the most recent production of the play directed by Mostafa Koushki (b. 1984), performed between 2019 and 2020 in Tehran, Iran, and Kerala, India. Based on an original in-person interview with Koushki conducted by one of the authors in Tehran in July 2020, the article discusses how the production reflected and responded to the country’s volatile political climate. The analysis considers how various elements, including the minimalist set and costumes as well as gender-neutral casting, work together to communicate the production’s criticism of the current state of affairs in the Islamic Republic while staying within the boundaries imposed on theatre performances by the Iranian censorship regime.

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A Long History of Political Productions

With a long history of unapologetically ideologically inflected productions, *Coriolanus* can readily be considered one of Shakespeare's most politically charged plays. The first performance on record, Nahum Tate's *The Ingratitude of a Commonwealth or the Fall of Laisus Martius Coriolanus*, first performed in 1682,¹ rewrote the play's central political conflict along the lines of rivalry between the recently formed Whigs (equated with the plebeians) and Tories (equated with Coriolanus and the Senate) (Brockman 1977: 12). Eighteenth-century adaptations of the play then sought to invoke the spirit of British patriotism and imperialism (Sheldon 1963: 153) while nineteenth-century productions were often inspired by movements such as Chartism, seeking greater democratization of British politics (Brockman 1977: 12). In the twentieth century, along with Shakespeare's other tragedies, the play began to travel more extensively beyond the anglophone theatrical world and on many occasions inspired productions openly advocating ideologies from the whole range of Europe's political spectrum. In the case of the French *Coriolan* (performed between 1933 and 1934 at the Comédie-Française), the adaptation's politics spilled over into real life when its "perceived pro-Fascist slant" fuelled violent street protests against the socialist government in power (Hardison Londré 1986: 122). The best-known left-leaning adaptation is Bertolt Brecht's version (written between 1951 and 1953), which echoes Mao Zedong's writings (Squiers 2013: 239).² The most notorious instances from the opposite end of the political spectrum are productions from Nazi Germany during the 1930s, which openly embraced racism and antisemitism "to expose the evils of democracy" (Leithart 2006: 346). A more recent, yet not any less extreme example is a script for a hip-hop musical adaptation by Steve Bannon and Julia Jones, set in the early 1990s during the race riots in Los Angeles, offering a eugenicist vision of the United States in which African Americans "kill themselves off through black-on-black crime" (Wilson 2020: 28). And in 2017 a Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Angus Jackson dramatized (and clearly condemned) the collective madness of the popularly driven demand for Brexit.³ As this short overview shows, in contrast with the non-committal politics of the original Jacobean play,⁴ adaptations of *Coriolanus* have tended to react strongly and openly to their present political moment. While this is to some extent also true of *Coriolanus* on Iranian stages, because of the specificity of both the current Iranian theatre scene and political climate, Iranian directors had to work with the play's political potential more carefully as well as resourcefully.

Political Theatre in Iran

Political theatre in Iran has developed in two distinct forms. The first one is a religious tragedy known as *Ta'ziyeh*. As a religious form of performance, *Ta'ziyeh* recounts the battle of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, against Yazid, the second caliph of the Ummayyad Caliphate, and Hussein's martyrdom in Karbala in 680 AD. It is still widely performed across Iran during Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar). The second type of political theatre concerns plays that render a critique of the structures of power in a non-contemporary temporal framework. These plays are usually set in historical periods before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. *Raporthaye shabaneye Dr. Mosaddegh* (Dr. Mosaddegh's Nightly Reports, 2016, written and directed by Asghar Kahlili), for instance, recounts the life and death of Mohammad Mosaddegh, Iran's prime minister in the 1950s. Another outstanding example is *Aheste bag ole sorkh* (Slowly with a Rose, 2018, written by Akbar Radi and directed by Hadi Marzban). Set in the months leading to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the play tells the story of a tea merchant and his family, whose lives are disrupted by the precarious political climate.

As evinced by both forms, "politicalness" in Iran's theatre often does not necessarily imply a direct or exclusive engagement with the country's politics at the time of a play's production. Instead, relevance to the country's current political and social issues is often realized by adapting a play script set (at least nominally) in a different historical period and/or location, as well as by framing more explicit references to the country's politics in such a way that they will appear to be invoking events both past and present.

