

DATE OF PERFORMANCE

6 March - 7 - 8 - 9
2025

By
Unread Archives

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Ost

Dramaturgy of Absence

Transnational theatre productions within the border and prison complexes

By Azadeh Sharifi

On 6 March, 2025, the lecture performance *Date of Performance* by the Iranian collective ی اهواش را (Unread archives) premiered at Ballhaus Ost in Berlin without the artists being present. The artists had not received visas because they were classified as high-risk asylum applicants upon entering Germany. Ahead of the premiere, Ballhaus Ost made the denial of visas to the artists visible through their social media accounts.

We were eagerly preparing for the “Date of Performance” scheduled to be performed at Ballhaus Ost from March 6th to 9th. This piece, created in response to censorship, the denial of basic rights, and the struggle of artists who are imprisoned or restricted from this craft in the Islamic Republic of Iran, now faces additional suppression by the Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

OUR ARTISTS' VISAS HAVE BEEN REJECTED

We're heartbroken & outraged – rejecting the visa application of artists at risk with the justification that “there are reasonable doubts about your intention to leave the territory of the member states before the visa expires” WAS NEVER, IS NOT and WILL NEVER BE OK!

In agreement with the artists, the show will go on. We'll present their work in full solidarity, ensuring their resistance is seen, heard, and felt.

Join us from March 6th to 9th to witness this powerful piece and stand with us in solidarity for the voices that must not go unnoticed. (Ballhaus Ost, Instagram, 5 March, 2025)

These circumstances are not uncommon for productions that are invited from the Global South to Europe. Migration and border regimes have complicated transnational collaboration in the past. In the case of the *Date of Performance* by ی اهواش را (Unread archives), the topic of the performance brought another layer of political restriction: Theatre produced and shown in the prison industrial complex of Iran. Presence and co-presence, a constituting element of performance, cannot be guaranteed under these conditions.

The announcement of the performance *Date of Performance* by ی اهواش را (Unread archives) had been intriguing, not only to regular theatre audiences but also to different

generations of Iranian diaspora in Berlin. Berlin has historically, from the 1960s until now, been one of the main epicentres for the political Iranian diaspora and one of the largest communities besides London, Paris and Stockholm. It accommodates several generations of diasporic Iranians who came as students in the 1960s and 1970s, and who were involved in the protests against the Shah regime¹, political refugees who fled Iran in the 1980s and 1990s and had been imprisoned either by the Shah regime or the Islamic Republic, and then in the 21st centuries a mix of political refugees (from the Green movement in 2009 and the feminist revolution in 2022) and those migrating due to the repressive Iranian government. Therefore, the audience room was filled with a diverse group of predominantly (German) Iranians of different ages, including my mother, whose own experiences of imprisonment as a political student in the 1970s in the infamous Evin prison and her active engagement in theatre during that time, has shaped the trajectory of my life and my informed knowledge of the history of theatre in Iranian prison. Before the performance began, Ozi Ozar entered the stage to inform the audience of a fact that had already been announced on social media: namely, that the artists had not been granted visas and were therefore unable to enter Germany. The lecture performance had been adapted for staging in the absence of the collective

هشنه مدن اوخی اه ویش را (Unread archives). Ozi Ozar, an Iranian theatre and film director, is part of the artistic collective that took over leadership of Ballhaus Ost in 2023. Ozi Ozar had been responsible for the communication and administrative aspects like obtaining funding and visas, and when it became clear that the Iranian theatre collective was denied entry to Germany, he assumed the role of the dramaturg. He announced that the performance at Ballhaus Ost had been divided into two parts. In the first part, a video documentary was projected on stage, consisting of the group's artistic work. In the second part, the theatre stage would be transformed into a volleyball court. Audiences were invited to join in solidarity with the political prisoners and the absent Iranian artist collective. On behalf of the artists, two important Iranian artists-scholars, Azadeh Ganjeh and Maryam Palizban, took over the responsibility of the artists' talk.

How are artistic processes and dramaturgical decision shaped when they are not only defined by processes of artistic negotiation, but also through the repressive structures of prison and imprisonment, as well as border and migration regimes? What effects do these external conditions have on the poetics of the performance?

