

## Critics' Forum

### Theater

#### **Taking 12: The Year in Review**

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

Last year, as I looked back on the theater scene of the preceding twelve months, I counted on the fingers of one hand the number of productions by or about Armenians. This year, both the number and quality of productions were up; organizations buzzed with activity; and one troupe even acquired a theater space. Below, as I review the year in 12 steps, I begin with "Little Armenia," the play I know best, since I had the fortune of co-writing it with Lory Bedikian and Shahe Mankerian.

1. Commissioned and produced by the award-winning Fountain Theatre, "**Little Armenia**" was inspired by countless interviews that we writers conducted in the predominantly immigrant and working-class section of East Hollywood that bears the name. The result was a work with three intersecting storylines that cut across generations and dealt with the struggles of an ethnic community to maintain its identity, language, and faith amidst financial hardship and the pull of assimilation. The *Los Angeles Times* called the play "seminal," and thanks to overwhelming community turnout, the production was sold out from its very first preview. As shows were added to accommodate demand, "Little Armenia" chalked up 21 performances over its five-week run.

2. After expending a great deal of effort and suffering disappointment by some unexpected setbacks, the Armenian Theater Company leased a space of its own, morphing into the **Luna Playhouse**. Energized by its committed core of artists, the company inaugurated the new space with Lilly Thomassian's "Thirst," a war drama infused with mythical elements and fashioned after Greek tragedy. The space has been bustling ever since, and Luna has already delivered on its promise to include Armenian-language plays in its repertoire. The company had earlier proven its ability to handle serious Armenian drama with its production of "Zhangark" (Twilight). Aghasi Ayvazyan's gripping tale, set during the immediate aftermath of Armenia's independence when the country was being suffocated by an economic blockade, was well served by a capable cast and Aramazd Stepanian's assured direction.

3. The **Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance** (ADAA) added to its list of impressive accomplishments as it increased its level of activity on the West Coast to catch up with its record on the East. Aside from announcing the establishment of a \$10,000 annual prize for an Armenian-themed script, the ADAA organized a series of high-profile readings, including a private presentation of Oscar-nominated screenwriter Jose Rivera's adaptation of the Micheline Aharonian Marcom novel, "Three Apples Fell from Heaven." Readings at the Fountain Theatre featured works by a trio of woman playwrights, including Bianca Bagaturian ("The Scent of Jasmine"), Lisa Kirazian ("The Blackstone Sessions"), and Kristen Lazarian ("Push").

4. The **Theater Excursions** program of the **Armenian Center for the Arts** completed its second full year. The program involves monthly theater outings for a group of aficionados, usually ranging in number from 40 to 100. Highlights among this year's selections included star turns by Annette Bening in "The Cherry Orchard" at the Mark Taper Forum and by Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett in "Fences" at the Pasadena Playhouse. Exclusive talk-backs with directors and casts followed four of the outings, including "Love's Labor's Lost."

5. In an earlier review, I celebrated "**Love's Labor's Lost**" as a triumphant production, as directed by **Simon Abkarian** for the Actors' Gang (at the Ivy Substation). Abkarian, I wrote, made Shakespeare's text "bloom into a masterwork of imagination, awash in surreal images and gorgeous stylized movement, all bathed in luminous light." In fact, he elevated one of the Bard's "lesser" comedies "to an emotionally complex and sexually charged piece of theater."

6. If "Love's Labor's Lost" set the standard for the best of theater, it was matched only by "**A Number**," **Caryl Churchill's** intriguing take on cloning, at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. Flawlessly staged by director Anna Shapiro, the production boasted not only intelligent designs of its sets, costumes, and sound, but also a vital portrayal by Josh Charles of three brothers who are as distinct in personality as they are identical in genetic make-up.

Among the top tier of the year's productions, director Randall Arney injected **Arthur Miller's** morality play "**All My Sons**" (at the Geffen Playhouse) with vibrancy and contemporary relevance. Laurie Metcalf's coiled performance as Kate Keller was revelatory and on par with a luminous Cate Blanchett's edgy "**Hedda Gabler**" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Standouts among actors included Laurence Fishburne, rivetingly intense in "Fences" (Los Angeles); Norbert Leo Butz, riotously manic in "**Dirty Rotten Scoundrels**" (New York); and Rufus Sewell, perfectly nuanced in "**Rock 'n' Roll**" (London).

7. Audiences in Los Angeles were treated to a rare revival of **William Saroyan's** "**The Time of Your Life**" – a lovely mood piece set against the backdrop of the 1930s. The play had found new life on regional stages thanks to a stellar production in 2002 by Chicago's famed Steppenwolf Theatre Company – a production that later traveled to Seattle and San Francisco. The staging by the Open Fist Theater Company lacked the technical polish of director Tina Landau's version (and her gift for choreographing movement) but nonetheless captured the essence of Saroyan's funny, heartbreaking, and redemptive narrative about the search for a better, decent life during a time fraught with financial anxiety and fear of war.

8. **Eric Bogosian** was represented on the boards at least twice this year. The Hollywood Fight Club's production of "subUrbia" had little to recommend it, except for a game group of actors. Far more accomplished was the Gangbusters Theatre Company's "**Talk Radio**," which channeled the frenetic energy of Bogosian's writing into a captivating performance by Christian Levatino as fictional shock jock Barry Champlain.

9. **Solo performances** displayed wide range and included “Black Angel: The Double Life of Arshile Gorky,” in which writer **Nouritza Matossian** portrayed the women who were key figures in the artist’s life. At the opposite end of the spectrum, “Pomegranate Whiskey,” a cabaret by **Lory Tatoulian**, offered uproarious musical numbers and monologues, including an inspired bit about a fatigued Statue of Liberty yearning to return to France. This talented and fearless performer certainly did not spare the follies of the Armenian community from her satirical bite, and her medley of children’s songs set to sultry jazz music was the stuff of comedic gold.

10. **Young Armenians** claimed the stage in “**Verchin Verabroghuh**” (The Last Survivor), an original theatrical presentation on the subject of the Genocide. This pastiche of vignettes was sometimes sentimental, often moving, and always treated with due reverence by a well-rehearsed cast comprised mostly of teenagers.

11. The **worst of theater** came from an unlikely source at an unlikely venue, but the only redeeming quality of **Sam Shepard’s “The God of Hell”** at the Geffen was its short running time. Neither funny nor piercing, this political “satire” about a Wisconsin couple visited by a mysterious salesman (read: government operative) who preaches patriotism and inflicts torture with equal glee managed to be vapid and dull, entirely superficial, and altogether exasperating within the span of a mere 85 minutes.

12. **Next year** starts with great promise, as award-winning actress **Karen Kondazian** reprises her role as Maria Callas in **Terrence McNally’s “Master Class.”** Kondazian takes the stage at the Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara on January 4, kick-starting what we can only hope will be an even more fruitful year for Armenian theater.

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*Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting (“The Farewells”) and directing (“Three Hotels”). His collaborative script for “Little Armenia” had its world premiere at the Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles earlier this year.*

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