

**AN INTERVIEW WITH PROMINENT ARMENIAN
PLAYWRIGHT PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN** *by Bianca Bagatourian*

On Aug, 13, 14, 15th, 2007, the Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance (ADAA) will hold their Second Annual ADAA/Fountain Theatre Armenian Play Reading Series at the Fountain Theatre in Hollywood's Little Armenia. This year, they will be presenting the plays of Perch Zeytuntsyan, one of the leading contemporary playwrights in Armenia today. The plays will feature prominent Armenian actors of the stage and screen including Michael Goorjian, Magda Harut, David Hedison, Karen Kondazian, Buck Kartal ian, Greg Zarian, Anahid Shahrik and more. (*For tickets, call the Fountain Theatre box office*) Mr. Zeituntsyan writes commentaries, short stories, novels and plays. He frequently contributes to the press on issues of current concern. This interview was conducted with Mr. Zeytuntsyann when he was recently visiting Los Angeles in April.

BIANCA: Do you think drama is important to Armenia in the present and in the future and how does it differ with other genres like fiction?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Playwriting is vital. It is important to communicate with a live audience of 300-400 people. The playwright can instantly touch on painful subjects. He takes the pulse of the society. And it is immediate. Particularly as you have only 60-70 pages in a play as opposed to a novel that goes on for 500 pages.

BIANCA: Why is playwriting not a popular form in Armenia? We have very few playwrights compared to novelists and poets.

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Because we haven't had a State. And not too many professional actors, Just one or two. Adamian, Papzian. They were stars. The rest were amateurs. There wasn't much of civic culture so theaters did not exist and there wasn't the economic support for dramas to be written. This really didn't develop until the Soviet Period when the tradition really took off.

BIANCA: Did any of the 19th century Armenian playwrights influence your work?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Shakespeare.

BIANCA: And your favorite play?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Hamlet. I like that play because it so open for interpretation. There are many possibilities. For example, To be or not to be, can be interpreted in many different ways. I also love Chekov. Especially The Three Sisters.

BIANCA: I can see obvious influences of Beckett and Ionesco in your work. Were they not also available to other writers?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: I tried to self-educate. I read books which weren't readily available in Armenia. I think it is very important for people to look outside their narrow sphere of existence and look beyond. This helps them to write through a world perspective. Checkov and Maupassant. That is how I educated myself in a more European fashion. No writer should stay in the narrow confines of his own environment. He should be writing in a world context as opposed to the one he lives in.

BIANCA: What inspires you?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Life. Reality. My wife and my children. I have to say that!

BIANCA: You write in such different veins. Your new play, Jesus of Nazareth, is in a realistic strain compared to Born and Died and The Saddest of Sad Men which are more absurd. Is it easy for you to switch back and forth stylistically?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Usually writers write in fiction form first and then turn it into drama. But I do the contrary.

BIANCA: Why?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Because as a playwright, when I see on stage the performance of my play, I learn a great deal more about myself and my characters. Then I can perfect them and the piece. When I finish a play, I like to work with the same people. Usually, directors don't like to have the writer looking over their shoulder, but I have three directors which I choose to work with regularly and they allow this because they realize it is a collaborative effort. They realize I am there to learn too.

Sometimes the directors will suggest a change and I will disagree. Usually, in this way, I fine tune the play but I don't make too many changes. For example in Jesus of Nazareth, the directors suggested that I should add two monologues and so I found two themes from the book "World Mythology" and after adding monologues based on these themes, I realized that it did make the piece much richer. This is a sly maneuver for a playwright. To have the opportunity to watch the performance before others and improve it.

BIANCA: What is the favorite play that you have ever written?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: The Legend of the Destroyed City. It is a historical play set in the fourth century and it begins with a tourist who goes to Europe. A guide shows him a free city with no laws where anyone can do as they like. This made me think that in the time of Arshak the king, in the fourth century, we had just such a city. Armenia was surrounded by the Byzantines on one side and the Persians on the other. The king was weak so he made a city for the lawbreakers where everyone could do as they pleased. This made him a stronger king. Everyone was equal. But, slowly the city of Arshakavan became very corrupt. Corruption entered the city and that was the reason for its downfall. He was a harsh king but he was ahead of his time in mind but not in spirit and this tension between the two is what brought about his downfall. This is also made very clear in this play.

