

Three plays By Lorne Shirinian: A review By Bedros Afeyan

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(Dedicated to the memory of my mother, a daughter of Urfa, Anaiis Afeyan, who sacrificed, suffered and shared her courage and love incessantly)

It is often asserted that the Armenian genocide of 1915 itself, its mechanics, the Ottoman Turkish ruthlessness, premeditation, dehumanization, barbarism, callousness and inhumanity, just can not be turned into art. Art, no matter how gruesome the subject, still manages to elevate, cleanse and dignify whatever it touches, if for no other reason than by its conventions. An Art Piece, in part, compresses time, neatly connects and codifies, reaches for archetypes, sharpens edges, flattens inconsistencies, stresses and repeats a particular set of points of view and thus makes something less horrendous than reality itself has witnessed. No matter how many Jews you strap, like sardines, onto the inside of a make shift train cart, shaking, defecating and urinating on each other in the dark as they are led to a concentration camp over a number of days, no matter how bad the portrayal gets, it can not begin to resemble the actual unfolding of events in 1942 in Germany or Poland. The overabundance of horrors can not be captured in a carefully crafted sequence of fleeting moments or by some well chosen words, movements, colors or scents. It will be toned down and risk being a white wash. So how to do the Turkish atrocities justice? How to bring them into perspective? How can a bedroom, a dining room or a living room conversation or two portray the sustained horror of the Ottoman mass murders or its lasting crippling effect on surviving Armenians dished out in daily doses of denials and historical revisionism which is a masterfully played game of passion for the unrepentantly militarist, religiously fanatical and racist elements of the "modern," "secular," "European," "democratic" Turkish state and its representatives? It is easy to say it can not be done, since it can not be done easily. Certainly, one must set one's scope quite narrowly, lest one be accused of merely preaching or howling into the darkness of historical injustices where many dormant ghosts jockey for position. Armenians are and

always will be more concerned with the calamitous fate of millions of their countrymen ninety years or so ago than any one else. This is as it should be. But complete denial and the suppression of nationally sanctioned limitless violence and ethnic cleansing should concern all nations and all peoples of the world. Armenians should not expect the world to deliver justice on a silver platter to the survivors and their progeny and return our land to us as well as our dignity. No, it is up to us to do all that with the help of the enlightened countries of the world which do not place political expediency before their morals and ethical compass. Nations who do not make bed fellows with unrepentant murderous regimes and their glorifiers, and call them honorable and modern, good allies and friends, when every indication is that none of these titles is or ever has been earned.

So what is a playwright to do? A diasporan playwright sees the Armenian communities sway and swing towards the accommodation of this or that extreme, be it nationalism or assimilation. The schools and churches attract some number of followers, especially the newly immigrated, but traditions seem to get vetted, ablated away or merged, replaced by local color and comfort. Median ages of the participants in regular events rise, the youth, by and large, stay away. What we are left with is calcification, lack of rejuvenation, intransigence on the part of the crowd which has bought the message with fewer and fewer members added to their ranks. The crisis becomes more and more acute as poor immigrants find status and affluence, the spiral does not follow an Escher path. The stairs only spiral downward. The community relations degrade and further compromise occurs so that at the end, you have an "ian" decapitated Papaz or Aznavour, a Hadison or a Gary where a Heditsian or a Garabedian would have been more authentic. But what's in a name? Armenians come and go speaking of Der Zor and Aleppo... Never mind its 2004 and North America is our home... Der Zor and Aleppo, Khor Virab and Mamigonians carry the glow of identity. Unless modern current thriving elements of our communities take center stage in our own literature and creative arts, even preserving traditions and memories will become difficult. It is the continuity or development of a

story line tying us comfortably to our past that may carry sufficient appeal to inspire the young and curious to join our plight and render our goals reachable. This does not mean ignore the assimilation or dilution of our culture but the realistic and persistent depiction of things as they are and as they should be as opposed to how they were in some idealized and exaggerated way, implying that the present is less interesting and less valid and perhaps even a bit shameful. Here then are some of the elements a diasporan Armenian playwright carries on his shoulders as he approaches his keyboard and looks at the flickering cursor on his confessional's screen. Besides all this, and especially when the writing is to be in non-Armenian and therefore in part be for a foreign audience, the story of the genocide has to be told from scratch since nothing is known about it, in contrast to the Jewish holocaust. We can not tell our Schindler's List stories since we still do not have the factual background exposition of a Shoah on which to base or build the "art."

Canadian Armenian author Lorne Shirinian, via his Blue Heron Press, has just published a full length play entitled "Exile in the Cradle" and two one acts entitled, "This Dark Thing" and "Red Threads on White Cloth" (See www.blueheronpress.ca). These three plays take different stabs at the issues sketched above and create a lively platform for discussion and exposition in stylized and well controlled tones and colors. The effort is yet another small step towards the dissemination of some of the facts surrounding the genocide that had precursor tremors in the last few decades of the 19th century and which culminated in the 1915-1924 whole sale deportation and murder of a million and a half innocent Armenian souls guilty of not being muslims, guilty of not being willing to give up their identity and become Turks, guilty of being successful more often than not and being ambitious and hard driven, not accepting a second class citizen role there to service their conquering Turkish overlords. No one should have to die due to their pursuit of a better life and yet this did happen to Armenians at the hands of the Turks, The story has to be told and told correctly and widely and well. Stabs in this direction are increasing. Ararat from Egoyan was another great Canadian Armenian effort towards these goals. Shirinian has now

given us three more.