A Brief History of Shakespeare's Performance in Iran

In order to appreciate what it takes for a deeply political play like *Coriolanus* to be successfully adapted and performed in present-day Iran, it is helpful first to examine the play in the broader context of the history of Shakespeare adaptations in the region. Shakespeare's plays were first performed in Iran in the 1880s in the north-western city of Tabriz for the area's linguistically diverse communities in Armenian, Turkish, and Azeri by Armenian and Turkish theatre-makers, some of whom toured the area and others lived there. Shakespeare's plays thus did not, as might be assumed, travel to Iran "in the baggage of empire" (Kennedy and Lan 2010: 10), as part of the European colonial endeavors in the area, but were and have continued to be shaped by a variety of local, regional, and international influences. It would be unproductive, therefore, to view the performance history of

Shakespeare's plays in Iran solely in terms of a bilateral relationship with the English-language texts and performances. As Jyotsna G. Singh observes, while the "[p]ost-colonial Shakespearean vocabulary . . . continue[s] to inform recent engagements within global, intercultural contexts," many modern adaptations can more productively be examined "beyond the twentieth century binaries of colonizer-colonized" (2019: 129).

Therefore, for Iranian theatre-makers like Moustafa Koushki, Shakespeare's adaptation takes place in "a world already populated with a *multitude* of competing dramatic and literary approaches" (Litvin 2011: 55). Margaret Litvin offers a productive approach for examining these multilateral routes along which Shakespeare's plays have traveled (and continue to travel) to and from Iran. For Litvin, it is necessary to recognize Shakespearean adaptation as "a kaleidoscopic array of performances, texts, and criticism from many directions: not just from the 'original' British source culture" (2011: 2). By viewing adaptations of Shakespeare through this "global kaleidoscope," Litvin argues that it is possible to restore the complex interplay of "variations in international politics, literary traditions, cultural fashions, individual upbringing, and sensibility," all of which contribute to the creation of Shakespeare adaptations in Iranian contexts (2011: 59).

This approach is particularly productive for examining the political undertones in Koushki's adaptation of *Coriolanus*. As previously mentioned, political subtexts in Iranian theatre can often be implied in a play's allusions to different periods of Iranian history or found in a play's integration of indigenous theatre traditions that can become politicized in different contexts. Viewing Koushki's adaptation of *Coriolanus* through Litvin's "kaleidoscopic" lens, therefore, allows us to better perceive the production's various local and global socio-political influences.

A Brief History of *Coriolanus* in Iran

The play was first translated into Farsi in 1935,⁵ but its performance history in Iran is much more recent. It starts with a projected yet unrealized performance conceived by the well-known director Ali Pouyan (b. 1953). In July 2013, Pouyan announced his plans for an ambitious production of *Coriolanus* with a professional cast of forty actors. In an interview in April 2016, he spoke out against the impenetrability of the processes through which the relevant bodies grant the required licenses for public theatrical performances in the country for "[their] lack of attention to my request [to stage the play]," adding that "I desperately say that they did not allow me [to stage *Coriolanus*]. Do you think I am the only one [facing such difficulties]?"

There are at least several other directors on the waiting list” (2016).⁶ This was not the only instance of the authorities refusing to facilitate Pouyan’s work, and the specific reasons for the refusal to license his *Coriolanus* have remained elusive.⁷ Given the context of the complicated, often purposefully non-transparent, and sometimes arbitrary censorship regime in the Islamic Republic, the lack of permission may have had little to do with *Coriolanus* as such, although censorship of art is, of course, arguably always political.⁸ In 2017, Pouyan was allowed to stage Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*, a play in which, ironically, the main protagonist’s fight against censorship takes center stage.⁹

The first Iranian production of *Coriolanus* on record is Hamed Asgharzadeh’s adaptation devised for the annual Iran International University Theater Festival in May 2017 and subsequently performed in September 2017 in Tehran. This adaptation embraced an experimental format, which saw the actors rehearsing and performing the play at the same time. Asgharzadeh often paused the performance and asked the actors to repeat scenes, revise dialogues, or discuss their roles. The spectators were also involved in the process as they were called on to provide comments about a particular scene, performance, or character. The production turned the relationship between political leaders and people into the power relations between the director and the actors. According to Asgharzadeh, “power relations between political rulers and people exist, on a smaller scale, in theatre between the director, who wants to maintain order through rules and regulations, and the actors, who have the same expectations from their director as people do from their rulers” (2017). In this adaptation, the actors, aided by the audiences, challenged the dominance of the director, which resulted in a carnivalesque production with each performance arriving at a different ending based on the particular direction the improvisation took that evening.