BIANCA: Are you working on any new plays now?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: I'm thinking about some. About what to do. Armenia is in transition now. There's a Chinese saying, "If you want to harm anyone, make them live in transition." So, we are in a bad situation now. Society is not sitting around and waiting for the next play. The demand for writers has diminished. In the Soviet period, they would publish tens of thousands of copies of a new play. Now, the regular run is five hundred. There is economic difficulty. And material values have now become the priority and spiritual values have taken a back seat. All this doesn't mean that the Soviet time was better. In some areas, some things were better. There was a certain stability and now it is in this state of transition. It was a narrow path and the new path is not yet created.

So, there was more culture in that time.

Let me say something amazing. Armenia, compared to most of the other republics, had more freedom under Soviet rule. Unfinished Monologue was produced in Soviet times, pre-Perestroika. When they went to perform it in Kiev, the people there were astonished that this was allowed. There was obviously a more controlled structure in the Ukraine.

BIANCA: Have you ever thought of leaving Armenia?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: No. I feel every writer must live on his own soil. No matter how bad the situation. He must be there to feel the situation. Armenian culture and scholarship is centered in Armenia and that is where it grows.

BIANCA: We are very pleased to be presenting three of your plays in August at the Fountain Theatre in Hollywood and we hope you will be able to come back and see them.

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: It is difficult. But Born and Died, one of those plays you are presenting, has never been produced anywhere so this will be a world Premier at the Fountain Theatre. Out of the eleven plays that I have written, this is the only one that has never been produced. The other play you are presenting, The Saddest of Sad Men, had it's first performance in Armenian in 1974 and had it's last performance in Arabic in Egypt in 1991. This is the one play that has been translated in the most languages, even in Hungarian. In addition to that play, there is also a novella that goes with it which has been translated into French. The third play, Unfinished Monologue is about corruption in the system. This was of course, met with a lot of opposition, until now. It was once printed in the Soviet newspaper that Berge Zeytunstyan was a secret agent for Anglo European literature sent to infiltrate us. If this was in Stalin's time, this kind of remark could have finished me off.

BIANCA: I was particularly taken with Born and Died. Was this play a metaphor of the oppression that Armenia was under?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: How should I know! People are always asking me questions about what does this mean or what is that. It is

whatever you want it to be. You must not ask a writer such questions. And don't always believe what they say either. This play was written for Vigen Chaldranyan. And Mickael Boghosian was in my mind too. Chaldranian suggested I write something using a monologue of Gogol and I thought it might be interesting to write a play which would be a rehearsal of this work of Gogol's monologue. Although, later I thought it would also have been interesting to have them rehearse a straight play and contrast it with the absurd reality of life. So life would be absurd and the play would be reality. The play would be more reasonably logical. This was an experimental play. At the end, there is resolution. We see their fundamental differences are resolved.

BIANCA: Is there a dream play you wish to write?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Oh, there are a lots and lots of things I want to write. There aren't enough theaters to produce them. Currently, three of my plays are in repertoire and a fourth would be too much. There aren't enough theaters to write for. My plays are performed quite often, from 1979 until now. All Rise, Court Is In Session, has been done every year in the Sundukian Theater. In the dramatic theater, The Great Silence has been performed since 1983. This one is also a great crowd pleaser I've been very lucky!

BIANCA: Can you name some other leading playwrights in Armenia?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: Gourgen Khanjian, Anahit Aghassarian, Garine Khoudikian. Aghassi Ayvazian is best, not as a playwright, but as a novelist. Writers don't like to say nice things about each other. The book by Peter Cowe and Nishan Parlakian, Modern Armenian Drama, covers pretty much most of the playwrights in Armenia today.

BIANCA: What would be your advise for other playwrights in Armenia?

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN: I have tried to teach at the Institute of Theatrical Arts and introduce a course of dramaturgy. I like to do workshops mainly. Two of my students, Hasmig and Mariam, are now working in Moscow. I would suggest they read anything they like to read. And to look outside their own sphere.

BIANCA: Thank you very much, Mr. Zeytuntsyan, it has been an honor and a pleasure.