This article examines *Date of Performance* by هشنه مدن اوخی اه ویش را (Unread Archives), a transnational theatre production situated at the intersection of border regimes and prison complexes and defined by these in its artistic approach. The article interrogates the relationship between dramaturgy, poetics, and production by applying absence as a dispositif (Foucault 1980), a purposeful arrangement or ordering that becomes an apparatus with its own rules and regulations (Dreyfus

1) In 1967, the Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi visited (West)Berlin. Ahead of the state visit, German students and other left-wing groups supported the Iranian diaspora by protesting against the Unrechtsstaat (unjust state). During the protest, the German student Benno Ohnesorg was murdered by German police which unleashed the German student protests (see <https://erlebte-geschichte.fu-berlin.de/themen/studentenbewegung/benno-ohnesorg-ein-tod-der-radikalisierung> and <https://www.igfm.de/iran-unfaire-gerichtsverfahren-folter-und-geiselnahmen/>).

and Rabinow 1982, 119-21). Within this framework, dramaturgy of absence is understood as a structure for artistic strategies in the physical absence of the artists, particularly when repressive systems are in place, that forms not only the process of the production but also the process of its presentation. In this article, I argue that *Date of Performance* negotiates not only the history of theatre in prison, but the conditions under which theatre has been created in Iran in the 20th and 21st centuries. Therefore, dramaturgy of absence becomes a constitutive and intrinsic part of Iranian theatre.

Absence as a dispositif

The moment when I started thinking about absence was in the aftermath of the performance and during the artist talk. In the absence of the Unread Archives collective, a talk had been organised with Azadeh Ganjeh and Maryam Palizban, two Iranian theatre artists and scholars, and the dramaturg Ozi Ozar, who had similarly migrated to Germany in recent years. One of the first questions raised was, in fact, concerning the theatrical format of the performance. The audience member introduced themselves as a ‘non-theatre-person’ who had seen the advertisement for the performance through social media and was interested in the topic. They said that the performance was informative, but could have easily been produced as a podcast, which could be listened to anywhere, instead of a theatre space. Here, what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the essential paradigm of performance, the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2004), was not given. The theatre collective مدن اوخی اهونی شرآ (Unread archives) remained anonymous and all in all absent, although I was able to get in contact with the director, Maryam, and get a little bit more information about the artistic process. Could *Date of Performance*, in the form that was shown in Ballhaus Ost Berlin, still be called a performance?

My scholarly answer, and the one I gave as a response during the artist’s talk, was a clear yes. This was a theatre performance produced for a theatrical stage. But through which lens and framework can it be identified as a performance? One way to approach the multilayered performance is through *absence as a dispositif*, an apparatus structuring the relationship between the poetic, production and presentation of the performance. *Dispositif* (or *dispositive*) as a “thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” (Foucault 1980) is understood as an apparatus, a system of relations that can be established between these elements. Foucault’s *dispositifs* are composed of forms of knowledge, power relations, and processes of subjectivation. The idea that we can also perceive absence has also become part of the contemporary philosophy of mind (Gow 2021). Michael Martin argues that “we can think of normal visual experience as experience not only of objects which are located in some space, but as of a space within which they are located” (Martin 1992, 189). The experience of empty space is a form of experiencing absence: experiences of empty space consist in seeing particular regions as places where objects could be (Martin 1992; Richardson 2010; Soteriou 2011).

For this performance, the concept of experiencing absence becomes central, serving not only as a key metaphor for both the artistic work and the dramaturgical processes but also as the materiality of the aesthetic experience. Absence not only concerns the poetics of the performance, theatre in prison, but also the conditions of the production and its dramaturgy.

To use *absence as a dispositif* as a framework enables me as a scholar and as an audience member to view what I saw on a theatre stage as a performance. The *non*-presence of the Iranian artist collective transformed the performance and its dramaturgy, creating a dramaturgy of absence through which the German audience became firsthand witnesses to the politics that are the subject matter of the performance: systemic violence by repressive regimes, the Iranian industrial prison complex, and the European border and migration regime – all of which shape artistic practice.

