

**-JSAS- Book Review by Bianca Bagatourian-
Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology
Edited by Nishan Parlakian**

Published by Columbia University Press, 2004

As a Diasporan Armenian playwright, I often wonder what priorities or instincts to follow. Must I tell the history of the Armenians? Should I write an Armenian play? Must it be a genocide play? What subject matter ought I spend the next six months to a year chiseling, molding and perfecting into shape? These questions, not matter how glib, recur without fail in the thoughts and emotions of a Diasporan playwright as he or she prepares to strike the keyboard every day, or, as one would say in bygone times, before pen hits paper, specific and purposeful choices must be made. Therefore, when I first discovered “Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology,” edited by Dr. Nishan Parlakian, published by Columbia University Press, 2004, I was elated. Dr. Nishan Parlakian, emeritus professor of drama at John Jay College, is himself a playwright and a director who has staged plays in Armenian and in English for many years. That someone had assembled in one place, a collection of plays about and by Armenians in the twentieth century was a great panoramic source of insight and inspiration to me and it was with that precise feeling that I embarked upon my journey of this book.

The chronological progression of the plays appropriately begins with “Ellis Island”, a fitting place to start our adventure even if the gates of this grand doorway are slammed shut on our protagonists, Anna, the old lady, and Peter, a professor from Lebanon. In this play by Raffi Arzoomanian, we intimately feel the importance of the rights of entry and also sense the importance of language in myriad ways, for it is the lack of the English language, which in the end, keeps Anna out of America. This is a play with a universality about the immigrant experience, both symbolically and metaphorically, which captures the fear of the unknown and the many twists of fate. I can only imagine how much more palpable these must have been when the play was actually performed within the main building at Ellis Island.

Our second stop is the more establishing piece called “The Armenians” by our greatest and most famous (Pulitzer prize rejecting) Armenian dramatist, William Saroyan. “The Armenians” is, as the title suggests, very Armenian. In fact, it is the most Armenian of the plays I have read by Saroyan. It is 1921 in Fresno and Armenians are discussing the plight of their old country and how they could possibly be of help. What better demonstration of the timelessness of a good story, when eighty-five years later, though circumstances are different, we are all still pondering the same question. And, not only does this world class author capture a piece of history marvelously, but I find myself wondering how much of his own story is told through the voices of such characters as Reverend Knadjian when he remarks “I find that I am most myself there, I am most real there, I am most deeply

Armenian when I am in my study.” Is this Saroyan the man speaking himself and is this how we meet the man through his works?

Next, comes “Grandma Pray For Me,” a play by the editor of this volume himself, Dr. Nishan Parlakian. Though themes and ideas like this have been explored by many an Armenian writer, to do so through the medium of drama is a different thing altogether. I was extremely touched by the vision of the Grandma with her prayer beads sitting in the window symbolizing all our Armenian grandmothers together, praying as a last resort, helpless in the new country, waiting. This story moves along at a perfect pace and the quality of the writing is very poetic, as is that of the next play we come to.

Who can ever forget, even after one reading, the poignant words of the opening monologue of Barbara Bejoian’s “Dance, Mama, Dance.” “There is a concentration camp of the mind, in which women have been forced to dwell...” In one poetic phrase, she captures a predicament, which has haunted women for centuries. In this sophisticated piece, Bejoian depicts Armenian life in Watertown, MA, which, for an Armenian from a far away land, may come as a complete surprise.

In “Nine Armenians,” a well known play by Leslie Ayvazian, we see another illustration of the idea that no matter how completely different our Armenian experiences are or in which country we exercise them, they are still, in fact, Armenian. Here we see three generations of Armenian women with their feelings of chaos, of togetherness, with the shouting, the affection, the bonding, all captured so well in a mere sixteen short scenes. The play is as much a joy to read as it is to see performed.

Our next stop brings us to “Mirrors,” by Herand Markarian, where the results of trauma are shown through the extremes to which it hurls us and our human psyche. The subject of the Armenian Genocide is more directly approached here and exorcised via haunting memories that live on decades after the nightmare is over. In the courtroom setting of “The Armenian Question,” by William Rolleri and Anna Antaramian, a Turkish general constantly attempts to derail the court on the question of the Armenian Genocide. This play, more than the others in this volume, deals directly with the question of the Genocide and the outrage it should cause among civilized nations and concludes with yet more unanswered questions. The volume ends with the commanding “A Girl's War,” by Joyce Van Dyke which takes us from present day America all the way to the Karabagh conflict and entangles it all with the personal conflicts of the protagonists. This play is the most contemporary, attempting to unite our lives in one country with the struggles and realities of another to which we are so deeply attached.

The prevalent theme in these plays seems to be that of the Armenian Genocide, though other topics such as assimilation and the plight of women do enter the dialogue, there is no getting away from that huge cultural wound which, if you will, dominates the minds and expressions of all Armenians even today. Plays are

meant to be seen, not necessarily read, but within a small ethnic group, where there is little opportunity for costly presentations, it becomes important to once again read plays to hear the voice of the people. For me, as a working playwright, to see what has already been done, clarifies what still needs to be done. Like a barometer, if you will, this book takes the pulse of contemporary Armenian drama.

And so, loud and clear, I heard the ancestral voices as Dr. Parlakian likes to call them, voices which, sooner or later, every person begins to hear. There are excellent notes provided before each play that orientate and help to trace the author and put into context what you are about to read. I welcome such a rich offering of Armenian contemporary drama and I applaud Dr. Parlakian for bringing this project to fruition as a worthy addition to the previous volume, *Modern Armenian Drama*, edited along with Peter S. Cowe. Together, these two tomes create a tremendously enriching and invaluable experience for a modern day Armenian playwright.