

A Feminist Tuberculosis Melodrama: Melek By Theatre Painted Bird

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Melek By Theatre Painted Bird By Emre Erdem Arab Stages, Volume 2, Number 1 (Fall 2015) ©2015 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Founded in 2000 by Jale Karabekir and Zeynep Kaçar, *Tiyatro Boyal? Ku?* (Theatre Painted Bird) is a pioneer feminist theatre and performance company based in Turkey. The group is primarily known for their deconstructive and feminist interpretations of plays from the Turkish and Western European canons, as well as their involvement in activities related to the ‘theatre of the oppressed’. The group’s productions include *Nora/Nure*, a Kurdish adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, which won the Ibsen Scholarship Award in 2009, and August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, which was Turkey’s official event for commemorating the Strindberg Year in 2012.

The company’s latest production was *Melek* by Rüstem Ertu? Alt?nay. Directed by the company’s artistic director Jale Karabekir, the play premiered in Sahne Cihangir in September 2013 and was last staged in December 2014. *Melek* is loosely based on the memoirs of tuberculosis-afflicted actor Melek Kobra (1915-1939), published by Gökhan Akçura in 2006. The single-actor play uses Kobra’s story as a vantage point from which to explore the politics of gender and performance in the formative years of the Republic of Turkey.

The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 under the leadership of President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Turkey’s formative years, known as the Kemalist Era (1923-1938), were characterized by a combination of secular modernization and Turkish nationalism. Women played an important role in this process. On the one hand, women’s bodies were perceived as symbols of national identity and markers of the difference between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. On the other hand, women — conceptualized primarily as mothers— were seen as the key agents who could create a new Turkey by transforming the households and raising the younger generations according to the ideals of the Republic. Moreover, the power of the discourse of honor continued, regulating the gendered behavior of both women and men. As such, women’s citizenship was defined at the intersection of multiple and conflicting expectations. In this context, theatre, film, and performance served as venues where the new codes of gender could be promoted, and female actors emerged as important public figures.

Melek Kobra came of age in the Kemalist Era and joined the ranks of the first Muslim and Turkish women actors. She was a member of Turkish theatre and performance royalty: Her father, Muhlis Sabahattin Ezgi, was a composer and director known as “the King of Operettas.” Her husband was the actor Ferdi Tayfur, known as “the King of Dubbing.” Her cousin was Keriman Halis, who was crowned Miss Turkey and Miss Universe in 1932. Growing up among these celebrities, Kobra was, in a sense, destined to fame. Her professional career started at the age of 16 with her father’s company *Muhlis Sabahattin’in Çocuklar?* (Muhlis Sabahattin’s Children). Later, she joined *Dariülbedayi* (later, Istanbul Municipal Theatre), which was the major publicly funded theatre company at the time. Nevertheless,

Kobra failed to negotiate the impossible expectations that defined women's lives in the Kemalist Era. Like some other prominent female actors of the period such as Afife Jale and Cahide Sonku, she developed a drug addiction, which was later followed by tuberculosis. She spent the final years of her short life under treatment at hospitals and sanatoriums, funded by her paramours, and died at the age of 24.

Melek tells the moving story of Melek Kobra with an unabashedly queer sentimentality. Written and staged as a powerful melodrama, it nevertheless contains strong political subtexts. Reflecting research that goes far beyond Kobra's memoirs, *Melek* presents a vivid portrayal of the theatre and performance scene in the Kemalist Era as well as the gender politics of the time. Thus, the play exposes the limits of the Republic's promises to women as well as their experiences of citizenship.



Rüstem Ertu? Alt?nay's Melek, directed by Jale Karabekir. Photo credit: Ali Güler.

Melek is set in a hospital room in Istanbul in 1939. The minimalist set consists of a bed and a window frame. At the beginning of the performance, the spotlight is on the white, fluffy marabou feather high heel slippers on the floor. The slippers, resembling those worn by brides in Turkey on their wedding night, represent the loneliness that accompanies the protagonist's illness. The play opens with the aria "Addio del Passato" from *La Traviata*. A farewell of the demi-mondaine Violetta before her death, the aria places the play within a broader genealogy of cultural productions about tuberculosis. Thanks to Karabekir's masterful directing and Erdem Ç?nar's intricate light design, lights and music continue to signify the passage of time, the change of space and moods throughout the performance.

Towards the end of the aria, the talented Ye?im Koçak enters the stage in an old rose nightgown and robe, taking her place by the slippers under the spotlight. As she wears the slippers, Koçak, as an actor, enters into the role of Kobra, another actor. Toward the end of the aria, the bed—where Kobra's passions, desires, illness, and failure will be narrated—is slowly lit. Once the music is over, the actor performs the death scene from *Camille* by Alexandre Dumas (*fils*) in an extremely melodramatic style, which cites the theatre productions of the period. As soon as the scene ends, Koçak resurrects as Kobra and starts narrating her life. This scene does not simply foreshadow the character's impending death but rather frames the play as a rehearsal for her death. In fact, *Melek* ends with the same scene from *Camille*, this time presented in a naturalistic style. In this occasion, the scene is followed by the aria "O Mimì, Tu Più Non Torni" from *La Bohème*—the farewell aria to Mimì, another demi-mondaine protagonist who dies of tuberculosis. Because it is the end of the play, this time it is not clear whether Melek is again acting the scene or performing her own death.

In *Melek*, the relationship between the self and the other is particularly complicated because of the multilayered performance. While we don't have access to the experiences of Ye?im Koçak, we witness how Melek Kobra, as an actress, engages with the repertoire of tuberculosis melodrama to make sense of her own experiences. In fact, in her case, the story of a young demi-mondaine who dies from tuberculosis functions in a way similar to what Diana Taylor in her 2003 book *The Archive and the Repertoire* calls a "scenario": a predictable, formulaic, and repeatable paradigm that structures the ways individuals understand the world and guides their actions.



