

## Young and Critical Voices of Turkey II: “We are here as we are and even if we are somehow failing, we keep working” Conversation with Onur Karaoğlu



By Eylem Ejder

This is the second part of a conversation series I initiated in June 2019 in order to make the young, creative and critical voices of theatre and performing arts in Turkey more visible and audible. I hope the series will also introduce the reader to the contemporary landscape of theatre practices and some prominent artistic discussions, tendencies, movements, and what the country has been through politically, socially and aesthetically. The conversation series which I started with ?rem Ayd?n, continues with my second guest, Onur Karaoğlu.

[Onur Hamilton Karaoğlu](#) works between theatre and performance art. Since 2010, his original and adapted writing and directing pieces were presented at spaces like garajistanbul, bomontiada Alt, Roxy, Heidelberg Theater and Rotterdam Schouwburg. His installations and video works were presented at Bahar (Sharjah Biennial 2017), SPOT, Operation Room and Artnivo. He is one of the founding members of Studio 4 Istanbul that produced theatre, film works and performances in space KÖ?E in Yelde?irmeni which has now turned into an international performance festival. Between 2014 and 2019, he worked as the director of Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence in Istanbul. Karaoglu has taught a class dealing with the link between theatre and performance art at Bo?aziçi since 2013. He received his BA in Sociology at Bo?aziçi University and MFA in Theatre Directing at Columbia University in New York.

Dealing with issues such as forced migration and departure, re-writing history, and writing queer history—all concerns of his generation—Karaoğlu searches for new ways of telling and inventing the stories that are not often seen and heard on the stage both thematically and formally.

I met Onur Karaoğlu on July 6 in Istanbul and had a memorable conversation on art, life, love and theatre which has continued via email correspondences. Here, we share a selected part of our long conversation.

**Eylem Ejder:** Onur, as a playwright, director and artist, you produce different performative works from a stage adaptation of the novel *Ali and Ramazan* (2013), to science fiction plays like *Light Theory* (2018), to a video or poster installation performance like *Vordonisi* (2019) or *Myrmidons* (2019). You also write film scripts. What are the motivations or interests behind this artistic diversity? And how do you choose in which form you produce your work?

**Onur Karao?lu:** There are several reasons for that. First, I am always inspired by the works of artists who try to go beyond the boundaries of the artistic form they use—in other words redefining their medium. My favorite thing in art is to invent new structures, new ways of story-telling and unique experiences. As an artist, the idea of inventing is always intriguing to me both thematically and formally. Theatre and performance art by their nature are very open to this mind set of inventing. They mostly operate in laboratory conditions with live interaction with less risky material circumstances. That's why maybe an experimental theatre maker can easily shift his mind to make works in other art forms. (Even though my training is in theatre, now I call myself an artist and I like the freedom it gives me to imagine.) Also, I wanted to be a writer when I was a teenager. Now I write all my works by myself and it gives me options to interact with different artistic practices. While I'm writing, I instinctively imagine performative aspects in it, and then it is very easy for me to think of different ways of presenting them. Another reason, as a theatre person in Turkey, with limited opportunities, it is impossible to make work as much as you want. So there is the question as an artist what can you do with your inner motivations to make more work constantly? You must find collaborations aside from theatre practice here. I can say the conditions somehow forced me to work in other mediums with different roles. However, I am not unhappy about it, by doing that I am learning new interactions, places, situations, etc. So I am now used to seeing challenges as opportunities.



*Light Theory* (2018), written and directed by Onur Karaoğlu. Photo: Murat Dürüm.

**E.E:** One of the challenges seen as opportunities might be the forced migration or departure in your works. It is a popular topic both in current theatre and in reality, especially after the Gezi Occupation in 2013 and the coup attempt in 2016. What do you think? In works like *Light Theory*, *Vordonisi* and *Lovers of the Same Fall* (2015), we feel the sense of displacement as the founding element of the scene. In these plays, more than the motivations behind the desire of leaving the country we see the possible transformative effects of the forced departure. I think it is what differentiates you than others. Would you like to talk about it? On the possible relationships between the transformative potential of theatre itself and sense of the displacement?

