

Armenian Revival: Introducing the Critics' Forum

By Hovig Tchalian

We are fortunate in the Diaspora, and particularly in the United States, to be at the center of a thriving community of Armenian art and culture. Not a week goes by, it seems, without the papers announcing a theatrical production, art exhibition, poetry reading or musical concert in Boston, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and elsewhere. As a result, there is now a thriving group of writers, poets, playwrights, and artists living and working in Armenian communities in the United States. Despite the abundance of cultural events in our communities, however, the time has come to cast a more critical eye at the body of work we are collectively producing.

Our instincts for self-preservation may very well tell us that more is always better. But considering the steady stream of Armenian cultural events and performances available to us these days, we would do well to reconsider that argument. The Armenian population in Southern California, in particular, has grown and matured immensely over the last several decades, having become one of the largest and most affluent such communities in the world. The growth of our collective appetite for cultural events reflects that development and the larger economic and social forces driving it. As such, we can now safely turn our attention from moral and material support of the arts to their improvement, which amounts to admitting that we no longer need more works but better ones.

The time is especially right for those of us living in Southern California—to return once more to my own primary point of reference—because there is something of a cultural revival taking place in our community. Events such as the UCLA Graduate Student Colloquium, which takes place early every year, have always attracted a good deal of attention, and rightly so. But these events have been around for quite some time. And they generally attract a small gathering of people, mostly academics and those who attend other, similar cultural events on a regular basis.

The revival I am talking about is taking place in a broader context, one which is redefining the boundaries of the Armenian community itself. For instance, a group of young people in Los Angeles has recently started organizing theater evenings. The group comes together one Sunday every month to attend a play. And although the attendees are almost all Armenian, the plays are decidedly not. They have included the works of American, English and South American playwrights. Another group of Armenians is funding an ambitious Armenian Academy with a rigorous curriculum aimed at better preparing Armenian high school students for college entrance. The recently formed project to fund an Armenian Center for the Arts (ACA) is another ambitious endeavor, this time to create a theater, gallery and workshop space in Southern California, for both Armenian and non-Armenian audiences. And the large number of Armenian candidates on the ballot for the recent city elections, particularly in Glendale, has spawned its own group of events and functions, many of a cultural or artistic nature.

There is a critical mass of these events taking place in 2005. But sheer numbers alone do

not tell the story. After all, the rise in numbers is due in part to programs commemorating the Genocide, and as I said earlier, the numbers have been rising more generally for some time now. I am calling this series of events a “revival” for an entirely different reason: the events have all begun changing how we define our community, because almost all are taking place in part outside it—whether the plays the Sunday evening group attends, the educational goals of the Armenian Academy, the mixed audience of the ACA, or the public offices the Armenian candidates have so successfully filled. In fact, I would go so far as to say that this revival could only have taken place in the process of extending the boundaries of the Armenian community as we know it, providing a perfect opportunity to reassess the quality of the cultural and artistic works created in our corner of the Armenian Diaspora, and particularly English-language ones.

Of course, it is more than a coincidence that Genocide commemoration should play such a central role in the cultural events, and not just in the early part of the year. So many of the greatest Armenian writers of the past century—Varoujan, Shant, Sevag, Oshagan, Gaboudigian—have produced their finest works in the shadow of the Genocide, and often in commemoration of it. The same cannot be said, however, of Armenians writing in English. In the years since the writing of Morgenthau’s letters, there have been countless and poignant attempts in both English and other non-Armenian languages to understand the historical significance of the Genocide. Ironically, the most subtle and effective of these have been produced outside or at the very fringes of the Armenian community. Some have come from non-Armenians following in Morgenthau’s footsteps. Others have been produced independently, and on different subjects, such as Werfel’s *Forty Days*. But few of the more compelling works can be said to have originated squarely in the Armenian Diaspora, and certainly not in Southern California.

A good example is the much-lauded play, “Beast on the Moon,” a professional production of which debuted recently on the New York stage and will soon make it out to Los Angeles. The play tells of an Armenian couple, Genocide survivors living in the American Midwest in the 1920’s. Their personal struggles gently illuminate the significance of the Genocide in its more personal, psychological aspects. The play was written by Richard Kalinoski, a Wisconsin-born playwright whose wife is Armenian. Ninety years after its occurrence, and seemingly no closer to acceptance, the Armenian Genocide maintains its hold on our collective imagination. But though we in the Diaspora have commemorated it unflinching for nearly a century, we remain as a community understandably too close to the tragedy to be able to represent it with any sense of emotional detachment or objectivity.

