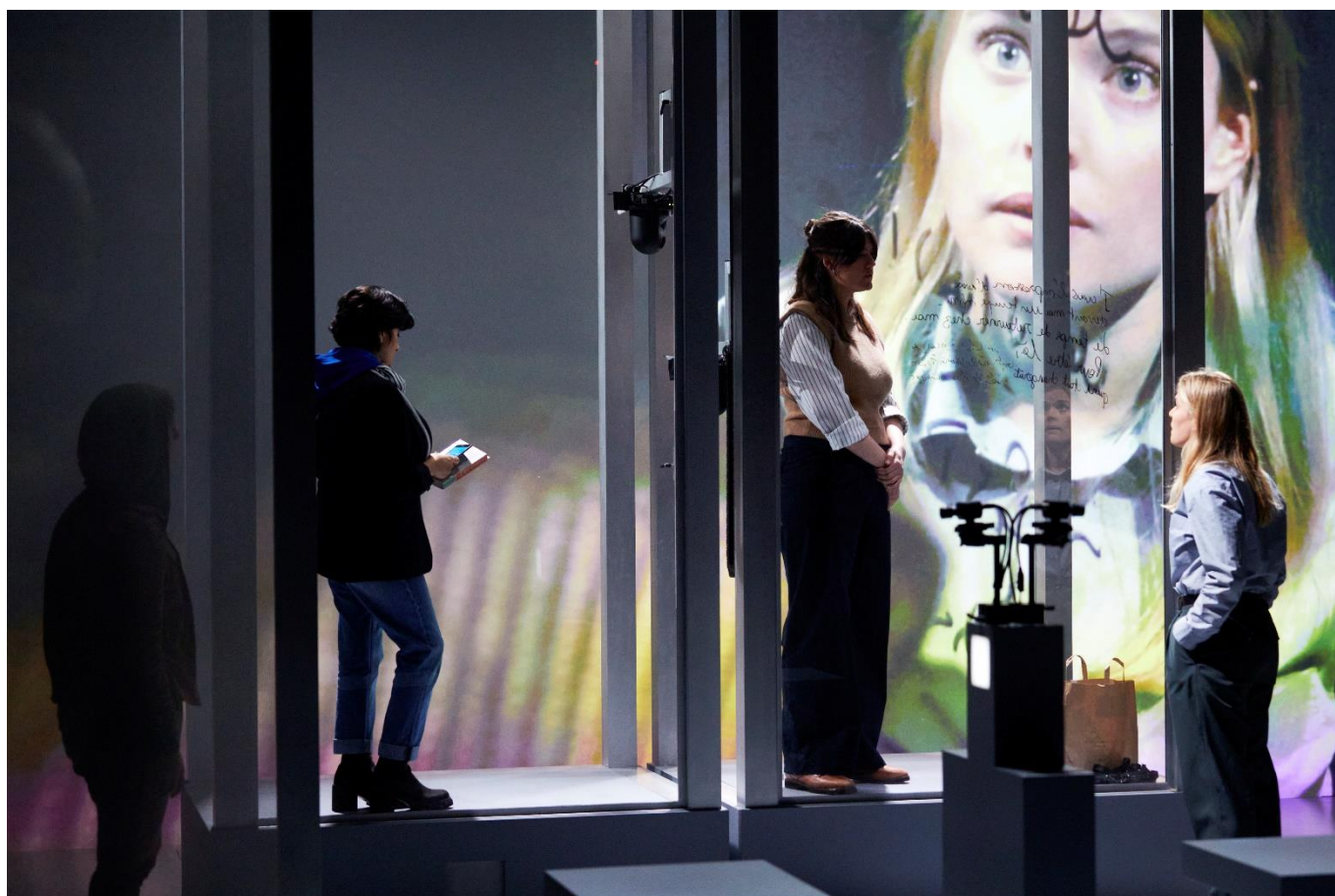


Comédie de Genève

# In transit

**FREELY ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL *TRANSIT*  
BY ANNA SEGHERS**

**A NEW CREATION BY  
AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI**



© Magali Dougados

Created on 23 February 2022 at Comédie de Genève

**Adresse postale**

Promenade Louise-Boulaz 2  
Case postale · 1211 Genève 6

# Credits

Freely adapted from the novel *Transit* by **Anna Seghers**  
Adaptation **Amir Reza Koohestani, Massoumeh Lahidji** and **Keyvan Sarreshteh**  
Text **Amir Reza Koohestani** and **Keyvan Sarreshteh**  
Direction **Amir Reza Koohestani**  
Translation **Massoumeh Lahidji**  
Set and light design **Eric Soyer**  
Video **Phillip Hohenwarter**  
Sound **Benjamin Vicq**  
Costumes **Marie Artamonoff**  
Assistant director **Isabela De Moraes Evangelista**  
Set construction **Workshops of Comédie de Genève**

With **Danae Dario, Agathe Lecomte, Khazar Masoumi, Mahin Sadri**

Production **Comédie de Genève**  
Coproduction **Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe - Paris, Théâtre national de Bretagne - Rennes, Fondazione Teatro Metastasio di Prato, Mehr Theatre Group, Festival d'Avignon, Maillon Théâtre de Strasbourg - Scène européenne, Triennale Milano Teatro**

Estimated duration 1h20  
Recommended age 15+  
Multilingual show with French and English surtitles

Created on 23 February 2022 at Comédie de Genève

## PRODUCTION AND TOURING CONTACT

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### Comédie de Genève

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# In transit

## PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT

On December 29, 2018, on his way to Santiago to attend one of his shows as part of the Santiago A Mil festival, Amir Reza Koohestani was detained by border police for several hours before being sent back to Tehran. He had overstayed, by 5 days, the 90 days allowed in the Schengen area in the last six months - due to the unexplainable fact that he had been delivered two different visas.

*In transit*, his new creation, is based on his observations while he was detained in the transit area of Munich's International Airport in an anonymous white space called a "waiting room", next to other deportees from Europe. Mahin Sadri plays Amir Reza who, during his detention reads Anna Seghers' novel *Transit* in order to adapt it to the theatre. In the "waiting room" different deportees appear - contemporary and past, fictional and real.

