

BEAST ON THE MOON: AN ARMENIAN JOURNEY OF SELF
DISCOVERY IN AMERICA

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Richard Kalinoski's play "Beast on the Moon," written in 1992, has as its protagonists two 1915 Armenian genocide survivors. It has been published as part of the Humana Festival Play collection of 1995 (19th Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays. A Smith and Kraus Book, pages 99-147, 1995). It was introduced to the public at that Theatre Festival (March 1 - April 8, 1995) and received great acclaim. Since then, it has been staged all over the world in regional and community theatres, as a search on google.com will quickly attest. The number of hits (over twenty pages worth) from Germany, France, London, Buenos Aires, Toronto, Dallas, Louisville, Oregon, Washington, DC, Long Beach, Milwaukee, Rochester, NY, and many others is a tribute to its long legs. With over forty productions staged since its Humana festival debut, Beast on the Moon is destined to remain a hit as its audiences grow and its potent message is spread around the globe. It

was a pleasure seeing its West Coast premiere by the Eureka Theater Company at the Bayfront Theater, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco some six years ago now, where it ran until April 14, 1996. Herein is an analysis of the play based on conversations with the playwright and the text of the play itself.

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Beast on the Moon is a two-act play which depicts the lives of two Armenian genocide survivors, beginning in 1921 when Aram Tomasian, the portrait photographer, is 21 and his picture bride, Seta, is an orphan of 15. The first act is comprised of short vignettes in which Aram, always referred to as Mr. Tomasian by his new wife, having brought her from Chicago by train to Milwaukee, tries to lay down the law and tell her how things will be in his home. What he wants is to have children and to have them fast. He is not a tyrant, as much as a man who has taken it upon himself to now live as he remembers his father living in Western Armenia before the Turkish massacres, where all his family was wiped out. This is not a whim, but a survivor's resolve to somehow erase his father's death. He will form his own family and if he lives just as he remembers his family living in Anatolia, he will have

resurrected a small fraction of the annihilated family and saved them from oblivion. Alas, this plan disregards a few important elements. What Seta might want and need is neglected and what Aram himself might require to live a healthy and productive life instead of the life of a father-imitator are missing from Aram's grand design. The plan is doomed to fail, and the play chronicles the transformation this couple goes through adjusting to the hard fact that Seta does not seem to be able to conceive a child, and that instead she develops into a woman who will state her mind and let Aram know that his ways will not do. This show of independence, and this willingness to adapt to America and mingle with the neighbors and be alive at that time and in that place, as opposed to living the surrogate ghost lives of dead relatives and their hazy memories, is Seta's victory. The beauty is that through this stubbornness of spirit and willingness to maintain some purpose in her life, she manages to bring Aram along, and he too is transformed away from his original suffocating and self-destructive course. The journey is not an easy one. But in the world of Aram and Seta, in the second act, there enters an Italian American orphan who himself needs help, and the love and care Seta shows towards Vincent,

this errant boy, while the source of domestic quarrels at first, eventually leads to the harmony that finally descends on the Tomasian household.

This beautiful human drama of loyalty to one's ancestors which drags with it the constant reliving of a traumatic past, this story of a young newly wed couple coming of age in America where hope and self reinvention are possible, this beautiful portrayal of an Armenian orphan girl who lives and struggles firmly and steadfastly even when faced with rape, rejection, scorn and isolation, this tale of resurrection and redemption between two little orphans who meet and help a third, *this* tale brings honor to the legacy of the genocide every living Armenian holds in his soul. Every unsung martyr and every invisible tear of anger, frustration and unmitigated resignation to the fact that we are the unrecognized victims of the first genocide of the twentieth century, perpetrated by the Turks, can find solace and a sympathetic chronicle in this gentle play by Richard Kalinoski.

