

Re-writing Theatre History, Performing Forgotten: Three Examples from Istanbul Stages



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Theatre in Turkey has arguably changed a lot in recent years if we consider how it dares to present untold and unrepresented stories in a highly affective and creative ways, through form and content as has never before been seen on stage. Some of the most remarkable examples of this trend, which I would like analyze here, are performances questioning the minority, identity, and gender problems, which also involve the field of theatre historiography.

Here I will focus on three performances staged during this theatre season in Istanbul. First, *Imagined Performance (Hayal-i Temsil)* written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, directed by Yi?it Sertdemir and staged by the Istanbul Municipal Theatre, brings together, through Armenian make-up artist Dikran's memories, two noted Muslim actresses, Afife Jale and Bedia Muvahhit, who first dared to appear on stage in the late

Ottoman era and who never acted together during their theatre careers. Second, *Who is Out There? The Last Hamlet of Mr. Muhsin* (*Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamlet'i*), written and staged by BGST, brings the construction of modern Turkish theatre history into discussion through the story of the leading theatrical figure Muhsin Ertu?rul. Third and last, *Forgotten* (*Unutulan*) written by Elif Ongan Tekçe, directed by Sanem Öge, and staged by Yersiz Kumpanya is a performance inspired by the life of Armenian actress and writer Mari N?vart, presenting the story of two Armenian actresses who were imprisoned and forgotten in the basement of an old hotel where they served as forced labor to pay their company's tour debts.

I've chosen these plays not only because they are biographic-historical plays dealing with the same historical period (around 1915), mixing real documents and fictive scenes, but also because they tell the story of leading theatrical figures through the eyes of Armenian artists, and open a larger debate about the role of history in the making of this theatre, and criticizing the field named "modern Turkish Theatre." Despite the big blind spots in theatre history that have not seen the constitutive role of minorities, especially the Armenian theatre and its actors, these performances shed light on unseen and hidden points. These works re-value the role of Armenian actors who appeared on stage only as comic figures up to now; the challenges of appearing on stage as a Muslim or Armenian woman are shown through many people's stories we did not previously know, our theatre historiography has been shaped without them. Still, such key concepts as "collective memory," "theatre historiography," and "minority and women's issues," draw attention to the forgotten, untold, and hidden things at the heart of the theatrical and cultural life through the history of the republic.

Imagined Performance

Imagined Performance (*Hayal-i Temsil*), composed of imagination and memory, tells the story of Muslim women's struggling to exist on stage. Having premiered in 2014, the hundredth anniversary of Darülbedayi, and still being staged in this theatre season, it brings together two famous actresses from the recent past: Afife Jale (1902-1941) and Bedia Muvahhit (1897-1994). They encounter the audience in a imaginary-theatrical universe as a reflection of their shared Armenian make-up artist Dikran's (Yi?it Sertdemir). Afife and Bedia were noted actresses known as the first Muslim women who struggled to appear on stage. They became actresses at Darülbedayi, which was transformed into the Istanbul Municipal Theatre after the foundation of the Republic. Afife, who said "if theatre exists, so do I," had a painful life because of her passion for theatre. She became an actress in hard times when Muslim women were forbidden to appear on stage. However, Afife managed to do this by using a pseudonym, "Jale." But when Ottoman authorities became aware that she was a Muslim, she was dismissed from her job at Darülbedayi. The following years brought her poverty, pain, and lasting melancholia, even though in 1923, at the foundation of the Republic, Atatürk removed the ban on Muslim actresses. Meanwhile, Bedia Muvahhit appeared on stage and became a new star.



Bedia Muvahhit (1897-1994). Photo: Rediyor.



Afife Jale (1902-1941). Photo: Turham Koruni.

Although during their careers Afife (?ebnem Köstem) and Bedia (Hümay Gülda?) never appeared in the same performance, *Imagined Performance* invites the audience to imagine them together on the same

stage, to witness their painful and joyous life experiences.



Imagined Performance (Hayal-i Temsil), written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak. Photo: Istanbul Municipal Theatre.

Throughout the performance, Afife and Bedia are never in a real dialogue; they share the same stage without knowing or seeing each other. The strong bond between them is represented by Dikran. It begins with Dikran's question to the audience, "Passion, do you know what it means?" He then goes on to introduce Afife and Bedia to the audience and tell their stories. Thus, from the first moment, it is clear that this will be a story of passion and achievement. What lies behind this idea of bringing them together is a passion for theatre, solidarity, and hope.

Even though they were never on stage together, both women had something in common: a passion for acting and for a theatre of resistance. They had many shared experiences in resistance, frustration, hope, love, and above all, the struggle to survive through theatre. The performance sought to make the audience feel the transformative power of hope and passion, even in the most hopeless moments.