The general idea of the play combines personal experience with mise en abyme, various points of view and bridges between two periods of history. Several spoken languages – Persian, French, Portuguese, English – respond to each other, like the characters from different countries.



## NOTE OF INTENT

When working on an adaptation of *Transit*, the novel by Anna Seghers about immigrants during World War II, I was stopped at a European airport, my passport was confiscated and I was asked to stay in a waiting room. What happened in those hours and what remained with me from that experience created personal and professional dilemmas in my mind that I'm still struggling with.

At first, I was faced with one of my old fears: losing my passport in an airport. But when that fear became the reality, I felt some kind of freedom with it. There was no reason to be afraid anymore, it had happened, and now, theoretically, I could be anyone, my name and profession could be anything. I was myself and not myself. My identity was in a transitory situation.

And then there were the people who had the power to strip people of their passports and deny entry to the country. The same people that in my adaptation were seeking refuge, were now overseeing a room full of refugees. Refugees from countries that might have been in that privileged position in another time, not so long ago. I was in the middle of these two groups, writing about them in one timeframe and experiencing them firsthand in another with my immediate future in the hands of the people I was supposed to create art for.

This situation caused me to question the very reason that we work in theatre. The officers enforcing the immigration laws and the lawmakers writing them are living and working outside of this bubble of ours. We have no effect on them. So why? Why are we spending our times on this futile attempt? What are we hoping to achieve? When the writer becomes the subject of the things he is writing about, when the director finds himself in the situation similar (though not identical) as that of his characters, meanings start to change and a need for new ways of addressing the problem arises. *En Transit* is the result of that need.