The narrator of the play, who is Vincent reminiscing in old age how he met the Tomasians and how their three lives got intertwined, tells the audience in the second act the origin of the title of

the play. In 1893 there was a lunar eclipse, and the Turks came out to the village squares with their cannons and guns and started shooting at the moon in order to kill the beast that seemed to be blocking it. The Armenians watched. Two years later, with the excuse of trying to quell some uprisings in the provinces, the Sultan ordered a holy war against the Armenians, and those same guns and cannons were brought out to the village squares, but this time, the Armenians were killed. In 1915, under the din of a world war, the program to systematically exterminate the Armenian race was put into action by the Turkish government, and by 1918, one and one half million Armenian civilians had perished. The beastly acts were right here on earth in western Armenia where the sand is soaked in innocent Armenian blood, and the air is filled with the unheard cries of terror from women and children who would not be as lucky as Aram and Seta to escape and have a second chance at life in America. Aram and Seta each describe the horrors they saw and share their pain when they finally do trust each other as mates for life. Aram and Seta are Armenia, alive and reborn, struggling yet victorious. Aram, Seta and Vincent are America, victorious yet struggling for a true identity.

Two objections can be leveled at this otherwise very impressive play.

The first concerns its Armenian content. The genocide plays such a central role in the lives of Seta and Aram that the playwright seems to have forgotten to include any of the positive elements of our traditions and culture. A play that paints an accurate picture of Armenians would have to include some of what we are about beyond the genocides and massacres that have punctuated and punctured our collective history. This couple would have known the Armenian community and church in Wisconsin, they would have attended mass on Sundays and otherwise attempted to mingle with other Armenians. That is in our blood and part of how we remain Armenian as opposed to theatrical or poetic figures doing symbolic acts with cut out photographs or non-childbearing wives. To drive the point home singularly that Aram is suffering terribly, and through that blinded enough to be able to induce untold suffering on another victim and survivor, all avenues of celebration and Armenian communal conviviality have been stripped of the play. That is a didactic simplification which begs for a more mature and profound understanding of the Armenian American reality into which the

genocide and its aftermath needs to be sculpted with more care. It is hoped that if and when it comes to the cinematic adaptation of the play this situation will be revisited since the camera almost begs to skip outside the confines of a dark living room with constant fades to black. The camera likes light and church yards and kids running and skipping and half hearing the somber traditions and rituals that ground us to our culture being celebrated inside. There would also be weddings and folk dancing and funerals, coffee houses and backgammon parlors and Aram's store and his customers and his manner of speech with them to contrast with the way he treats Seta. All this would enrich the authenticity factor of this play.

My second objection concerns the lack of remorse and guilt Aram shows for all the abuse he leveled at his helpless wife just because he was driven by a powerful obsession towards an irrational goal. When he finally does realize that his path was wrong and that it must change, why does he not apologize to his wife and ask for her forgiveness? Surely he is a caring enough fellow to want to make amends beyond agreeing to have his picture taken with Vincent and Seta and beyond buying the boy a coat? Yet nothing beyond these two

gestures are found
in the play. It would have been more agreeable and
understandable if
Aram had been shown to make the crucial transition from
a man who
loves and respects his slain family and their memory so
madly that all
he has left for his wife is scorn, criticism and anger,
to a man who
frees his heart to welcome his wife as the primary
object of his love
and respect. Aram would have to exorcise his demons
more forcefully if
a happy balance is to be found in the Tomasian home.
Again, unless
symbolic gestures and metaphors and quick brush
simplifications are to
be transcended, a more carefully crafted psychological
denouement
might be desirable.

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S TOOLKIT

This play is so well constructed that it bears
revealing some of its
stagecraft. Various staging devices are used to propel
the story
forward and to affect the dramatic moments' pace and
coloration.
Kalinowski uses an old camera, a hand-held mirror, a
large, old family
portrait of Aram's with the heads cut out, a tattered
doll, a gold
coin, a rare stamp, and a big black coat -- that Aram's
father used to
wear -- as primary props in order to tell his story.

