

Critics' Forum

Theater

New Play Development: Birthing a Script – and a Community

By Lori Yeghiayan

Plays do not hatch, fully-formed, from the imagination of a playwright, like Athena, the Greek Goddess of Wisdom (and War), bursting forth from Zeus' skull. No. A longer, more complex birthing process is usually required to nurture a script from idea to first-draft to a script ready for production.

I recently sat down with Los Angeles-based playwright Lilly Thomassian, whose play *Nadia* just won first prize in the inaugural William Saroyan Prize for Playwriting. Our discussion centered on the function of community in the development of new work for the stage and screen, and the role the diasporan Armenian community might play in it.

Not surprisingly, the conversation also included a close look at the playwriting process itself, one that Thomassian is intimately familiar with, because she has used it herself on a number of occasions. Understanding the intricacies of the process is key to recognizing the diasporan Armenian community's special role in expanding the number as well as the quality of Armenian-themed plays being produced and staged today.

Before a production of a new play can take shape – with a director, actors, sets, lights and costumes – the script must be complete, or at least nearly so. The process of getting the text to this place is referred to by those in production as “new play development.”

On any given day, there are staged readings or workshops of plays-in-progress being produced by theaters big and small, in major cities and small towns all across the United States. And, there are legions of playwrights sitting alone at their keyboards working on the re-writes that spring from these collaborations.

Why? Because it is common wisdom in the field that inviting a director and actors into a writer's process at various points in a play's development is the best way to cultivate new work for the theater and to develop new talent. It is also the road to production in the current U.S. model. Often a theater's Literary Department – assigned the task of scouting new plays for possible production – will not even read a script submission unless the play has had a development history, such as a staged reading.

This new play development process has only been applied in a limited way within the Armenian diasporan community in the United States. Often, there is ample support within the community for the results – a film screened, a play produced – but there is less support for the steps necessary to achieve those results.

A greater investment in new play development among the U.S. diasporan Armenian theater community could translate into more playwrights and screenwriters of Armenian descent, as well as more – and stronger – scripts featuring Armenian characters and

themes. It could also lead to the next stage of maturation for a theater community still in its infancy. The ultimate outcome: more Armenian artists making an impact in the field and more Armenian stories being disseminated to a wider audience.



Anais Thomassian and Joe LeMieux in Lilly Thomassian's *Thirst* at Luna Playhouse, 2006. Photo credit: Leon Parian.

The presentation of the three finalists for the William Saroyan playwriting prize this past August is a commendable step in this direction. The competition, established by the William Saroyan Foundation in 2007, awards a \$10,000 prize for the best full-length play based on an Armenian theme. For this inaugural year, the Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance – a Boston-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to project the Armenian voice on the world stage through theater and film – administered the competition and produced a three-day festival to present the top three scripts. Each play was assigned a director and actors and, after a short rehearsal period, was presented to the public in a performance at the renowned Fountain Theater in Los Angeles.

The value of such an enterprise to the life of a play and the career of a budding playwright can hardly be overstated. When I asked Thomassian whether she had ever had a play of hers go straight from first-draft to production, she dismissed the suggestion: “No,” she said, “I can’t imagine.”

As it turns out, Thomassian’s prize-winning play *Nadia* – about an Armenian family living in modern war-torn Iraq – did not emerge from her head dressed in full regalia like Athena, armed and ready for battle. It took ten years, working on and off, and at least 30

drafts for the play to reach maturity. Readings and workshops were an important part of that process.

“I love what a director brings to a play,” added Thomassian. “And, the actors show you a side of the work that you didn’t even know you were writing. That’s what I love. [In a staged reading,] you’re not working on a production, but on the text and making it play better.”

The great majority of the development process for Thomassian’s plays, however, has taken place outside of the Armenian community.

For example, to develop *Nadia*, Thomassian worked with groups such as First Stage in Hollywood and Playwrights Ink, a writing group for Los Angeles playwrights. Her plays *Let the Rocks Speak* and *Thirst* – both of which received successful Los Angeles productions – were similarly developed, with support primarily coming from non-Armenian theater groups.

Such support not only helps shape a particular piece of writing, but it can also be a vital source of encouragement for early-career writers. Feedback from the very community most invested in the success of Armenian art and artists may be just what is needed to encourage a budding playwright.

Greater support from within the Armenian community could also lead to the development of a network of Armenian theater artists. Connections made through such efforts would foster more collaboration among Armenian artists and result in a greater impact in the field. After all, the collective voice is stronger than the lone one.



A scene from the 2003 Fountain Theatre production of "Let the Rocks Speak," by Lilly Thomassian.

Steps taken in support of new play development within the Armenian community nurture Armenian playwrights and plays and are to be applauded. Such efforts are not only a wise investment in individual artists working in this powerful story-telling medium; they also foster the growth and development of a diasporan Armenian theater community in the United States.

An even greater investment in the process would help ensure that when scripts finally do spring to life fully-formed – armed with the literary equivalent of Athena’s mighty thunderbolt – the work is in top form, showcasing Armenian talent and stories in the best possible light.

And wouldn’t that be wisdom indeed?

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