

## Critics' Forum

### Theater

#### **Soaring Satire: The Best of Theater in 2009**

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

This year's trend in Armenian theater had to be satire, given that it seemed to thread virtually every significant production of the past 12 months. It appeared in both Armenian- and English-language scripts, in original scripts and revivals of classic scripts, and it served as the sign of a maturing theater community that not only entertains its surrounding society, but enlightens it by exposing its follies. Here, I take a look back at the best of these theatrical offerings – the ones that stood out for piercing wit and potency.

#### **Best of Productions**

The year had a propulsive start as “Out of the Cage” came out of the gates to set quite a high bar. This tour de force of a sketch-comedy show by the Arvest Gang delivered one uproarious vignette after another – all of them rich in reference to Armenian history, politics, and culture. The ancient Battle of Avarayr provided material for a Monty Pythonesque spoof; efforts at Turkish-Armenian reconciliation were skewered, literally, as fools' sport; and the folk song “Akh-Eem-Anoush-Yar” inspired the wailings of the fictional Peshawar Ensemble. Collaboratively written by Vahe Berberian, Vachik DerSarkissian, Ara Madzounian, and Henrik Mansourian, “Out of the Cage” was a rare brand of comedy – sharp, incisive, and side-splitting.



*The fictional Peshawar Ensemble performing in "Out of the Cage," one of the year's best productions. Photo by Ani Serederyan.*

Far more understated, though no less accomplished, was Arena Productions' sublime staging of Gourgen Khanjian's “Averagneri Bahagneruh” (The Guards of Ruins).

Khanjian's script – reminiscent of both Maxim Gorky's "The Lower Depths" and William Saroyan's "The Cave Dwellers" – unfolded in the "ruins" of an abandoned building used as a place of refuge by society's refuse. While the play's existentialist themes and absurdist humor could have easily been mangled, a combination of superb writing, direction, and acting achieved an elusive trifecta instead.

### **Best of Direction**

For striking and – just as importantly – sustaining the delicate balance between tragedy and satire in "The Guards of Ruins," Anahid Aramouni Keshishian is deserving of special recognition. Her environmental staging may have had a touch of the superfluous, but her helming of the main action exhibited a profound sensitivity to and respect for the material, the actors, and the audience.

### **Best of Performances**

Although Greg Derelian fared memorably as Shakespeare's flawed hero in "Coriolanus" and Hratch Titizian proved riveting as Uday Hussein in "Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo," individual performances of note gave way to ensemble work this year. The manner in which Anoush Arakelyan, Aram Mouradyan, and Artyom Yeghiazaryan fully embodied their characters in "The Guards of Ruins" was practically uncanny, while members of the Arvest Gang maneuvered from one character to the next with remarkable agility. Sako Berberian, Vahe Berberian, Harout Dedeyan, and Vachik DerSarkissian were among the winning thespians, along with Ara Madzounian, who was in stellar form playing (in different sketches) a Japanese samurai, an unstable horseman, and a beleaguered understudy.



*Greg Derelian was memorable as the tragic hero "Coriolanus."*

Agility was a foremost requirement as well for the cast of the vignette-driven “The Big Bad Armo Show” and its sequel “A Big Bad Armo Christmas.” Comedienne Lory Tatoulian was joined in both shows by Voki Kalfayan, Alex Kalognomos, Helen Kalognomos, Armen Martin, and Anaïs Thomassian. They shone collectively – their version of a ladies’ choir, with the men in drag, was alone worth the price of admission – but Kalfayan was pitch-perfect as the Aussie host of a documentary, parodying Animal Planet, on Armenian “mating.” (His imitation of fellow theater artist Vahe Berberian – wholly exaggerated, of course – was equally inspired). Tatoulian was expert as ever with her “dandeegeen” persona (a send-up of a middle class Armenian housewife), but added the fetchingly crass Sossi character to her repertoire. (Raffi Rupchian, who nailed his portrayal of Sossi’s uncouth husband in “Big Bad Armo” was sorely missing from the Christmas show).



*One of the best ensembles of the year performing in "The Big Bad Armo Show."*

With its cast for “Kaghakavaroutyan Vnasneruh” (The Perils of Politeness) numbering nearly 30, Ardavazt Theatre could not avoid unevenness. However, its contingent of talent included Maro Ajemian, Narine Avakian, Alex Khorchidian, Ari Libaridian, Krikor Satamian, and Sossi Varjabedian, who brought a satire from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to vivid life in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

### **Best of Wishes**

Ardavazt Theatre celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year – a remarkable milestone for an Armenian ensemble in the United States. Meanwhile, the resilient Luna Playhouse

managed to survive financial challenges of the current economic climate and continued to produce eclectic fare.

Hopefully, the fiscal crisis will ease in 2010, Armenian theater will bloom even more fully, the caliber of stage productions will reach unprecedented heights, and all the artists involved in these endeavors will go on breaking their legs.

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