

SHAKESPEARE AND THE ARMENIAN THEATRE *By Nishan Parlakian*

Shakespeare's last play was probably written in 1611 some 370 years ago. Armenian translations of his plays began to appear some 200 years later. Edward Alexander writing in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* ("Shakespeare in Armenia," Vol. IX 1958, 387 - 394) tells us of an 1812 Armenian translation into grapar published in Madras, India of Voltaire's *Julius Caesar's Death* which was perhaps a condensed French version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Alexander goes on to report that in 1822 in Calcutta's Armenian weekly newspaper called *Shdemaran*, isolated lines from Shakespearean plays were translated in several issues, the longest passage being of fourteen lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In Moscow in 1840 Mgrdich Emin, Professor of Literature at the Lazarian Academy, translated various excerpts of Shakespearean plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* for use in his lectures. And in 1853 a complete scene from *Julius Caesar* was translated and appeared in *Pazmaweb*, a publication of the Armenian order of St. Mekhitar whose monastery is located on the island of San Lazzarro in the Venice Lagoon.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, translations of full Shakespearean plays began to appear. Aram Teteyan published his *Armenianized Comedy of Errors* in Smyrna in 1853. Encouraged by a magazine editor who had been inspired by European Shakespearean productions, Teteyan went on to translate *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

In the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries translational interest heightened. Stepanos Malkhassian, for example, working from versions in German, French and Russian, translated *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Gebork Barkhudian, a frequent translator of Schiller,

Armenianized *The Merchant of Venice* and Vartkes Soureniants translated *Richard III*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear* from the English. There is a long list of translators from this period, including works by such well-known writers as Vahan Tekeyan and Vahan Totov-ents and notable actors such as Hovhannes Abelian and Vahram Papazian of whom we will say more later.

The pre-eminent translator by the turn of the century, however, was Hovhannes Mahseyan (1864 - 1931). According to Rouben Zarian, translators before Mahseyan and during his life were minor talents compared to him. To paraphrase Toumanian, Mahsey-an's work constituted "a sudden great leap" in the sphere of Shakespearean translations. The stature of Mahseyan's work rises above all others perhaps in the same ratio that Shakespeare's art towered over the works of his contemporaries like Jonson, Chapman, Webster and Marston.

No doubt the excellence of Mahseyan had something to do with his grasp of the English language which must have been extremely firm since as a professional diplomat for Persia, where he was born, he served as Ambassador to Great Britain. As a Persian diplomat, a highly unusual career for an Armenian and a Christian, he served long years in high offices in various embassies as well as ambassadorships in Berlin, Tokyo and London. Apart from his fluency in English, he was master of Persian, classical and current, Arabic, German, Russian, Turkish and French and had probably read translations of Shakespeare in some of these languages. With his excellent knowledge of German, he was known to have referred to the great Schlegel translations of Shakespeare so highly prized by Germans. He may even have known some Japanese and could not have been unaware of the Japanese translations of Tsubuchi Shuyo whom he could have met when Ambassador to Japan.

Mahseyan studied and translated Shakespeare for forty years and in that time, in recognition of his work, he was invited in 1916 to participate in

the tercentenary of the dramatist's death in Stratford-on-Avon, where he eulogized Shakespeare and spoke of the Bard's importance in the Armenian literary heritage.

The enthusiastic response to his first translation of Hamlet in 1894 encouraged Mahseyan to continue, for a while, his translations at the rate of one a year: As You Like It, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice and King Lear. He had revised Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice and completed translations of Othello and Macbeth by 1923. For a time, it was thought that the seven plays mentioned were all he had done. At his death in 1931, however, several other manuscripts were found. Zarian's total count is fourteen translations-twelve published, two lost.

