

Critics' Forum
Theater
Five Solo Flights
By Aram Kouyoumdjian



Arpie Dadoyan

In what is either an extraordinary trend or an extraordinary coincidence, no less than five female writer/performers of Armenian descent have graced Los Angeles stages this year with solo shows they've authored. The number is striking given the relative paucity of Armenian actresses in general and solo performers in particular.

Among these five solo outings:

- Four pieces were of an autobiographical nature. Adriana Sevan's "Taking Flight" at the Fountain Theatre, for instance, was an account of fragmented relationships following the collapse of the Twin Towers. "Taking Flight" traced the changed landscape of Sevan's world after her fiancé narrowly escaped the tragedy and her best friend suffered life-altering injuries. The story was understandably heavy, and Sevan tried to modulate it with some levity and to embellish it with mystical elements. But the stretch did not come easily, and "Taking Flight" often strained under its own weight.

- Three shows touched on the authors' roots in countries of the Middle East. Nora Armani's "On the Couch," which also played at the Fountain (after an earlier run at the Luna Playhouse), harked back to the Egypt of the Nasser era. In "Ka Yev Chka" (There Is and There Isn't), Anahid Aramouni Keshishian recalled pre-revolutionary Iran. And in "Aypen Kim" (From A to C), Arpie Dadoyan conjured up the Lebanon of her youth and adolescence with gentle humor. In all three cases, however, the intensely personal aspect of the text left little room for the exploration of the political and social dynamics that Armenian communities encountered in these adopted countries.
- Two selections were in Armenian. It was refreshing to hear Dadoyan and Keshishian – both performing at Luna – share intimate stories in a language that does not often lend itself to emotional revelation without coming across as unduly sentimental. Keshishian's writing had a lyrical quality, while Dadoyan's piece was fluid and conversational, and even managed to incorporate some dialects that the generation of Western Armenians who survived the Genocide carried with them for some decades.
- One entry stood apart in being entirely fictional and constructed around multiple characters. Lory Tatoulian's "Pomegranate Whisky" (at the Heartbeat House Studio) was a *faux* cabaret featuring comic songs and monologues. An accomplished work, it showcased a wide range of Tatoulian's talents, including her facility with a number of accents. It also managed to remain altogether entertaining while stinging with satirical bite. One could not help relishing Tatoulian's signature portrayal of a gossip and judgmental Armenian housewife of middle class (but of little class). Yet the standout piece of the evening had to be an inspired bit about a bored and embittered Statue of Liberty longing to return to France.

Hopefully, this phenomenon of Armenian women embracing the art of solo performance will prove itself a trend, rather than a coincidence, since the trend is surely overdue. And hopefully, it will mature as an art form, both in style and substance, to explore deeper questions of individual and collective identity, as remarkably done by such leading African-American solo performers as Sarah Jones, Dael Orlandersmith, Anna Deavere Smith, and Charlayne Woodard.

The year is certainly not over. And then there's next year and the year after that...

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Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting ("The Farewells") and directing ("Three Hotels"). His latest work is "Velvet Revolution."

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