Mostafa Koushki and *Coriolanus*

Mostafa Koushki’s (b. 1984) *Coriolanus* is, therefore, only the second production of the play staged in Iran.¹⁰ Koushki has been a familiar figure in Iranian theatre and film for almost twenty years, chiefly as a stage and film director and producer, although earlier in his career, he occasionally acted as well. His most significant contribution to the country’s cultural scene was the creation of the private Theatre Mostaghel Tehran in 2015. According to Monavar Khalaj, the establishment of Theatre Mostaghel Tehran occurred against the backdrop of “growing hopes that the broader political rapprochement and a more relaxed approach by authorities would help the Islamic

Republic's arts scene flourish" (2019), hopes that have since dissipated in the current political climate. Marjan Moosavi observes that this "privatization" has encouraged two types of private theatre to emerge, those from "a new generation of active artists who use privately owned, small black-box venues to stage low-budget, often experimental, plays" and those that "focus on raising money rather than on attracting more spectators who appreciate artistic innovation" (2017).

Drawing on works by a playwright well known among Iranian audiences, therefore, appears to have allowed Koushki to straddle these two approaches, experimental and populist, employed by private theatres in Iran, as his Shakespeare adaptations feature innovative dramaturgy, visually striking stage sets, traditional Iranian music, and socio-political commentary while remaining economically viable in terms of box office revenue. As Niloofar Mohtadi notes, "[p]rogressive performances of classics are becoming more common in Tehran, showing that implementing certain formulas can work and even be successful at the box office" (2020). Koushki's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, was "staged 260 times in 2016" alone (Rahimi 2022: 209), revived in 2017, and toured to festivals in Gdansk, Poland (2018), Gyula, Hungary, and Kerala, India (both 2019). At the same time, the foundation of the Theatre Mostaghel Tehran included establishing annual theatre workshops. These workshops have fostered emerging talents in the performing arts; students of the thirteen-month workshop in 2017 were among those participating in Koushki's production of *Coriolanus* (Koushki 2020a). Indeed, for Mohtadi, Koushki's "experimental approach in *Coriolanus*" only further underlines that "theaters can make unconventional performances for mainstream audiences" (2020).

Coriolanus was Koushki's third venture in directing a Shakespearean adaptation, following *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2016) and an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* called *Romoliet* (2018).¹¹ Instead of using one of the three available Farsi translations of *Coriolanus*, he and his team created their own customized play-script (Koushki 2020b). The production was performed in two runs at Theatre Mostaghel Tehran, the first from 28 July to 30 August 2019 and the second, with some changes in the acting crew and scene design, from 23 July to 28 August 2020. Both runs were hailed by reviewers and spectators alike as vibrant and innovative, with one critic praising Koushki's "fearlessness manifested in his adapted text, young acting cast, and bold mise-en-scène" (Taheri 2019). In January 2020, the production traveled to the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK) in India.

Koushki's *Coriolanus* occupies its unique position in relation to the politics of the present moment in contemporary Iran.



