

Critics' Forum
Theater
Homelands Faraway, So Close
By Aram Kouyoumdjian

Just as I was preparing to reread Leslie Ayvazian's "Nine Armenians," I was handed a copy of a new anthology that surveys plays written in English by authors of Armenian ancestry. "Contemporary Armenian American Drama," edited by Nishan Parlakian and published by Columbia University Press, is a handsome volume comprised of eight plays culled from the past three decades. It opens with Raffi (Ralph) Arzoomanian's short "Ellis Island 101" and closes with Joyce Van Dyke's "A Girl's War." It also includes "Nine Armenians."

This high-quality publication merits further discussion, and I will return to it at a later date. Today, I wish to take up Ayvazian's entry – a 1995 work that has been staged at some of the most prestigious American regional theaters, coast to coast. Along with Richard Kalinoski's "Beast on the Moon," it is probably the most widely produced play by or about Armenians in recent years.

I had read "Nine Armenians" some years back in the no-frills acting edition published by Dramatists Play Service (which eschews such trifle matters as, say, proofreading). I had also seen two stage versions – a polished, professional mounting at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and a disappointing, dismal effort (by Golden Thread Productions) at the Magic Theater in San Francisco. I decided to revisit the text after reviewing Turkish-American dramatist Sinan Unel's "Pera Palas," which led me to contemplate how ethnic playwrights portray their ancestral homelands in their scripts. In my previous article ("Culture Clash in 'Pera Palas'"), I had likened Unel's play to "a love letter to Turkey," even though it negotiated the delicate terrain between a country's past and present problems, and its future promise.

As I approached Ayvazian's text anew, I focused primarily on its depiction of Armenia. What imagery, I wondered, had Ayvazian used to evoke a country that is both distant and near?

Ayvazian's affinity for her ancestral nation was obvious. Yet, the writing was shaped by a perspective fraught with a tendency to lament and pity. And it began in the very first scene:

"The Armenians are starving."

Not a page went by when I was not struck with "Aman ... we are dying."

Similar images appeared in subsequent scenes, with characters describing Armenia as a "dangerous," "uncomfortable," and "cold" place, where "[t]he children draw black suns ... [a]lways black suns in the sky."

In all fairness, Ayvazian's play is set in 1992 and unfolds within the context of the devastating economic blockade of Armenia by its hostile neighbors, which deprived the country of essential food and fuel. Certainly, Ayvazian has a writer's prerogative to offer an artistic response to that dire situation. The language she employs for this purpose, however, verges on the melodramatic, as illustrated by such emotional outbursts as "Armenia has no allies! It is unprotected!" Occasionally, the writing even becomes condescending when, for instance, Ayvazian reduces the sole character in the play who actually lives in Armenia to a starving man who begs for bread. This condescension is compounded by the self-importance Ayvazian attaches to her diasporan characters, who consider themselves saviors of their beleaguered homeland because they will "help" by bearing witness:

Ani: What will you do there [in Armenia], Mom?

Armine: I will sit.

Ani: Sit?

Armine: Ya, I will sit.

Ani: Sit?

Armine: Ya. I will sit with the children in the orphanages.

Louise: She will watch.

In truth, Ayvazian's diasporan characters are ineffective onlookers, unable to do more than "sit" and "watch." But as she opts to write in earnest tones, without a hint of irony, Ayvazian misses the falsity of the solace these characters derive from their noblesse oblige.

Ayvazian does allude to aspects of Armenia's beauty, although most of them are associated with ancient history or tradition. She momentarily revels in the vistas of Ararat, casts an affectionate glance on the craft of sewing lace, and lovingly accentuates her words with instances of Armenian song and dance. Incomprehensibly enough, however, she sidesteps modern triumphs. She ignores the fact that only a year before the events of her play, Armenia had attained independence after 70 years of Soviet rule; its borders were once again open to its dispersed people; and sweeping changes were afoot in all walks of life. The play shies away from the complex issues raised by the phenomenal shifts in the country's political, economic, and social landscapes. Instead, it takes a more simplistic approach – one that embraces the oft-repeated notion that "suffering" is fundamental to the Armenian experience.

And therein lies the true pity.

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