

*ARMENIAN THEATER: AN UPDATE (1992) By Nishan Parlakian*

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In Spring 1992, while a Fulbright appointee in Armenia lecturing on American drama at the State University in the capital city of Erevan, I had my third opportunity in recent years to study the nation's theater. Alexis de Tocqville, the astute observer on the American nation after the Revolutionary War, informs us that a country's theater can offer valuable insights into its problems and interests. Perhaps we can see if that is true of Armenia. The observations that follow are based mainly on stage productions dating from Spring 1990 to Spring 1992 and constitute an update of the theater of Armenia from 1980 when I first visited it, then still a communist state. The full impact of the recent political realignments which made Armenia an independent state cannot be properly assessed yet, especially on theater; but changes already are in evidence, as some of my remarks will show.

The lack of fuel in the nation at the beginning of 1992 made it impossible to sit in unheated buildings, forcing both the University and the theaters to wait for the warmth of Spring to pervade their interiors and enable them to function. The chairman of the Foreign Languages Department in which I taught had promised to let playwright Jirair Ananian know I was in town. Ananian, one of the best-known playwrights in Armenia today, author of *Taxi, Taxi*—a farce I had seen in Erevan a decade earlier and subsequently translated and produced in New York—arrived at my dormitory suite one evening with his close friend director Annen Elbakian, who heads the new Baronian Musical Theater in Erevan. It was an auspicious meeting for, as it turned out, Ananian and Elbakian became my guides for much of the theater I saw.

Ananian seems to be king of Armenian comedy today. He took me to the opening of his new play *The Man from the Flying Saucer*, produced by the government sponsored Baronian Musical Theater, which is devoted

exclusively to the staging of comedies. The play is about an elderly husband who argues with his wife, gets on the wrong side of his tough brother-in-law and, fearful of being beaten up by him, escapes his clutches by climbing into neighbors' apartments through their balconies. The shenanigans he sees going on in these apartments make for a very humorous comedy-farce about the moral and social mores of Armenian society today. I had seen a rehearsal of this play at the long-awaited, newly-built but as yet unopened home of the Baronian Musical Theater headed by Armen Elbakian, but the play actually premiered in the Stanislavsky Theater on historical Abovian Street. At the same theater we also attended a performance of Ananian's Taxi, Taxi, which is now in its twentieth year on the Armenian stage. A new generation of Armenians is laughing at the antics of a cab driver who finds a suitcase in his taxi, tries unsuccessfully to turn it over to the authorities and ends up retrieving its contents when his wife unwittingly appropriates them as gifts for herself and their future in-laws. A concurrently running third Ananian comedy called Carousel was playing at the Sundukian Theater—the oldest and most venerable government subsidized house—where we saw it. The work is a musical farce in which a wife gives her husband money to bribe a big shot for a better job—one he can work at during the day. But, as it turns out, the husband mistakenly gives the money to a businessman on the floor below and thus the comedy of errors gets under way.

Elbakian invited me to two comedies he directed under the banner of the Baronian Musical Theater at the Stanislavski Theater. These were Moliere's George Dandin (or the Imbecile Husband) and Khanoum's Shenanigans. The latter play is uniquely Armenian dealing as it does with the devices of Khanoum, a matchmaker of Tiflis, in tricking an aging prince to agree to have his young fiancée marry his young nephew in his place.

The main event of the season at the famed Sundukian, a theater in which plays of all genres are produced, was the opening of Ibsen's Enemy of

the People starring Khoren Abrahamian one of Armenia's foremost actors. I reread the play in English before going to see this Armenian version, which turned out to be ... another play entirely. It is not uncommon for Armenian interpreters of so-called translated works to metamorphosize them into something quite different from the original. Very often the interpreter decides on the play's theme and then very directly creates an impressionistic set which literally spells it out visually for the audience. In this case, Ibsen's interiors were transferred, as it were, into a black swamp full of leaking sewage pipes, a setting symbolic of the chief conflict in the play. Dr. Stockman's role, played by Mr. Abrahamian, was brought to the fore and other roles were diminished. There was an artistic excitement about the experience which I'm sure brought the production accolades when it premiered in Oslo in 1991, despite the fact that Norwegian audiences most likely recognized considerable variances from the original.