In the following, I will examine the content and dramaturgical strategies of the *Date of Performance* in two parts: I start with the video that contains the main part of the performance, creating a genealogy of theatre and theatrical performance within the Iranian industrial prison complex, followed by Fortress Europe and its migration and border regime, where I argue that the *dramaturgy of absence* is not a single incident, but rather an inherent aspect of transnational collaborative theatre productions, particularly between Europe and the Global South. The final part is dedicated to how the *dramaturgy of absence* has shaped and structured the poetics, dramaturgy and production of *Date of Performance* by the Iranian collective هدشن هدن اوخی اهوي شرآ (Unread archives).

Iran's industrial prison complex and Iranian theatre

The stage is black.

“The actor in this performance has been in prison for 844 days”

The sentence is projected in English and Farsi.

The numbers are in red and additionally written in a bigger font above the sentence. Simultaneously, a voice counts first from 1 to 20, then again from 1 to 120. Are these the days within confinement? Or the days awaiting prison time?

Prison has become a metaphor to describe life in the Islamic Republic (Nikpour 2024), but the history of imprisonment intertwined with the everyday life of Iranians, and particularly Iranian intellectuals and artists, goes beyond the current regime. In fact, 20th Iran exhibits one of the most notorious records in modern political repression, with tens of thousands of individuals being imprisoned, tortured, or executed, especially during the 1960s-80s (Matin-Asgari 2006).

After the takeover of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, which included Reza Pahlavi and later his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran's modern prison system was established as part of its massive state-building and legal centralisation efforts. Just as the Pahlavi government centralised Iran's legal administration in the late 1920s and early 1930s, codifying an unprecedented and expansive

secular penal and criminal legal code, the early Pahlavi state planned for many prisons. Nikpour argues that the newborn Pahlavi elite saw these new prisons as a solution rather than a problem and as a necessary step in the project of transforming Iran into a ‘civilised’ modern nation-state capable of taking its rightful and sovereign place on the global stage. These ‘progressive’ and ‘modern’ institutions were designed and built with the help of Europe and the United States, which were supposed to reform criminals into productive citizens² (Nikpour 2024, 4). Prison imagined as ‘correction centres’ quickly turned into spaces of detaining and locking away dissidents. Following Martin-Asgari’s arguments, under both regimes, political imprisonment was a project with the same modern and rational purpose. The objective was to isolate, contain, and destroy, or to politically remake citizens who most seriously challenged the state’s claims to political and ideological legitimacy. Both regimes persecuted individuals of diverse ideological stripes, but the main target remained the Left (Matin-Asgari 2006, 690). Prisons, therefore, are not only centres of ‘correction’ but also what is predominantly seen in the US context: prisons as an industrial complex (Schlosser 1998), a capitalist venture that boosts profit not only in the economic and financial sense but also through hegemony and epistemic violence. They became groundstones of Iranian institution- and nation-building that can be witnessed through the history of the notorious Evin prison where predominantly political prisoners are incarcerated. It was built in 1972 under the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The prison grounds include an execution yard, a courtroom, and separate blocks for common criminals and female inmates. Initially designed to house 320 inmates – 20 in solitary cells and 300 in two large communal blocks – it was expanded to hold more than 1,500 prisoners, including 100 solitary cells for political prisoners, by 1977 (Abrahamian 1999, 105). It was originally operated by the Shah’s security and intelligence service, SAVAK. But after the revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic quickly made use of the structures, implementing and expanding SAVAK interrogation and torture methods³, and it was further expanded to hold up to 15,000 inmates.⁴ Political prisoners were tortured almost exactly as under the monarchy in the 1970s and for the same purposes of obtaining information, cooperation, and public repentance (Matin-Asgar 2006, 702). Solitary confinement, torture and violence have been justified in the name of the safety of Iranian society and the Islamic Republic’s integrity, which is claimed to be under constant threat from ‘foreign invaders’⁵ who are infiltrating Iran.⁶ The number of prisoners across

