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VOICES OF THE CHILDREN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARMENIAN QUESTION *by Bill Roller*

Early in 1977, when the young, talented director Anna Antaramian asked me if I wanted to collaborate on a play about the Turkish Genocide against the Armenian people, my immediate reaction was typical of most Americans: What genocide? Thus began my education in historical events that would overwhelm me. They still do.

Anna had been asked by then Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) at Saint Vartan's Cathedral in New York City (now Patriarch of Jerusalem) if she would team up with a playwright to mount a theatrical production for commemoration of Martyrs Week, coming within two months. Time was a problem. But the enticement for me was the inescapable sense of injustice being inflicted on Armenians. Nothing attracts a playwright as does injustice, and there is no injustice that can compare to the scale and enormity of genocide.

For theatrical purposes, Anna and I needed somehow to bring truth into head-on confrontation with falsehood at the level of international relations. How do you stage that? As collaborators are known to do, Anna and I had to "kick that around." At some point in the process, it occurred to us that the "arena" in which truth collides with falsehood is that of the courtroom. It made sense that we would need a court that is somehow authorized to settle international disputes, thus the United Nations became a convenient "umbrella" organization.

In 1977, humankind's apparent inclination to destroy its own living environment was also reaching a stage of universal cognition. The potential for worldwide starvation was conceivable as a consequence of

global drought. One such thought led to another, and we had a situation in which many of the nations of the world were required to appeal to the UN for famine relief. Including Turkey. It did not require a giant leap of creativity to hypothesize that Armenian-Americans – direct survivors of the Genocide – might contest the efficacy of Turkey’s receiving tons of grain paid for by American taxpayers.

We had a place to begin.

But even before pen touched paper, Anna was recruiting actors. She operated on the principle: “Build it, and they will come.” They came even before it was built: Anahid, Lynne Cherry, John P. Clark, Glenn R. Czako, Anita Khanzadian, Joseph Ragno, Jane Roberts, Ed Setrakian, Richard Sisk, Paul Tankersley and Martin Zurla.

Zurla, an accomplished theater artist (playwright, actor, director) and co-founder and Artistic Director of Raft Theatre, then located at the Title Theatre in Westbeth Artists Colony in New York’s West Village (Raft would later relocate to Theatre Row on West 42nd Street), offered the use of his facilities for the remainder of the play’s Off-off Broadway Equity Showcase run following the first two performances at the Cathedral.

The cast was assembled. Then came the survivors. Anna had put out the word in the community that we wanted to interview them. We wanted them to tell us their childhood stories of torture, mass atrocity and murder. These “children” came as people bent by age and infirmity, some who could not walk very well but who would have crawled up marble staircases to sit before a tape recorder and tell their stories for generations they would never meet.

Pathos and rage possessed us. Actors turned away in tears as the old people struggled to tell their stories. We realized then that numbers on paper would not convey that sense of outrage to audiences. Only these

epic horror stories could do that. Even as a non-Armenian, there is an inner place that still pangs when I conjure up those haunted faces recounting the unthinkable, courageous souls who took those memories to bed with them every night of their lives and woke up with them every morning.

Anna and I set to work synthesizing the experiences of these “children” into mature theatrical characters and – even though we did our best to lend a sense of authenticity to the theatrical “container” of a courtroom environment – their stories and the depth of their emotions created a heartbeat for this play that persists to this day. As co-authors, Anna and I must acknowledge that the original production was truly a collaborative work of artists and seekers of justice, and not the least of these were the “children.”

All 12 of the 1977 Equity Showcase performances were sold out. But there was no question that the original script “played to the chorus.” As a property, it was therefore “retired” to become what Archbishop Manoogian then referred to as a projected library of literature based on one of the most monumental – and monumentally evil – events in human history.

It was in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy that acclaimed prize-winning playwright and theatre artist Ed Shockley, Artistic Director of the Philadelphia Dramatists Center and the American Concert Theatre, mounted staged readings – serving as both producer and dramaturg — to develop and update the script; the first of these took place at the Community Education Center in Philadelphia in October 2001, directed by Dwight Wilkins. The “team” was joined by veteran theatrical producer Lee Pucklis shortly afterward.

Publicity efforts then attracted the attention of noted Armenian-American dramatist and Professor of Theatre Dr. Nishan Parlakian, who for many years served as Artistic Director of the New York Diocese; he

now offered to include the play in his upcoming anthology, then on the drawing board at Columbia University Press. Subsequent readings and staged readings took place at the Playground of Philadelphia's Adrienne Theatre (October 2002) and New Freedom Theatre (March 2003), then at Saint Vartan Cathedral in New York City (May 2003); all were directed by Shockley, each resulting in significant revisions by Anna and myself with Shockley's dramaturgical guidance. Critical feedback was also provided by Dr. Parlakian as well as the InterAct Theatre's Writers Group under the direction of that theater's Literary Manager, Larry Loebell.

It was largely due to the heroic efforts of the dedicated Armenian-American advocate of justice Sam Azadian, with the cooperation of Hiran Gulian, both of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the Knights of Vartan, that interest in hosting the New York event was generated.

The events of 9/11 do not belong solely to Americans, nor do the nightmare years of the Holocaust belong solely to Jews. All civilized people everywhere own these historic happenings, and they are universally, though sadly, acknowledged. Most of the enlightened nations on earth have also given official recognition to the Turkish Genocide against Armenians; in so doing they prevail upon the Turkish government to cease the hypocrisy of denial. However, American presidents, be they politically left or right, have resisted repeated congressional resolutions to do the right thing.

We continue to hear the voices of the old people — broken, weary but not vanquished — and we applaud such recent works as *Nine Armenians*, *Beast on the Moon*, *Ararat*, and *A Girl's War*, as well as the authors of the other works contained in the anthology *Contemporary Armenian American Drama*. We are firm in the conviction that the arts must continue to amplify the Voices of the Children so that they will be heard by all.