FIGURE 1. Banner from the production website with the motto “This is a political play” in Persian and Japanese. (Photo: Mostafa Koushki)

Advertisements for it highlighted this dimension, with the banner on the production’s website announcing boldly and perhaps provocatively: *In yek teatre siyasi ast* (This is a political play) (Fig. 1). In contrast with Shakespeare’s opening, which features a mob of belligerent armed Romans, Koushki opens with a small crowd of citizens prostrate on the stage, complaining about their poor living standards. According to Koushki, this choice responds to what he viewed as the contemporary socio-political context of the performance, “where a lot of people passively repeat populist slogans propagated by the media and politicians” (Koushki 2020b). A few minutes later, Coriolanus (acted by Iman Abdi) appears, running on a treadmill, scolding his fellow citizens for their inertia. He will remain on the moving treadmill for the entirety of the play while the rest of the Romans will mostly stand, sit, and lie on the stage. For Koushki, Coriolanus acts as the disruptor of a socio-political torpor that has stifled progress in the Roman state. The production is primarily concerned with the conflict between the values of the protagonist and the rest of the Romans, and deemphasizes the conflict between Rome and the Volsci. The choice to have the Roman citizens speak in unison in a chorus-like manner, rather than as individual voices, as they do in Shakespeare’s original play, reinforces this power dynamic, which sees Coriolanus pitted against the collectivity of Rome. The adaptation, according to the director, stands “in the middle of left-wing and right-wing interpretations (of Shakespeare’s text)” (Koushki 2019). However, this does not mean that the production is ideologically neutral. As Michael Bristol points out, “[t]o interpret *Coriolanus* is to engage in critical reflection on the legitimation problem of the modern state, especially if the state is seen as a constellation of balanced interests,” and this reflection does not “permit ideological neutrality” (1987: 219). In Koushki’s version, Coriolanus’s defeat is less inflicted by Aufidius or any other external enemy than by negligence of the state’s own citizens and failings of the society which they collectively make up.

This reconfiguration of the original play’s power dynamics reframes the plot into a political context familiar to the Iranian spectators. As Koushki observes:

The setting of the play . . . is Iranian. My definition of dramaturgy and my approach to adaptation stress the incorporation of familiar Iranian elements into the theater of Shakespeare. I am curious to know what constituents of our life can be linked to Shakespeare's plays. (2020b)

Coriolanus's futile struggle to keep moving ahead clearly alludes to the ineffectuality and ultimate failure of many social movements and protest campaigns in Iran over the past two decades, often derailed by the state's interventions and censored or misrepresented by the state-owned media. The spokesperson of the state, who does not have an equivalent in Shakespeare's original, becomes one of the major characters in Koushki's version, announcing the government's increasingly unpopular decisions to the ordinary people while urging them to remain calm and patient (Fig. 2). Coriolanus alone attempts to counter this flood of propaganda, his thankless and fruitless endeavor embodied in Koushki's dramaturgical choice to position him on the treadmill. Like Shakespeare's original play, Koushki's adaptation depicts the clearly legitimate concerns of the plebian crowd being answered with little more than a "pretty tale" from the patrician class.¹² Koushki observed that "this similarity between *Coriolanus* and our society was of crucial importance to me. The play urges its audience to wake up, think, and raise doubt about what state media outlets propagate" (2020b). The production's choice to preface each of the spokesperson's announcements with the signature tune from a nightly



FIGURE 2. Spokesperson of the state. (Photo: Parichehr Zhian)

newscast on one of the state-owned (and naturally unfailingly pro-government in its outlook) TV channels ensured that this reference would not be lost on anyone familiar with Iranian media.¹³

Music and Politics

While the theme tune from the news bulletin represents the most obvious example of an aural device that unmistakably places the adaptation in the Iranian context, music plays a much larger role in the Iranian recontextualization of this production. Koushki hired Ali Sina Rezania to compose a score inspired by traditional Iranian music for the production. Rezania is well known both as a composer and a musician skilled in an impressive number of different instruments. In Iranian theatre, he has become notable for his ability to play a range of musical instruments during a single theatrical performance, enabling him to retain the intimacy of a solo musical performance while offering the variety of sounds typically available only from musical ensembles. In Koushki's adaptation, Rezania played several different percussion instruments, including drum, *tabla* (a set of two drums of different shapes and sizes), hi-hat, and *daf* (a frame drum similar to a large tambourine), during scenes featuring fights and military action. Still, he shifted to the much softer-sounding Persian *santur*, a hammered dulcimer instrument with Mesopotamian origins, in the scenes when Coriolanus talked to his wife, Virgilia.