The mirror is a gift by Aram to Seta in the first scene. This is her new home and she is to have her own hand-held mirror. The mirror symbolizes the vanity required of her. She must look pretty and take pride in it. Her being overwhelmed at this gesture says quite a bit about how deprived her existence was in the orphanage back in Istanbul. In fact, she is not even the girl Aram had chosen from the three dozen photographs he was sent. That girl died. Seta was the one who answered his letters and thinks the nuns must have used the other girl's picture because Seta had sores on her face due to bedbugs when the pictures were being taken. She had been starving for quite some time before being picked up by the orphanage and thinks that this might be the reason why she is unable to bear him children. She has a half torn doll that was given to her by her mother. It symbolizes her attachment to her past as well as her attachment to make-believe worlds and her initial child-like simplicity. She is happy with her doll and resentful in its absence. In fact, when Aram wants to take her to his room for the ``business of man and woman'' she points her doll to him and clutches it to her chest as if it had the power to stop her from growing up or in order to prove that she is not yet

ready for grown up play. When Aram washes up and comes to take her into their bedroom, she hides under the dinner table and refuses to come out. She fights him and then finally lets out a scream saying that she sees a Turk when she looks at him. Why? He asks. Is that what they did to you? No, she says, I was too young and had no breasts. That is what they did to my sister. She submitted herself to their violence in order to save me. Throughout the first act, the couple tries to conceive a baby and fails. Either by returning from the doctor's office, admitting disappointedly that no, she is not pregnant, or after a good meal she has cooked, Aram insists that they try again. And again... It becomes a painful ritual for her, a monotonous and anxiety building lifestyle until she finds ways to expand her horizons, to make new connections, and to escape her fate.

The family portrait is an integral part of the play. With the faces cut out, and with Aram's picture in place of his father's, we know what Aram is trying to achieve with his wife. But Seta resents the oppressive presence of this portrait on an easel which dominates their living room, even if her portrait is now in the place of Aram's mother's. Seta covers up the picture with a sweater

whenever Aram is
not at home. She rebels against him and his plan.
Instead, she clings
to her doll, which causes him consternation. The power
politics
between them is played out with each trying to force
his preferences
and desires onto the other. That she succeeds at the
end is a
testament to America and its ability to redefine male-
female relations
and all other relations which, in the old world, would
have remained
far more rigid and patriarchal.

His camera is ever so dear to Aram, the photographer.
Every moment
that he considers special, he naturally wants to record
on film. Seta
resents the intrusion this camera makes into her life,
especially
since all the moments he chooses to preserve are
painful and awkward
ones for her. Whether it is a picture with the baby
carriage without a
baby, a picture with the gift mirror or the iron set,
Seta would
rather suffer them without a permanent record, and so
she insistently
complains about the camera's presence. By the end of
the play,
however, once they have found a common language and
they both care for
Vincent -- so much so that Aram has gone out on his own
and bought the
boy an overcoat -- Seta does want a picture, a picture
of all three of
them, as a family.

The coin is all Vincent has left from his father, the single stamp is what Aram cherishes from his. When Aram finally warms up to Vincent, he lets the boy examine his stamp and they bond. The big black overcoat of Aram's father is always hanging on a coat rack on stage and remains unused. When Seta wants to give it to Vincent, for the latter is much too exposed to the elements in the harsh winters of Milwaukee, Aram is furious and refuses to comply. He is still living a cloistered life where his memories and his pain are alive and are all that matter. The needs and wants of others are of little consequence. The climax of the play comes when Seta, furious with the haunting headless family portrait, dares to take it off the easel, to put the easel on the floor, and to nail her doll, spread eagled onto it. She then stands the easel back up, and what we have is an image of a (Christ like) crucified woman, which is exactly what the Turks did to her mother. Why your pain? She seems to be saying. Why not mine? I too am a living dead person, she confesses. It is only after she displays her deepest and still raw wounds that Aram becomes compelled to tell her just what happened to him at the hands of the Turks as well and how he came to escape while every other member of his

family was
beheaded and their heads hung from a clothes line for
him to see.

In the end, Seta, by deepening her ties and attachment
to the young
orphan, Vincent, is able to show Aram by example that
living in the
present can be much more rewarding and liberating. The
coin, the
stamp, the overcoat, the doll and the portrait all lose
their primary
meaning and are replaced by the emerging picture of a
family of three
with strong ties to one another: the Tomasians of
Milwaukee,
Wisconsin, America.

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