The first is an ambitious pastiche of scenes that begin with a train ride on April 25, 1915. and culminate with a present day poet, with an assimilating sister, living in Toronto, fighting to preserve her allegiance to the history of her ancestors via her writing, as well as coping with failed loves, children, grand children and modern problems we all face today. Her past and her present mesh or jar depending on circumstances she does not entirely control. She questions, yet believes, she doubts yet she perseveres. She is a poet and so is one the two Armenian deportees on the train on April 25, 1915 (the other is a business man, confident and "in" with the Turkish ruling classes, so what could go wrong?). This makes the tale easier to tell for a poet like Shirinian and less troublesome in terms of finding people who can articulate their feelings and thoughts and artfully, at that. Even the identity-escaping or -denying sister is a sculptor while the x lover runs a museum. The point is, this is a layer of society that is far from the ghetto, far from the smoke filled club house where the crashing pieces of a large number of backgammon sets make for a curious sort of rhythmic dares with the roll of tiny dice and puckered lip coffee sips as the quieter notes in between. Taunts, clashes, insults to village or last name, generalized macho stances from survivors of unspeakable horrors? No, this is not what Shirinian knows about nor can reach in his stage world.

Instead, you have dignified, well reasoned, compressed modes of theatrical expression, Anglo-Saxon in its sensibilities, full of factoids but lacking in authority or vigor. A short depiction of a rape or a sequence of nightly rapes in 1915, suicides, murders, deprivations, and yes, the next poetry book that will appear which will explain it all, but we were so good in the past together, and is this new assistant of yours your new lover?, and so on. This is the tone. The cup never runneth over. The Turkish officials on the deportation train are vicious but this is the first day! Even they can not do much yet to set the true tone of what is really to come in the years ahead.

The family conflicts and the juxtaposition of generations, the artists and their identities, all these make for a wider palette than the church/club

house scene, perhaps, but it is hard to see the passion and drive behind the piece. It is very well measured and restrained so anyone will be able to sit through it. Whether they walk out with sympathy towards the Armenian cause or any significant added knowledge about our specific plight and saga, is harder to gauge. This is why one can applaud the effort as yet another step towards the bridging of the gap of knowledge and consciousness that we would like to see our cause receive. For Armenians in the audience, resonances and tender moments will be aplenty. The mirror is not obscured by the usual fog of biased exaggerations and self-deceiving assertions.

The two one acts are braver and more condensed in form and scope. The first is allegorical. It may be thought that it has nothing to do with Armenians or their historical plight. And yet it does. In the very narrow sense, *This Dark Thing*, depicts the reversed roles victims and victimizers sometimes play. You made me do it, you were asking for it, I never meant to hurt you, this is what you get for acting that way, and the themes of jealousy, envy, sudden failure when one's self image still insists that you are leading, feared and dominant. Violence can come from such sources and untold violence at that. But this theory is a weak and simplistic psychoanalysis while the genocide has geopolitical and racial overtones, two body interactions can not capture. This play is an experiment by way of an allegorical telegraphic vignette, if for no other reason than to prove that a calamity as wide as the Armenian genocide has parallels and resonances in all sorts of human interactions and is not monolithic in its scope or direction.

The second one act, *Red Threads on White Cloth* is more of a 20 page performance piece where GENOCIDE is spelled out after some testimonials and declarations. It is a spectacle more along the lines of something that could be staged at an April 24 commemoration of the genocide as part of the ritualization required at such memorial events. It can have its place in the cannon of what Armenians need to say and do to remember, to understand, to heal and to move forward with constructive and purposeful moves towards the resolution of our geopolitical, social, and cultural problems in Armenia and in the vast

diaspora that is the home for the majority of Armenians.

Many more plays will have to be written on these very same themes.

The ghetto and the library, the newsroom and the bedroom will all have to be subject to spotlights speaking of our evolution and transformation, our metamorphosis and degeneration towards hyphenated identities that should enhance possibilities and expand our horizons but never be allowed to make us forget who we are, where we come from, and what we have to offer to the world as a culture and our essence which is uniquely our own. Tolerance, acceptance of the other and constructive competition can elevate us as a people. Narrow mindedness, myopia, festering insecurities and inertia could be the end of us yet. Egoyan, Shirinian, Kolinowski, Balakian, Arax, Berberian and many others are the contemporary torch bearers of the path that is ours to take and to persevere until one day, neighbor with neighbor, disparate culture with disparate culture, we will celebrate humanity in its diversity and subtle glory, as opposed to be filled with fear from that difference, succumb to the urge to crush that other, and in so doing darken our own souls and cause endless agony to the innocent nonviolent cultured minorities on whom we will have stomped foolishly.

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