Koushki acknowledges the relationship between music and politics in Iran, mentioning the legendary musician Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, who later in his life became notable for his support for *jonbeshe sabz* (Green Movement), sometimes also referred to as *bahare parsi* (Persian Spring), which took place between June 2009 and March 2010.¹⁴ As Koushki points out, Shajarian is an example of someone with the potential to affect political change, yet “all his attempts, all his actions remain futile because they face both the state censorship and people's inaction” (2020b). Koushki stops short of describing the singer himself as a Coriolanus-like figure and is more interested in the parallel between the role of the people in the fictional context of the production on the one hand and in present-day Iran on the other. (Koushki talked in the interview about Shajarian as an active force in Iranian politics because we conducted it in the summer of 2020, before Shajarian's death on 8 October 2020.) Koushki also looked to one of Iran's most significant political figures in his characterization of the relationship between Coriolanus and the citizens—the former Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh.¹⁵ As Koushki observes, the citizens' vacillation between support and condemnation for Coriolanus echoes the circumstances of Mossadegh's rise and fall in Iranian

politics. Popular protests partly fomented by the British and American intelligence services played an important role in his government's demise. As Koushki reflects, "In our own history, during the premiership of Mohammad Mosaddegh, we saw morning protests in which people supported him while the same demonstrators chanted 'Death to Mosaddegh' in the afternoon" (2020b). Koushki's Coriolanus, in contrast to the citizens, remains steadfast in his resistance to popular and patrician influence. Far from a totalitarian dictator, Coriolanus's intransigence and blunt expressions are presented by Koushki as indicators of his political integrity and sincerity. For Koushki, "the more [Coriolanus] struggles, the more he feels alienated and alone" (2020b).

Stage Set: Coriolanus on the Treadmill

Unlike its musical score and sound effects, the production's visual aesthetic conveyed through the set (designed by Koushki), costumes (by Hasti Hosseini), and lighting (by Hassan Mohammadi) does not overtly indicate a specific cultural or geographical affiliation. On the contrary, the treadmill, the set's centerpiece and a readily recognizable mainstay of the worldwide fitness industry, signifies globalized modernity. The treadmill in the 2019 run of performances at Theatre Mostaghel was an elaborate contraption reminiscent of a pedestal and high enough to ensure that Coriolanus was physically elevated above everyone else (Fig. 3). Indeed, Koushki has reflected that "the treadmill symbolizes a position that belongs to Coriolanus but is envied by his fellow countrymen." Its design also incorporated lighting, illuminating the running Coriolanus from the bottom up, giving him an eerie otherworldly aura and further visually underscoring his alienation from the other characters on stage. The back wall of the set was decorated with vertically hung strips from flags of countries including the United States, Canada, Sweden, North Korea, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Japan, England, Greece, and South Africa, as if to remind the audiences that despite its many references to contemporary Iran, the drama they are watching ultimately takes place in a globalized world, against the backdrop of international politics. Koushki acknowledged this transnational dimension of his *Coriolanus* when discussing its broader political context at the festival in Kerala during the production's only trip outside of Iran: "In dictatorial government and totalitarian regimes . . . the masses repeated words of the domineer [sic.] without any thought, and the domineer rides on it. . . . There is no difference between Third World and Developed countries in this trend" (ctd. in Muringhateri 2020). The sets of the performances in India in 2020 and those produced later that year



FIGURE 3. Coriolanus (Iman Abdi) on his treadmill in the 2019 version of the production. (Photo: Parichehr Zhian)

in Tehran were likewise not suggestive of a particular geographic setting either, although some of the key features were different from the initial 2019 run. The treadmill, this time, was only a frame with a moving belt at the top, both smaller and lower than the machine seen in the previous year's run. The illumination of the treadmill was also gone, as was the colorful medley of the flags from the back wall, leaving the whole set noticeably darker (Fig. 4). The overall impression was that of industrial bleakness. Koushki is known for changing various aspects of his productions between individual performances. He explained in the interview: "As theatre is a live phenomenon, what we see on the stage is subject to social and political developments of a society. That's why my re-production of a play is never similar to the previous one" (2020b).

