

Critics' Forum
Theater
Clair de Luna
By Aram Kouyoumdjian



Poster Art for "Thirst," the inaugural production at Luna Playhouse

The light of the moon has been shining a little brighter ever since the Luna Playhouse opened its doors in September, traditionally the start of the theater season. As the season formally ends with the onset of summer, the time is opportune to take a look at Luna's first "year" in existence.

The intimate, 49-seat venue in Glendale is run, synergistically, by Aramazd Stepanian, Lilly Thomassian, and Maro Parian, who share directing and producing duties. They created the Luna space after clearing a daunting number of financial and legal hurdles – and they operate it at tremendous personal sacrifice.

Thomassian is a playwright, and "Thirst," her intriguing rumination on war, written in the style of Greek tragedy, was the premier production at the new theater. Parian directed that piece and has since designed sets and costumes for nearly all Luna shows. The playhouse further benefits from the talents of resident designers like Henrik Mansourian (lights) and Shahen Hagobian (sound).

Since "Thirst," three full-scale productions have been mounted at Luna. Stepanian directed "Hanoon Hayreniki yev Zhoghovrdi" (In the Name of the People and the

Fatherland) – a contemporary satire by Gevorg Sargsyan – with inventive panache. Earlier, he had helmed Aghasi Ayvazyan’s “Zhangark” (Twilight) while heading the Armenian Theater Company, which has now been absorbed into the Luna ensemble.

To date, I have seen almost all Luna fare with an Armenian connection, but the venue has offered an eclectic, cross-cultural selection of plays, including the Irish-themed “Bailegangaire” and the upcoming “Chinatown Correspondent.”

Currently serving up laughs, under Thomassian’s direction, is “The Lady in Question,” a parody of film noir. Although no masterwork of comedy, “Lady,” set in Germany circa 1940, revolves around a femme fatale, the internationally renowned pianist Gertrude Garnet, and her efforts to help a fellow artist escape from Nazi capture. The tickler in this piece of theatrical camp by “drag legend” Charles Busch is that Gertrude gets played by a man. At Luna, R. Christofer Sands shines in the role, amidst a gifted cast.

On the quieter side, solo performances have found a supportive venue at Luna. Earlier this year, “On the Couch with Nora Armani” enjoyed a brief run there. The question of ethnic identity was a key theme for the Egypt-born Armenian actress, just as it is for Anahid Aramouni Keshishian in “Ka yev Chka” (There Is and There Isn’t), which is now playing (in repertory). In this Armenian-language piece, Keshishian regales her audience with astutely observed stories – both funny and poignant – of her childhood in Iran. Later on this summer, Arpie Dadoyan will take the stage for a triptych of sorts, presenting three separate solo works in quick succession.

While welcoming established artists, Luna has afforded opportunities for emerging talents as well, showcasing Jacklyn Narian’s “Stuffed Grape Leaves” this spring. That modest piece attested to Luna’s nurturing embrace of neophyte efforts.

Not all is perfect at the playhouse. Some of its productions have suffered the lack of a well-trained stage crew – always a challenge in theaters struggling to achieve high production values on limited budgets. Staffing its control booth with experienced board operators needs to become a priority in Luna’s second season.

And what a season that promises to be. The playhouse has already announced a William Saroyan double-bill (including the rarely-staged “Hello Out There”), to be followed by a production of Harold Pinter’s “The Lover” ... in Armenian! That translation alone – by Artashes Emin and Aramazd Stepanian – will mark a significant contribution to Armenian theater. Now, if only the rumor that an Armenian version of Arthur Miller’s “All My Sons” is forthcoming would turn out to be true ...

In the span of a single season, Luna has proven itself a serious player on the theatrical scene. Hopefully, the Armenian community will recognize – and revel in – its sparkle.

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