

S7 Ep6: Nassim Soleimanpour talks to Susan Wokoma

Royal Court: You are listening to a podcast from the Royal Court Theatre. Please note the following episode may contain strong language.

Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma. You are a playwright, Theatre maker, and the artistic director of the Berlin based Theatre company Nassim Soleimanpour Productions. You are most well known for your work *White Rabbit*, *Red Rabbit*, which has been performed in more than 40 languages and was deemed an audacious theatre experiment. This year, your latest piece, *ECHO* debuts at the Royal Court Theatre, Jerwood Space Downstairs, in collaboration with Lift. Welcome to the Playwright's Podcast.

Nassim Soleimanpour: Thank you very much, Susie.

Susan Wokoma: Now, I ask this question with everybody. What is your earliest, experience of Theatre?

Nassim Soleimanpour: Oh, okay. Well, I mean, my father is a novelist.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Nassim Soleimanpour: So I was raised in a family where art was a thing. And then very early on, I remember at school, I started, like, doing, you know, some shows. I remember, I remember I was like trying to wear like, a jacket on stage in front of an audience. And it took me almost twelve minutes. I couldn't find the sleeve. [he laughs]

Susan Wokoma: That is classic performer. Ah, character, costume. Like, you don't know what to do with the hands, with the pockets.

Nassim Soleimanpour: I feel like I'm still there. I'm trying to find the sleeve.

Susan Wokoma: I feel like we're all trying to find the sleeve. So, as you said, your father, novelist, so was writing something that was always encouraged? Was it just around? Did it seem like it was always your destiny to write stories? Or did you sort of find your way to Theatre in another way?

Nassim Soleimanpour: I think destiny is a good word. I did all my best to escape it, to be honest. I studied as an engineer. Yeah. and then when I switched to Theatre, I studied as a set designer. I worked with architects. I did all my best not to repeat the beautiful tragedy of my father. And here I am very happy that destiny picked me. And I'm doing it. I've been doing it now for some time.

Susan Wokoma: And what was that point when Destiny chose you? Do you remember? Was there a clear moment where you were like, ah, destiny's got me, I've got to do this. Or was it a gradual realisation?

Nassim Soleimanpour: I think, since you mentioned white rabbit red rabbit - That was the turning point.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Nassim Soleimanpour: I wrote some plays in Farsi, which is Persian, my mother tongue. And then to do shows in Iran is quite different. You know, the supervision, censorship,

everything. And I was never good at finding, my way into the system. I couldn't understand how things work in Iran. And as I said, because of my father, even like, it was even more tricky because he was also not good. He was a political activist, was in jail before and after revolution. so someone convinced me, on the road, maybe you try and write in English. And I was like, I am already suffering to write in Farsi. And as you can see, I try to speak in English, but still, this is not my mother tongue.

Susan Wokoma: Right. Okay.

Nassim Soleimanpour: and then I got convinced and I wrote my first play in English, which is rabbit. And then it became a hurricane. I mean, it took me over all around the world, meeting with amazing people, being in beautiful stages.

Susan Wokoma: So I didn't. So white Rabbit, Red Rabbit was your very first english language play.

Nassim Soleimanpour: True.

Susan Wokoma: And. Whoa. That's incredible, because if anyone doesn't know or hasn't heard the play, it's travelled the world. It had an amazing run, in New York, didn't it? Where you had incredible artists like Whoopi Goldberg, Nathan Lane, Martin Short, Cynthia Nixon, who would come and be involved in the play. If anyone doesn't understand how it's set up, it's an unrehearsed performance for anyone who takes, actively takes part. So the people that I listed weren't audience members, they were in the piece. Could you describe it for anyone who might not be aware of your style?

Nassim Soleimanpour: I think it's quite similar to what you and I are doing now. When

you start saying good things about me, I blush and I have a sip of water because we didn't rehearse. The more we do it, you know, it's this vulnerable situation. it's like a. It's very text based.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Nassim Soleimanpour: writing, writing, proper writing. But it's like the mentality, maybe because I've studied also as an engineer back in the day, is more going with algorithms. And what if the actor says that, what do I write that covers whatever happens afterwards? They just show up. Rabbit is nothing. It's just like two glasses of water, an optional ladder on stage, and the script in an envelope. And it's 70 minutes of. They open it. They don't. Any gender, any ethnicity, any background, any language. They just open it and they just read it. No director, no light, no set, no nothing.