It is tempting to attribute the shift to the darker and more austere visual mode between the 2019 and 2020 runs to the continuing deterioration of Iran's political and economic situation. The country experienced one of its most turbulent years in 2020. Political tensions between Iran and the United States escalated in January, when Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani was assassinated in a drone strike ordered by then-US President Donald Trump. In retaliation, Iran targeted two US military bases in Iraq. Forces of the Islamic



FIGURE 4. Coriolanus on the treadmill in the 2020 version of the production. (Photo: Sayna Ghaderi)

Revolutionary Guard Corps (part of Iran's military forces) were on high alert in anticipation of a potential US reprisal when they mistakenly launched missiles at the Kyiv-bound Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 shortly after it took off from Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport. All 176 passengers and crew were killed. Iran's economy was heavily hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, US sanctions, and conflict between President Hassan Rouhani and *Majles* (Parliament), resulting in significant deterioration of standard of living for much of the population. And so, despite the cultural and geographical non-specificity of both versions of the set, the differences between them still invite a metaphorical connection with contemporary Iran.

Koushki's decision to position Coriolanus running on a treadmill for almost the entire play draws attention not only to the uphill political struggle of Coriolanus as a character throughout the performance but also to the material body of the actor who must perform this physically demanding activity. Indeed, the character of Coriolanus can be seen as a homologue for the actor performing the role, both required to endure physical stress as part of their occupations, both bodies, the semiotic and material, an object of display for an audience (citizens and theatregoers), and the behaviors of both subject to constraints imposed by the state. Abdi has

commented on the physical strain of rehearsing and performing the role of Coriolanus in Koushki's production, during which in 2019 he lost 10 kg (Koushki 2020a). While the audience watches Coriolanus's mutilation in battle, it also witnesses what Hans-Thies Lehmann describes as "the *decomposition of the human being* that is happening on stage" (2006: 163). While Koushki has commented on the fact that his production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* prompted a greater degree of scrutiny of the actors' physical movements on stage than his version of *Coriolanus*, perhaps his *Coriolanus* nevertheless offers a more biting response to the state's supervisory role in Iranian theatre.

Costumes, Concealment, and Constraint

The costumes can be said to reflect the production's Iranian context in a similarly roundabout way. Everyone except Coriolanus wears loose-fitting khaki or blue outfits reminiscent of generic military uniforms. Coriolanus has a more elaborate, mostly black outfit that includes details like a cape or an armband with a vaguely Roman flair, which, like his elevated position on the treadmill, sets him apart from the rest of the characters. The costumes are more subtly specific to the Iranian context in that they are designed to comply with the required dress code: the women wear head-coverings and both female and male actors have long sleeves and trousers, although the uniform-inspired style of the costumes unobtrusively accommodates these features. While the patricians urge Coriolanus to reveal his battle-wounded body to the citizens of Rome in Shakespeare's play, the body of the actor on the stages of Iranian theatres is often forced into various states of concealment and constraint to satisfy the state's censors. In both cases, the body becomes a potent "signifying material" for the state (Lehmann 2006: 162). By drawing attention to what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls "the relationship between the *materiality* and the *semioticity* of the performance's elements" (2008: 17), Koushki disrupts the boundary between the action taking place in the dramatic space of Shakespeare's Rome and the theatrical event taking place in contemporary Tehran. The production in India was free from the dress code constraints, enabling Koushki to stage it with an alternative costume design that revealed much more of the actors' bodies. All male actors, except the one playing Coriolanus, were naked from the waist up, with long hair and beards. Presenting this group of actors stripped down to a minimal costume on stage, as Koushki hints in our interview, could be his way of showing that the ordinary Romans are not able to think beyond their most basic needs and, accordingly, never realize the cause for which Coriolanus is fighting. Female actors, although not faced with Iran's hijab regulations while abroad, maintained their head-coverings

because otherwise they could have encountered problems upon their return to Iran.

