

## Critics' Forum

### Theater

#### **Culture Clash in "Pera Palas"**

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

At any given time, even during the slow summer season, the Los Angeles theater scene features at least 100 productions. Armenian theater usually accounts for none of them, although it may occasionally give life to one – say, once every nine months.

Unsurprisingly, then, the current lineup has no plays by or about Armenians, and Aram Saroyan's "At the Beach House" isn't due until October. Interestingly enough, however, the lineup includes a play about Turks and Turkey. "Pera Palas," by Turkish-American playwright Sinan Unel, is now running at The Theatre @ Boston Court over in Pasadena.

Named after the famed hotel in Istanbul that serves as its primary setting, "Pera Palas" follows three main story lines, each of them unfolding during a separate time period in the twentieth century. The first, beginning in 1918, just as Turkey is transitioning from a sultanate to a republic, traces the relationship between an English writer named Evelyn Crawley and the family of a wealthy pasha. The second, occurring mid-century, focuses on an American teacher who falls in love with a Turkish man and must decide whether to marry into a society completely foreign to her. The third, taking place in 1994, concerns Murat, a gay Turkish expatriate who returns home with his American lover, Brian, for a strained visit with his family. The play frequently alternates between the three stories, and characters from different time periods often appear on stage simultaneously. Tom Buderwitz's stylish set combines elements from all three periods, but the eras are kept distinct, thanks to Ivy C. Chou's costumes, which some of the actors must change in and out of with unbelievable speed.

Director Michael Michetti always remains in tune with the play's shifting tones and maintains a fluid pace – wise for a production that clocks in at nearly three hours. He is competent, though not masterful, in choreographing the movement of his characters through ever-changing times and locales. His challenge is, admittedly, considerable, since the play is not only double-cast but has ten actors playing a couple dozen roles.

The ensemble generates many strong performances (despite consistently butchering the pronunciation of Turkish names and phrases along the way). Still, Seamus Dever stands out for his nuanced portrayal of Murat, and Jeanie Hackett (as his sister, Sema) matches him every step of the way. Their scenes together, brimming with tension, exemplify how restrained emotions may be preferable to sentimental outbursts in creating onstage drama. Unfortunately, Bill Brochtrup digs deep into his bag of clichés to come up with a gratingly stereotypical turn as Brian.

At its best, "Pera Palas" insightfully probes the culture clash created by a Western presence in an Eastern setting, a theme that invites reference to "Indian Ink," Tom Stoppard's examination of British colonial rule on the Asian subcontinent. ("Arcadia," an earlier play by Stoppard, had already set the benchmark of populating the stage with

characters from diverse historical eras). But Unel is no Stoppard. He lacks Stoppard's wit and his genius in unifying the disparate component parts of his plays into a sublime climax and dénouement. At several points, Unel's play verges on becoming a sprawling soap opera – one with misguided attempts at humor.

Ultimately, it seems Unel is not as interested in writing a great play as he is in composing a love letter to Turkey. True, his script takes up several social issues of a sensitive nature – such as the role of women in Turkish society, intermarriage, and homosexuality – and attempts to present them in a balanced manner. Indeed, several of his scenes are compelling, and most manage to avoid being shrill. Unel layers his writing with some narration that boasts a lyrical quality, and at least one monologue (on the recent rise of fundamentalism in Turkey) echoes the poetry of political passages in Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." Yet, for a play that purports to revolve around "three tumultuous periods in twentieth-century Turkey" – one of them amidst World War I – Unel remarkably bypasses any allusion to his country's allegiance with the Central Powers or its perpetration of genocide against its Armenian population. And, as his survey of the twentieth century progresses, he forgoes discussion of Turkey's human rights violations and its persecution of various minorities, including Kurds.

Instead, Unel succumbs to selective memory in striving to sculpt Turkey as his seductive central character – a country marked by conflict, but also by intrigue and romance. He celebrates its natural beauty, pointing his audience's imagination toward the Bosphorus, and revels in its architectural marvels, such as the Hagia Sofia. But he most reveres the country's past – a past that enriches the present with a sense of tradition to be carried into the future.

"Pera Palas" ends up a drama wrapped in a promotional brochure – peculiar yet effective and, therefore, noteworthy.

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*Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting ("The Farewells") and directing ("Three Hotels"). His performance piece, "Protest," is currently being staged at the Finborough Theatre in London.*

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