

Critics' Forum

Theater

Theater in '08: The Biggest and the Best

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

It may seem that not much happened in Armenian theater this year except for the revival of works by a certain playwright in commemoration of the centennial of his birth. Yes, it *was* the Year of Saroyan. But much else *did* happen in Armenian theater, which was big this year. Quite big. Yet, as I reflect upon the past 12 months, I realize that the play that made the biggest impression on me was actually the smallest one of all.

Let's start with Saroyan, though.

On the anniversary of the great playwright's 100th birthday, his best known work, *The Time of Your Life*, had the good fortune to land at the Pacific Resident Theatre in Venice. That accomplished troupe delivered a memorable production of the whimsical, heartbreaking, yet ultimately life-affirming play, which unfolds over a single day in a waterfront saloon populated by eccentric characters.

The Time of Your Life had suffered an entirely forgettable production last year at Cal State Northridge, which had gotten an early jump on the centennial celebration. This year, two sister Cal State campuses caught the revival frenzy, unearthing rarely staged works from the 1950s. Cal State L.A. tackled *The Cave Dwellers* in a vast, intriguing production about dashed dreams, while Cal State Fresno opted for *The Slaughter of the Innocents*.

Even rarer than rare was Martin Bedoian's revival of *Love's Old Sweet Song*, a Syzygy Theatre Group production (in Burbank), which illustrated how strong direction can save a problematic script – in this case, a romance unfolding amidst surreal circumstances. By contrast, Tamar Hovannisian's overdone rendition of *My Heart's in the Highlands* at the Luna Playhouse (in Glendale) exemplified how a strong script can be hindered by problematic direction.

THE BIGGEST

Saroyan may have been the biggest name on the theatrical scene in '08; but no production could compare in size to the mammoth undertaking of *Zemiré*, the “opera semiseria” by Dickran Tchouhadjian, which the Ardavazt Theater Company and Lark Musical Society staged at the cavernous Pasadena Civic Auditorium.

I did not review *Zemiré* as a theater piece, since it really is an operetta and music is its dominant feature. But its very staging constituted a tremendous achievement. It involved nearly 150 performers, including a symphony orchestra; required a lavish set and period costumes; and demanded a budget to match – estimated at \$350,000 to

\$400,000. Its impressive scope was testimony to ambition realized through organizational synergy and multi-disciplinary vision.

So why did *Zemiré* leave me conflicted? Because I could not help wondering how many smaller productions could have been funded – or how many original works commissioned – with a \$350,000 or \$400,000 sum. There is, of course, immense value in preserving our cultural legacy. But what about enhancing it with new creations? How do we allocate resources between preservation and inspiration? Where do we find equilibrium? Those are questions that our theater community must confront as it matures and grows in strength.

One original work that managed to secure the funding for a major premier production was *Red Dog Howls* – a haunting play by Alexander Dinelaris about a 91-year-old Genocide survivor with a devastating secret. Broadway veteran Kathleen Chalfant headlined the production on the main stage of the El Portal Theatre in the NoHo Arts District, under Michael Peretzian’s skilled direction. The intricately woven script by Dinelaris stood out for its taut dialogue but was hampered by overuse of expository monologues that verged on the melodramatic.

THE BEST

The play that stayed with me all year did not have big production values, a big budget, or a big cast. It had a big heart – and it touched mine. My favorite Armenian theater experience was the ultra-modest staging of Susanna Harutyunyan’s “A Fitting End” – a one-act chamber piece that served as the endnote to the production of “Soldiers” at Luna.

“A Fitting End” is a dialogue between a gravedigger burying soldiers killed in a battle and one of the surviving soldiers of that battle. In the midst of their philosophical discussion, the gravedigger realizes that he has no body for his last plot – and looks to his conversation partner as the solution to his dilemma.

Astutely funny and miles deep, this smart meditation on life and death was directed with beautiful simplicity by Maro Parian, who had to be the director of the year. After helming “A Fitting End” – in her own translation from the Armenian – she took on *Fool for Love* in English and delivered a moody and evocative interpretation of Sam Shepard’s visceral play, before turning to Federico García Lorca’s iconic *The House of Bernarda Alba* in Spanish – all at Luna.

The intimate Luna space was home to *From Toumanyán’s World* as well. This staging of fables by Hovhannes Toumanyán was a surprise pleasure, thanks to the modern sensibility and surreal humor that director Aramazd Stepanian had deftly injected into the traditional tales, while keeping true to their spirit. Aiding the effort was Tigran Kirakosyan, displaying fearless comic range in his portrayal of myriad characters.

I missed Ani Minassian's adaptation of another Toumanyanyan work, *Kach Nazar*. Her song-and-dance-infused production had only a single performance at the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse.

Outside of these adaptations, the only original Armenian-language play to see light this year was Vahe Berberian's *Baron Garbis*. It was Berberian's first full-length play in nearly 20 years, and it extended the life of that endangered species known as theater in the Western Armenian dialect.

Berberian's title character himself was a man on the verge of extinction – representing a generation of Armenians who came of age in Beirut during the middle decades of the last century. Baron Garbis encapsulated their distinct mannerisms and speech, captured with masterful authenticity in Berberian's script. Maurice Kouyoumdjian (no relation to me) seemed born to play the role, while Sako Berberian was excellent as his son. Equally excellent were Ara Baghdoyan and Ara Madzounian as members of the production's alternate cast.

Berberian and his cohorts will return to the stage in February for one of their zany comedy nights. Zaniness will surely be on the menu of Lory Tatoulian's upcoming show, which promises to focus on all themes Armenian. And a revival of *Little Armenia* is in the works, aiming for a May bow.

We may only be in the first days of the new year. But Armenian theater is already stirring.

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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*."

You can reach him or any of the other contributors to Critics' Forum at comments@criticsforum.org. This and all other articles published in this series are available online at www.criticsforum.org. To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to www.criticsforum.org/join. Critics' Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.