Left to Right: Dikran (Yi?it Sertdemir) and Afife Jale (?ebnem K?stem). Photo: Istanbul Municipal Theatre.

Having started with Dikran's appearance on the empty stage, the set was changed many times. Dikran opened and closed different parts of the walls that were designed to represent the depths of his memory. The scenery (designed by Cem Y?lmazer) was transformed in many ways. The set consisted of two different make-up rooms, beds, a back garden, a theatre stage, and countless other locations. Armenian artist Dikran was a kind of bridge between the two women, a kind of stage director organizing every new scene as it sprang out of his memory. He was a kind of translator who carried the meaning of emotions circulating among these women, to each of them and also to the audience. Dikran (Yi?it Sertdemir) performed different roles, ranging from an officer searching for Muslim actresses, to Afife's musician husband Selahattin P?nar, to Bedia's husband actor Refet Muvahhit, to a Russian music hall owner. Each of them is quite memorable.

Shakespeare tragedies, especially *Othello*, were significant in the careers of both actresses. In the play, when Afife and Bedia simultaneously performed Desdemona, Dikran played Othello to both. He performed Othello with the left side of his face toward Bedia and the right side toward Afife. On one side there was a noble Othello playing to Bedia, on the other side a vulgar Othello playing to Afife in a music hall. This created a striking difference between Afife and Bedia. When Afife was declining in reputation, Bedia was becoming a shining star; when Afife could not find any stage but the vulgar music hall in which to act, Bedia was going on theatre tours and appearing on films.

But then there appeared another translator of emotion, an imaginary mouse which Afife and Bedia encountered at different places. They started to talk with this imaginary mouse between them as if they were communicating to each other and pouring out their common grief, frustration, joy, and hope. Within these scenes, the mouse voice that both women imitated was used to tell their inner feelings, and was transformed into a “social energy” being circulated among the audience. The unseen mouse thus becomes a faithful listener, the silent interlocutor of the story, translator of the exchanged feeling between them, as well as the vehicle for the hope, joy and solidarity that moved not only Afife and Bedia but the audience. Lastly, when the expected encounter happened at the end, when Afife and Bedia finally encountered each other on the stage, the cheerful and hopeful sound of the mouse echoed in almost every part of the auditorium.

It was also worth emphasizing that these two important theatrical-historical figures come to life through the eyes and memories of the Armenian artist Dikran, which means this re-writing, de-constructing or re-constructing of Turkish theatre history has been brought about by the “Armenian minority” who have had an irrefutable role in theatre studies in Turkey. Dikran is an Armenian artist who brings to light real and hidden aspects of the theatre. In what follows we will see variations of this process—of the struggle of women and minorities to exist in and through theatre.

Who is out there? The ghosts of “Turkish Theatre”

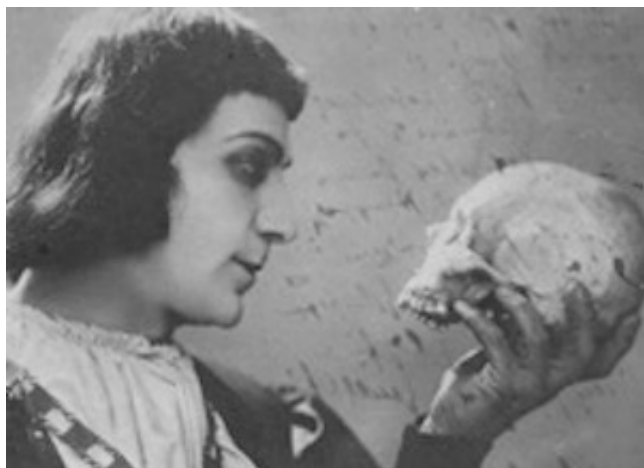
The second example is *Who is Out There? The Last Hamlet of Mr. Muhsin* by BGST, one of the leading theatre ensembles in Istanbul. Muhsin Ertu?rul (1892-1990) is a director, an actor, and a leading intellectual figure who has had a significant role in shaping theatre from late Ottoman to Republican period. Let’s imagine he is writing his memories in his room alone at night. What kind of an experience might it be for us to witness his hope, frustrations, joys, losses, fears, regrets, and struggles to exist on stage? Might it not be a history of Turkey’s theatre that he is trying to write as well his personal stage life? If “writing down one’s memories means to awaken the dead,” what/who might be Muhsin Ertu?rul’s and Turkish theatre’s (unburied) dead? Who might be out there haunting him, at the very moment he is saying “I am not writing about my personal life, I have been writing about the theatre history we have,” and performing this history in his memory theatre? Under which artistic, ideological, and political conditions might this “theatre history” have been shaped? Moreover, can we find a real confrontation out there? If so, what might it be and between whom?



