

Introduction to Armenian Theatre *By Nishan Parlakian And S. Peter Cowe*

Armenian literature arguably has one of the longest and most varied dramatic traditions of Eurasia, though it has not been continuous. By its nature, drama, in contrast to poetry, is an urban art dependent on the institution of a theater and associated groups of actors, as well as the existence of a sizable and relatively sophisticated audience. For Armenian theater, these conditions were met by the cities of Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman Empire, and Tiflis, administrative center of the Russian viceroyalty of Transcaucasia. By the second half of the nineteenth century both possessed large Armenian communities with a burgeoning middle class, developed educational system, and significant socioeconomic and cultural contacts with Western Europe.

Similar conditions prevailed in Armenia during the Roman period, which witnessed a significant degree of urban construction. Some of these cities were equipped with theaters, for example, Artashat, capital of King Artashes I (188 - 160 B.C), and Tigranocerta, capital of Tigran the Great (95 — 56/5 B.C.). The historian Dio Cassius records a memorable performance of Euripides' *Bacchae* in 53 B.C., in which the skull employed at Agave's dramatic entrance with her son's head was that of the Roman general Crassus. The production was overseen by King Artawazd II (55 - 34 B.C), who also composed tragedies in Greek, which were valued by the writer Plutarch (A.D. 50 - 125) but have not survived.¹

Although from that time until the second half of the seventeenth century no dramatic text exists, spectacle and theatrical performance of various kinds maintained their appeal. Despite the conversion of the Armenian court to Christianity in the early fourth century A.D. and the increasing importance of the new religion as a significant element in Armenian identity, the recitation of legends of ancient deities and

heroes, orally transmitted by the bard (gusan) to instrumental accompaniment and improvised gesture, continued well into the medieval period over the opposition of the church. Court performances of mime and dance paralleled the dramatic elaboration of ecclesiastical ritual, for example, in the Palm Sunday Dmbatsek [The opening of the doors] and the Washing of the Feet on Maundy Thursday.² In the early modern period, Armenians were also involved in shadow theater (karagoz) and various types of farce, such as orta oyunu (central staging), about which more will be said later.³

Jesuit school drama exercised a marked influence on Eastern and Western European theater. Under its impact, the school became the first institution to nurture a new movement in Armenian dramaturgy. Its first fruit was a neoclassical tragicomedy of 1668 at the Papal Academy in Lvov on the role of the Roman martyr St. Hripsime in the Christianization of Armenia. The work is emblematic of Counter-Reformation proselytism among Armenian merchant communities in different parts of the Middle East and sought to advance the union of the Armenians of Poland with Rome. During the next century and a half this tradition became firmly rooted in Armenian culture through the efforts of the Armenian Catholic Mkhitarist Brotherhood of San Lazzaro, Venice.

This religious community played a major role in the development of Armenian publishing through the support of merchant munificence, issuing a series of grammars, dictionaries, and translations, as well as inaugurating the literary movement of Armenian classicism and producing the first modern critical history of the Armenian people. These Mkhitarist dramas were in-house productions at Mardi Gras and other holidays. Mainly drawn from biblical and ecclesiastical themes and composed in classical Armenian, the tragedies also treat episodes of secular history, for example, The Perfidious Death of King Khosrov. Plays of Metastasio, Alfieri, and Comeille were also performed in translation. The comedies, in contrast, were lively farces mostly written

in the Armenian vernacular of Constantinople, involving stock characters drawn from the motley Ottoman capital (Jew, Greek, Albanian, etc.), supplemented by works of Goldoni and Moliere.⁴

In 1808 Mkhitarist school drama was brought to Constantinople and in 1820 to the Crimea, where in the 1860s the former Mkhitarist, Khoren Kalfayian, wrote the tragedy *Arshak II* and the rollicking farce *Alafranka* critiquing Armenian xenophilia. The Armenians of Tiflis, capital of Georgia, passed from Iranian to Russian rule in 1801, to be followed, in 1828, by those in the Khanate of Erevan. This period witnessed a significant expansion of Armenian educational establishments in what was now called Transcaucasia, the most important of which was the Nersisian school, whose first director was the Moscow-trained cleric Harutiwn Alamdarian (1795-1834). He introduced drama in a more Romantic vein, which influenced the sentimental work *Theodora or Filial Love* (1841) by his pupil Khachatur Abovian, more famous for his novelistic treatment of the Armenian struggle for liberation from Iran in *Wounds of Armenia* (1858).

The second social institution to promote Armenian drama was the voluntary association. Founded in a number of cities during the nineteenth century with the aim of fostering educational and cultural projects, these organizations performed plays such as Mkrtych Martirosian's comedy *Physiognomist of Duplicity* written in Calcutta in 1821 and works of Romantic nationalism written by the Mkhitarist-educated playwrights of Constantinople Mkrtych Beshigtashlian and Tovmas Teizian in the 1860s. Soon after the entry of the Khanate of Erevan into the Russian Empire, an Armenian amateur group there also premiered Griboedov's hugely successful comedy *The Woes of Wit* in 1827.⁵

The first step toward creating a professional theater in Tiflis was made by the dramatist Galust Shermazanian, who, in 1836, turned the first floor of his house into a hall where he staged plays satirizing social ills such as bribery, clerical backwardness, and tsarist bureaucracy. This

more realist, secular approach is also manifest in the first works of serious Armenian drama criticism by Sargis Tigranian in the introduction to a translation of Racine's *Athalie* (1834) and in the writings of the social revolutionary Mikayel Nalbandian in the 1850s. During that decade students at Moscow University such as Nikoghayos Pughinian and Mikayel Ter-Grigorian began to write and produce vaudevilles in the Armenian dialect of Tiflis, making fun of the manners of the city's Armenian mercantile class, transferring these to the Caucasus upon graduation. Out of this matrix emerged the first East Armenian theater company in 1863, which staged in the same year *Sneezing at Night Is Good luck*, the first work of Gabriel Sundukian. Though his predecessors' works have passed into oblivion, Sundukian's oeuvre is continually reprised on the Armenian stage.

1. For a somewhat dated overview of preclassical Armenian theatrical activities, see V. Arvanian and L. G. Murad, Two Thousand Years of the Armenian Theater (New York: The Armenian National Council of America, 1954).

2. See H. H. Hovhannisyan, Tatrone Mijnadaryan Hayastanum [The theater in medieval Armenia] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1978).

3. See L. S. Myrsiades, The Karagiazis Heroic Performance in Greek Shadow Theater (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988), pp. 3,7-8.

4. See L. Zekiyani, Hay Tadroni Sgzpnakaylere [The initial steps of the Armenian theater] (Venice: St. Lazar's Press, 1975).

5. See V. A. Parsarnyan, Gribayedave ew hay-mxakan haraberutyumtere [Griboedov and Armeno-Russian relations] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1947).