

Critics' Forum
Theater
The Year That Was (Not)
By Aram Kouyoumdjian

Hard to believe, but for the first nine months of the past year, Armenian theater in Southern California practically did not exist. It seemed as if all its key producers – aside from the Ardavazt Theater Company, which revived a pair of one-acts – had decided to stage ... their own disappearance. Indeed, finding an Armenian play proved about as likely as encountering a unicorn.

The phenomenon was puzzling, given the vibrancy of Armenian theater in 2009, when Ardavazt presented a Baronian classic, Greg Derelian tackled rare Shakespeare, and we were spoiled with dual outings from Vahe Berberian, Anahid Aramouni Keshishian, Lory Tatoulian, and their respective troupes. Perhaps these latter artists, in particular, needed a year to refuel. Perhaps next year will bring another trove of treasure. At this moment, however, we have to acknowledge that 2010 marked a slump for Armenian theater.

For the past five years, I have written a December wrap-up article to recognize the best of Armenian theater during the preceding 12 months. Now I find myself facing the fact that there was little in 2010 to recognize, even with the uptick in activity at year's end, mostly in the form of lackluster productions sorely lacking in quality. Still, I would be remiss if I did not single out the first-rate comedic skills that Vahik Pirhamzei and Anahid Avenesian displayed in "Indz Hokepan Bedk (Ch)E" (I (Don't) Need a Psychologist) or the consistently strong work that Narine Avakian and Ari Libaridian do at Ardavazt year after year. Tom Mardirosian was memorable among the stellar ensemble of "Ruined," but the performance of the year belonged to Hrach Titizian, who was shattering as Uday Hussein in "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo" – a performance he will repeat this spring (in a cast led by Robin Williams) when the play reaches Broadway.

It may be more fitting, then, to devote this year's article to reflections on the current state of Armenian theater, in light of the shift in progress that it suffered in 2010. After all, this sudden change of direction was a grim reminder of how fragile our theater community is, how lacking in foundation and infrastructure, and how dependent on a handful of talents.

1.

We must note, from the outset, that Armenian theater has all but abandoned every genre except comedy. If we're lucky, the comedy translates into fine satire (as it did last year in "Averagneri Bahagneruh" (The Guards of Ruins) or in sharply observant sketch programs like "Out of the Cage" and "The Big Bad Armo Show"). More likely, it appears as farce, a term I use generously, since the self-described "farces" I review frequently dispense with precision timing and choreography, and settle for limp, cliché humor.

I understand our community's hunger for light fare, especially when our notion of drama seems to be limited to endless iterations of "Beast on the Moon." But our appetite for frivolous scripts (inevitably about romantic relationships and marriage) appears insatiable,

even as we ignore weighty themes – such as diasporan existence in the aftermath of our homeland’s independence – crying out for theatrical representation.

This type of uncommercial writing requires nurturing in the form of commissioned and subsidized productions. The biennial Saroyan Playwriting Award, administered by the Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance, has honored two scripts with hefty subject matter – Lilly Thomassian’s “Nadia” in 2008 and Silva Semerciyan’s “Another Man’s Son” in 2010 – but neither work has been seen by Los Angeles audiences. Thomassian, who is local, has since finished writing “Komitas” (in collaboration with Lory Tatoulian), but a production has stalled due to lack of funding.

Organizations engaged in cultural endeavors – Hamazkayin and AGBU both have theater wings – must intensify efforts to ensure that Armenian plays are not merely entertaining but relevant. Meeting this challenge will require a readiness to cultivate new works while revitalizing classics through modern interpretations.

2.

Quality scripts, of course, deserve quality direction. The community, though, has too-small a cadre of progressive directors whose deft touch enhances the audience’s theatrical experience. Some of their best work – such as Martin Papazian’s propulsive rendition of “Topdog/Underdog” – occurs in non-Armenian contexts. I actually have to go back a year or two in order to conjure up the natural authenticity of Vahe Berberian’s “Baron Garbis,” the visceral sensuality of Maro Parian’s “Fool for Love,” and the exquisite nuance of Anahid Aramouni Keshishian’s “The Guards of Ruins.”

Certain directors, however, remain mired in the techniques of the past, churning out ill-conceived farces in which unlucky actors are made to run around the stage, straining to be funny through oversized gestures, eye-popping reactions, and generalized “mugging” (pandering to the audience). Not one but two Hamazkayin plays were compromised of late by this stale style.

It’s time for our community to heighten its expectations and do away with its penchant for applauding mere effort. It’s time, as well, to demand better production values. No longer should Armenian audiences have to endure amateurish sets, poor lighting, and bungled sound cues. And let’s be clear about painted scenic backdrops – unless they’re serving some kitschy throwback effect, they have no place outside of school productions.

3.

All this really points to an overarching need for an Armenian theatrical venue. Staging plays in alternative spaces can be eclectic, and I’ve seen impressive productions in outdoor settings, in warehouses, and even in cars – yes, cars. Rarely, however, have I enjoyed experiencing theater in such makeshift accommodations as auditoriums, dance studios, and banquet halls.

Access to a legitimate theater can afford graduated seating, adequate lighting instruments, and a stable environment in which a production can be polished before opening. A theater

stay can also end the crippling practice of one- or two-night engagements, which denies actors the opportunity to grow into their roles. There's a reason non-Armenian productions, whether professional or not, typically run for several weeks, during which time they evolve to gain stronger footing.

Finally, we must end the odious habit of "Armenian time" – starting a play 20 to 30 minutes after the announced hour. A 30-minute delay in even a 200-patron venue translates into a loss of 100 human hours. With all the work we have to do in Armenian theater, we don't have that kind of time to waste.

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