**O.K:** The issue of forced departure is something I have had in my life through people I meet for over a decade now. I have friends who have left Turkey or are planning to leave Istanbul since they don't feel themselves in peace here. I met many people from Syria in Istanbul at this time, who came to Istanbul running away from the war, most of whom have already left Turkey to resettle in some Western countries. Finding your home, finding peace is something I can't stop thinking about, (somehow I am looking for that in my own life and I know how difficult it is in Turkey with the situations that constantly oppress us in various ways) I really don't know what to do about this. I don't think art can find answers for this. I believe I can only ask questions about it, I can think as much as I can with different opinions on it through the pieces I do. That's why I make all these works, to pose some questions or keep the record of some emotions. When I was researching for *Light Theory* I found out that when Istanbul was taken by the Turks in 1453 (it was the last total war the city experienced), a lot of Eastern Roman people immigrated, running from the war, and some of them historically well recorded. When I was reading about them it made me think differently about the Syrian people coming to Istanbul. The whole play is about finding yourself in a situation in which you must leave your home for good suddenly. And I wanted to imagine the moment just before you leave your house, you look at things a final time, and ask yourself "Have I forgotten something?" I am maybe too attached to memories and objects and it made me think how painful that moment could be. So I wanted to write the whole play about that moment. How can it resonate at different times with similar situations? I think it always feels the same.

**E.E:** Onur, when you talk about the concept of moment, you mention more than a moment. You open the past and future, longing and hope in a certain moment for the audience. It is as if we look at the colorful pieces of past, future and present from a kaleidoscope and as we play it, we discover new things, images and possibilities hidden in all times. This is why I like to imagine you as a "historian of future times" or an "inventor of past times." Where does your interest in science fiction and history come from? What is the relationship between discovery, play, science, text and theatre for you? What do you want to say about the role of the perception of time in your works?

**O.K:** Perception of time is my dear subject, yes. We all love to play with time in our minds. All arts try to manipulate time and I like to imagine time as a physical dimension to understand the mechanism/logic/structure of the work. Somehow time is linear in our daily lives. We want to break it in many ways—always. Since art opens up a useful space for that, I love playing with it. One way to do it is to invent things. Inventing things sounds like science when you think objectively but I think art and science intersect here and their operations are equally open to inventions. The methods may differ,

because one is responding to the laws of nature, and the other responds to the laws of human nature. One is more provable and the other is more subjective. So the territory for more subjective invention goes to more philosophical territories where we can be in more metaphysical places. I am not suggesting a conclusion here, rather I want to describe my understanding of invention in arts. In a more metaphysical perspective, I imagine a fact, as I do in *Vordonisi*, a real existing island which sank after a 1010 Earthquake in Istanbul coming back to the surface in 2043. Then I invent a time machine by re-organizing our five senses which I imagine can keep us in the moment we are in now, and then it becomes somehow a bizarre but perceivable suggestion/invitation for the audience. The whole idea of that installation performance, to make people go to a journey with you by entering a room with an analogue VR device I made to create different physical and metaphysical perspectives and following some rules there. The act of believing in the arts becomes easier than in science I guess. This is funny but helpful for artists. Art uses some form of storytelling which implies a manipulation. There is an archeologist in *Light Theory*, making a scientific presentation in the year 2400. When she says they invented a device using light theory to see the past, specifically our time now, we believe her because we want to hope it can happen long after we stop living to tell our stories in the future

**E.E:** One of the basic themes in the plays is love, and most of all, queer love. There is longing and hope for love, and the power of love to change and transform life. What power does love have to change and transform the stories of the generation you address?

**O.K:** This is maybe very personal, but I believe in love more than anything else in life. As if we are in this world to love. I am a romantic person by nature, and I embrace it with all its difficulties. That is a motivation in life. Lovelessness is a motivation too. Maybe since I live in Turkey, I feel as if I have to have a lot of queer love stories in my works. This is partly because an activism towards queer love is very much needed here, and also it is who I am too. I get strong motivation from falling in love or losing love too and it is not typical for me, I know. But my works deal with the complexities of relationships through love. When I read Perihan Ma?den's book *Ali and Ramazan*, which is based on a real relationship of those two men which took place in 1980s and 1990s Istanbul, I immediately thought that I should make a play of it. In 2013, I made that play. It touched me so deeply, because I knew when I was much younger, I was hanging out at the places where they had that relationship, and the idea of somehow our paths crossing without knowing each other at the same places, at the same time was very striking for me. I think that's something important for me. When I make a work, somehow I investigate an intersection from my own life so I can add my own personal perspective in it. Love becomes a metaphor for everything this way.



*Ali and Ramazan* (2013), written by Perihan Ma?den, adapted and directed by Onur Karao?lu. Photo: Mustafa Çankaya.

**E.E:** I believe in love more than anything as well. Indeed, I distinguished the lively affect of a play as the one created by Love or not. I am thinking the role of LGBTI+ movement in your “love metaphor.” I remember how your artist and activist queer characters were shining like Benjamin’s “angel of history” and moving us to a hopeful future. This is something very new to my sense of what one sees on the Turkish stage.