Susan Wokoma: Wow. So there are no instructions because I've actually been a part of something quite similar. There's a, playwright, Theatre maker, called Tim Crouch.

Nassim Soleimanpour: Ah he's my dear friend.

Susan Wokoma: Ah - is he? Well, I did oak tree, which was an incredible experience.

And I

00:05:00

Susan Wokoma: did dear Elizabeth, also at the gate, which is similar, but we had instructions. It was. And with Tim, I was on stage with him, so were the performers, were they on their own? And it was just open, you know, open the script.

Nassim Soleimanpour: And, yes, rabbit is very wild. I mean, I do have another show called Nassim where, like, I'm also physically around and I do things, but no, it's just you. You just, like, they admit you. You come, they introduce you to the stage, and then someone would go, Suzy's gonna do it tonight.

Susan Wokoma: You know, making me feel sick - and also excited.

Nassim Soleimanpour: Well, you would be a blast at back.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, well, I've got. Why do you think. I mean, I've sort of, sort of explained why I would want to do it because it makes me feel sick and excited. Why do you think so many of these people, these amazing people who are artists, they're famous, but they're also artists. Why do you think they were drawn to this experience? What do you think it was about maybe the confines of what their life is now like as an artist compared to the experience of.

Nassim Soleimanpour: I mean, if I'm being fair, I think there are different phases in the life of the play. I mean, people like Tim, he did it. The first few actors who did it in Edinburgh, Tim was among them, and I owe it to them. You know, there was no history. There was no. They could have been embarrassed. They just showed up. And this crazy kid in Iran who wrote a play, you know, I don't know if I would have the guts. I think it's their nature. The first few people who stepped in, lots of great british actors that I can name. and then as it started, like, proving itself, of course, it becomes a phenomenon. People want to be part of the fight Club. I hope we've proven with all these shows that we're not going to embarrass you, we're going to challenge you in a good way. But people are brave. Brave people are up for good challenges for a good cause. And I was in Iran, they wanted to give me a voice, maybe because I couldn't

physically be here at the Court, which is fine now.

Susan Wokoma: So how is it writing a piece where you don't know who the performer is going to be? Because my experience as an actor it's, you know, there's casting. So you read a play and it could be played by anyone, but it will say, you know, Louise in her, twenties did it, and then you're like, okay, cool. But what is the experience of writing this thing that could be embodied by anybody? Is it freeing? Is there restrictions there?

Nassim Soleimanpour: very beautiful question, actually. I think it first started for me, it started with losing the location. Because I was like, okay, I'm not performing in Iran. I can do Tokyo. Why not Beijing, you know?

Susan Wokoma: Ah.

Nassim Soleimanpour: So I first lost the sensation of location, and that encouraged me to concentrate on time. I mean, I always talk about it. I think about the audience in 400 years, you know, I was just like, why not? You know? Because that's one thing. Look at us. Like, I watched, like, a play last night, and there were lots of references to Hamlet, you know? so you try to think of the people of other times and , like, space times, let's say. And then you go, it's very beautiful. I cast in my head. No, now I have you in my head. I go, huh? Suzie's gonna laugh. You know, she's gonna be wild. Like, Cassie Najimi is one that I always think about, because she was very wild. When we did Nassim together, she did an amazing show. But I walked out and after the show and I told my stage manager, I need a glass of wine. We're in New York, and I always go over like, oh, my God, if I have a catty, you know, how do I just. Because they're unpredictable, it's like a blind date, and you keep doing it in your head. And I'm quite slow when I write. Rabbit was seven years. Nassim was five years. Echo is now four

years. So I have a lot of time to sit and think about all these amazing people that I know.

