

AN INTRODUCTION TO PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN *By S. Peter Cowe*
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The author of the two plays represented in this volume was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1938. A decade later he resettled in Soviet Armenia with his family during a period of harsh economic conditions in the aftermath of World War II. Zeytuntsyan's literary promise manifested itself early, his first short story *Nver e* [The Gift] appearing in 1953 while he was still a pupil at the Aghayan School in Erevan. Only three years later he had amassed enough material to publish his first collection of short stories under the title *Nra arajin enker e* [His First Companion] as a high school senior. The work was well received by critics and won second prize at the Soviet Youth Festival. Over the years he has also translated a range of short stories and other genres from English, including works of Krskin Caldwell, Greene, and Hemingway. Zeytuntsyan then turned to the longer prose genres of novel and novella. His output in this area includes *Mer taghi dzaynere* [Sounds of Our Neighborhood] (1959), *Mezanits heto* [After Us] (1963), *Parizi hamar* [For Paris] (1965), *Klod Robert Izlerli kam xx dari legend* [Claude Robert Izerli or a Twentieth Century Legend] (1968), *Katakergutyun arants masnakitsneri* [Comedy without Participants] (1975), *Verjin arevagale* [The Last Dawn] (1989), *Goghatsvats Dzyune* [The Stolen Snow] (1995), etc. As Zeytuntsyan has pursued the important function of cultural bridge by rendering significant works of foreign fiction into Armenian, so several pieces of his own oeuvre have been translated into Russian, French, Arabic, Czech, Bulgarian, Hungarian, the languages of the Baltic Republics, and most recently into English.

Zeytuntsyan, acclaimed as one of the greatest Armenian dramatists of his generation, like Shirvanzade and Levon Shant, began writing for the theater when already mature as a writer. His first drama, *Amenatkhur marde* [The Saddest Man] a tragicomedy on the citizen's struggle to

maintain intellectual and moral integrity under a totalitarian regime, appeared on the Erevan stage in 1974. Thereafter ten plays of his have been produced there and in Russia, and later published in the Armenian Republic . Of these one might mention *Avervats kaghaki ajaspele* [The Legend of the Ruined City] (1975), *Astvatsneri kanche* [The Call of the Gods], *Anavart menakho- sutyun* [Unfinished Monologue] (1981), *Mec Irutyune* [The Great Silence] (1984), *Otki, datarann e galis* [All Rise, The Court is in Session] (1988) and *Tsnvel e u mahatsel* [Born and Died] (1995).

At the core of Zeytuntsyan's artistic focus lies the role of the individual in society and his or her relation to the authority of the state. Different facets of this nexus have formed the basis of several of his literary works. Thus, for example, the play *Arshak II* highlights the tragic situation of one of the Armenian kings of the Arsacid dynasty (3507-367/8 C.E.), who committed suicide rather than submit to the suzerainty of the Sasanid Persian emperor Shahpur II. Similarly, one of his most recent compositions, a hybrid novel/play *The Stolen Snow* explores the struggle to preserve religious freedom successfully waged by the general and governor Vahan Mamikonian in the second half of the fifth century against the renewed Persian attempts to reintroduce Zoroastrianism as the state religion in Armenia.

Composed at the end of the Brezhnev era of stagnation, Zeytuntsyan's play *Unfinished Monologue* anticipates the reforms initiated by Andropov and pursued by Gorbachev under the twin watchwords of glasnost and perestroika. The main character, Rafayel Avetyan, almost single-handedly maintains a campaign for sense and utility against the inflexible strictures of a rigid centralized bureaucracy. In order to engage in this he is constrained to lead a double life, ostensibly executing his superiors' instructions, while actually giving priority to the communities his construction project is meant to benefit. Ultimately, he is brought to the edge of self-destruction in the process. More recently, Zeytuntsyan has provided a masterly portrayal of social life in Erevan at the height of

the war in Nagorno Karabagh under the destabilizing effects of the transition to democracy and a market economy are reflected in his absurdist play *Born and Died*. It problematizes established theatrical conventions, highlighting the issue of self-censorship and the actor's desire to escape the oversight of the director and playwright.

Many of Zeytuntsyan's dramas draw their subject matter from Armenian history, particularly events with particular relevance to current issues. Among these, a significant theme of the author's prose and theatrical works of the late eighties has been the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This tendency reflects the growth of nationalist sentiment in the republic during the final years of Soviet rule. To this topic he dedicated his novel *The Last Dawn*, and his dramas *The Great Silence*, and *All Rise, The Court is in Session*. The first play handles the murder of Taniel Varuzhan on April 24, 1915, along with several other Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople. Cut down in his prime, this poet had been in the forefront of a movement for national cultural revival, reawakening its deepest and oldest symbols in his poetry. The second treats the tense trial of Solomon Tehlerian, who was acquitted by a Berlin court in 1921 of assassinating Talat Pasha, the Ottoman minister of the interior responsible for the massacre and deportation of large sections of the Armenian population of the eastern vilayets. These plays have been frequently staged in Armenia as well as in different parts of the Armenian Diaspora. Recently he received the State Prize of Armenia, the republic's highest award, for his prolific output. At the moment his latest play *Jesus of Nazareth and the Second Disciple*, composed on the occasion of the 1700th anniversary of the Christianization of Armenia, is playing at Erevan's Dramatic Theater. Outside the bounds of his literary pursuits, Zeytuntsyan has also held public office in Armenia. For some years he occupied the position of executive secretary of the Writers' Union of Armenia (1975-1986). Later he was appointed Minister of Culture in the first post-Soviet administration. He has also been elected a corresponding member of the Tiberina Academy of the Social Sciences and Arts of Rome.

In addition to prose fiction, Zeytuntsyan has been involved in other kinds of writing. After graduating from advanced studies in screenwriting at Moscow (1962-64), he worked at the Hayfilm center in Erevan, rising to become senior editor of the art film section of the Erevan studio for television films (1968- 75). The innovative, thought-provoking film *Erevanyan oreri khronika* [Chronicle of Erevan Days] shot by the celebrated director Frunze Dovlatyan (1973) was based on his screenplay. Over the years he has also expressed himself on significant socio-political issues affecting the Armenian Republic through the medium of speeches and newspaper articles. Some of these were edited in an anthology *Tsulere der ayntegh en* [The Bulls are Still There], which was published in 1990 and won the Golden Pen award of the Republic's Union of Journalists.