**O.K:** LGBTI+ movement produces a lot of hope. I am involved in this movement. Partly this movement is the reason why I make work. Partly all those queer characters in my works are a reflection of myself too. I am always hopeful and sometimes I think I am too naive about things, the future in general. But otherwise I don’t see any point of moving on. And also hope should exist in this very moment. Even though I like referring to the past or future a lot in my works, I am talking about now. I don’t know if

hope is an emotion or an idea but I insist that we must have it in our present through all those references to the past and future. As you mentioned before, I made an installation of a theatre poster of an unperformed play called *Myrmidons*. It is based on Aeschylus' play which survives today in fragments and we know that it is about Achilles and Patroclus' relationship. Two actors complete the fragmented text to make a play to tell their love in 1980. On the day of the premier, the 1980 military coup d'etat in Turkey takes place and the play disappears again. The only surviving material is the poster of the play. I exhibited this poster with a text at an exhibition last year. Of course it is fictional, but true too. We have a history which is not well-known - the queer history before 1980s, and we have now where we are trying to achieve progress for our freedoms and this will happen by doing all these works. Even though they are very small marks in time, that's how things will happen I guess.



*Myrmidons* (2019), Onur Karao?lu. Photo: Onur Karao?lu.

**E.E:** It seems LGBTI+ movement is also a frontier in theatrical developments. New collectivities and collaborative works of art in Turkey have occurred recently in which LGBTI+ had a great role. There are new independent festivals, new experimental venues for performance art, to mention a few. You are

involved in that movement as a founder, participant or supporter. What do you think about the importance of these collective and collaborative works in theatre?

**O.K:** This is related to your question about researching form in theatre. If you are interested in more formal research in theatre, you need to collaborate with like-minded people and those collaborations should be on a different level than making one single production together. In the new Turkey Theatre Tradition emerging in the last 20 years, now it feels to me right to be more into research. I know with Covid, circumstances changed a lot, we really don't know where things will go, but even at this time, we can be more open to try new things, we can be more experimental since our time is asking for that. If we only want to go back to what we thought was normal before, I don't think things will work out as they did. I know there is a heavy weight on the shoulders of people making theatre in Turkey. You must create a production system that will go on even though no one is really paid, you will deal with the social and political situation here, you will build an audience, and if you can do that you will try new things to experiment around the form of theatre. It is a very difficult task. I feel lucky, because over the last ten years, I built a community of collaborators here who are ready to take risks with me and share the same language together. But we don't really know where our practice will take us in the long term, we keep working and having faith in each other which is another form of hope for me.

**E.E:** Speaking of the pandemic, how did you experience the days in quarantine? How did it effect the way you produce art and the way you perceive life? We know that your digital play *Read Subtitles Aloud* has created reactions.

**O.K:** During the pandemic, I made a video dialogue series called *Read Subtitles Aloud*. I think it came from a place where I needed to have dialogue with others. The logic is this: You watch a video in which a person is directly speaking to you and by reading the subtitles appearing on the screen you speak to the person on the video and a logical conversation unfolding a story happens. I thought it as a story of a theatre company in a difficult situation since they can't perform any more work because of the pandemic. There are several characters having some issues with each other which they try to resolve and work together. The audience who watches all the episodes becomes the main character of this series by reading subtitles and joining the performance. That challenge of generating a performance on video was quite interesting and it got a lot of attention in Turkey. Now we are producing its American adaptation with a festival from New York to be released in fall 2020. With the pandemic I think experimenting with theatrical ideas became more widespread and I think it is a useful approach to think of the basics of theatre over and over again. There are no more given circumstances, we somehow have to make them and practice it. I think situation will not change very quickly and we will all keep trying and probably failing too. But it is for sure I am learning and discovering a lot at this time.



*Read Subtitles Aloud* (2020). Video-dialog series written and developed by Onur Karao?lu. A scene from episode 1, "Digital Kiss." Photo: Onur Karao?lu.

**E.E:** Among the digital plays, it was your work that attracted my attention most. As you said, it was giving the opportunity to the audience to become the main character of the series by reading the subtitles and joining the performance. It was also telling the story of a group of young people who try to make theatre under difficult circumstances. Though the theatre practices are exposed to changing form during the pandemic, this story or the structure of "play within a play" is something I found as a common motif in a dozen plays. Might it be a way as a theatrical reaction of resisting the "present." What do you think about that?

