

We are talking about Contemporary Theatre and Politics in Turkey





Theatre Madrasa. Courtesy: Sirince Photo.

Upon looking at Turkey from afar one can see several negative processes. The first thing that comes to our mind is imprisoned journalists, academics, politicians and artists. The Constitution which was passed after the 1980 coup still has the same oppressive character and many civil rights gained after years of struggle have been erased; the “State of Emergency” process which was followed by a coup in 2016 has given the government the opportunity to silence all opponents including intellectuals, media, NGO’s and others. In this climate of ever intensifying anti-democratic practices, several people, including intellectuals, young, well-educated and displeased with the regime in Turkey, among them theatre people, have been migrating abroad.

On the other hand and ironically enough, all those severe events have caused theatre to flourish both abroad and in Turkey. Recently European stages have seen festivals for plays coming from Turkey, international journals like *Comparative Drama* (Volume 52, 2018) have given place to Turkish theatre in their issues, actors have started to perform in the countries they have settled in.

As for the new developments within Turkey we can mention the following;

- Many playwrights have emerged writing about the current issues
- Venues, theatre companies and the number of theatre goers have increased in number
- Theatre people have started to search for forms of expression that have not taken place very often before
- The subject matters started to vary and cover issues that have been considered taboo before
- Thanks to social and digital media, theatre has become more visible/audible

(though many theatre performances are still text-based) and the approach to play texts has changed.

Having designed a dialogue between two critics, who co-founded the Critical Collective and co-produced works on contemporary theatre in Turkey, this conversation traces our long-term investigation, concern and curiosity for post-2000s Turkish theatre, which is rapidly changing in its form, content and political function as mentioned above. Raising critical questions, we will try to discuss the changing aspects of theatre and performing arts in Turkey, considering the recent social and political transformations the country has been through.

Eylem Ejder: Let's start by talking about the landscape of theatre in the country in the early 2000s. You have been writing reviews for more than 20 years, Handan. How was the landscape of theatre at the beginning of this new age?

Handan Salta: Well, that takes a long while to answer. Instead I would like to remember an argument initiated and sparked by the government. Back then, everyone had started to question the necessity of National Theatre or other subsidized theatres and that debate brought its own fruits and deterioration at the same time. Just two years after the AKP came to power [2013], the Ministry of Culture was merged with the Ministry of Tourism, an action with suggested much. Later, the then Prime Minister publicly started to question the value, necessity and existence of a national theatre, opera and ballet; were they really appropriately fitting our culture, tradition and identity? Should it be acceptable to put aside a large sum to finance these institutions? It was the talk among theatre people those days, since this debate was signaling a new era when the state apparently did not need theatre as a tool for propaganda; subsidized theatres would have to change their function toward shaping, directing, and persuading its audiences. On one hand this opened the way to liberation; small theatre companies would emerge, they would employ innovative acting styles and young playwrights would raise contemporary and taboo subjects. However, it also brought economic instability to theatre people as the afore-mentioned debate was giving the signals that theatre art was not a favourable activity to be supported by the government which was relevant to present. Secondly, this economic enforcement would make this young generation of theatre people search for their own audience since the aging audience was familiar with old-school theatre that younger generations had already stopped attending.

E.Ejder: Let me make some additions. These newly emerged independent groups like Bo?aziçi

