

Critics' Forum
Theater
Occupy Armenian Theater
By Aram Kouyoumdjian

In the year-end article I wrote last December – months before the Occupy movement launched in New York and spread to 80 countries – I began a quiet protest, lamenting the state of Armenian theater in our corner of the diaspora and calling for increase – and improvement – in its cultural production. This past year, however, delivered neither quantity nor quality, let alone both. Armenian-themed productions numbered in the single digits, and I recall only one full-length work – Ardavazt Theatre Company's "Ser Yev Dzidzagh" (Love and Laughter) – favorably. And next year? Vahe Berberian's new play, "Gyank" (Life), looms on the horizon, but whether it will usher in a lively theater season remains to be seen.

For now, I've had enough of the status quo, so I hereby occupy Armenian theater. These are my demands:

1. *That diasporan Armenian theater embrace a bold vision, reflect our exilic identity and condition, and serve as historical record and social commentary.* Let's have some respite from the inane comedies and farces that have hijacked Armenian theater. I endured "Chorekshapti ... Sirelis" (Wednesday ... My Darling) but could barely get through the semi-literate announcement for "Don Juan" – a plagiarized version of "Boeing, Boeing" about "a woman's doctor" (you mean "gynecologist"?) and the "flight attendant girls" he is simultaneously romancing.

I actually enjoy comedies and farces – when they're actually comedic and farcical. But our theatrical output of the past few years would lead an outsider to believe that marriage and marital infidelity were our community's sole concerns.

Perhaps I exaggerate – but not much. There is some serious fare out there; the Genocide and its aftermath are recurrent themes in dramatic works, but where are the plays about the conflicts of diasporan life and psyche; about the longing for homeland and, in light of Armenia's independence, the myth of return; about belonging (and non-belonging) in a host society?

All this may be a great deal to ask of an Armenian art form that has never been sufficiently developed. Even during the renaissance ("zartonk") of Armenian literature in the 19th century, Ottoman censorship stifled drama, and the Genocide rendered it virtually non-existent in the early decades of the 20th century. Only in the heyday of the Armenian diaspora in Lebanon did theater become viable – at least, until the outbreak of civil war.

It can thrive again in California, where a large, educated, and affluent Armenian community can support serious work. For that to happen, however, Armenian playwrights must recognize the potential of banding as a collective and creating a theater of diaspora – theater that is provocative and not solely concerned with commerciality. In so doing, they may well form a new literary circle, in the tradition of the "Mehian" (Temple) writers of Constantinople (circa 1914), who were devoted to celebrating the Armenian spirit, and the "Menk" (We) writers of Paris (circa 1931), who confronted issues of post-Genocide exile.

2. *That diasporan Armenian theater have institutional patronage.* Theater is an expensive undertaking, and its funding should not be the burden of artists but of arts institutions. Neither the Hamazkayin Educational and Cultural Society nor the Tekeyan Cultural Association has made any sustained commitment to theater. The Armenian General Benevolent Union subsidizes Ardavazt, but that company rarely ventures beyond the lightest of fare. An industry organization, the Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance, biennially administers the William Saroyan Playwriting Prize (and its substantial \$10,000 award), but its backing of productions has been limited to staged readings.

In order for Armenian theater to make significant strides, funding for it must increase exponentially. Is such ambition realistic? Absolutely. Ten years ago, the Armenian community raised a million dollars so that the San Francisco Opera could stage “Arshak II” for six performances. A comparable amount could fund a well-managed theater company and repay the community in cultural dividends for years! It’s high time to make that investment.

3. *That diasporan Armenian theater have a home – and residents.* How is it that Armenians in California have built myriad churches, schools, and community centers – but not a single theater? A theater, after all, is the space where the community’s voice is expressed, both literally and metaphorically. Armenian diasporans in (and from) Beirut know this; the Hagop Der Melkonian Theater has nourished the cultural life of that community for decades.

A theater would not only serve as a gathering place for the community, it would provide a permanent home for resident companies, allowing members (actors, directors, designers, and choreographers) to obtain training between productions, and furnishing a venue for developmental workshops of new plays.

4. *That diasporan Armenian theater enjoy high production values.* I’ve previously railed against amateurish sets, lights, costumes, and sound. (I’m talking about black curtains or painted outlines of doors and windows serving as backdrops, or phones that continue ringing onstage long after actors have picked them up.) While I don’t mean to repeat myself, my demands would not be complete if I did not insist on professionalism in the technical aspects of theater. Talented designers and competent stage crews are as critical to successful productions as playwrights, directors, and actors.

5. *That my demands be met with utmost haste, so that I can end this occupation and return to the business of appreciating and enjoying Armenian theater.* If not, I’m prepared to hold out.

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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 “Happy Armenians.”

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