- 2) The foremost of these new modern prisons was central Tehran’s Qasr Prison. Qasr’s history is emblematic of the changes wrought by the legal and carceral transformations of the last century in Iran. Qasr Prison first opened in 1929 on the grounds of a former Qajar castle and royal gardens and closed its doors to prisoners in 2005 before reopening as a museum and public park in 2008, after over a quarter century of use under the Islamic Republic.
- 3) Under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad acknowledging that rape had been part of “some detention centers”. (<https://archive.nytimes.com/thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/28/iranians-say-prison-rape-not-new/>).
- 4) In 2006, BBC claimed that around 2,575 men and 375 women were in Evin jail. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5077180.stm>).
- 5) ‘Foreign invaders’ is an old trope that has been infused in Iranian society since the colonial and imperial interests of Great Britain and later the US. And indeed in 1935, the first democratic ambition under Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown by a staged Coup d’Etat.
- 6) This is currently happening while Iran is at war with Israel and the US. Many Iranians have been accused of being Israeli spies, interrogated and tortured. Reports are made through social media.

Iran has increased steadily in the past century, including another vast rise after the revolution, culminating in this current era of mass criminalisation and incarceration. There are now at least a quarter of a million prisoners in 268 official prisons, (Nikpour 2024, 7), making imprisonment part of the everyday life of Iranians.

The history of Iranian prisons is an integral part of everyday life among the Iranian people. Intellectuals, artists and art practitioners have experienced imprisonment and death through the Iranian industrial prison complex. Iranian governments of the 20th and 21st centuries have used imprisonment (and execution) as a repressive tool of silencing those who oppose their political agenda. These forms of repression can not only be understood as physical (and psychological) violence but as epistemic ones through which the absence of artistic, social and cultural in Iran's society is produced. The history of Iranian theatre has therefore been inextricably linked with the Iranian prison system. However, artists have found ways to make use of existing means and conditions, even in solitary confinement.

The performance *Date of performance* examines these conditions that have had an influence on Iranian theatre since the 1950s. The so-called father of Iranian theatre studies, Abdolhossein Noushin, was imprisoned after his second play. It was in prison that he wrote *The Art of Theater*, the first theoretical book on modern Iranian theatre (Rahmaninejad 2020, 24). On stage, a famous quote from Abdolhossein Noushin's book is projected:

"If the actor in theater does not utilize their body as an instrument of performance, the production can no longer be called theater. Abdolhossein Noushin, p. 108"

The quote is then overlayed with an incoming call from Evin Prison. The stage remains black, and the audience is not given the name or the face of the caller. We can only assume that he is male. He informs the audience that he might get interrupted, but that he will call again on another phone.

The inmate caller starts his account by providing a historical overview of Abdolhossein Noushin's role as an Iranian playwright and theatre director, emphasising his significance as a figure within the Tudeh party. Following the completion of his second production in 1948, he was imprisoned. However, he was able to escape in 1950, along with other artists. It is a widely acknowledged fact that he established one of the most significant theatres in the region, the Saadi Theatre, while being imprisoned.

The call is interrupted by a computer-generated voice that informs the audience that the call is now over, but the inmate caller continues to speak. He then turns to Karim Keshavarz, an influential translator of theatre theoretical texts as well as plays, who was imprisoned almost at the same time as Abdolhossein Noushin. Many of his translations, which were also produced within confinement, helped shape the canon of Iranian theatre inspired by global performance and theatre. The inmate's account is a summary of the years between 1941 and 1953, which are known as the "stage period" due to the wide range of performances that were staged in the newly formed theatres in Iran. Dozens of theatres, including Saadi Theatre, Ferdowsi Theatre, and Farhang Theatre, were established at that time (Soleimanirad 2025, 92). These theatres and theatre practitioners were connected to the marxist-socialist political groups in Iran. The communist Tudeh Party made use

of agitprop methods that artists developed within their theatre practices to circulate their political agenda to the common people. Consequently, given that most playwrights, actors, filmmakers, producers, and poets were members of the Tudeh Communist Party, the content and themes in the flourishing cinemas and theatres of Lalehzar Street were predominantly radical and leftist (Rezaei, Rezvani and Soltanzadeh 2022).

Then abruptly, the inmate caller entangles the conditions of his current imprisonment into his narration.

“2. Dey 1403 (24 December 2023), 23:00 Tehran time

Solitude Running Dancing Family Streets The sky at night Internet Freedom Azadi”

The caller reflects on the fact that these words become concepts over which every prisoner pauses, as they were an integral part of everyday life before imprisonment. He argues that prisoners will never disturb one another when they witness the state of being lost in thoughts, because these are the only spaces where freedom from imprisonment is possible.