Performing Arts Ensemble (BGST) from Bosphorus University; Seyyar Sahne from Istanbul Technical University – then they built the Tiyatro Medresesi (Theatre Madrasa), an international performing arts center in ?irince; Alt?dan Sonra Tiyatro (Theatre After 6 pm) from Istanbul Technical University; ?ermola Performance from Mesopotamia Cultural Centre. These mostly grew out of the practices in university theatre clubs or some cultural centers mostly in Istanbul between the late 90’s and the first decade of the 2000’s. Having graduated from university—not from theatre departments but with different majors—these practitioners established their own theatre companies and began to produce their own texts, since they found Turkish play texts from previous periods not compatible with their own concerns and possessing copyright fees they could not afford. Indeed, these theatrical endeavors have been so effective that many researchers from different areas and disciplines like sociology, urbanism, architecture and political science, have pointed out how this theatrical dynamism is affecting various aspects of public space and urban life over the last decade. (See Cansu Karagül’s *Alternatif Tiyatro* (Habitus Yay?nlar?, 2015); Deniz Ba?ar’s master’s thesis *Performative Publicness* (2014); Devran Bengü’s Phd thesis in architecture, “Publicness in the Process of Public Space Structuring” (2017); and *Comparative Drama*’s special issue “Performing Turkishness: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas” (2018) edited and organized by Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertu? Alt?nay.) These were the characteristics of the first decade of ‘new age.’ At the beginning of the second decade some theatre groups had already initiated education programs for acting, playwriting and directing as well as attending master or PhD programs on theatre and teaching at theatre departments. Correspondingly, the number of newly opened departments of theatre and performing arts were on the rise. These developments brought about a vivacious theatrical life; it was totally experimental and sprung out its own narrative of experience.

H.Salta: Since theatre had become more liberal, youthful, adventurous and vivid, again it created, invited and fed a new generation of theatre-goers; people from different walks of life were feeling represented on stage. Women, gays, Kurds, non-Muslims, transsexuals were given voice on the stage, although in some cases it felt as if those new plays were following a template to be politically correct, hip, and artsy. In time the feeling of filling in templates faded and more genuine and sincere plays started to be written. What accompanied the authenticity and sincerity of those new plays was the formation of narrative. Well-made plays had to be changed with different storytelling methods. Like their predecessors Sabahattin Kudret Aksal, Melih Cevdet Anday, young playwrights also wrote plays with an absurd or grotesque touch, formed plots in non-linear structure, merged comedy elements with highly dramatic content and thus prepared the audience for a different theatre experience.

E. Ejder: You’re right. Another component accompanying the formation and diversification of the narrative might be the issue of space. The stories put on stage had to be arranged according to the limitations and opportunities of the performing space where the groups had been mostly transforming the basement of old apartments or derelict buildings located in central and old settlements of Istanbul like Kumbarac?50 in Beyo?lu, Theatron in Kad?köy. This close relationship between theatrical narrative and space can be traced from the names of the newly founded groups, like Seyyar Sahne (Mobile Stage), Mekan Sahne (Place Stage), Yersiz Kumpanya (Company without a Place). Considering the increasing number of international theatre festivals, acting and writing workshops, translated works about contemporary theatre and performing arts, all these allowed the practitioners to produce more in different ways as you mentioned above. Ten years ago, it was almost unthinkable for those companies to have a place in the festival program, but presently this new voice is given the opportunity to be heard in many places, including the Istanbul International Theatre Festival. We know that ‘experimental searches’ in theatre studies are not unique to our age, such endeavors in theatre always exist and will continue to do

so. However, the cases that we have addressed might be reasons for these recent works to stand out against the previously performed ones. What do you think? I am curious to know how the following political turning points led to substantial changes in theatre's landscape; the Gezi Uprising in 2013, the state of emergency following a failed coup attempt in 2016, and the new presidential system (further expanding Erdoğan's authority).

H.Salta: What you mentioned is very important as these companies would not be suitable for a different *zeitgeist* indeed. After Gezi there was a wide-range paradigm shift in our understanding, which inevitably included theatre. The fact that Theatre Critics Association awards were mostly given to those new companies, young playwrights and actors after 2013 hints at the need to hear different voices now (at least by the critics). The first years of an ever-present government startled us all with a discourse aiming at changing several milestones of 'Old Turkey' (as they called it), then came the prohibitions on many little aspects of our daily lives. Remarks made by the statesmen started to concern women's rights, the modern/western lifestyle, the gay community, which encouraged the protest in Gezi Park. Gezi was the accumulation of all protests about restrictive regulations in many aspects of life by mostly young people against the government. That uprising and mood of solidarity stayed in peoples' minds however disappointed they felt afterwards. Theatre performances after Gezi both flourished in number and variety of forms and this brought a new breath of freedom alongside disappointment. As for the coup failure and increasing pressure on every aspect of life as the aftershock brought self-censorship and great climate of fear. Some companies could not find venues for their plays, some had to change their tone to a softer note but they kept on expressing their concerns, frustrations and dreams.