Left to right: Latife/Arusyak (Banu A?kdeniz), Muhsin (Cüneyt Yalaz), Vahram (?lker Yasin Keskin) in *Who is Out There? The Last Hamlet of Mr. Muhsin*. Photo: Kenan Özcan.

These are the opening questions raised by the performance. Taking its name from *Hamlet*'s first sentence ("Who's there?"), it began with a quotation "something is rotten in this country." It was thus clear from its opening moments that this production would utilize *Hamlet* in presenting Muhsin's journey into the past. In other words, it announced from the beginning that it would struggle with ghosts.

The play had a simple set: a writing table at the center, three chairs, a coat hanger stand, a bookcase, and a skull on the table recalling *Hamlet*. An old man, Muhsin Ertu?rul (performed by Cüneyt Yalaz) is writing his memories; the noted Armenian actor Vahram Papazyan (?lker Yasin Keskin) the first instructor of Muhsin, and an imaginary actress Latife (Banu A?kdeniz) are the cheerful ghosts from his memory introduced into the room to accompany Muhsin during the writing process. All are representatives of significant milestone of the theatre. Muhsin is a representative of "westernized Turkish theatre" and the political-cultural transformation of the country dating back to the nineteenth century, deepening as the country went through the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Vahram is a representative of the Armenian theatre heritage—rejected, long-suppressed, and exiled by the above-mentioned process. As a fictive character, Latife, who introduces herself as Arusyak, an Armenian woman, is an embodiment of Muslim women's struggle to "exist on stage."



Muhsin Ertuğrul (1892-1979). Photo: TarihNiDio.



Vahram Papazyan (1888-1968). Photo: Agos.

We know what the Ghost wants in *Hamlet* is for him to undertake revenge. In this performance, what the ghosts want from Muhsin is for him to stage *Hamlet* one last time. Choosing and desiring to play *Hamlet* is, for several reasons, not an arbitrary choice:

First, these were the actors who played Hamlet in Ottoman Istanbul for the first time. Armenian actor Vahram Papazyan was captivated by the *Hamlet* tragedy when he first saw it during his tour in Europe and he offers young Muhsin to stage *Hamlet*. Second, Muhsin says that whenever he is in trouble he remembers and reads *Hamlet*. Third, for all of them, it is a matter of “to be or not to be,” a matter of “representing and being represented,” “a matter of remembering.” Fourth as Muhsin says, “There is something rotten in this country.” This is why they together remember and perform some parts from *Hamlet* while also enacting their own lives. They want to be remembered on stage, they want to reveal what is rotten and why, and they want to represent and be represented through the theatre. This is actually the performance of an unachieved rehearsal of their “last *Hamlet*,” since Muhsin appears as a Hamletic character who always delays/puts off what he has been expected to do, how he has been expected to act,

to perform, to re-present.

Through their journey into the past, these spirits revive certain moments from the past such as their first meeting, their first stage experience, young Muhsin's leaving home to live on stage, Vahram and Muhsin's first *Hamlet* performance, Vahram's escaping from the country because of political pressures, and Muhsin's rising and becoming the general art director at Darülbedayi. In addition to all of this, they perform certain scenes from *Hamlet*: Hamlet's encounters with the Ghost and Ophelia, his famous tirades, his exile, his fight with Leartes. We are shown not only events from the past but traditional theatrical forms, acting styles that had an important place in the late Ottoman era, despite being ignored and rejected in the Republic period. What is remarkable in these scenes is how critically they open the events for discussion. It is not a linear enactment of the past without any interruptions. While the actors are performing the past, they are also discussing in detail what really happened and criticizing each other for past behavior. In this way, the "there and then" of the past and the "here and now" of the present are crystalized in the present moment of performance, in order to allow the audience to feel, to question, and to understand ignored realities and reasons of the past and of today.



Who is Out There? The Last Hamlet of Mr. Muhsin, written and staged by BGST. Photo: Kenan Özcan.

With a broad strokes parallel plot to *Hamlet*, *Who is Out There* criticizes Muhsin Ertu?rul while trying to understand him. There are many similarities between Muhsin and Hamlet. Both are among the leading intellectuals of their time, well-educated and opposed to authority and incompetence. They are also both unable to go into action, Muhsin, like Hamlet, is always delaying. Vahram sometimes represents Laertes,

sometimes the Ghost, as he confronts Muhsin and calls on him to go into action. Latife wants to give Muhsin a memorable present from the past, as Ophelia did for Hamlet.