Susan Wokoma: that's an incredible answer. I kind of feel. I definitely feel like the only way you can create something like this is if you're thinking about how it lives beyond, you know, in hundreds of years, which is something that I think a lot of playwrights, writers, screenwriters might feel restricted by. It's the now. It's the, How can you grab people now? What can you say that is going to keep people in their seats for 45 minutes before they start getting bored? But this kind of expansive, almost connection to what people might want to still here in the future is kind of huge.

Nassim Soleimanpour: yeah. I think without spoiling what ECHO is, I think that's actually in the core of ECHO - is this now, is that I sometimes feel like it's my job as a writer to tour, you know, give, you tours in time, like, because I sit in my room and in my space, and I try

00:10:00

Nassim Soleimanpour: to imagine what's going to happen five years from now in Rio de Janeiro, you know? And in order to do that, I'm like, oh, maybe I should tell you a story about my mom, which happened ten years ago in Shiraz. So I somehow go back and forth in time as I think every playwright does. I think we all do. We sit in the auditorium and we think, oh, I should go back home and send an email. So this concept of now does not really exist. I think it's an illusion to do a show for now, to me, does not exist. You cannot do this because now does not exist scientifically.

Susan Wokoma: That's amazing. So let's talk about ECHO So, very similarly with white rabbit, red rabbit, you're going to have somebody who's going to be on stage. Is this

person going to be with you on stage or will they be on their own?

Nassim Soleimanpour: no comments.

Susan Wokoma: No comment. Oh, damn it. See, the way that I very casually was like, so, I don't know, perhaps. And you're like, no, damn it. that's incredibly exciting. How do you get a building like the Royal Court to go Yeah, sure. Brilliant. Let's do that.

Nassim Soleimanpour: There is a story in the core of it. Ah. It is personal. There is a form that is very exciting. I think we really are pushing the form with this one because rabbit, as we said, was really wild. Then we have Naseem, the play where I physically tour with the show and I'm around and I do funny things with some live streaming. I come on stage, you know, and then. But this one is a bigger production. It's very ambitious, very. With creative technology. It's a very different one somehow. Like a remote magic show, if you wish. so that was presented to all the co producers we have now. God knows we have co producers in Belgium, Germany, France, New York, ah, London, Sweden, all prominent theatres. So they all interrogated us while we were, like, speaking about all of this. And then it's hopefully maybe the team, I think. We think we have a very good team. It seems. It was convincing.

Susan Wokoma: Right? So you're. Your plays have such an international scale. And I guess what you said earlier in terms of you thinking about not being constricted to location is the way that you're able to experience that. Have you noticed, a different reaction where your plays are, put on?

Nassim Soleimanpour: Yes and no. I start with the no, because we describe cold reeds as they're like machines. Machines have certain type of input, certain type of process

and certain type of output. If I have a printer and I want to give this plant to my printer and I expect to receive tomatoes, that's not a machine. This is just a dream. Unless someone builds such a machine. Maybe.. now, so think of a car. we don't want car crash. We design it properly. You need to have certain skills, at least. It's a cold read. You should be able to read, you know.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Nassim Soleimanpour: in whatever language, you could do it in braille. so, yes, so this is fixed. This is not going to change. The ballpark is quite clear and we guarantee it for the sake of the actor who steps in. The brave people who do it for the producers, for the audience, for everyone, for the show. But then how do you drive the car? Some people want to go faster, some people want to go, they want to stop, they want to play rock music, they want to get emotional, take photos, you know, so we try to accommodate. And in different cultures, you feel how it changes. I've been on tour with Nassim. We've done it in, God knows, I think, like, a dozen languages. To, do it in Tokyo, in Japanese, is so different from the New York run that you said with the audience, with the actor and with the language. With the language. I don't know if it's a short story, but it's fun. In Nassim, we ask for a swear word.

Susan Wokoma: Okay.

Nassim Soleimanpour: and we had, like, this amazing, teacher, university teacher, who translated it. And it should get like Laughter when we do that bit. And we didn't. We did two shows and no one was laughing. And I was like, is it the japanese audience? Is it? But they're laughing elsewhere. So I had a chat with him and I told him, where's this word that you're giving me? He said, bad person. I said, like, I need something stronger.