The recounting of Iranian theatre history within the Iranian industrial prison complex and the intertwinement of artists who are themselves imprisoned whilst researching and creating a performance, constitutes the poetry of the performance.

Within this poetic and dramaturgical paradigm, artists from multiple generations appear to engage in dialogue with one another without ever meeting or being in the same time and/or space. The audience then listens to an interview with a theatre artist who remains anonymous as he is not introduced. The video does not include images of the artists themselves, but the person can be recognised by those familiar with Iranian theatre as Nasser Rahmaninejad, a theatre playwright who has been living in exile in the US since 1979. Rahmaninejad provides a detailed account of the shift in the political prison atmosphere from the late 1960s onwards. The Tudeh members, rather traditional intellectuals who preferred to use their imprisonment to study quietly and in solitude, were joined by radical leftists who were part of armed guerrilla groups inspired and influenced by anticolonial movements in the Americas. As “organic intellectuals” in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci 1992), they saw their imprisonment as part of the political struggle, where they further educated each other, but in secret and far away from the guards. It is within this context that not only academic texts and theatre plays were written, but also plays and performances were produced. Through this paradigm shift, Nasser Rahmaninejad’s theatre practice in prison was formed. For his first performance in prison, he used revolutionary texts as a basis to create what he describes as an intersection of political speech and theatrical performance, what would now be called a lecture performance, which also included revolutionary and folk songs⁷. Rahmaninejad produced ten short plays in his one year of imprisonment.

This transformation in the 1970s is the backdrop against which the only video showing the face of a political prisoner and artist is presented. Vida Hajebi Tabrizi was a political activist

7) Many revolutionary songs in Iran have been historically, particularly in the 20th and 21st century, masked as folk or children’s songs.

and a writer. She was also my mother's friend. The video was recorded by the BBC given that Vida was among the first female inmates of the notorious Evin prison, and the Shah's regime was under pressure to show its prison conditions as humane. In the video, Vida is not pleased to be talking to the foreign press, because it could be used against her. During her six-year confinement in the female ward of Evin prison, she produced the first recorded performance of Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*.⁸

Throughout the performance, many other important Iranian theatre practitioners and playwrights like the poet and playwright Saeed Soltanpour, the director and playwright Mohsen Yalfani, and younger female artists and theatre practitioners of the 21st century, who due to repression remain anonymous, talk about their political vision that they translate into their theatrical work and how these are shaped by prison. The conditions of imprisonment permeated the prisoners' daily lives both within and outside of the prison environment. These conditions had a profound effect on how they approached the poetics, dramaturgy and production of a performance. Prison and/or the threat/fear of imprisonment and execution, and the threat of the absence of life constitute what is narrated, how performance and plays are dramaturgically arranged, and where and when they are produced and presented. Censorship, self-censorship and/or dealing with the absence of artists, the freedom of expression and movement become the pre-existing conditions of Iranian theatre. *Date of Performance* focuses on theatre in prison, but in truth, it examines the conditions under which theatre has been created in Iran in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In the case of the theatre collective itself, this is what the dramaturg of Ballhaus Ost, Ozi Ozar, wrote to me:

At the beginning of the revolution, they stopped performing on stages that required the formal permission of the Islamic Republic (Mojavez Ershad), and as a protest, they began engaging in more sports instead. One of which was playing volleyball in Laleh Park of Tehran, which is not far from Tehran's city theatre and all the conventional theatre schools. This becomes a form of resistance for them. While doing this, they find a sports hall a very theatrical space, and the volleyball training becomes a form of theatre rehearsal for them. This goes on until the actor in the piece gets arrested, and they decide to put the "Date of performance" together and not let the absence of the actor go missing in that third space they created for themselves." (Email Ozi Ozar, 10 June, 2025)

Fortress Europe and its border and migration regime

So, how does the border and migration regime of Europe, Fortress Europe, come into account for artistic processes? How does it shape this specific performance, and expose a systematic condition for transnational theatre (and art) production between Europe and the Global South?

8) My mother was imprisoned as a political student in Evin prison in the 1970s. There, she performed theatre as part of her political activities. My first memories of theatre are therefore not my own but those that were part of my mother's narration of imprisonment.