As the nation's premier theater, however, the Sundukian has housed three of the most important plays in Armenia in the last decade, according to Levon Hakhverdian, one of its most eminent drama critics. I saw one of these, *Unfinished Monologue*, by Berj Zei-tountians, starring Khoren Abrahamian, in 1990. It was a serious appraisal of the reasons why the economy of Armenia does not develop. The drama was clearly a vehicle absolutely suited for Abrahamian's vast talents and truly meant, as its title indicates, to be a solo tour de force for the great actor. In this play Abrahamian plays the role of an aging entrepreneur, wheeling and dealing as he "makes it" in the business world by illegal means. A skeletal unit set utilizing the well known Sundukian turntable gave the piece a flow one might expect more readily in a film. Soft rock and contemporized Armenian music pervaded and freneticized the action.

Another of the best plays of the decade, according to Hakhverdian, was *Save Our Souls*, which—like *Unfinished Monologue*—deals with current economic and social problems in Armenia. The best of the three,

however, says Hakhverdian, was *Your Last Haven*, which addresses the reasons why Armenians immigrate to America, chief among these being the disgust with governmental corruption on all levels.

I should point out that Jirair Ananian's *My House is not Your House* may be said to fall into this category of political and social criticism. I saw this farce at the Sundukian in 1990. It deals with one of the greatest problems in Armenia today, the housing shortage. In the typical Ananian manner, the play opens with a situation that promises great humorous potential. The play begins with a mistake that the Housing Authority makes in assigning two families to the same apartment. The fun lies in seeing the opening and closing of doors with split second timing, as in a Feydeau farce, as each family becomes more and more entrenched in the apartment without the other family's knowledge.

The third major house of the Erevan theater is the subsidized Dramatic Theater which began to function as June approached. Its director, Armen Khandigian, had given an interview on Erevan television where he discussed the problems facing his theater. I was fortunate enough to get a video glimpse of his forthcoming production of *Julius Caesar* and, although it may be unfair to comment on the production as a whole, I was reasonably convinced from what I heard and saw during the televised interview that Khandigian's approach in this play (as in many of his earlier plays) was impressionistic. In the bits that I saw on TV, for example, a grotesquely dressed man was laboriously dragging a coffin at the end of a rope around the stage. My impression of this "stage metaphor" was that it was meant to symbolize the burden of guilt carried about by Brutus for his part in Caesar's assassination.

During my earlier visit in 1990, I had already noted that impressionism tended to dominate Mr. Khandigian's approach to plays at the Dramatic Theater. In notes I kept at the time, I commented on this tendency in his direction of *Brother Balthazar*, the modern classic of the great Armenian satirist Hagop Baronian. All the players were in black or white, as was

the setting itself (one side of the stage black, the other white). I'm not sure that the colors were meant to be clearly symbolic or to represent, as they often do in American movie westerns, the "good guys" and the "bad guys," because in the second half of the play the colors were reversed. The plot of the play is simple enough: should Balthazar divorce his philandering wife or would it be better to keep her and save legal fees? The play needs little by way of specialized scenery. I've seen this play done superbly by the great Armenian actor Mher Mkhrdichian, whose touring company used whatever scenery was available to them, as they moved from city to city in this country.

The Dramatic Theater, of course, has given audiences some excellent productions. In 1990 I saw *The Great Silence* by Berj Zeitountians, a play that appealed to me in a special way despite its elaborate decor. It was about Daniel Varoujan, considered by many to be the greatest poet of Armenia. He was one of the three hundred intellectuals murdered at the outset of the 1915 genocide of Armenians. The play as staged at the Dramatic Theater had a dream-like quality in its stylized setting. It built up tension scene after scene, some touchingly involving Varoujan's wife, as it became clear that the poet—who is regarded as the spiritual voice of Armenia—was doomed to die early in the holocaust that was to overwhelm the Armenian nation.

