

## A Drama of Unlived Stories: *Old Child* by GalataPerform



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by GalataPerform By Eylem Ejder

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Founded in 2003 by Ye?im Özsoy, GalataPerform is one of the foremost theatre and performance companies in Istanbul, Turkey. Taking its name from the historical place Galata, where the company is located, GalataPerform is known for its projects such as *New Text, New Theatre*, and the *Visibility Project*. GalataPerform has organized different kinds of projects, festivals, and workshops to support new playwrights and directors. The most important are the workshops for new playwrights, and thanks to these activities, many plays have been staged in festivals organized by the company, or at the Istanbul International Theatre Festival. In this way, GalataPerform aims to become a home base for new writers and directors. Ye?im Özsoy, the artistic director of the company, wants theatres to encourage playwrights to create new narratives with a focus upon Turkish political, historical, and everyday life problems. The best-known productions of the group are *?z* (2013), written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, who has received both national and international awards, *Dil* (Language, 2014), written by ?enay Tanr?vermi?, and *Kabuk* (2015), written by Ay??l Ak?ehirli. *?z* and *Dil* were directed by Ye?im Özsoy and *Kabuk* was directed by Mine Çerçi, co-founder of Cloud Theatre.

The company's most recent productions were *Ya?l? Çocuk (Old Child, 2016)*, written and directed by Ye?im Özsoy, and *Balat Monologlar Müzesi (Balat Monologues Museum, 2016)*, including five monologues and two short plays, written and directed by different new writers and directors under the project coordinator Ahmet Sami Özbudak (also the assistant director of *Old Child*). *Balat Monologlar Müzesi* was staged in an unusual theatre space—in an old, abandoned historical school which has been transformed into a kind of museum. All of these productions were staged in Istanbul.

In this essay, I will focus on *Ya?l? Çocuk (Old Child)*, which was staged first at the International Istanbul Theatre Festival (April 2016) and was presented again during the theatre season of that year. *Ya?l? Çocuk (Old Child)* is, as Ye?im Özsoy writes, dedicated to all the children all over the world who are exposed to violence, the brutalities of war and injustice, and as well as the children being killed and losing their lives in different regions as a result of different political problems during the years 2015-2016. Özsoy writes and stages the un-lived stories of four “old children,” Jamal, Allen (Aylan), Cemile, and Deniz, showing them with their relatives, including Jamal's wife Victoria, Allen's unseen father Abdullah, Cemile's husband Serhat, and Deniz's mother, Nezahat. In fact, all of these children are dead, but now living in a kind of utopia, created by Ye?im Özsoy. In other words, as the dramaturg of the play, Ferdi Çetin, notes, Özsoy gives them an afterlife with the thought of what might have happened if they had not been killed in political wars or terrorist attacks. That is to say, they all exist only in a play that tries to atone for the unbearable reality of the today's world by creating its own reality. Based on real stories, *Ya?l? Çocuk (Old Child)* rewrites a forgotten reality and re-creates a new reality. Employing the transformative power of the theatre, she wants to change the reality on the stage, and by doing so, she may attempt to change the world. Maybe this is why the dramaturg Ferdi Çetin calls the play a “post-realist drama.”



*Old Child*, written and directed by Ye?im Özsoy, GalataPerform. Left to right: Allen, Jamal, Serhat and Cemile (lying on the bed), Nezahat (sitting on the bed), Victoria, and Deniz. Photo: Gökhan Co?kun

Jamal Salih Eliyan (played by Bertan Dirikolu), thirty years old, grows up in Gazze, in the camp Al-Shati near ?ifa Hospital. In a festive day, a bombing attack killed him when he was on a swing in the park. But in the play, we would learn that a Norwegian doctor saved him, and now he is living in London with his wife Victoria (played by Enginay Gültekin) and their two children. Like the others. Jamal is serious and self-absorbed, which is why his wife Victoria calls him an “old child.”



*Old Child*, by Yesim Ozsoy. Photo: Gökhan Co?kun

Allen (Aylan, played by Erdem Kaynarca) drowned in the Aegean Sea while he and his family were escaping from Syria (a reference to the three-years-old Alan Kurdi, we never forget, who was found lying lifeless on the beach 2 September 2015). But in the play, Allen, now thirty years old, lives in Greece and works as a room clerk in a hotel. His father Abdullah (Metin Belgin), to whom Allen is continuously writing letters, lives in Kobane, Syria. He is never seen in the play but we do hear his voice. Allen hates Turks and the sea.

Cemile (played by Ceren Demirel) is the only girl among these “old children.” She was a child living in Cizre, southeast of Turkey, where a war between the Turkish army and the guerrillas is still being waged. The character is based on Cemile Ça??rga, who was killed in front of her home as a result of being fired upon. Her dead body is hidden in a deep freezer because of the curfew. But in the play, she is thirty-years-

old doctor and married to Serhat (played by Emre Yetim).

Deniz (played by Akant Çetin) lives in Ankara, Turkey. He is Veysel Deniz Atılgan who died as a result of a bombing attack at a rally for peace which he attended with his father in Ankara. But now he is nearly thirty, and still living in Ankara with his mother Nezahat (played by Yeşim Özsoy) as a Law School graduate.