**Amir Reza Koohestani**



© Magali Dougados



# INTERVIEW WITH AMIR REZA KOOHESTANI

by Arielle Meyer MacLeod, dramaturge of Comédie de Genève

**You portray your own character, played by an actress, and do so with a certain sense of self-deprecation...**

Yes, absolutely. Because I have no legitimacy in setting myself up as a representative of today's immigrants. The refugees, the immigrants, are in Greece, in the Mediterranean or at the Hungarian border. This experience, for me, was only a kind of *in vitro* experiment, like when you find yourself on a ghost train in an amusement park: you scare yourself for a minute, you imagine what horror is like, while knowing very well that the end of the tunnel is close. Personally, I had nothing to lose, they were only going to send me back to Tehran and, as I say in the text, that same evening I was going to sleep in my bed and find a full fridge. However, I sat next to people who, if they were sent back home, would lose everything, sometimes their lives even. In English, to designate these extradited migrants, we use the term *deported*, like the people sent to the death camps in 1940. What I was able to perceive there, in this waiting room where I was only held for a few hours, is a rather frightening system that knows perfectly well that it's not being monitored, and that uses the word *deportation* in all consciousness to talk about the fate of the people it turns away at the border.

***En Transit*, your show, explores a twofold temporality and goes, without transition if I may say, from 2018 to 1940.**

This twofold temporality comes from what I felt when I read Anna Seghers' novel shortly after the incident at Munich airport. As a travelling Iranian, I've spent my life going to embassies, talking to land agents, providing proof of goodwill, getting visas, taking steps to be able to travel. When I read Seghers' novel, I discovered that the characters were subject to exactly the same procedures: they had to justify themselves, show their credentials, obtain the agreement of such and such a person, of such and such a service, in order to be able to move and avoid death. In 1940 it was Westerners, Europeans who took these steps, Poles, Germans, French people who wanted to take refuge in Iran or South America. People were fleeing *from* Europe, today migrants are fleeing *to* Europe, and are subject to the same procedures. The twofold temporality of the show lies exactly at this point, in this place of convergence where the whole play takes place: a transit zone, that's to say a non-place, a purgatory that crosses the ages. I made a kind of woven piece, the threads of which are very intimately linked, without, however, indulging in a learned architecture. I didn't say to myself: "This situation refers to this other one, or this person is the reflection of this other one". No, I let myself be guided by poetic correspondences to create a flow between the two space-times. First, there's a lawyer who simultaneously tries to help refugees at an airport in 2018 and those stuck at a port in 1940. This figure begets others, the flow becomes increasingly close between the two temporalities, to indicate that what's being played out, in the end, is always the same story.

**In the background of Anna Seghers' novel, there's the Kafkaesque absurdity to which individuals are subjected as they're shuffled from one administration to another to obtain visas, certificates and other safe-conducts. You insist on this dimension of the absurd.**

Absolutely. The situation in which I found myself in 2018 was absurd, laughable in many ways. I found myself stuck at Munich airport, even though for more than 20 years I've been presenting shows in Europe, and in particular in Munich, that always feature characters who are forced to leave – people in transit. It was absurd of course, because I found myself in the situation of my characters, but above all, it was laughable because I had to ask myself what the point was of putting on plays that deal with these issues. Everyone comes to clap, it's wonderful, it's very good, we all agree in substance, but in the end nothing changes. The person who detained me at the airport doesn't come to see these plays. Through the absurdity of the situation in which I found myself, it was the absurdity of everything I believed in that dawned on me: all this artistic production, all these debates, all this reflection changes absolutely nothing, it has no influence on the reality of the facts which remain the same. In Anna Seghers' novel there's a character who alone

embodies the absurdity of the situations faced by the men and women stuck in these transit zones. She's the woman with the two dogs, whom Amir, my double in the play, meets – a woman subjected to a crazy situation. To obtain her visa for America, she needs a certificate of good conduct showing that she has never embezzled money, that she curses the German-Soviet pact, that she has never had the slightest sympathy for communists and never will, that she does not entertain men in her room, in short that she has always led and always will lead a blameless life. She gets the certificate from an American couple to whom she promises in exchange to take care of their two dogs and bring them back to America. But the two dogs themselves become an obstacle to boarding the plane, as well as a condition for obtaining a visa. So she continues to pamper them and feed them while she herself has no food. Is there a better definition of the absurd? This absurd leads to tragedy.