Evading Censorship

However, thanks to the nature of the state's censorship apparatus, the two runs of *Coriolanus* in Tehran faced less interference from the authorities than some of Koushki's earlier productions. The censorial interference in his *Coriolanus* productions was limited to banning one of the female actors from the 2020 run because she had sung a patriotic song in the 2019 run, thus violating the ban on women singing solo on stage in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the censorship regime implemented by Iran has focused primarily on suppressing cultural production that contravenes religious proscriptions, while artistic expression that is politically subversive often faces less scrutiny. In the theatre sector, this means that costumes must adhere to the country's Islamic dress code, female and male actors cannot physically touch on stage, and dancing and solo singing by women is not allowed. Directors staging plays that depict courtship or relationships between unmarried men and women, as, for instance, virtually all of Shakespeare's comedies do, have to be highly resourceful since they need to navigate a minefield of restrictions and regulations. Koushki and his team devised an elaborate mis-en-scène for his earlier production of *Romeo and Juliet* to accommodate the extensive interactions between the two titular protagonists in this context where "such manifestations of intimacy and passion are forbidden on the Iranian stage." In this instance, the characters interacted via large "rotating cylinders" and "a piece of glass" in order "to convince the monitoring bodies that they [did not] touch each other" (Koushki 2020b).

The masculine worlds of Rome's politics and army, in which *Coriolanus* takes place, present no obvious targets for this kind of censorship: the play-text never explicitly calls for the few female characters to interact physically with men, and it is more broadly free from the kinds of male-female relationships that tend to fall afoul of the censors. While both Volumnia and, to a lesser extent, Virgilia have been described in literary criticism as strong characters possessing varying degrees of agency, the roles they explicitly assume in the plot are those of a doting mother and a devoted wife.¹⁶

Gender Neutral Casting

Even though the gender politics of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* appears orthodox enough to satisfy the Iranian censorship, through its unorthodox dramaturgy and mis-en-scène, Koushki's *Coriolanus*, on a

fundamental level, seeks to embrace gender equality. The production used a casting system that required many actors to be ready to play more than one part, with some of the cast expected to be able to play both male and female characters in different performances. The aim, according to Koushki, “was to remind [his] actors, regardless of gender, they should be prepared to perform all the roles in the play (Koushki 2020b). The actors did not find out which part they would be called to take on until shortly before each performance, and both Coriolanus’s and Volumnia’s parts had a pair of male and female actors ready to play them.

The plebeian crowd, which has generally been dominated by men across the play’s performance history, also notably comprised more women. The one character added to the original Shakespearean cast by Koushki, that of the media spokesperson, was played by a man in the initial 2019 run and by a woman in the performances staged in 2020. In addition to highlighting Koushki’s gender-neutral approach in selecting his actors, this extratextual character demonstrates that propagandist media can turn individuals, irrespective of their gender, into devices that promote the ideologies of the rulers.

These dramaturgical and casting choices ultimately broadened the scope for participation of female actors, so that a play-text with only four parts for women in its original *dramatis personae* list was transformed into a vehicle offering female and male actors alike a wide range of roles in the play. Koushki reflects that this production was the first time many actors had performed on stage and that he “wanted them to know they can perform any role, regardless of their gender, as long as they are mentally and physically prepared” (2020b).

This aspect of the production can also be interpreted through a political lens, as women’s rights have been on the agendas of the recent Iranian reform movements, which have led to incremental but promising changes in laws, including those related to the right to divorce (traditionally an exclusive right for men), the custody of children after divorce (which used to terminate for mothers at the age of seven for both boys and girls), and legal age of marriage for girls (which increased from nine to thirteen). Moreover, since 2007 the Tehran municipality has focused on the empowerment of women by constructing Skill Centers where women can obtain new qualifications.

Conclusion

Although Koushki’s *Coriolanus* does not directly reference these or other topical events, its audiences quickly identify with a dramatic world in which the hypocrisy of the politicians and the inertia of the public frequently come together to alienate social reformists. In his

review of *Coriolanus*, Kiomars Moradi reflected that Koushki's use of the treadmill resonated with the exasperation that many contemporary audience members felt in Iran. "As a spectator," Moradi argued, "you see yourself like Coriolanus constantly running, struggling to change a world where true hero(in)es are being mocked by the media" (2020). Rarely has an adaptation of Shakespeare in Iran been so keyed to its contemporary political moment. Fischlin and Fortier argue that, in addition to a critical reading implied by every theatrical production, every adaption of Shakespeare "features a specific and explicit form of criticism: a marked change from Shakespeare's original cannot help but indicate a critical difference" (2000: 8). As such, different constituents of Koushki's play, including the adapted text, allusions to contemporary social and political contexts, music, acting, and targeted use of minimal stage props, create a theatrical adaptation that invokes Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and yet addresses contemporary anxieties about power, media, gender, and social reform.