In defining a good translation Zarian observes that it should not make the reader feel "he is reading a translation" and Alexander states that "the intelligent translation is, of necessity, an interpretation of the original." "The success of Mahseyan's effort," writes Alexander, "is attested to by the fact that just as every line of the original is marked with that individuality which enables immediate identification, so too is the Armenian infused with that same 'breath of Shakespeare.'" Zarian, in essence, is in agreement and observes that "Mahseyan had the power of coping with Shakespeare and making him ours, making him speak Armenian." He adds that Mahseyan wanted to make "Shakespeare the heritage of Armenian literature, to give the Armenian reader the impression that what he was reading is not a translation at all, but actually a text originally written in his mother tongue. He wanted his Armenian reader to have indeed the illusion that Shakespeare himself had written the text in Armenian, or, at any rate, give the impression that had Shakespeare written in Armenian, he would have written in this manner and this manner only." If all this business about the absolute and total identification of Shakespeare and Mahseyan sounds like Armenian chauvinism of the highest order, it is perhaps fitting to give you the substance of the remarks of a non-Armenian, the great German linguist

Arminius concerning the Mahseyan translations. The eminent Armenian critic Charles A. Vertanes in a long article on the history of Armenian drama published in the pamphlet entitled "Two Thousand Years of Armenian Theater" writes as follows: Arminius held that if Shakespeares's works, due to some unforeseen catastrophe, were ever lost, they could be replaced most accurately from Mahseyan's translation. When he read Shakespeare, he said, he either did so in the original English or in Mahseyan's Armenian translation."

What did Mahseyan do to achieve his wondrous effect? According to Zarian, Mahseyan was a poet in his own right. He broke from the iambic pentameter decasyllabic line of the original when needed and went beyond dictionary equivalences, bringing his own artistic inspiration into play. Unique English "idioms and expressions," Zarian informs us, "will not submit to literal translations." At times, he writes, Mahseyan even resorted to usages from grapar or Classical Armenian "exceptionally rich in colloquialisms, to words and phrases that had once belonged to the sphere of literary speech, but had later been forgotten or fallen out of use. Necessity induced him to build new words, phraseological combinations and phrases, and to resort to the use of idioms and expressions from living dialect which were considered unacceptable as good writing style." Zarian believes that Mahseyan's linguistic judgment was so perfect that in reading his translations, it is "almost impossible to substitute a single word for one more appropriate." Mahseyan's translations not only brought the enrichment of Shakespeare to Armenian literature, but also they stimu-lated the progress of Armenian literary style. An English critic quoted by Zarian wondered how a relatively young language like modern Armenian had been molded by Mahseyan to attain the richness and flexibility of Shakespeare's language. The critic added that through Mahseyan "the language of a small down-trodden people had won the right to be on an equal footing with that of a developed nation." Not only is Mahseyan to be considered to date the best Armenian translator of Shakespeare, but also he must be rated as one of the most eminent Armenian literary personalities.

Though many years have passed since their publication, there have been no further attempts at new translations of Hamlet, Othello, The Merchant of Venice and Macbeth.

Armenian translations of Shakespeare continued, of course, after Mahseyan. At one point a plan to finish translations of all Shakespeare's plays by 1964 was set in motion in Armenia. By 1958, nineteen plays were available in three volumes. Relatively unknown writers Sourenian, Alajajian and Djerbashian made small contributions to that number. The major contributor to the translation program however was the poet Khachig Dashdents whose Coriolanus I saw in Yerevan in 1979. Alexander informs us of an article in the Armenian press in which Dashdents is said to have "captured Shakespeare's gleaming metaphors, epithets, deadly sarcasm, never ending humor and delicate implications" and thus proves himself a worthy successor to Mahseyan. For that reason a sample of his work will be included in our readings today.

Performances of Shakespearean plays seemed to follow the progress of translations. Again Zarian offers us a good outline. A production of Macbeth by the Mekhi-tarists of Venice is recorded for 1864. In 1865 in Tiflis, Georgia, Mr. and Mrs. Tovmas Fassoulyadjian performed a scene from The Merchant of Venice. The whole of that play was performed in the same city in 1866, the bicentennial of Shakespeare's birth, followed the next year by Othello, both starring Gevork Tchumushkian. In 1867 also Hagop Vartovian starred in Macbeth in the city of Constantinople. These productions did little to create a Shakespeare following. This became possible, however, in 1880 with the emergence of Bedros Atamian, who as Armenia's first great Shakespearean actor made the Bard's plays widely accessible. Like Mahseyan in his art, Atamian's artistic contribution constituted a great leap forward for Armenian theater. Bedros Atamian's greatest achievement was his rendition of the role of Hamlet, although he was justly famed for his portrayals of Othello and King Lear. In 1883 Atamian and his Armenian theater group performed Hamlet in the Armenian language at the Pushkin Theater in

