

Critics' Forum

Theater

In Search of "Armenian Theater"

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

It seems like a simple enough question: "What is Armenian theater?" Indeed, if I intend to write about it, a definition should come easily. But it proves quite elusive.

The difficulty does not pertain to dramas written in the Armenian language. Rather, it concerns the works of Armenian playwrights who, in a diasporan setting, compose in the language of an adopted country. Sometimes, they take up Armenian subjects; sometimes, they don't. Can we consider their works a part of "Armenian theater"?

William Saroyan, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his masterful "The Time of Your Life," certainly wrote plays that revolve around Armenian characters and themes – but he did so in English. Three of these plays have been published as "An Armenian Trilogy." Is that title a misnomer? Saroyan also penned numerous plays with nary a mention of Armenians. Can they be catalogued as "Armenian theater" solely on the basis of their author's ancestry? Can "Armenian theater" include *some* of Saroyan's plays, while rejecting the rest?

And how exactly do we classify plays about Armenians written by non-Armenians? Richard Kalinoski's "Beast on the Moon," for instance, tells the story of an Armenian couple trying to overcome the trauma of the Genocide to build a new life in its aftermath.

From a purely literary perspective, plays that are not written in the Armenian language do not constitute "Armenian theater." (In academic settings, courses in the literature of a certain language typically exclude works in translation). From a broader cultural perspective, however, dramas *by or about* Armenians must qualify as "Armenian theater" – even if they are written in English or another foreign language – since they capture and reflect our diasporan existence. In fact, the non-Armenian language itself forms an essential element of such an existence, often supplanting the mother tongue altogether.

If we do not adopt this broader definition, we can declare Armenian theater in the Diaspora practically moribund. Plays in the Armenian language have never been too numerous in our literature and nowadays have become virtually non-existent outside of Armenia. In California, home to the largest concentration of Armenians in the Diaspora, the last original Armenian-language drama of significance was Vahe Berberian's "200," which appeared more than a dozen years ago as the final installment of a trilogy that began with "The Pink Elephant." Since then, the occasional farce has popped up, only to be quickly (and deservedly) forgotten. From the existing canon, a few operettas have been staged, but weightier pieces are hardly visited. The most recent revival of a classic – Levon Shant's "Ancient Gods" – had to be imported from Armenia in a production of the Sundukian National Academic Theatre that was mired in outmoded styles of acting and direction.

Even when we add the English-language plays by or about Armenians, the numbers do not climb all that exponentially. Saroyan's body of work is substantial but several decades removed from the present day. In modern times, perhaps the only Armenian playwrights of note are Eric Bogosian and Leslie Ayvazian, if we use name recognition, publications, and regional productions as our measures. Ayvazian's play "Nine Armenians" has been produced by prestigious companies coast to coast – from the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York to the Intiman Theatre in Seattle – with a prominent staging in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum. I have heard the play be criticized within our community as lightweight and stereotypical. True enough – the writing does not delve too deep; still, it has many strong moments that are alternately poignant or hilarious. (I save my harsher words for Ayvazian's "Singer's Boy," a truly exasperating exercise, despite the presence of Olympia Dukakis to head the cast of its world premiere at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco).

"Nine Armenians" is not as important for what it *is*, as for what it *should have been* – a precursor, a forerunner, and ultimately a launching pad for a new generation of plays that explored the various manifestations of the Armenian diasporan existence and engaged in a dialogue about its underlying complexities through an artistic medium that is arguably the best suited for it.

We are still waiting.

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