E.Ejder: This is clearly something very close to the "narrative turn" or the return of singularities with their narratives of experiences from past, present, and future indeed. People are very eager for re-telling, re-presenting, re-writing experiences that have been interrupted, missed, lost, dreamed about and struggled for. The joyful and struggling spectre of the Gezi community –in a sense "the community who have nothing in common" haunts the theatre today and transforms it into a sort of front line through its form and content. It is a meeting point where diverse groups gather together, dream, resist, hope, and act in solidarity. This is why, I guess, in many stories on stage we find a bit of hope, freedom, and the sense of a better world despite disappointment, sadness, and incompleteness. Since the community changes, theatre experience changes as well. In other words, the theatre has become a possible space to retrieve lost and missed opportunities including those of the Gezi Uprising. It might be the reason for a number of actors/actresses from different generations who have not been on theatre stages for a long while and for many young graduated actors who are instead acting in TV series, willing to make theatre. Similarly, it might be the reason why the authorities often attack theatre people.



Gezi Uprising (2013). Courtesy: Vimeo.

H.Salta: The affinities between Gezi and theatre is worthwhile thinking about; I remember people telling stories to each other, celebrating birthdays, singing/dancing, helping each other in the park back then. Later on people gathered in the parks at different places in Istanbul, presumably to keep the feeling of solidarity and togetherness. The following year plays would start to be written about Gezi, and aftershocks would follow; compared to the previous and following season's number of performances 2013-2014 season had the highest number of plays. Another important aspect of the Gezi uprising was the number of women present in the protestors and supporters (A symbolic but important gesture was made by mothers; upon the Prime Minister's call for mothers to go and take their children from the park, mothers came to support them) and women marked the Gezi process with their visibility. This, I believe, is reflected in the plays to be staged later on.

E.Ejder: Are you saying that after the Gezi Uprising, the visibility of women in social life, their opposite and solidarist stance was amplified? If so, this can be traced easily in theatre through looking at the increasing number of female playwrights, directors, performers and stories having feminist concerns. Also, we witness the ever-increasing femicides in the country over the last decade, which have been addressed by female theatre people in the last few theatre seasons.

H.Salta: Well, Gezi helped women to be heard by larger crowds and encouraged solidarity among women. This might have given further impetus by ever increasing plays by and about women. Another important factor is of course, as you stated, the increasing number of femicides (in 2008-80, in 2009-109, in 2010 –180, in 2011 – 121, in 2012 – 201, in 2013 – 237, in 2014 – 294, in 2015 – 303, in 2016 – 328, in 2017- 409, in 2018- 440 women were murdered)[\[ii\]](#)

Concerning the kind of plays performed since then, we have a large span indeed. Let's begin with women, apart from several articles you wrote, we started an initiative called Feminist Endeavour, so stage is yours!