Moscow. Subsequently he toured Russia for five years competing sometimes in the same week, even in the same day with the likes of such great Shakespearean actors as Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi. Zarian asserts that Atamian's Othello and Lear were considered by contemporary critics to be no less than the portrayals of Salvini and Rossi. His Hamlet was by far superior. Through his high artistry the great Armenian actor won respect for his nation, for its language and culture. "He came to be regarded," writes Zarian, "as a criterion by which to judge his people."

The best Hamlet immediately following Atamian was that of Siranoush whose dramatic greatness has been compared with Eleanora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt. (Bernhardt, of course, was one of the few women of international fame who played Hamlet.) From the beginning of the twentieth century on, Siranoush portrayed such great roles as Ophelia, Katrina, Portia and Lady Macbeth.

Her interpretation of the Hamlet role was positivistic and optimistic in that she wanted Hamlet to represent a character who was going to change the world for the better. Of an opposing philosophical temper was the noteworthy interpretation of her contemporary Garabed Kalfayan who rendered Hamlet as a pessimist seeing humanity mired in its existential bog incapable of extricating itself.

Another of the great Shakespearean interpreters at the turn of the century was Hovhannes Apelian who began acting in the 1880's in the role of Edgar in King Lear and was praised for his performance by Atamian. He followed Atamian as the chief interpreter of Othello and appeared in the play for twenty-five years beginning in the 1890's. but he was not a slavish imitator of the great master. His interpretation of Othello was that of a man (man in a general sense) deceived, of man falling into hope-Ins disillusion and loss of faith. Zarian, who saw Apelian perform, says that despite "his sturdy appearance and robust looks, he was the most gentle, the most lyrical of Othellos. His performance was a poem

of love." He gave us an Othello who "was tormented by the thought that men were capable of so inhumanly trampling the noblest and most sacred sentiments which he had always known to belong to the highest sphere of human morality and which would have remained intact had not the cruel blow come to shatter his best illusions."

Since Atamian, Apelian and Siranoush there have been many Armenian Shakes-peareans. A partial list would obviously exclude someone's favorite. Some notable names include Zarifian, Armenian, Manuelian, Papazian. Mnakian, Satenik Atamian, Nersissian, Zohrabian, Bedrossian, Noorian and Marootian.

Among those mentioned, Zarian singles out Hratchia Nersissian for his excellent rendition of Hamlet, Macbeth and Falstaff as well as Othello in which characterization he laid little stress on the hero's social characteristics. Apparently an advocate of the presentational school of acting, Nersissian did not believe that an actor should spout out a playwright's ideas as an orator from a podium, but that he should be the character and allow his speeches to arise naturally from the context of the emotional atmosphere on stage. This method applied to the role of Othello gave it a style reminiscent of Atamian's in an earlier age. Nersissian's interpretation was fortunate since it differed from the one established at the time by the great Vahram Papazian whose Othello dominated the Armenian stage for more than half a century. Papazian first played the role in 1908 at the age of twenty in Turkey during the tyranny of Sultan Hamid. That first performance, by Papazian's own admission, was somewhat amateurish. Despite the lack of a notable actor, however, an unruly crowd of theatergoers had gathered, impatient to witness a play that ended a thirty year ban on the Armenian theater in Turkey. After the show the audience would not disperse and forced Papazian to reappear on stage to recite Daniel Varoujan's poem "The Massacre." The role of Othello grew over the years reflecting the changes in Papazian's ideology and mastery of his art. First his rendition rpede Othello the romantic hero destroyed, then the sociological alien