He said, like, but, mate, we are summarised, you know, you cannot go stronger than bad person. I mean, I later spoke with, like, younger generation, and they were like, no, no, no, but that does not, of course, like, that's a different thing. You know, like the f word in. In German. I speak German now.

00:15:00

Nassim Soleimanpour: I live in Berlin. I've seen rabbit has the f word. And, people don't laugh. You know, it's very strong in German. You don't say it. It's like, oh, So, yeah, all these little things, I think, changes when you travel.

Susan Wokoma: And was there a difference in how you approach Nassim compared to ECHO? I know that you spoke about how long it takes you to write. you know, it took you how many years to write white rabbit?

Nassim Soleimanpour: Seven.

Susan Wokoma: Seven years. So what is that process of, ah, writing for you?

Nassim Soleimanpour: It's a very good question. for me, it always. It starts, I mean, life is a thing like, I walk, I meet people. My dog's name is Echo.

Susan Wokoma: that's one way to get to me, is a dog. Well done. Well done.

Nassim Soleimanpour: He's my best teacher. No, because I was the youngest as a son. We don't have children. I am the child. I'm enough for the whole family. But to see him, how he's smelling, how he's learning, how old he is, he's like twelve years now. so you

get questions like, why is he doing it? You know? But my brain is very formal. I immediately get obsessed with the form. I'm just like, can you do a show where people are in ten different stages all around the globe, simultaneously perform, but the audience experience what will happen. So that's how. Because I think I've studied as an engineer, right? And then I start, like, coming up with the mathematics of it.

Susan Wokoma: Wow.

Nassim Soleimanpour: And then it's like a swiss watch when you. I always say, I think it's Schumann who said it. Some say Einstein, but I think everyone can make something simple look complicated. But one needs to be a genius to make something complicated look simple.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Nassim Soleimanpour: So the simplification, the process of polishing and polishing so that it looks cute, you know, unless a maker like Tim walks in, he would go, ah, ah, that's what you did. Maybe you should have, because he also is very formal to me. and then you invite the people that you trust, like Omar, like the people that I mentioned, Derek Richards, in this case, Emmanuel Kirsty Housley, Stewart Pringle, they're all like, you know, and they all start interrogating you and the form and the content.

Susan Wokoma: How does that feel when you've done the mathematics of a piece and then you start inviting other people into that and they start going, nah, that doesn't. Oh, I don't quite. How does, like, just in terms of you, your ego, I guess. How do, how do you manage that? Because we were talking to some, the company, Dirty Hare, and, one of the writers found it really hard, the kind of sharing process of the work, whereas the

other two members was so much more from a devising background. So how do you cope with that?

Nassim Soleimanpour: Pain is okay. Pain sets you free. It is painful. I understand. But I always say, the best thing that I can say with a formal piece, at least those that I write, I describe columns. I say, like, this is a building. You commissioned me to create this building for you, and this is my design. And you, as someone who commissioned me, you can come in and say, oh, I don't like this pillar. No, that's your right. But do not dare to touch the pillar because everything is going to collapse. Maybe I move the whole building and hide it somewhere. It's my job to move things. And then we have the interior design. You leave spaces for people to come and breathe. Like, you go ten minutes of video arts, you know, and you can say, and we see this and we see that. But why would I want to pick that? I leave it to the video artist to decide it's for them to breathe. It's for them. It's a canvas on top of which they can paint.

Nassim Soleimanpour: No. So it is, I think, yeah, it is a beautiful dance that one should enjoy.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Nassim Soleimanpour: And I do enjoy when I do it with people that I love to work with.

Susan Wokoma: And do you find... I'm so obsessed with what you said about maths because I feel like so many people entered the arts to escape maths. [they laugh] It really tickled me when you were like, the maths of it, I was like, no. With that way of thinking and putting something together. How private are you in that respect? So I know that there is a point where you share your work, but does it stay with you for a long

time? I'm thinking to go back to White Rabbit, red rabbit, do you spend most of that seven years in isolation with the work before you share it with others?