The term “Fortress Europe” had long been employed to critique the repercussions of European border policies as embodied by the Schengen process. It indicated the ongoing endeavours to strengthen, reinforce, militarise and upgrade the borders, largely by introducing new border technologies. The term suggests that the border functions as a protective barrier around Europe, from which migrants would metaphorically rebound, facing either a perpetual existence in the netherworlds of transit or death. (Kasperek 2016)

The historical development of migration in Europe was constituted by former colonial states that were immigration countries in the 19th century. While others became countries of immigration after World War II. Germany has been one of the latter, where migration was predominantly shaped through the guest worker model (Lavenex 2009) and where policies aimed to get rid of immigrants. But post-World War II Germany also had a unique law, deriving from the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Until 1993, the constitution of West Germany included an article – Article 16, paragraph 2, sentence 2 – which declared that “Victims of political persecution have a right to asylum”. Many refugees, including my parents and many other Iranian political refugees, profited from this law, which allowed every victim of political persecution an unrestricted and actionable claim to protection (Münch 1993). In 1985, the Schengen Agreement aimed to abolish internal border controls while reinforcing the external borders of the constructed Schengen Area with a perspective of shared responsibility. Schengen thus marks the birth of the European External Border as an institution and European policy field (Kasperek 2016, 3). Since then, the law on migration and asylum has become more restricted, making it impossible to find legal routes into Europe and, essentially, Germany⁹. Although this may seem to apply only to migrants and refugees intending to stay permanently, it also affects artists who are invited to produce or present their work in European art institutions. Artists are denied entry into Europe, although they might (not) have a visa, and they become victims of racial and other forms of abuse through representatives and institutions of border regimes. The German dramaturgs Elisa Liepsch, Nadine Jessen, and Ewe Benbenek recount in their article on “Theater als solidarische Institution” (theatre as an institution of solidarity) their experiences with the border and migration regime, when an artist from Nigeria was stranded at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris and was not allowed to travel to the theatre festival in Frankfurt. The French authorities did not recognise the visa of the artists entering the Schengen area, and he was threatened with deportation and entry in the register of persons (Benebek et al. 2016, 93). Although the German art institution was able to help the Nigerian artists cross the border, the date on which the performance was programmed had been missed, and it could not be shown.

Fortress Europe had denied the presence of the artists, or – to acknowledge that this is an act and not an arbitrary event – had produced absence within the transatlantic artistic process.

9) While, for example, many migrants and refugees were allowed by the former Chancellor Merkel to enter Germany, particularly in the year 2015, their legal status and their right to become residents and ultimately citizens remained opaque. Many have since then faced deportation and/or have still not received a legal status.

Artists of the Global South have been constantly confronted with these additional circumstances. The Kenyan performance artist Ongutu Muraya, who had studied and lived in Amsterdam, decided to stop applying for European visas and return to Nairobi. In an essay, he explains his reason, which derives from freeing his imagination, to transcend internal limits rather than merely trying to cross physical borders (Muraya 2020). His work was, however, presented in Basel, Berlin, Munich, and Amsterdam; he was also part of a collaborative production that premiered in Ghent and was also presented in Antwerp. He recounts:

In all these situations, the work went on without my physical presence and on the condition that the following statement be read to the public:

‘Good evening. My name is Ongutu Muraya. I unfortunately cannot be physically present with you this evening. Let me try to briefly contextualise this absence. There is no easy way of doing this without seeming self-righteous or morally superior. So, let me emphasise that my decision is not to say that I am a better person. Or throw shade or shame on anyone who is brave enough to stay with the visa trouble. I decided to no longer apply for EU visas. It became too difficult for me to convince myself to go through with this periodic process of justifying my existence in order to gain temporary approval from a system that is undeniably discriminatory. A system whose biases and filters disproportionately affect people of colour. Of course, this decision has consequences for my work and mobility as an artist and a person. And my absence tonight is one of the many costs I have to pay. But my absence tonight is also a protest. A visa on arrival should be a basic right for all. It really is not unreasonable to ask for equal opportunity. Not aid, not pity, not sympathy, but equal opportunity – unrestrained by artificial barriers, prejudices, and preferences. And as long as this is not the case, I will look for strategies to be present without confirming a system I am opposed to. My mind is clear but my body is stuck in this timeline – a timeline where the greater “we” continues to allow the unnecessary deaths of people trying to cross real and abstract borders – however they manifest.’ (Muraya 2020)