Rüstem Ertu? Alt?nay's *Melek*, directed by Jale Karabekir. Photo credit: Ali Güler.

In the case of *Melek*, the tuberculosis scenario is particularly striking because it has been borrowed from the European melodramatic canon. As such, the production's exploration of the nature of performance is of significance for its historical politics. The protagonist, like Kobra in real life, uses the story of *Camille* to make sense of her own life and her approaching death. The archive of tuberculosis fiction in the play is not limited to *Camille*. Aside from the arias from the two major operas inspired by *Camille*, the play also cites various examples of the late Ottoman and Turkish literature on tuberculosis, including a lengthy passage from Peyami Safa's 1930 novel *Dokuzuncu Hariciye Ko?u?u* (Ninth External Ward). This postmodern style not only demonstrates the relationship between fiction and reality and European and

Turkish literary canons but also implies how Western cultural products and forms shaped the way Turkish people made sense of their experiences and understood the world in the context of a postcolonial modernization and nation-building program. Thus, while presenting a highly sentimental melodrama, *Melek* also attempts to deconstruct the very genre of tuberculosis melodrama.

Another interesting question this production investigates is the relationship between artistic performance and the performance of everyday life. This becomes most visible in a scene towards the end of the play, where Melek Kobra awaits her death: “In this hospital bed where I lie as I wait for death, other sick people, other hospital beds, other dead bodies parade before my eyes. I try to learn from their deaths; I try to learn how I should die. I made a lot of mistakes when I was alive, I should better not make any as I die.” With these words, *Melek* encourages its audiences to think about not only life but also death through the lens of performance.

The play’s exploration of the relationship between artistic and everyday performance persists throughout the performance, demonstrating how fiction and reality shape one another, and how everyday life (despite any illusion of naturalness) is rehearsed, staged, and performed. With scenes depicting diverse ways of experiencing the world, such as a dream where the protagonist’s cocaine hallucinations are mixed with a fairy tale her husband Tayfur tells her or a dream scene where she reunites with him long after he abandons her, Melek demonstrates how subjectivities are constituted at the intersection of multiple realities.

The minimalistic set design, combined with an elaborate use of light, allows the audience to focus on Koçak’s performance and supports the play’s melodramatic aesthetics. The bed, where the play begins and ends, represents Kobra’s illness and her unavoidable death. It also becomes a stage on and around which the stories of ecstasy and anger, passion and surrender, and an ultimately abandoned longing for belonging converge. The window, on the one hand, demonstrates the passage of time with the aid of light. As dusk approaches, so does the protagonist’s death. On the other hand, the window also symbolizes the world outside the hospital, with which she longs to reunite until the last minutes of the play. Nevertheless the window opens to nowhere. The production thus suggests that, despite the pro-women policies in the Kemalist Era, women’s citizenship was defined by conflicting demands that were impossible to negotiate. Supporting the story of Melek Kobra with references to Afife Jale and Cahide Sonku, the play also shows that the first generation of Muslim and Turkish female actors were particularly vulnerable to failure. As *Melek* demonstrates with a rich archive of performances, including not only theater and cinema but also beauty pageants and dances at public balls, the primary reason for this vulnerability was that the Kemalist government used performance as a tool to challenge the dominant gender norms. The production thus reveals that the opportunities enjoyed by female performers under the Kemalist government were actually part of a dangerous bargain in a patriarchal society.

The biggest strength of *Melek* is also the play’s major weakness: the multilayered text and its openness to interpretation. As a historical play, it suggests insightful commentary on the politics of gender and performance in Kemalist Turkey. As a postmodern text, the play also explores important questions regarding the nature of performance and the archive. Still, *Melek* is also a melodrama, and Karabekir’s staging, particularly her adept use of light and music, combined with Koçak’s masterful acting (Koçak had won the Ekin Yazın Best Female Actor Award in 2014 for her performance), emphasizes this aspect of the play. In that regard, *Melek* is different from most contemporary plays on Turkish stages that would be commonly conceptualized as “political”, and it has indeed been predominantly interpreted as a

melodrama, albeit a successful one.

Nevertheless, the performance's use of melodramatic elements is highly political. On the one hand, *Melek* presents the genre of melodrama—more precisely, the subgenre of tuberculosis melodrama—as a case to explore the aesthetic dimension of late Ottoman and Kemalist postcolonial modernization attempts. Investigating the relationship between artistic and everyday performance, the production reveals how the postcolonial engagement with the genre has influenced the ways people make sense of their own experiences. On the other hand, the affective power of the performance, produced in part with the aid of the melodramatic elements, helps the audience build empathy with Melek Kobra, whose story is told from a feminist perspective. Thus, as a feminist melodrama, *Melek* challenges the conventions defining the aesthetics of the political in Turkey. In order to expand the category of “political performance” and transform the habits of the audiences and theatre professionals, Turkish theatre needs more productions like *Melek*.

Melek / script: Rüstem Ertu? Alt?nay / direction: Jale Karabekir / choreography: Gökmen Kasabal? / dramaturg: Nelin Dükkanc? / costumes: Burcu Rahim / lights: Erdem Ç?nar / cast: Ye?im Koçak / premiere: 13 September 2013 at Sahne Cihangir, Istanbul, Turkey.

Emre Erdem is a director and dramaturg based in Istanbul. Since 2008, Erdem has been an ambassador to European Capitals of Culture for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's International Theater Institute (ITI). Erdem is also a member of PEN Turkey and the International Association of Theatre Critics Turkey. He currently works for the Istanbul State Theatre.



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