

# **“Happy Armenians” and a Post-Centennial Paradigm for Armenian Drama**

by Aram Kouyoumdjian

“Finally!”

Of all the compliments that audience members kindly shared with me after seeing my latest play, “Happy Armenians,” this single but altogether-loaded word somehow penetrated deeper and resonated with me longer. The speaker, a longtime friend of mine, practically sighed it, as if the utterance were allowing him a cathartic release – an escape from some crushing weight. I understood the emotion behind the sentiment because the play I’d written was about Armenian history, but it wasn’t a story of suffering or lamentation. It was an unapologetic – revisionist, really – reimagining of that history as one of victory and domination.

“Happy Armenians” unfolds in an alternate version of history in which the Kingdom of Cilicia did not meet its end in 1375 but beat back Mamluk and Central Asian invaders to emerge as a sprawling empire. At the play’s open, the empire has endured for 640 years and counting. Ruling over colonies as far away as Scandinavia, it is powerful and prone to conquest and oppression. It does what empires do.

## **A Response to Genocide**

I wrote “Happy Armenians” because I wanted to create a work of theater that responded to the Genocide during this year of its centennial without being a “Genocide play.” The fantastical premise of “Happy Armenians,” which contemplates what might have been if Armenians had eluded nearly a millennium of persecution, was intended to be that response – deeply personal and poignant, yet assertive and leavened with humor.

Even as I raced to finish the script, however, an opportunity came up for me to stage an outdoor theatrical performance in conjunction with the groundbreaking iWitness installation at the Music Center Plaza and Grand Park downtown. The installation featured outsized portraits of Genocide survivors, taken by my photographer friends Ara Oshagan and Levon Parian, and displayed on jagged three-dimensional, larger-than-life metallic frames; architect Narineh Mirzaeian had come up with the concept and fellow architect Vahagn Thomasian brought it to life. (For their innovative spirit, Oshagan, Parian, and Thomasian were named Leading Global Thinkers by *Foreign Policy* magazine earlier this month.)

The open-air, site-specific performance piece I ended up designing was entitled “i Go On,” playing on a line from a Samuel Beckett novel. Using testimonials from 14 survivors, it invited audience members to join a procession of 10 performers along 14 “stations.” (Each performer told an individual survivor’s story, followed by a cacophonous choral recitation meant to give voice to the survivors whose stories could not be separately told.) The procession sought to evoke deportation marches and protest marches, as well as the Stations of the Cross; religious symbolism ran through the piece not just because Armenia was the first Christian nation but because the Armenian Church had

canonized the victims of the Genocide earlier this year. A fountain sequence in the middle of the procession, featuring 10 additional performers submerging themselves into water, symbolically referenced the Euphrates river, which became an unmarked grave for countless Armenian bodies.



Fountain sequence for "i Go On." Photo by Taline Abkarian

“i Go On” allowed me to engage with the Genocide narrative head-on in a way that an ordinary play in a traditional theater space could not. Themes on the scale of genocide do not readily lend themselves to theatrical presentation because their magnitude is too great, too overwhelming, for an enclosed and confined stage. But in a park with over a dozen playing areas – set amidst towering survivor photos – the performance piece could achieve a dimension appropriate for its content.

### **Imagining No Genocide**



Heather Lynn Smith and Daniel Hubbard in “Happy Armenians”

Less than six months later, I was staging the opposite play – one that envisioned a track of history in which the Genocide never occurred. “Happy Armenians” had been in me for several years; I

have drafts of scenes dating back to 2010. Whenever I would tell anyone about the premise, the typical response I received was, “What a great concept!” However, a concept alone does not a play make. For starters, there was the minor issue of an actual plot. What was to be story? What sort of characters were going to populate the stage, and what exactly were they going to do or experience? When would their story be taking place? And where: in a corporate high-rise? a rural village? a hospital?

Eventually, I settled on a palace. The story would be about royalty – specifically, the ruler of the Armenian Empire, who is facing imminent death and grooming his successor, a most unlikely (and unwilling) heir to the throne.

Then there was the question of tone. The play started out as a farce and subsequently turned too serious, until I finally decided that it would have to be a dramedy. We worked hard to achieve a delicate balance between drama that was not too heavy and comedy that was not too silly. We aimed for poignancy, while consciously resisting anger or darkness. By “we,” I don’t just mean myself and the cast – although the quintet of Daniel Hubbard, Heather Lynn Smith, Tavis L. Baker, Jade Hykush, and Gregory DePetro navigated that fine line with remarkable skill. The design elements were just as integral to the endeavor – from the rich but deep colors of Maro Parian’s set and Henrik Mansourian’s lighting, to the buoyant but moving strains of Ara Dabandjian’s original music compositions.

### **A New Paradigm**

Ultimately, we tried to make “Happy Armenians” uplifting, and audiences assured us that uplift was what they felt most. This still pleases me to no end, since I am hopeful that the play will help usher in a new, wide-reaching, and forward-thinking post-centennial paradigm in Armenian drama that moves beyond mourning for the past but instead contemplates a future from a position of strength and optimism.

At a panel entitled “What’s Next?” shortly after April 24, I argued that a new paradigm is imperative, given the landscape change our Diaspora has undergone. With the near-dismantling of our Middle Eastern communities, the Diaspora has decidedly shifted West, where Armenians have attained levels of education, wealth, and political influence that are virtually unprecedented in modern times. Accordingly, our communities and arts organizations must abandon outmoded systems of governance and operations, and engage in cultural productivity that is both progressive and aggressive. Our notions of victimhood must give way to a redefined identity that does more than remember and commemorate, but rather prioritizes an ambitious agenda for the coming age – an agenda that includes the committed pursuit of Genocide reparations and the challenging business of nation-building in the independent republic – and tackles it with a renewed sense of confidence.

The work awaits artists and audiences alike, for the next centennial has already begun.

***Aram Kouyoumdjian** is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting (“The Farewells”) and directing (“Three Hotels”). His latest play, “Happy Armenians,” had its world premiere in Los Angeles this past October and will be revived in Northern California in February.*

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