***En Transit* is set entirely at the border, in a 'non-place' as you say. The characters who cross it all speak different languages – French, English, Farsi and even Portuguese. You insist on the blurring of languages, which prevents people from speaking to each other but sometimes allows them to understand each other despite everything.**

Yes, I'm only interested in language to get rid of it because, for me, it's what prevents access to the person. That's why I always write texts that are imperfect, incomplete, made of odds and ends, so that the character is not buried under the text. In this I'm still very much influenced by Beckett, by his desire to collapse language, his effort to simplify speech to the point where it would be possible to dispense with it. My actresses, like the characters in the play, don't all speak the same language, and that's very interesting, because without the comfort of a common language, we have to find other ways to understand each other.

**To the blurring of languages you also add the blurring of genders, since all your characters, men and women, are played by four female actors. Why is this?**

The idea came about quite simply. It's the first time I've staged my own character, so I had to find someone to play me, and frankly playing me is no walk in the park! I was going through all the actors in my entourage, and then suddenly I thought: why does it have to be a man? This is theatre, you can do whatever you want, and the actor who knows me best is an actress, Mahin Sadri, who's always been a close friend. If anyone can perceive all the intricacies of my character, it's her! So I decided that the other male characters would also be played by women, it's no more complicated than that, this question of gender is not really an issue. I'll paraphrase Beckett again: he said that the four men in *Waiting for Godot* represent the whole of humanity. To represent this humanity, I've chosen four women. Just as I want to go beyond the anecdotal aspect of language, I also want to go beyond the anecdote of gender to try to access something deeper.

## **TOUR 2021-2022**

26 and 27 March 2022 at Triennale di Milano (IT)

from 7 to 14 July 2022 at Festival d'Avignon (FR)

19 and 20 July 2022 at Grec Festival - Barcelona (ES)

## **TOUR 2022-2023**

from 5 November to 1st December 2022 at Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe (Berthier) in the framework of Festival d'Automne à Paris (FR)

from 25 to 27 January 2023 at Maillon Théâtre de Strasbourg, Scène européenne (FR)

from 2 to 5 February 2023 at Teatro Metastasio di Prato (IT)

from 7 to 10 March 2023 at Théâtre national de Bretagne – Rennes (FR)

15 and 16 March 2023 at CDN Orléans - Val de Loire (FR)

## **AVAILABLE ON DEMAND**



# Amir Reza Koohestani



© Laetitia Vançon

Amir Reza Koohestani was born in Shiraz, Iran in 1978 and is considered to be one of the most important Iranian theatre makers of his generation.

After a brief experience as a performer, he devoted his time to write his first plays, amongst which *The Murmuring Tales* (2000) which received critical acclaim in Tehran, during the 18<sup>th</sup> FADJR International Theatre Festival.

In 2001 he founded the Mehr Theatre Group in Tehran, whose first piece *Dance on Glasses* brought Koohestani international recognition. After studying in Manchester, UK, for several years, he returned to Tehran where his creations have made him a major actor of the resurgence of theatre in his country.

In February 2012, the movie *Modest Reception*, whose script was co-written by Koohestani and Mani Haghighi, won the NETPAC Award at the Berlin International Film Festival 2012.

Koohestani's work has been shown in many European countries for the past 15 years. *Amid the Clouds*, *Timeloss* and *Hearing* (2015) have been shown in Iran, as well as at Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels, Wiener Festwochen, the Oslo International Theatre Festival, Zürcher Theater Spektakel, Santarcangelo Festival in Italy or the Festival d'Automne à Paris, among others.