*Old Child*, by Yeşim Özsoy. Left to right: Jamal, Deniz, Cemile, and Allen. Photo: Gökhan Coşkun

Although located on a beach, the set designed by Başak Özdoğan includes a bed, a suitcase, a fridge, an armchair, and a white balloon. Apart from these, there are some toys which the children play with at the beach, and a child's shoe representing the babies or children dying on the Aegean Sea while escaping from Syria with their families. The four "old children" Cemile, Deniz, Allen, and Jamal, place themselves on different parts of the stage and begin to present short monologues, sharing the same childish dream of the sea. Slowly the others—Victoria, Serhat, and Nezahat—appear. What we see on stage is four different stories each performed by two players (except Allen's story) sharing the same place. When one dramatic story is performed, the other players slowly move in silence. The characters in different stories seem to be unaware of each other onstage, even if they share the same space. Nevertheless, they all hear same sounds—the sounds of bombs and waves—or sometimes pick up an object which belongs to another. For instance, Nezahat takes a coin that Allen has dropped, or Deniz finds a toy bear that Victoria has left. In this way, the characters are tied up with each other.

Istanbul is the junction point of the four stories. Doctor Cemile is about to go abroad from Istanbul, Deniz is about to go to Istanbul to attend the wedding of his cousin, Jamal is planning to go to his homeland Palestine via Istanbul, and Allen is going to Kobane via Istanbul to visit his father. In the beginning, we see on stage some ordinary people and pieces of their lives. They seem just like us. Scene by scene, the rhythm and the tempo of the play change as the color of the lights change. Uneasiness and hesitation grow apparent in the play. The falling bombs or the strange, threatening sounds coming from offstage could be heard only by the “old children.” When Cemile questions her husband Serhat what her name is, he could not reply. Similarly, Deniz’s mother Nezahat doesn’t know his son’s age when he asks her. The uneasiness and uncertainty led audiences to ask what is happening. The crucial question is whether the old children are real or not, as Cemile asks Serhat. From that moment, the audience understands that this is not an ordinary story. What we know from the play is not the truth. Who is real? Deniz or his mother, Cemile or her husband Serhat? How can a mother not know the age of her son? Who is a ghost? Allen or his father? The truth is that none of them are real, the only thing real is that Allen, Cemile, Deniz, and Jamal died when they were young.

Nezahat, Victoria, and Serhat slowly go offstage when the sounds of bombs, waves, and the children’s voices increase. The old children Deniz, Jamal, Cemile, and Allen stay on the stage. They begin to move back step by step, as if they were trying to turn back to the starting point where they stood at the beginning of the play, or as if they were trying to reach back to the truth that lies in the past: how they died. In this scene, all the sounds are blended: the sounds from a bombing in Gaza, the sounds of waves from the Aegean Sea, the sound of the bombing at the train station in Ankara, and the voices of children playing in the park. Now they all speak their monologues about the moment of death, not within the consciousness of an adult but with a tone of childish astonishment. In this scene, the play didn’t turn into a sob story that emotionally manipulates the audience. When the little Jamal died at the park in Gaza, he looked at the holiday candy in his pocket, and that is why he was sad. When Cemile was killed, she felt frozen, and she also imagined herself as a beautiful queen of snow (without knowing that in reality she was lying lifeless in a freezer). When Allen drowned, he thought he would live in the lost Atlantis with fishes, and when Deniz died at the rally for peace near the train station in Ankara, he thought that the peace was appearing everywhere in the world. They are now living in their new world that does not include the evils of the “real world.”



*Old Child*, by Yesim Ozsoy, GalataPerform. Photo: Gökhan Coşkun

In the final scene, they all lie on the bed and watch a movie together. Four happy children play at the beach in the movie. Jamal, Deniz, Allen, and Cemile watch the children playing for a while, and then they turn to the audience and smile. Now we are face to face with a heart-wrenching truth, reminding us of the verses from Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet: *“I come and stand at every door. But none can hear my silent tread /I knock and yet remain unseen/ For I am dead for I am dead.(...)/ All that I need is that for peace/ You fight today you fight today /So that the children of this world/can live and grow and laugh and play.”*

***Old Child:*** *Written and Directed: Yeşim Özsoy / Dramaturgy: Ferdi Çetin / Asistant Director: Ahmet Sami Özbudak / Scenography: Bak Özdoğan / Sound & Music Design: Çar? Beklen /Light Design: Kemal Yi?itcan / Video: Melisa Önel / Poster: Ethem Onur Bilgiç / Performers: Allen: Erdem Kaynarca, Allen’s father: Metin Belgin, Jamal: Bertan Dirikolu, Jamal’s Wife Victoria: Enginay Gültekin, Cemile: Ceren Demirel, Cemile’s husband Serhat: Emre Yetim, Deniz: Akant Çetin, Deniz’s Mother Nezahat: Yeşim Özsoy.*

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*Programme.*

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