In the podcast *Points of Entry*, hosted by Katie Kheriji-Watts, Muraya calls his decision to stop participating in the European Union’s “undeniably discriminatory visa system” an artistic strategy of “absence as protest” (Kheriji-Watts 2021). I understand his decision to utilise absence as an artistic strategy within the presentation in Europe, a *dramaturgy of absence*.

***Date of Performance* and its dramaturgy of absence**

Ongutu Muraya’s decision was a deliberate choice to utilise absence as a dramaturgical tool. In the case of *Date of Performance* at Ballhaus Ost, it was a decision of despair.

The dramaturg of Ballhaus Ost, Ozi Ozar, describes the preparation for getting the Iranian theatre collective to Germany as follows:

Then we entered the kick-off phase, trying to prepare everything as much as possible while maintaining as much security as possible. As a result, no one involved in the project was endangered since the whole team was in Iran. From the beginning, it was clear to us that the visa process can be tricky as the Goethe Institute has been legally closed for years.

Nevertheless, we tried to get visas for 3 people from the project to come here for a week before the show for preparation and rehearsal and the showing of the piece. We did everything by the books – applied through the visa-metric company in Iran (which is responsible for Schengen visas for pretty much all EU embassies).

Yet, on the Monday that they were supposed to arrive, I received a message from Maryam stating that their visa had been rejected because there was a danger that they wouldn't leave Germany within the specified timeframe. This was a bullet to my heart, as I have been there a few times in my life." (Email Ozi Ozar, 10 June, 2025)

Even playing by the book and ensuring that every administrative and bureaucratic aspect was in order according to migration law did not guarantee the artists' safe passage across Europe's borders. Ballhaus Ost decided to stage the performance in the absence of the artists as a sign of solidarity. Ozi Ozar describes how he "dropped everything else that I was doing" and became the on-site dramaturg of the performance: "Setting up the stage and doing a few Zoom calls with them from the Saal of Ballhaus Ost and trying multiple things to make the piece fit what they wanted it to be" (Email Ozi Ozar, 10 June, 2025).

Ozi Ozar's dramaturgical decision on how *Date of Performance* would be staged at Ballhaus Ost was coordinated with the collective. Therefore, I understand Ozar's announcement at the start of the performance, as made from a dual position: as a representative of Ballhaus Ost as well as the dramaturg of the performance in the absence of the collective Unread Archives. It becomes part of the performance and not (only) a prelude by the institution. After the first part, which included the material of the performance, the stage was transformed into a volleyball court, and the audience was invited to play on stage. It is presented as a solidarity act in the absence of the artist collective. It is also reminiscent of the time when the collective itself was not able to work on their performance in Iran and instead played volleyball, very close to Evin prison. Here, the audience is actively invited to take up the stage in the absence of the artist collective. The empty space is filled with different generations of Iranians in the diaspora who had similar experiences of imprisonment, denial of border crossing and by the migration regime. Dramaturgy of Absence is the dispositif of *Date of Performance* – it structures the poetics and the aesthetic experience of the performance. Ozi Ozar describes his own experience:

During the four nights of the shows, what was lovely and heartbreaking for me was that they, at the end, showed something like a general probe to the audience as you

can never get to what you want when you are not there, and I could also only do so much as I was not involved in the creation process. (Email Ozi Ozar, 10 June, 2025)

Epilogue

While I am writing this article, Iran is being bombarded. Officially, military bases and the Iranian government are the target, but more than 700 ordinary citizens have been murdered as part of collateral damage. Many people have fled from Tehran, Isfahan, Rasht and other major cities in Iran. The director of the performance, Maryam, finally received a two-week visa to come to Berlin, and we had planned to meet there on 15 June to talk about her work. Besides the bombs, the Iranian government had shut down the internet for days, which felt like ages, and when she finally sent me a message over social media, she only wrote to me that she was not able to leave the country but was in a safe place.

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