Nassim Soleimanpour: It changed per project, and I am changing. I am changing. I think it was very like I was a caveman when I wrote rabbit. No commission, no nothing. I did it all and I sent it out towards the end I worked with two amazing canadian dramaturgs. Blank was similar. Nassim I was coming out of my shell. I did one now for audible That is just like

00:20:00

Nassim Soleimanpour: me going back, and I'm just like, right. I've written everything. Work with Donny Ottawa, my director. every now and then. But, yeah, it's per project, and I think people have different. I'm also a human being. Sometimes I'm like, why don't I write a novel?

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Nassim Soleimanpour: I just sit and write something.

Susan Wokoma: Do you think you'll ever write a novel?

Nassim Soleimanpour: I think it's coming up. I have a feeling that, yeah, I might. I think now we're in the midst of devising with all the crazy thing, and as much as I'm enjoying it, part of me goes for, like, do I need to go up north in the snow and just hurt people a bit less and, enjoy silence. [they laugh]

Susan Wokoma: So ECHO asks its audience to confront what it means to be a refugee in time as much as space. It's an experiment in concept touring for the age of climate crisis. An ambitious, magical and uncompromising production. Are we. Are we in the same ballpark?

Nassim Soleimanpour: We're in the same show. Unless Nassim wakes up in the morning and changes the whole script, which is not going to happen at this point.

Susan Wokoma: it's so brilliant. So now. So your other play, Nassim.

Nassim Soleimanpour: Yes.

Susan Wokoma: Was, directed by Omar Elerian

Nassim Soleimanpour: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Who is going to be back directing ECHO here. How does it feel to work with him again?

Nassim Soleimanpour: Oh, my God. I mean, I can spend hours and hours talking about Omar. it is amazing. I've known this guy now for, like, God knows, ten years. I think Omar has a very unique, space in my heart and in my work, because I used to write plays without directors. Rabbit, blank, lion, hamlet, they all didn't. And then I bumped into this smart director. We were both younger, twelve years ago, and he was like, write a play for me. And I was like, you're a director. I don't play

Susan Wokoma: Don't do that. [they laugh]

Nassim Soleimanpour: And then he said, like, I know you better than this. I think you want challenges, and I'm giving you a challenge. And then we went on this crazy journey of, how can you do a cold read, which is directed? And then we did Nassim together. And, it's with all my. I mean, I can. I, had the luxury of knowing him for so long, and I've been around as he was working with Orenze on Misty, and he was doing the chairs with the amazing Marcello and Catherine. So I'm just learning from this man. I mean, he is smart. He can go as deep as I go. Sometimes people get bored because I get very philosophical and everyone's like, yeah, but no one cares. But he can go that deep. And then he has an understanding of the team Being at the Court, actually, I must say, I sometimes now get confused. Who is the writer? It's like, yes, that beautiful neon sign you always go, oh, we studied the Court in Iran. So I'm like, my name is going to be there. But is it really like my name should be there? Because you have now a show which is very advanced when it comes to technology. We have great Derek Richards to be our technologist, and he is as much writing the play as I am, as Omar does, as Emmanuel Bartz, our producer, because it's very complex. So, yeah, it's being made somewhere in between, and people are kind to allow me to label it with my name.

Susan Wokoma: Take the label. I feel that this so much about how you pioneer the vision and that you do need somebody who plants that seed. And that is the thing that makes everyone inspired and brings out the best in them and in you. So I think your name at the front of this building is very well deserved, and I cannot wait to see ECHO. thank you so much for joining me. Thank you on the Podcast.

Nassim Soleimanpour: Thank you very much, Suzy.

Susan Wokoma: Thanks for listening to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast. If you'd like to listen to more, then make sure you subscribe. If you're interested in what

you've just heard, you can book tickets for this and other plays in the Royal court's New season at, the royalcourttheatre.com. follow us at RoyalCourtTheatre on Instagram and Royal Court on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Playwright's Podcast. See you soon.

Susan Wokoma: Bye.

00:24:34