

Critics' Forum

Theater

Play Dates

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

If I were to tell you that I go to the theater every month with “a large group of friends,” you’d probably think I mean a dozen people. Or maybe 15. Say 20, just to be generous.

You’d be off by a mile.

Over the course of the past year, I have enjoyed regular “play dates” with a circle of (mostly Armenian) theater aficionados numbering 50, 70, and even 90. Our outings have taken us all over Los Angeles, from points east to points west, treating us to a wide range of theater – challenging drama, absurdist comedy, and even experimental fare.

The outings started last November when my friend Ara Oshagan and I decided – “on a lark,” as he describes it – to see plays on a monthly basis, inviting friends to join us as they wished. “Whoever comes, comes,” he said, using English words but a decidedly Armenian construction to convey a sense of open-hearted, but casual, welcome.

We began, auspiciously enough, with “4.48 Psychosis,” Sarah Kane’s little-known, but poetically haunting, rumination on suicide. We numbered a mere seven people at that premier outing, but as we dissected the play over late-night dessert, we knew that we were hooked on this collective experience.

We would never see that kind of intimate group again.

By the second outing, in December, attendance had quadrupled, as turnout grew to 28 for Harold Pinter’s “The Homecoming” at A Noise Within, in Glendale. In January, when we caught “Anna in the Tropics” at the Pasadena Playhouse, our number had reached 47.

That third outing turned out to be a watershed evening, which we appreciated only in hindsight. Oh, it wasn’t the play that left a lingering impression. The overpraised Pulitzer Prize winner by Nilo Cruz was underserved by a cast prone to overacting. The sparks lit up instead at our post-play gathering, where the common topic of conversation seemed to be the lack of arts venues in the Armenian community. Within a few months, many of the participants in that conversation had launched an ambitious project – the Armenian Center for the Arts – and the theater outings formally became a part of ACA’s arts programming.

In February, the taboo plot of Edward Albee’s “The Goat” – about a successful architect’s sexual liaison with the titular animal – lured 56 of us to the Mark Taper Forum downtown. But the master playwright’s triumph lay in the script’s insightful themes – the bounds of social tolerance and the rupture of human relationships in the face of unforgivable transgression.

Equally strong themes resonated in our selection for March, John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt," a compelling play about a young priest's suspiciously inappropriate behavior towards one of his students. Oscar winner Linda Hunt headed the cast at the Pasadena Playhouse, even as the play was capturing the Pulitzer Prize for its script and the Tony Award for its New York production.

Speaking of New York productions, we actually chose one as our pick for April. So as not to distract from local events commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, we announced the Off-Broadway production of "Beast on the Moon"—the story of two Genocide survivors trying to carve out a new life in Wisconsin—as our symbolic pick. (Still, nearly a dozen of us were able to catch a performance of the play over the course of its run). I've always had reservations about Richard Kalinoski's script, which often lapses into sentimentality, but this classy production eschewed manipulative emotion, thanks to strong acting by Omar Metwally and Lena Georgas, and well-calibrated direction by Larry Moss.

In May, our group constituted two-thirds of the audience for "Yellowman" at the intimate Fountain Theatre, in Hollywood. This two-character play – which tackles discrimination within the African-American community based on the lightness or darkness of one's skin color – boasted powerful, yet lyrical, writing by Dael Orlandersmith, and the undulations of its moods were expertly captured by the flawless performances of Deidrie Henry and Chris Butler. In the end, the audience rose for a standing ovation, and members of our group were effusive in their praise at a reception that the theater hosted for us after the play. Judging from the feedback, I'd say that "Yellowman" still ranks as the best received of the 11 productions we have seen to date.

Opinion was far less unanimous in June, when 70 of us turned out for Sarah Ruhl's ironically-titled "Melancholy Play," our first comedy. Many of us were delighted by its witty dialogue and absurdist humor, though the sillier, more far-fetched elements of the script generated groans as well. Undeterred, we indulged in further experimentation in July, when we opted for an environmental staging of "Macbeth." Director Eric Tucker's inspired adaptation was performed in a NoHo warehouse (in North Hollywood), with the audience perched on bleachers that were often moved around the cavernous space to allow for ever-changing perspectives of the play's action. Since the venue could not accommodate all 80 members of our group, we bought out two successive nights of the show and soaked up the highly-inventive features of its movement sequences and lighting design.

Our numbers peaked in August, when 90 of us descended on the open-air amphitheater of the Will Geer Theatrum Botanicum (in Topanga Canyon) for Arthur Miller's "The Ride Down Mt. Morgan." The script by the brilliant mind behind "Death of a Salesman" was rich in language and ideas – both of which suffered violence in the hands of a dreadful cast.

After a summer of eclectic choices, this fall we returned to straightforward dramas in traditional theater settings. In September, we were back at the Mark Taper Forum for

“Radio Golf” – the final installment in August Wilson’s monumental 10-play cycle about the African-American experience during the twentieth century. (Extraordinarily enough, Wilson recently succumbed to liver cancer, soon after completing a project that had preoccupied him for more than twenty years.) And this month, we’ll sample a bit of Americana with William Inge’s “Picnic,” set in “the quiet desperation of a small Kansas town,” where “the sudden arrival of Hal, a dangerously handsome young drifter, ignites a firestorm of sexual passion, ripping to tatters pre-conceived notions of individual destiny.” Promising, indeed.

Next month marks the beginning of Year Two, which we’ll open with Aram Saroyan’s “At the Beach House.” We’ll try to make the next 12 choices just as exciting and adventurous, various in genre and geography, high in caliber but reasonable in ticket price, and followed, as always, by a post-play gathering marked by sparkling conversation.

Will our numbers surpass 100? Will we encounter the next theatrical masterpiece? Who knows ... We’ll see.

For now, we’ll take it one month at a time.

All Rights Reserved: Critics Forum, 2005

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. 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.