persecuted, then abstract man defeated by guile and deceit. In the twenties and thirties, the Moscow press called Papazian one of the best modern tragedians and a French critic remarked that he had seen Parisian audiences moved to tears, declaring that Papazian was the best Othello he had seen. His fame in the role was such that he was a frequent guest artist abroad. Peter Bitlisian informs us in an article "Othello and the Armenians.. ." (The California Courier, June 23, 1960) that Papazian was invited by the Iranian government to act in Teheran where the great artist performed the role in French with the others in the cast speaking Persian. In any of the languages he knew, suffice it to say, Papazian was an awesome Othello. One critic said of him: "He was born for the role" and another that "the part seemed to have been created for him." The scene of the handkerchief, says Zarian, was a marvel and "had he created nothing else but this one scene, he would still have the full right to be ranked among the best Othellos in the world."

Shakespeare is alive and well on the stage in Armenia, today. In 1979, as a guest of the Armenian government, I saw productions of Coriolanus and Richard III at the Sundukian State Theater in Yerevan under the direction of Hratchia Ghaplanian. The Coriolanus production went on to win top honors at the 1980 Shakespeare Festival in Weimar, Germany. And just recently in an Armenian periodical, I read of an interesting production of Romeo and Juliet with the well-known Medoksia Simonian in the role of Juliet.

If there is a problem connected with Shakespeare and the Armenian Theater, it has to do with the dearth of Shakespearean productions in the diaspora. Zarian mentions the productions of amateur Armenian theatrical troupes in France, Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Iran. Mr. Bitlisian informs us that Manuel Marootian kept Shakespeare alive on the diaspora stage for the greater part of his life both in South America and Iran.

In this country Shakespeare fared well in the early part of this century in

New York City at the Armenian Art Theater under the direction of Hovhannes Zarifian until his death in 1937. The octogenarian Mugerdich Noorian tells of playing Iago and Claudius to Zarifian's Othello and Hamlet. After the demise of the Zarifian group, it was not until a decade later that Elia Kimatian, an actor in the Zarifian group, staged The Merchant of Venice. To the best of my knowledge, at least in New York City, there have been no Armenian Shakespeare productions of a reasonable caliber throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies.

It is fair to say, I think, that the presentation that follows here, reading though it be, is the first presentation of Shakespeare in Armenian in New York City in thirty-five years. Let's hope it acts as an inspiration for some of us to mount full-fledged Shakespearean productions in the near future. As director of the Diocesan Players, I used to insist that our group do only plays of actual Armenian origin. I think I have learned from my short study, for the purpose of introducing this program, that Shakespeare is indeed Armenian!

"Shakespeare and the Armenian Theatre " was first presented at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City on August 8, 1981. It was one of eleven multinational Shakespeare programs in the series "Shakespeare and the World," created and prepared by Dr. Anne Paolucci, President of the Council on National Literatures. The series was one of the major segments of the "Shakespeare Summerfest" (June-September, 1981), an exciting program consisting of lectures, exhibits, special events, films and dramatizations, throughout the metropolitan area, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and given in conjunction with a Folger Shakespeare Exhibit "Shakespeare: The Globe and the World." When Dr. Paolucci telephoned me and asked if I would prepare scenes in English and Armenian from plays of Shakespeare and if I would find the best actors available for these readings, I realized that the project was an exciting one and a real challenge. I accepted, of course, and immediately set to work to bring together the kind of group that would make the program one of the

highlights of the "Shakespeare and the World" series. It proved to be just that at the American Museum of Natural History--and not just for Armenians, but for a general audience. What made this group--Herand Markarian, Elizabeth Khodabash, Hovhannes Bezdikian, Shoghere Markarian and me--accept the challenge of giving this program and what brought you to it, perhaps, is suggested best, I think, by the great Armenian poet Hovhannes Toumanian who wrote, "Shakespeare has become a criterion by which to determine a nation's cultural standards. A people who does not translate Shakespeare is illiterate. Those who are unable to understand him are intellectually immature, and the language into which Shakespeare cannot be translated is indeed poor." Toumanian's remarks are to be found in Rouben Zarian's monograph Shakespeare and the Armenians (Yerevan, 1969; translated by Haig Voskerchian) a work upon which I draw considerably in this report.