In some ways the most daring of the plays I saw in 1990 was the Dramatic Theater's *The Eternal Return*, about the poet-writer Bairour Sevag, an outstanding spokesman for Armenian rights in the Soviet Union and a man who fought the forced authority of the communist establishment with his controversial pen. The avant garde setting of the production looked like an abstracted back yard of a city building, and the ideas of the play seemed to overwhelm its plot. Sadly, Sevag died in 1977 in an auto accident of suspicious nature. True, the play appeared during the period of Glastnost tolerance, and because of that fact some may not deem it to have been an overly courageous statement. But like all plays before the coming of democracy, it had to pass the test of a

communist board of censors at dress rehearsal.

In an update of the Erevan stage in 1990, I commented on the growth of the small theater movement which had not been current on my first visit in 1980. Like our off-Broadway theaters here, these theaters have special interests and agendas. Of these the Camera Theater, I noted, should be lauded for extravaganzas such as *Haik* and *Brave Nazar*. Even before Glastnost had begun, the Camera Theater, formed in 1982 by Ara Yernchakian, was taking pot shots at the central government; and when I saw them in 1990 they were still bringing joy to audiences a year away from freedom. After playing here and there, the group was given free space to create a 150-seat theater in a basement. Government subsidy followed allowing the company, consisting of fifteen actors and four musicians, to eke out a living. *Haik* is theater of frenzy reminiscent of New York's Ridiculous Theatrical Company. It pokes fun at governmental corruption and at the same time defends the spirit of the Armenian nation and its language. Decrying the soviet system, *Haik*, the hero of the piece, points to the red flag and shouts into a microphone: "We have come to God too late." After more than two hours, the dramatic frenzy ends with the cast reciting in chorus the Armenian alphabet—a simple yet dramatically moving conclusion.

*Brave Nazar* at the Camera is the adult version of the children's story "Seven in One Blow," about a meek tailor whose killing of one bothersome fly is magnified into his killing of seven stalwart men with one sweep of the sword. In this version, his kill is raised to a thousand men—perhaps because the tailor's name *Nazar* rhymes with the Armenian word *Hazar*, meaning "one thousand." At any rate, a myth grows about the now invincible soldier, and for his bravery the international press has him elevated to kingship. The whole thing is an obvious spoof on Gorbachev and his rise to power.

I expected the Camera Theater to be doing something politically rousing in these troubled times, but by the beginning of June nothing of the kind

was evident.

The Experimental Theater on Toumanian Street was formed in 1982 by Hratchya Ghazarian, whom I met in 1990. The theater of seventy seats or so is housed in a basement that happens to be perfectly congruous with the set of their new offering called *Exiles*, which takes place in a basement dwelling. The plot involves two men who have fled Russia to this unknown country as a result of the 1917 Revolution. It is New Year's Eve and the men have a feeling that with the coming of the new year they will be able to go home, again. They are the bane and boon of each other's life. One earthy, the other sophisticated, they are in a situation reminiscent of Sartre's *No Exit*. They cannot live with each other; they cannot live without each other. I tried unsuccessfully to find a significance in this play in terms of the Armenian scene today but found it difficult to imagine, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, why such a play was done.

Another of the small dramatic groups is The Malian Kino Theater which specializes in what we in America call "story theater." In 1990 they were doing a sexy series of vignettes from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The production had a commedia dell'arte quality. This year they were at it again with dramatized Bible stories which were hilariously funny. Essentially, their current production depicts God creating heaven, earth and Adam and Eve. God and the chorus of angels he conducts are dressed in white sheets and adorned with halos. After the Lord expels Adam and Eve from paradise, He softens and offers to take them back in. But Eve says they can't return because she is expecting a child—a theatrical reversal which certainly is an original view of this old, old story.

Under current deplorable living conditions, it is small wonder that some "off-Broadway" type theaters were defunct or in hiatus at the time of my visit. And yet, even in these worst of times new theater groups rise as replacements. One of these was the On Wheels Theater, which had a

large space in a mansion on Baghramian Avenue. The group was performing two short plays by Saroyan: the reliable *Hello Out There* and the lesser known *Hungerer*, about a destitute and homeless man (a writer) and a woman who meet in an abandoned building and miraculously fall in love despite the vicissitudes surrounding them.