NOTES

1. No definitive record exists of performances from Shakespeare's lifetime, although the play was likely part of the Globe's season from April to July 1608, when London theatres were open during a brief respite from intermittent outbreaks of the bubonic plague (Rasmussen 2008: 1539).

2. Brecht never finished the script but it has still been occasionally performed.

3. For more information on this production, see <https://www.rsc.org.uk/coriolanus/angus-jackson-2017-production>, accessed 14 February 2023.

4. One of the few possible references to Jacobean politics in the play is a parallel between the plebeian crowd demanding grain in the opening scene and the peasant riots of the Midland Revolt of 1607–1608. For more detail, see Hindle 2008.

5. The first translation dates back to 1935 when Mohammad Khan Bahador translated and adapted the play-text into a prose fiction format. The translation appeared in *Armaghan*, a literary magazine published between 1919 and 1979. *Coriolanus* was next translated into Farsi in 1968 by Alaeddin Pazargadi, a prolific translator, whose two-volume translation of twenty-seven of Shakespeare's plays is still widely used in Iran. This translation was also in prose but Pazargadi meticulously followed Shakespeare's dramatic format. In 2018, Mehran Safavi published the most recent translation of *Coriolanus*. Both Pazargadi's and Safavi's translations are currently in print in Iran.

6. All translations from Farsi are ours.

7. In the same interview, Pouyan mentions that the authorities also refused to support his production of *Rudaki* (a play about the Persian poet Rudaki [858–940/41]) to tour Tajikistan in 2008.

8. For a detailed discussion of censorship practices in Iran since 1979, see [Rahimi 2015](#). For a case study of how the process was applied to a particular Shakespeare production, see [Karimi-Hakak 2003](#).

9. The initial run of this production in 2017 was at Salone Theatre Iranshahr (Iranshahr Theatre House) in Tehran. In 2018, it was restaged at Theatre Shahre Tehran (Tehran City Theatre).

10. Earlier in his career, Koushki focused on film and television, directing and producing numerous short films and TV series through his private film-making institute. His most notable theatre productions as director include: *The Wind Shakes the Glass* (2014), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2016), *Romoliet* (2018), and *Coriolanus* (2019, 2020). For more on Koushki's artistic career, see [Javanian 2022](#).

11. Both were performed at Theatre Mostaghel Tehran. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also traveled to Gdansk Shakespeare Festival in Poland and Gyula Shakespeare Festival in Hungary.

12. In *Coriolanus*, Menenius responds to the citizens' complaints in the play's opening scene with an offer to tell them "a pretty tale" ([Shakespeare 2008](#): 1541). This turns out to be the "Fable of the Belly and the Members," which he begins a few lines later and which compares the citizens to body parts that foolishly rebel against the belly.

13. The reference is specifically to the Channel 2 TV station and its main news program at 8:30 pm.

14. Shajarian (1940–2020) was famous as a singer as well as instrumentalist, noted in particular for his mastery of the *santur* and for crafting his own instruments. Although initially a supporter of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, towards the end of his life he became a vocal critic of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and was banned from performing and distributing his music although he continued to comment on the political situation and advocate for reform.

15. Mosaddegh (1882–1967) served as Iran's prime minister twice: April 1951–July 1952 and July 1952–August 1953. He is best known for nationalizing the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and cutting the country's strong ties with Britain as well as for implementing progressive social and economic reforms. He was overthrown in a coup orchestrated largely by the CIA and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

16. For a recent discussion of motherhood in *Coriolanus*, see [Compagnoni 2020](#). Coppélia Kahn usefully elaborates on the relationship between Coriolanus and Volumnia in a play that "offers a troubling, richly problematic treatment of the cultural nexus between bearing children and bearing arms" (1997: 147).

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