

INTRODUCTORY OUTLINE ON THE HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN THEATER* *By The Reverend Charles A. Vertanes*

Since Armenia won national statehood nearly thirty-five years ago, after the loss of political independence for about six hundred years, the significance of the past of the Armenian people has become definitely established on its own. Its recognition had started in the nineteenth century, but it had been a slow process. It was done almost paternalistically, even begrudgingly. The process has gained momentum, and an interesting, colorful past is being unraveled before our eyes bringing to light, among other things, the wealth, variety, and resourcefulness of Armenian culture since Sumerian times. It is now evident that the culture and civilization on the Armenian plateau from the earliest times of which any trace has been left, through the ancient, classical and medieval periods of history, were on the same high level as those of the foremost peoples in neighboring countries. There were times when one or another country or section in this whole region was ahead than the rest, but for the most part they developed together, in continuous interaction with one another, and that in this process of give and take, the peoples of the Armenian plateau made distinctive contributions to the culture and civilization of the whole, the influences of which at times reached far beyond the bounds of that whole region..

Some of these contributions have been indicated in previous years in the Armenian programs at this representative Women's International Exposition. Last year the program was organized around the theme of " Armenia: The Cradle of Gothic Architecture." Actually Armenia's contribution extended to the genesis of medieval architecture in general. It was predominantly a church architecture, since religion played a central role in the political, social as well as cultural life of the people of that age. A brief sketch of the history of that contribution was published last year in the form of a booklet.

This year the theme adopted by the Armenian Exposition Committee is the history of the Armenian theater, especially of the past two thousand years. The contribution of Armenia in this field to the culture of neighboring peoples, and the art of peoples farther away is more modest than was the case with architecture. It is nevertheless surprisingly new to modern knowledge and indispensable to an understanding of the origin of the theater of antiquity itself and of some of those established customs and traditions in the dramatic arts whose meaning has been lost in the remote past. Professor Georg Goyan, in the first two volumes of his monumental work on the history of the Armenian theater, digested in this booklet, has shown convincingly that the theater of the ancient Armenians possesses the direct clue to the birth of the theater and unfolds clearly the historical origin and development of some of its ostensibly meaningless or mysterious current practices. He has done both through a study of the origin and development of such attributes of the theatrical arts as the onkos, the cone-shaped hat, the tiara, and other "fossils" of the religion and mythology of prehistoric Armenia.

The Armenian theater of antiquity, for a long time remaining in close touch with its historical roots, the religious cult out of which it evolved, and keeping intact its primitive ritual, symbolism and characteristics well into the Christian era, now serves as a rich source for the study of the beginnings of the scenic arts. Some of the elements of the ancient cult survived in the ritual and organization of the national church, furnishing a useful parallel to similar historical phenomena in the development of the theater. Thus, St. Carapet, after whom the cathedral at Taron, replacing the temple of the god Tir and Gisane, was named, inherited the long hair, the characteristic attribute of Gisane, as well as the function of patron saint of the arts. This, and the many other examples given in the digest of Dr. Goyan's work illustrate the wealth of the source material available to the scholar who is interested in the genesis and early history not only of the theater, but of the arts and religion in general.