E.Ejder: Thank you! We might argue that female theatre-makers are the avant-garde of this diversified and dynamic field. They not only deal with women's issues by discussing the state of being a woman in a conflicted, male-dominated society, but give weight to all the marginalized, unprivileged, oppressed people not adequately heard and seen in cultural and theatrical life. The first staged plays concerned with transgendered people's problems, for instance, were written by Esmeray, Ebru Nihan Celkan, and Seyhan Arman. The plays "performing history" became quite popular and are based on an approach revealing feminist endeavors of women, about whom we have not known much, from the recent history of the country, particularly at a period between the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the new Turkish Republic. Examples here include characters like Zabel in *Zabel* (2017) written by Aysel Y?ld?r?m and Duygu Dalyano?lu; Mari and Nivart in *Unutulan* (Forgotten-2018) written by Elif Ongan Tekçe; ?ehvar Han?m and Sabriye in *Nihayet Makam?* (*End Makam-* 2018) by Burçak Çöllü. They are also women who are rewriting and performing the challenges of being a young actress through remarkable meta-theatrical experiments. In short, women have been ceaselessly re-writing, re-telling, re-enacting our shared stories from past and today, and recycling our painfully past experiences toward a hopeful present and coming future. I keenly believe that women are, thus, new and alternative historiographers of our cultural life as well as theatre. This is also one of the substantial or inspirational reasons for our co-founding a collaboration called "Feminist Endeavor" between four women theatre critics in order to highlight women's endeavors in theatre and to give weight to the power of solidarity between women in a society and in a performance.



Scene from BGST's play *Zabel* (2016). Courtesy: BGST.

H.Salta: Apparently, we need more confrontation with the past; like the establishment of Turkish republic, minorities and other issues we have swept under the carpet. Up to now, we have witnessed a few confrontations with 1915 and September 6-7, 1955 despite the hardcore opposition from various direction. It is highly probable that we are going to witness more such confrontations through personal stories which can avoid the censor to some extent.

E.Ejder: I want to refer to each of them since their contributions are highly important and effective. Examples include: BGST's plays *Zabel* (2016) and *Kim Var Orada? (Who is There? 2015)*, which is about 1915, the year of genocide and its tragic effects in theatrical and cultural life and GalataPerform's *The Trace (?z -2013)*, which focuses on different social turning periods of Turkey from recent history including 'events of 6/7 September' and in 1955, a mob attack directed toward Greek minorities in Istanbul. Another play by the same company, *Ya?l? Çocuk (Old Child, 2016)*, is devoted to the stories of children killed during civil war, bombings and terrorist attacks including Veysel Deniz At?lgan, a 11-year-old boy killed by the bombing attack at a rally for peace in Ankara in 10 October 2015 and Cemile Ca??rga, who was shot down in front of her home during the civil war in southeast of Turkey and whose dead body had to be kept in a deep freezer because of the curfew ; Dostlar Theatre's *Sivas 93*, a documentary play on Sivas Massacre, an arson attack at Mad?mak Hotel in Sivas, which killed 37 people, mostly Alewites and intellectuals, on July 2, 1993; Bak?rkoy Municipality Theatre's *K?ran Resimleri (Scenes from Massacre-2016)*, which tells the traumatic stories of those who experienced "Mara? Massacre," which killed more than one hundred Alewite civilians in 19-26 December, 1978 in Mara?; ?ermolaPerformance's solo show *Disco Number 5 (2011)*, which tells of the political tortures which resulted in the deaths of many leftists and Kurds in Diyarbak?r Prison House after the coup in 1980; Alt?dan Sonra Theatre's solo performance *Fail-i Mii?terek (2010)*, which refers to the murder of *Agos* newspaper's editor, Armenian writer and journalist, Hrant Dink on 19 January, 2007 in Istanbul; Tatavla Theatre's *Küskün Yüreklerin Türküsü (The Song of Resentful Hearts, 2018)*, which brings the struggle of Saturday Mothers on stage; Duende Theatre's solo show *Sahibinin Ac?s? (The Sufferer's Suffering-2016)*, which is the story of funeral of Berkin Elvan, 15-years-old Gezi victim who died 11 March 2014, after 269 days in coma; Pelin Temur's play *Kuyu (Well-2014)*, a performance in ritual form describing the mourning of women whose loved ones were put in an acid well in 90's. The list should include more and will keep growing since there are plenty of pains, traumas to tell, share and confront in this country.