His plays are noticed for their poetic style and explore, with a critical symbolism, the everyday life of characters caught up in the turmoil of their environment.

# Anna Seghers



© Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin

Anna Seghers – real name Netty Radvanyi, born Reiling – was born in Mainz on November 19, 1900 and died in Berlin on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983. She was a German woman of letters.

During World War I, she served in the army. In 1920, she passed her baccalaureate. She then studied History, Art History and Sinology in Cologne and Heidelberg. In 1924, she received her doctorate at the University of Heidelberg with a thesis entitled *Jews and Jewishness in the Works of Rembrandt*.

In 1925, she married Hungarian sociologist László Radványi. In 1928, her first book was released under the pseudonym Anna Seghers – she chose her pseudonym out of admiration for the works of Dutch painter and engraver Hercules Seghers – *Revolt of the Fishermen of Santa Barbara* (*Aufstand der Fischer von St. Barbara*). At the suggestion of Hans Henny Jahnn, this first novel was awarded the Kleist Prize, and was brought to the screen in 1934 by playwright Erwin Piscator.

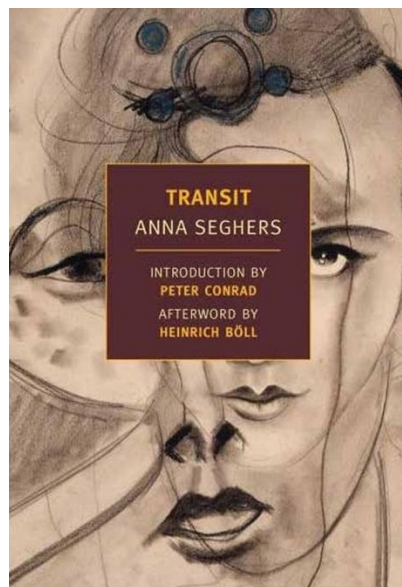
Also, in 1928, she joined the German Communist Party (KPD), and the following year became a founding member of the Union of Revolutionary Proletarian Writers. In 1930, she travelled to the Soviet Union for the first time. After the national socialists (nazis) took power, Anna Seghers was arrested by the Gestapo but later released. Her books were banned in Germany and burned. Shortly afterwards, she fled to Switzerland and from there to Paris.

After the outbreak of World War II and the entry of German troops into Paris, Seghers' husband was interned in the South of France at the Vernet camp. In Marseille, she was concerned about her husband's liberation and the possibility of fleeing abroad. This period forms the plot of the novel *Transit* (published in 1944).

In March 1941, Anna Seghers and her family managed to reach Mexico City via Martinique, New York and Veracruz. In 1942, what remains probably her most famous novel was published, *The Seventh Cross* (*Das siebte Kreuz*). In 1944, Fred Zinnemann turned *Das siebte Kreuz* into a film. The film and the book's success earned Anna Seghers worldwide recognition.

In 1975, she was awarded the Culture Prize of the World Peace Council and honorary citizenship of (East) Berlin.

# Transit



© DR

*“The fact that this novel turned out to be the finest Anna Seghers wrote, surely has something to do with the terrible uniqueness of the historical-political conditions she chose as her model. I doubt that our literature can point to many novels that have been written with such somnambulistic sureness and are almost flawless.”*

Heinrich Böll

Marseille 1940. Veterans of the Spanish War, deserters, Jews, writers, artists and German opponents of Nazism, some of whom like Anna Seghers found refuge in France as early as 1933, everyone that the Wehrmacht is chasing is, so to speak, stuck with their backs to the Mediterranean, waiting for a hypothetical boat to freedom. Although Marseille still sits in the free zone, no one among the fugitives doubts the imminence of a total occupation of France. In the maze of *Transit*, we witness a choreography of human comedy that keeps breaking down.