

## Critics' Forum

### Theater

#### **The Best of Theater: 7 in '07**

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

The practice of handing out awards or issuing “best of” lists to honor artistic achievements certainly has its detractors. These detractors are offended when artists are pitted against each other in “competition,” and they doubt that art can ever be evaluated objectively.

I find their arguments valid. I never look at the Oscars or the Tonys as final arbiters of the “best” film or play in any given year. I recognize them as purely subjective exercises. After all, high-brow fare like *Atonement* may be fodder for the upcoming Academy Awards, but the People's Choice Awards has *Transformers* among its three Best Movie nominees and may be bestowing its Favorite Leading Man honor on former wrestler Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

Awards and “best of” lists are important, however, as expressions of appreciation and encouragement that recognize artistic talent and effort, and basically say, “Well done!”

It is in that spirit that I offer this entirely personal “best of” list that covers Armenian theater for the past year in seven categories. It highlights the productions that were particularly impressive in their staging and the individuals who displayed a superior command of their craft. In essence, however, the list stands as a compilation of experiences that managed to do what theater does best. They moved me.

#### **I. Productions**

What most deserves celebrating in this category is the sheer number of Armenian productions – nearly three dozen – that abounded in Southern California over the last 12 months. These numbers point to an unmistakable boom in Armenian theater currently in progress.

Helping the boom is the intimate Luna Playhouse that has accounted for much recent theater activity in the Armenian community, staging not only its own productions but providing a venue to both established and emerging guest artists.

Among Armenian-language shows, Luna's production of *Hanoon Hayreniki Yev Zhoghovrdi* (In the Name of the People and the Fatherland) offered an engaging take on Gevorg Sargsyan's surreal account of an ordinary man caught up in a bureaucratic nightmare. Among English-language productions, Luna's revival of William Saroyan's *Hello Out There*, in which a young woman befriends a wrongly jailed man, was potent in its emotional charge. Over at the Fountain Theatre, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary staging of *Sojourn at Ararat*, which recounts Armenian history through our nation's poetry, was lyrical, poignant, and inspiring. Among translations, the Ardavazt Theatre Company's version of *The Venetian Twins* was an entertaining romp that ably captured the farcical elements of Carlo Goldoni's 18<sup>th</sup>-century script.

## II. Directors

In the realm of drama, **Nora Armani**'s direction of *Sojourn at Ararat* was graceful and fluid as it navigated the show's tonal shifts, while shifts of perspective – almost filmic in effect and achieved by altering the angles of movable set pieces – infused **Tamar Hovannisian**'s take on *Hello Out There* with vibrancy. **Michael Arabian** replicated the moody atmosphere of John Patrick Shanley's *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* (at the Elephant Theater) without sacrificing its visceral energy.

In the comic realm, **Aramazd Stepanian** was inventive with the surreal aspects of *Hanoon Hayreniki Yev Zhoghovrdi*; the *commedia dell'arte* style was solid in execution in *The Venetian Twins*, helmed by **Krikor Satamian**; and sheer camp was delightfully realized by **Lilly Thomassian** in *The Lady in Question* (at Luna), a spoof of film noir.

## III. Actors

The majority of memorable performances by actors happened to be in Armenian-language productions. **Robert Khatchatryan** showed beautiful restraint in *Hanoon Hayreniki Yev Zhoghovrdi* with his superb portrayal of a befuddled Everyman, while cast mate **Aram Muratyan** exhibited impeccable comic timing as a corrupt mayor. Muratyan was in equally fine form sharing the stage with the excellent **Ari Libaridian** doing double duty as *The Venetian Twins* and with **Krikor Satamian**, a skilled veteran who coaxed laughs as an adulterous politician in *A Lost Letter* (Ardavazt Theatre Company at the Manoogian Center). **Avetis Khrimyan** did expert work in *Yedtsentsoom* (Aftershock) at the Stars Theatre, playing a man confronting personal crises in post-earthquake Armenia.

The exceptions to these Armenian-speaking players included **Voki Kalfayan** as the wacky and tacky lounge lizard headlining *The Gazillionaire Show* (at M Bar), and, conversely, **Alex Kalognomos**, solemnly impactful as the wrongly jailed man in *Hello Out There*.

## IV. Actresses

Kalognomos had a strong co-star in **Karine Chakarian**, and **Anais Thomassian** was the perfect foil for Kalfayan as ditzy and squeaky-voiced bandleader Pretty Penny. These young actresses were in good company with **Narine Avakian**, who shone in *The Venetian Twins* as the twitch-addled Rosaura, and **Mary Kate Schellhardt**, whose emotionally devastating performance in *Sojourn at Ararat* embodied both tragedy and hope.

Noteworthy performances by veteran actresses included **Karen Kondazian**'s acclaimed portrayal of operatic diva Maria Callas in *Master Class* (Santa Barbara Theater at the Lobero) and **Violetta Gevorgyan**'s turn as a mother fending for her family in *Yedtsentsoom*.

## V. Solo Performances

**Bryan Coffee's** accomplished work in *The Weekly Armenian* (at the NoHo Arts Center) notwithstanding, the significant trend in solo performance was the dominance of the field by female artists. No less than five women of Armenian descent took solo flights last year. (That number would rise to six if one were to count Sona Movsesian's clever *armeniamania*, in which two of her friends crash her one-woman show). The pieces were often autobiographical and explored not only their authors' Armenian identity but their diverse roots in such countries as Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon.

The standout piece, however, was **Lory Tatoulian's** *Pomegranate Whisky* (at the Heartbeat House Studio), a *faux* cabaret act constructed of monologues and accentuated by musical selections. Tatoulian was spot-on throughout her show, but perhaps nowhere more so than in a sketch about the Statue of Liberty, dragging on a cigarette in a fit of ennui and droning about returning to France.

## **VI. New Works**

Several full-cast plays in Armenian and English found their way to local stages, while three translated works included the first-ever version of Harold Pinter's *The Lover*. A number of these new works reached the boards thanks to the efforts of **Aramazd Stepanian**, who not only co-translated *The Lover* (with Artashes Emin), but directed the American premiere of *Hanoon Hayreniki Yev Zhoghovrdi* and the world premiere of *Yedtsentsoom* (by Khoren Aramouni). As such, Stepanian can further be credited for making the most substantial contribution to Armenian-language drama in 2007.

## **VII. Technical Achievements**

The dynamic duo of **Maro Parian** and **Henrik Mansourian** continued chalking up successes in technical theater. Parian, both a director and a designer, was the talent behind the sets of *Hello Out There* and *Sojourn at Ararat*, and the costumes for *Sojourn* and *The Lady in Question*. Mansourian's elegant lighting design for *Sojourn* included the smart and subtle use of reds, blues, and ambers – correlating to the colors of the Armenian flag.

The best sound effects were in Bryan Coffee's *The Weekly Armenian* – and were remarkable for the fact that they were generated with nothing more than Coffee's own voice box.

## **Looking Forward**

The new year kicks off with great promise, as Vahe Berberian's *Baron Garbis* premieres in January. This Armenian-language work is the first multi-character play from Berberian in nearly 20 years. It will, hopefully, usher in 12 months of quality productions that will generate much to celebrate come this time next year.

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