We might also add new performances dealing with our recent tragedies mentioned at the introduction of this conversation. *Art?k Bir Davan Var (Now You Have A Trial-2018)* by BGST and Seni Seviyorum Türkiye (*I Love You Turkey- 2017*), for instance, illustrate well the current experience in Turkey which has become a sort of dystopian universe.

However, there are some subjects that we haven't encountered on stage yet. A friend of mine, a German journalist asked me, for her new research, about the condition of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the new Turkish plays dealing with their problems. I have not come across any other example, except for *Ben, Cuma (I, Cuma)* (written by Salihcan Sezer and performed by Adnan Devran in 2019) which directly tells the story of a young homeless Syrian boy living in Istanbul, collecting paper. I want to quote her question

here: “What are the motivations behind theatre’s indifference to Syrians stories?”

H.Salta: Let’s start with the last sentence. This indifference might have several reasons; firstly, audience might not have been attracted to the plot. Considering highly negative feelings and discontent towards Syrians one can anticipate the absence of the subject on stages. Secondly, as stated above, many issues are only recently being staged on Istanbul stages, let alone the rest of the country. Speaking of those plays I would like to add two more; one is *Antigone* 2012 played in Kurdish language (by Ermola Performans) is centered around extrajudicial killings and a woman’s quest for her brother’s killer. The other one, titled *80’lerde Lubunya Olmak (Being Gay in 80’s)* (2011) by Mekan Art?, is centered around 1980 coup and based on the firsthand experience of transvestites, transsexuals trying to survive under the martial law. Despite the painful content of the play, the audience is given the songs of those days sung by the those who had no chance other than singing in clubs and prostitution. Thus, the play ironically reflected the neglecting, ignoring and hypocrite mood of society hiding behind ‘entertainment’. The play *Kimsenin Ölmedi?i Bir Günün Ertesiydi* (2012) (*After the Day Nobody Died*) by Alt?dan Sonra Theatre -also about a transvestite, brought quite a success and popularity and led the way to other plays on the same issue.



Kimsenin Ölmedi?i Bir Günüün Ertesiydi. Courtesy: Altıdan Sonra.

E.Ejder: Well, one of the reasons for theatre’s indifference might be the fact that playwrights are mostly producing works dealing with their own concerns. So, the question is “what kind of concerns do they have?” So far, we have addressed many of them: collective traumas, political crimes, issues of women, minority and language, the problems of LGBT individuals, social and political pressures, and more recently and apparently the young generation’s migration called “New Wave”, from Turkey to Europe, mostly to Berlin. Several plays have emerged dealing with the idea of being in between- “leaving or staying”.

H.Salta: I know that migration issue occupies your mind as well. We are experiencing one disaster after

another; it is traumatic to see so many friends, acquaintances leaving this country for good. There are two sides of this migration for the ones who are left behind; on one hand you are angry with the conditions that make them leave and you get worried about them, but on the other you can't help feeling deserted and your sadness turns into anger. While watching those plays about 'deserters' this split mood prevails the theatre experience. I always feel the need to question the effect of those plays on the audience; are we expected to sympathize with the characters, understand them better, be curious about their future lives out 'there' when thousands of immigrants here are living a segregated life. Who should I give ears to; those who left for various reasons or those we are apparently going to live from now on? When everything is being shifted, what stories we would like to hear? It seems that we will see more of the outpouring we started to see on stage to digest and understand the hard times we are going through and I believe this outpouring process will give way to a colourful and pluralist narratives.

E.Ejder: The narratives are like the rescue flares which are thrown into the sky one after another. It reminds me of Hannah Arendt's words; "freedom is the capacity to begin something original and unexpected". Seemingly, theatre of Turkey has this freedom capacity since it is continuously re-writing, re-telling our shared painful and joyful experiences and performing unexpected in response to the overwhelming experiences circulated by so-called "New Turkey".

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