

From Dystopia to Utopia: Finding Hope in *Now You Have A Trial* by BGST





Now You Have A Trial by BGST. Courtesy: Kenan Özcan.

For a while, I have been interested in the ways how the contemporary theatre in Turkey deals with the current political situation, how theatre responds to and reflects the political turmoil which is being described with such language as “polarization,” “authoritarianism,” “censorship,” “state of emergency,” and even “producing traitors.” Moreover, how theatre struggles with such concepts, how it has the potential to change our way of seeing the present, and how it makes the audience feel a bit of hope and a sense of solidarity in the face of a fractured and polarized life (for more about the relationship between current politics and contemporary theatre studies, see my essay “Contrasting Landscape of Theatre in Turkey: Resisting (with) Theatre” in *Critical Stages*, 2018, issue 17); “Toward A Theatre of Monodrama in Turkey” in *European Stages*, Spring 2019, Volume 13; “and Critical Endeavor: Experimental Searches in Contemporary Performance Criticism in Turkey”, which will appear in *Platform*’s issue on “Criticism” in June 2019).

It is possible to trace the reflection of a conflicting socio-political atmosphere of the country in almost every new play in whatever form and content. What I see as the apparent reflection of the socio-politics in theatre is the increasing of dystopian narratives (among others “narratives of loneliness” (almost all monodramas) and “narratives of sleeplessness” (*Dirmit, Dangerous Games, Macbeth/ A Nightmare for two, Schizo ?eyks*).

Some are quite remarkable among a variety of productions presenting dystopian narratives from the last season. Examples include: *Art?k Bir Davan Var (Now You Have A Trial*, staged by BGST); *Hakikat*,

Elbet Bir Gün (Truth, A Day for Sure, written by Berkay Ate?, directed by Serkan Saliho?lu, and staged by D22); *Seni Seviyorum Türkiye (I Love You Turkey* written by Ceren Ercan, directed by Yelda Bask?n, and staged by Bak?rköy Municipal Theatre); *Tefti?ör (Inspector*, a re-written of Gogol's book, written by Irmak Bahçeci and O?uz Utku Güne?, directed by O?uz Utku Güne?, staged by Tiyatro Adam); *Kazanova* (inspired by Dürrenmatt's novel *Traps* or known as *A Dangerous Game* and written by Irmak Bahçeci, directed by Emrah Eren). Though, the plays are staged in different theatrical aesthetic and narrative technique, what they are in common is their search of justice in a place that increasingly becomes to a dystopia. But in any case, most of the above performances achieve to make the audience feel "how the world might be instead of as is" (Jill Dolan) by pointing to the importance of solidarity in an atmosphere of fear and oppression.

I will review one example an international production among them which arguably portrays well the living experience in today's Turkey: *Now You Have a Trial (Art?k Bir Davan Var*, 2018-2019) staged by BGST Theatre premiered at Istanbul International Theatre Festival in 2018.

Now You Have a Trial by BGST

Unlike other plays by BGST which, while depicting artistic and historical figures (as does *Zabel* and *Mr. Muhsin's Last Hamlet*) from a century ago, focus on the blind points of historiography in Turkey and invite the audience to consider the reasons behind this as well as their effects on our daily life, their last production *Now, You Have A Trial* uses a different form. (For the reviews of other plays by BGST, see my essay "A Theatrical and Real Encounter with Zabel Yesayan", *European Stages*, Spring 2018, Volume 11, "Mr. Muhsin's Memory of Hamlet Rewrites The History of Turkey's Theatre", *Critical Stages*, 2018, Issue 18.)



The birthday party of Mr. K's boss. Courtesy: Kenan Özcan.

Instead of focusing on a historical figure and questioning today through the past, this new work satirizes the present situation as a consequence of a series of events the country has experienced. Here are some turning points in recent socio-political life: first, the Gezi Park Occupation in 2013 that gathered people from many diverse groups, those who, we used to think, would never get together at the same place. Then the bombing and terrorist attacks by ISIS which caused the death of 103 people at the rally for peace in October 2015 in Ankara. Next, the coup attempt in 2016 which led to over two years of a state of emergency and many people being tried and imprisoned as alleged. Then the new presidential system (2017) that brought the discussion of regime shift toward authoritarianism and Academicians being dismissed from universities for signing the declaration of "Academics for Peace." Journalists, intellectuals, artists, and politicians were arrested for criticizing the government and labeled as traitors, adding to an increasing number of people arrested and being tried for sharing opinions against the authorities on social media. As a consequence of all this, now the dominant feeling in the country is that Turkish society has been polarized into two sharply divided camps--those who support the ruling party and those who do not. Now politics is not something outside our lives, but prevails just as much in private, even the daily relationships between people.