It is possible that the *Hungerers*, infrequently staged in America as a significant Saroyan drama, was a poor choice for the On Wheels Theater. When I first met Raffi Muradian and Artur Khachaturian, the leaders of the group, I had made reservations for their production of *Hello Out There*, a vintage Saroyan piece. Illness prevented me from seeing it, but I am sure the acting level of the roles of the young jailed gambler and the girl who tries to save him from a lynch mob would have been a better barometer of the true abilities of the best actors of the group. It should be noted that the actors of the On Wheels Theater, like those of other small theaters, are for the most part young and their choice of plays, therefore, limited. Levon Hakhberdian—the chief drama critic in Armenia—confirmed this but added that, as these young groups develop, their acting pools will grow older and their choice of plays will broaden. Right now, however, the chief problem confronting the group is that the mansion in which they are housed will be taken over by the American Embassy and they—like BO many of the struggling off Broadway-type groups— will be homeless.

The homeless Gavit Theater staged a production of its *Hanoum Gigos* (translated into English for me as *For the Sake of Gigos*) at the auditorium of the Choral Society on Sayat-Nova Boulevard near Abovian Street. The work was written by the group and depicts the misrule of Armenia through the ages. As with the presentations of the Camera Theater in 1990, there seems to be an improvised frenetic quality about this production. I felt, however, that the aim of the production and the theater group was not altogether clear. I think that this group of first-rate young actors has yet to find its voice. Unfortunately, at a time when the Armenian government is struggling to



maintain itself and to define its complex political relationships and interests, the voice of the Gavut Theater may have to address Armenian realities in such a way as to support as much as possible Armenian national interests generally rather than criticize particular issues or policies at a time when the nation is desperately struggling to survive in its own right.

A word at least about two organizations which have a theater-education orientation. The Government Youth Theater headed by Yervant Ghazanchian works on a grand scale in its home building on Moscovian Street. Its work is of the highest professional caliber. Oddly enough, however, its audience is composed mainly of children, even though the content of its presentations is obviously geared for adults. It was indeed a remarkable experience to see Hagop Baronian's *The Eastern Dentist* (about an adulterous dentist's sexual escapades) being enjoyed by children of six and seven. This play, which I had directed in New York in the original Armenian, had been musicalized for the Government Youth Theater and was performed with consummately excellent acting.

On the much smaller stage of the Theater Institute, the college as it were for young people interested in stage careers, I saw a version of Moliere's *Misanthrope*. The play was nothing like the original, having been cut trimmed and transformed, but the young cast caught the seventeenth-century style of the piece. The Institute presents several student plays a year, as the final requirement for graduation. After a four-year period of training, the acting is quite good, although the older roles played by these young still relatively new actors leave something to be desired.

In 1990 I was rather pleased with the way the Armenian Theater, moving away from the communist line adhered to in 1980, was touching on formerly delicate subjects concerning the political and social well being of the nation. I hoped that it would continue in that vein with the coming of freedom and democracy. But in the Spring of 1992 my hope seemed unrealized. It is perhaps difficult to debate ideas in theater when

the public faces famine. But there are major questions being debated by citizens who gather in Erevan's parks and plazas. Chief among these, of course, is the question of Armenia's support of the Armenian Republic of Karabagh. Shall Armenia proper make peace by letting Azerbaijan overrun and ethnically cleanse the region? Various Armenian political parties debate these questions in the United States as well as in the Parliaments of Armenia and Karabagh. These debates have not reached the Armenian Theater, even though they have been in the thoughts and hearts of all Armenians since 1988, the year of the great earthquake when the controversy with Azerbaijan began.

The subsidized theater in Armenia allows for an excellent repertory system that enables most artists to be constantly employed and working at their craft. In a future update, we will try to determine if the advent of capitalism and the profit incentive has changed the structure and goals of Armenian theater.