We need only think of examples other than Kalinoski’s play to judge the accuracy of what I am claiming—that most of the outstanding examples of Armenian Diasporan art of the last two decades or more, and particularly in the English language, have been created outside the immediate confines of the community itself. Peter Balakian’s novel, *Black Dog of Fate*, was written after the New Jersey-born author rediscovered his Armenian heritage. Atom Egoyan’s often extraordinary films are those of an Armenian born in Egypt and raised as a Canadian, directing as much for the audience at Cannes as those of Armenia or the Diaspora. Egoyan’s two films on overtly Armenian subjects,

Calendar (1993) and the more recent *Ararat* (2002), despite their many strengths and merits, are arguably too hampered by the weight of history and the burden of their message. *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), the film that garnered Egoyan the greatest critical acclaim and is easily his best work to date, succeeds precisely because of a certain detachment from its subject. It tells of the devastating effect a school bus crash has on the residents of a small town. The depth and subtlety of the film's psychological portrayals allow it to rise above the particular tale it tells to the level of human tragedy, much like Kalinoski's play.

Admittedly, the detachment required for producing art rather than polemic may be difficult if not impossible to achieve. We feel compelled as a community to measure even our artistic achievements with the yardstick of history. As such, many of the English-language works created in the Diaspora are anchored to the Genocide—either the tragedy of the event itself or of its aftermath, the immigrant experience. Unfortunately for us, by anchoring ourselves to the past, we have also compromised the quality of the art we produce. And more importantly, we have compromised its ability to transcend its own historical circumstances, not only those of the Genocide but of its own maturation process. The effect is art whose real and imagined audience is none other than the community of Genocide survivors and immigrants who collectively make up the Armenian Diaspora. Even if we hoped to create nothing more than effective polemic, we must admit that no new converts to the Armenian cause can be had by preaching to the converted.

If we compare this state of affairs to that in the Jewish community, whose history is similar in a number of ways to ours, we notice some interesting differences. There, a standout film about the Holocaust such as *The Pianist* (2002), which won acclaim at the Oscars, was based on the biography of a Jewish musician growing up in Poland during World War II. The story it told, however, had universal appeal. The earlier and critically acclaimed box-office hit, *Schindler's List* (1993), though spearheaded by a Jewish director, Steven Spielberg, was conceived with a decidedly international audience in mind. And I mention only two examples from several dozen possibilities, whether films or other works. *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), for instance, eclipses both of the films mentioned in popularity, having long become an international phenomenon as well as a cultural and literary classic. It is said to be one of the most widely read books in the world.

No doubt this comparison between the responses of the Armenian and the Jewish communities to historical tragedy is also marred by history—the international community has accepted the Holocaust while continuing by and large to either deny or ignore the Armenian Genocide. This well-known fact also suggests a larger truth: if the Jewish community is still coming to terms with the devastating effects of the Holocaust some sixty years after its acceptance, then how much greater must the need for a coping mechanism be in the Armenian community *during* the ninety-year struggle for acceptance. But by the same token, the cultural works mentioned here are in large part worthy of general critical acclaim, regardless of their subject matter. If we are confident that Genocide recognition will indeed occur, then we must also recognize the need to do a

better job of preparing ourselves and the rest of the world for it. And raising the bar on Armenian Diasporan art includes paying more attention to what we define as “art,” regardless of its message. It also means better defining the role and character of the Diasporan “artist.”

There are many talented artists living and working in Armenian communities all over the United States and the Diaspora more generally. And some of them may very well be the Egoians and Balakians of tomorrow. But the process of getting there requires a genuine dialogue between them and their audience as well as their potential critics. By critics in this case, I refer not to those who might undermine or discredit the art they see, hear or read. I refer instead to those willing to “critique” or constructively analyze it, often from the more “detached” perspective we discussed earlier.

The most difficult truth we face may indeed prove to be accepting the fact that today we have too many artists and not nearly enough critics in the community. Some of those critics were present at the UCLA Graduate colloquium I mentioned at the start. But they had convened among themselves, apart from the community of Armenian artists at large. The genuine and necessary work of critique must be carried out in open dialogue with artists and for the benefit of the entire Armenian community, but with a much more cosmopolitan audience in mind. What we need at this particular moment, then, is not an artistic revival so much as a genuinely critical response to the art already being produced in such great abundance. The success of any cultural revival and the fate of the Armenian Diasporan communities that created it demand nothing less.

A new weekly column called Critics’ Forum represents a first effort in this direction. The articles in the series appear every Saturday in the pages of Asbarez, Armenian Weekly, and a growing list of other publications, including online venues. Each column highlights an event, a work, or a set of issues in one of four areas:

- Literature
- Theater
- Film and Music
- Visual Arts

The Critics Forum is made up of writers, artists and critics whose works you may have already read in these pages or elsewhere, including Adriana Tchalian, Aram Kouyoumdjian, Ara Oshagan, Sam Ekizian, and hovig Tchalian, among others. With your help, we hope to start a conversation about where the art we produce has been and where it’s going.

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