Mr. K is being queried by police. Left to right: Cüneyt Yalaz (police chief), Duygu Dalyano?lu (officer), at the center of the center Mr. K (sitting) (Özgür Eren), and İlker Yasin Keskin (Police). Courtesy: Kenan Özcan.

Written by Cüneyt Yalaz and ?lker Yasin Keskin (actors of Theatre BGST), *Now You Have a Trial* illustrates the injustices, fear, and pressures in a series of absurd events happening in an “unknown place and time.” Though the theatrical language of the play is a combination of grotesque, satire, and black comedy, it is also quite realistic, because the absurdities in the play remind us of what we have passed through recently in this country.

The action takes in an unknown country where frequently electricity has been cut off for years;” where the stories that children listen to on the radio are, therefore, interrupted; where the people can be plunged into darkness at any time. There is no continuity to actions in this country. In this dystopian place a lawyer tries more than a thousand cases, judges are constantly dismissed from their positions, lawyers are put in jail even before their clients, social media accounts are blacklisted. Every action, voice or person opposing the system is charged and tamed, or else exiled.

The play begins with the main character (reminding one of Kafka) Mr. K’s rehearsal of a “marketing story” in his flat at night. Mr. K (performed by Özgür Eren) is not only a public relations officer at a generator firm, he also has to be a good storyteller and writer in order to sell the products. Unexpectedly when he rehearsals his last marketing story about the cutting off of power, ironically the same thing happens to him. The electricity is cut off and two policemen (performed by Cüneyt Yalaz and ?lker Yasin Keskin) enter into the house to query Mr. K for a trial, although no one knows why. He does not know if he is guilty. All he knows is "now, he has a trial."

During the play we see his “legal struggle” in this unlawfulness where he does not know what he has been charged with. However, towards the end we learn that his crime was to support a solidarity company with the children in a civil war territory, and to send his childhood marbles and slingshot to them. The court thinks his action encourages the children to become terrorists, and thus he is being charged with aiding and abetting. At the end, the court learns that supporting the children was in fact the idea of Mr. K’s twin Melek, who will be sent into exile at the end.

The performance has a humorous style balancing this gloomy subject matter. This humor can be felt in the scenography and costume design, and in the acting style as well. Designed by Naz Erayda, the scenography seems to reflect a polarized universe based on a dominant blue and off-white color. The blue—from stage props to costumes of polices, plaza workers, and court officers—and the choreography suggest militarism, oppressiveness, formality, uniformity, and ridiculousness as well as science fiction movies. Contrastingly Mr. K with his off-white suit and his sister Melek (meaning angel), the voice of conscience, with her whiteness from head to foot increasing scene by scene tell us many things about how much our color changes as we incorporate into existing system as well as how we can preserve and invigorate our color (identity, world view, stance). Likewise, the frequency of vertical lines underlines the organization of the hierarchies arising from this suddenness and top down power. The action mostly takes place in Mr. K’s flat, in his working place at a plaza, in the elevator, and the court.



Now You Have A Trial (Art?k Bir Davan Var) , written by Cüneyt Yalaz and ?lker Yasin Keskin, staged by BGST Theatre. Courtesy: Kenan Özcan.

Mr. K in the off-white color and design of his costume illustrating the intersection of vertical and horizontal lines, is an embodiment of everyone who is at the threshold of such a dystopian universe. Another thing I found interesting in the scenography of *Now You Have A Trial* was its potential to create a feeling of solidarity—the main idea of the play—by combining taborets in the shape of hexagons—which has always seemed to me a miraculous geometric shape. In doing so, it creates a new space in which the idea of solidarity and hope, and new forms of relationship emerge from the heart of this dystopia. Because the only way to get free from such fear and tyranny is solidarity, as Melek says: “You are not alone, go and find others like you, be with them, resist, bear, and act with solidarity.”



Mr. K dominated by the police who will put his leg in an electronic device in order to watch and listen to him. Courtesy: Kenan Özcan.

The other thing I found quite subtle was the motif of electricity cut-off. Each scene is linked to the following one through a new electricity outage. I liked this idea not only because it recalled the cliché image of “truths hidden in the dark,” but also in the way BGST Theatre told and toyed with the idea of interruption/cuts/exile while at the same time criticizing a socio-political culture whose experience with modernization both creates interruptions and is being created by the interruption itself.

The more Mr. K capitalizes everything into a marketing story –from his childhood sufferings to social concerns, the more BGST turns the tables. Mr. K becomes the subject or the victim of his own story, as he tries to sell the generators with a nostalgic childhood story. On the other hand, BGST presents the possibilities of how to deal with such lawlessness. In opposition to the artificial stories produced by and happening to Mr. K, BGST shows us how we may create together more authentic, real, and inclusive stories. In the final scene Mr. K is in fear and can not speak to the court. Melek is exiled by the court and yet she says “do not be afraid. If you don’t want it, they can not exile me. Tell me. Do you want me stay with you or not? I am an angel. In any case I may find a way to come back, unexpectedly, suddenly. I will come again.” So, what is being exiled here is not only Melek, but what she represents: inner conscience, struggle, hope, solidarity, and courage. In addition, it is also remarkable that BGST’s feminist approach here gives this crucial role to the woman named Melek. Here, Melek who has a natural lisp, is not only the representative of the women but those of who are deprived of the right to speak, but who are not heard and seen.