I was puzzled by a stylized, silent show at the beginning: Vahram and Latife are showing Muhsin a letter and keeping it away from him while Muhsin is trying to get it. This unclear “letter scene” is, however, clarified toward the end. It was the letter written by Vahram in 1964, during his day in exile in Yerevan which asked Muhsin whether there was a role for him in Istanbul or Ankara. Muhsin says he never received it. Similarly, Afife’s desire to be on stage again was rejected by Muhsin, since he did not find her a relevant “theatre figure” for the “new, modern westernized Turkish theatre.” After the letter is opened and read at the end of the evening, Muhsin says: “let’s play *Hamlet* for one last time.” But since it was now “too late,” and the sun was about to rise, there was no opportunity for Vahram to perform anything other than the Ghost from *Hamlet*. The last thing Vahram and Latife said was “don’t forget us” in Armenian and Turkish. The last words spoken by Muhsin were “there is something rotten in this country” echoing what he said at the beginning of the play.

The following play begins at the very heart of this “rotteness” and “forgottenness” and dares to transform this dystopic universe into what theorist Jill Dolan has called a “utopian performative,” where the audience can find hope.

Remembering the *Forgotten*

Who is Out There? ends with the words “don’t forget us.” My final play, *Forgotten*, which premiered in March, 2018, begins at a point where the Armenian “women/actresses” were indeed almost forgotten and left to die, not only in the damp and dirty basement of an old Anatolian hotel, but also in the depth of theatre’s memory. Is there a way for them to survive? If so, what is it? *Forgotten* seeks the answer to this question. It includes all the themes that I talked about for the above performances: hopelessness and hope, being an Armenian, being a woman, being an actress, forgetting, being forgotten, remembering, being remembered, waiting for hope, passion for theatre, and survival through theatre.



Left to Right: Nivart (Burçak Karaboğa Güney) and Mari (Elif Ongan Tekçe) in *Forgotten*. Photo: Suna and Koray Tekçe.

Here is a dirty, old, and gloomy place: the bottom of an old Anatolian hotel near the train station, where two Armenian actresses Mari (Elif Ongan Tekçe) and Nivart (Burçak Karaboğa Güney) have been imprisoned. They were actresses in an Armenian touring theatre, but even after Muslim actresses could appear on stage legally, it was difficult for Armenian actresses to find a role on Istanbul stages. This is why many Armenian theatres toured during that period. Inspired by the real life of the actress/writer Mari Nivart, *Forgotten* embodies her in the *doppelgänger* characters Mari and Nivart, and deals with the problems they encountered while they were touring around Anatolia. Because they couldn't pay their hotel expenses, they were forced to labor in the hotel (when they were not locked in the basement). The only thing they could do in order to resist this pitiless condition was to rehearse their dreams and desires, that is to say, to stage a new play based on their pasts: songs, dances, and scenes from *The Lady of the Camellias*. But this "imagined performance" was interrupted sometimes with knocking on the door which meant that each, in turn, had to go out and clean the hotel. It is understood from the scenes in which they returned in underclothes, that they were exposed to sexual abuse. They seem worn, tired and unhappy.

We don't know much about them. How old they are, how long have they been stuck here; Will someone come and save them? It seems as if everything is lost here. The sense of time and place is lost, meaning is lost. Here is a kind of Beckettian theatrical universe where they have already forgotten their own memories as they are forgotten about. The only thing they can do is wait for hope and stage plays while waiting.

Mari and Nivart complete each other; if one forgets, the other one remembers; if one abandons herself into despair, the other one expresses hope; if one dies (like Nivart's dying at the end because of tuberculosis), the other one lives. Although they have lost the meaning of time in this timeless place where they are stuck in-between, they have the potential to create time with their sense of the body. This is why during the play they imagine, dream, and stage plays endlessly. Like the others (Vahram, Latife, Afife, Bedia, Dikran in the above performances) all they want is to be "remembered" ("wishing one will remember us, remember what we did"). In order to be remembered by others, to remember what happened, moreover to hope for a better life, they have to perform plays ("if we settle down to stage a play, perhaps we may remember then"). And "if the audience likes the play," they think then "they may return their own life again." There is hope in this performance. They never gave up performing dreams and living with plays, even when they felt no one cared about them.

As did *Imagined Performance* and *Who is Out There*, *Forgotten* invites us to remember all the forgotten, to feel their absence in our hearts, in the past and today. They encourage us to resist something. In any given time "our dreams and hopes are a victory in the face of the reality." As a part of the audience who attends these performances, perhaps this writing is, for me, an attempt to respond to these plays in the way they expect me to: "to remember," "to go into action", "to tell" the stories and dreams we have.

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