In Turkish “trial (dava)” has multiple meanings: “trial,” “case,” “goal,” “aim,” “to struggle for a better world,” even “to die for an ideal.” Thus, at the end of the play not only the silence of Mr. K. but rather the silence of each audience member now has a “trial.” I think “now we have a trial” and also whether we are the active subject or the victim of this trial depends on which Melek we see at any electricity cut-off, and of course what we say to her: Live with us, or leave us.



Banu Açıkdeniz (Melek), Özgür Eren (Mr. K) in *Now You Have A Trial*. Courtesy: Kenan Özcan.

Before concluding, I would like to share one more thing. While I have been thinking of the relationship between current political turmoil and its reflection to contemporary theatre practice in Turkey, and writing of the first draft of this essay, a quite important thing, which I would call “election for utopia” has just occurred in Turkey. On 6 May 2019, Supreme Election Council (YSK) canceled the Istanbul local election (on 31 March 2019) on the ruling party’s appeal, who officially lost the election and asserted that opposition’s victory was due to a “organized corruption” at the ballot box. In the same day, the opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, who was selected as Metropolitan Mayor spoken out about his certificate of election being revoked. In his speech he said: “They say, ‘business people don’t speak’, but they will. They say, ‘artists don’t speak’, but they will. Now, it is time to speak. You will see that everything will be fine.” After his speech, numerous artists and business people have responded his call. And people gathered under the hashtag #HerşeyÇokGüzelOlacak (Everything will be fine) which raised hope and suddenly became not only a trendy topic, but rather turned into a political slogan which people say everywhere and even have printed on their t-shirts and bags. Soon after, another surprise came in. The ruling party appeared with the new counter-slogan by president Erdoğan for the new election that

will be on 23 June 2019: “everything will be better (than this).” In both “utopian slogans,” first one says nothing goes well today but will turn into something good, while the second says everything is fine but will be better than this and what the opponents say.

Is everything really going well in this country? Or do we really believe that everything will be fine? But, how? Why are the people of Turkey longing for hope and utopia? Might it be because people have been living in a kind of dystopia for a long while as in *Now, You Have A Trial*? Perhaps the childish, clownish, hopeful girl Melek (angel), the inner voice of everyone, who has been long suppressed and exiled from our lives, is now, “suddenly,” just as she said at the court, about to come back, bringing with herself a piece of hope and “utopian performative” (in sense Jill Dolan uses) for all of us. If it is so, it would be interesting what these dystopian narratives will turn into in the near future, or how it will affect the theatre which is rapidly changing in its form and subject according to the affective dimensions of recent socio-political climate.

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Table of Contents:

1. [In Memoriam: Sami Abdul-Hamid](#)
2. [Humanism through performative arts: A comparative study of *My Papers Weren't Done?* and *Zapi Rouge* by Daniela Potenza](#)
3. [*We Live in Cairo* by Margaret Litvin](#)
4. [*Laugh Till/When You Die: The Throes of Tahrir Square* by Karma Sami](#)
5. [*Oslo vs. The Accords: Examining the Global Consequences of Fractional Truths on Stage* by Marina J. Bergenstock](#)
6. [*Yussef El Guindi's Hostages: Thirty Years Later and Still Frighteningly Relevant* by Michael Malek Najjar](#)
7. [*From Dystopia to Utopia: Finding Hope in *Now You Have A Trial** by BGST by Eylem Ejder](#)
8. [*We are talking about Contemporary Theatre and Politics in Turkey* by Handan Salta and Eylem Ejder](#)
9. [*Arab World Contributions to the Avignon Festival, 2019* by Marvin Carlson](#)
10. [*Middle Eastern Representation at the Brussel's Kunstenfestivaldesarts \(2019\)* by Manuel García Martínez](#)
11. [*Events from the Arab/Islamic World at the 2019 PRELUDE Festival, New York* by Jacquelyn Marie Shannon and Dohyun Gracia Shin](#)
12. [*Al-Marakbi and Ceaseless Visibility: The Creation of "Docile Bodies" and a "Disciplinary Society"* by Dina Amin](#)
13. [*Review of *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant: A Critical Anthology** by Ibrahim Areeg](#)
14. [*The Boatman: A Play* by Sameh Mahran | Translated by Dina Amin](#)

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