**O.K:** I am very happy to hear your positive feedback for *Read Subtitles Aloud*. I know it came to me as a response to the feeling I had during the lockdown. We all felt it. It wasn't like I had to do something at that moment, it was more like a gesture to find a meaning to my daily life. We are theatre people, and our survival strategies are deeply rooted in our daily life I guess. I also would like to answer your other question in relation to this. We are also inventing reasons for our works from our lives, we devise them into plays. I have several ideas on the issue that theatre people are designing their works around the lives of theatre people. First, it is in our core, and making honest and truthful work is only possible by starting from yourself, your own problems. This is how performance art frames its foundation as well. As theatre people, if you want to create a piece about a problem, you must do extensive research and build a structure with that research that will work well. This is a lot of work. Let's imagine, when making a play about workplace deaths in Turkey, one should really study the situation here, and then should come up with a strong statement and structure. I also know how much it is needed and how difficult it will be. You must be really working hard to do this play and make the audience get interested in that. With no financial playwriting or play-making support it is difficult to make those plays. No one is really making money

from theatre in Turkey most of the time. So the easy solution is to make plays about people making theatre. Another thing which is even sadder is to make a play about workplace deaths now will be considered a political theatre piece and people try to be careful with their choices more and more. I am trying to say that it could be the result of self-censorship that we are even afraid to confess to ourselves. Then we come this place, theatre people telling their own stories can be seen as something political. Even the attempt of making these plays is a way to stand up against oppression. So we are narrowing down our mental space maybe, but still there is a statement in it. We are here as we are and even if we are somehow failing, we keep working. There is something hopeful about this.

**E.E:** We have arrived at a very nice point and I am curious to hear more about what you think about the contemporary theatre practices in Turkey and where you see your works in this landscape?

**O.K:** Theatre in Turkey, like everything here, had big breaks in its historical formation. I was born in 1982, two years after the military coup. When I was growing up I wasn't totally aware that a tradition which formed in the 60s and 70s had been disappearing for making theatre here at that time. So when I was a teenager, when I started to make theatre as a young enthusiast, I experienced this lack of continuity for theatre practice. I still don't know how I became obsessed with being a theatre person in such an environment. Partly I knew that theatre could be a tool against any form of oppression here, so I was drawn into it, in a way instinctively. I now realize I didn't know exactly why I was making theatre when I first started making it, but I now know. What I am trying to say is, Theatre in Turkey had to reconstruct its tradition after almost 20 years due to the lasting effects of this break that happened after the military coup. A new tradition had to emerge. By the 2000s I would say, more theatre companies had been formed, more plays had been written and this increase in the culture started a new movement to build a new tradition for theatre in Turkey. After the 2010s I can easily say that now, this new tradition is growing much quickly and significantly despite all the political and social turmoil happening, especially since 2013. So many new plays are written every year, and in Istanbul hundreds of new productions premier annually. This is the growth of the new tradition and we are part of it. It is creating its own aesthetic and forms, and luckily we are more connected with the rest of the world today. I hope this new tradition will become more and more aware of the other practices around the world in its formation. I am trying to say that I should see myself in relation to this movement. Here in my gut-feeling logic appears. As a teenager I was into making theatre, because I could sense the freedom it could offer to interact with the world against any form of oppression. Without realizing this completely I'd begun making it, but now I deal with the subject of oppression a lot. So my practice found its core values over time, and also the problems and subjects I deal with. I also have problems with the form and I try to expand my horizon towards different experiences of practicing theatre and I think we will understand what they will mean over time as long as we keep presenting more works. Because this is the nature of founding the movement while you are in it; you keep working, and can only understand its effects in time.



*Light Theory* (2018), written and directed by Onur Karaoğlu. Photo: Murat Dürüm.

**E.E:** Your theatre has a splendiferous simplicity. From the words to the voice of the performer and to the images, everything on stage is what it is, nothing more. And this pureness invites the audience to a very lively and interactive encounter. What do you think? I am asking because you mentioned before to the challenges and limits of making theatre in Turkey and offered us a way to see the challenge as opportunity. What do you want to say about the form?

**O.K:** It is a cliché but also true I think: obstacles reinforce imagination. Yes, we have limited means to realize our theatrical works but that makes us go wild with our imagination. As you also point out, simplicity may work sometimes for a more complicated meaning. But apart from the work, the situation of the artist is an important subject too. It's a conscious choice being an artist. And if you are an artist living in Turkey, or making productions related to Turkey, you will demand/cultivate a daily life that requires social respect and equality. So I am OK with that. The issue about the formal research for the theatre can be there too along with all political motivations. I know I can create an environment where I can experiment with the form, I must demand it, I should find like-minded people. I can even do this in my living room 'salon' so I am not discouraged by the circumstances. At the end of the day, I know that I am not a brave person in my life in general, but as an artist I learn to be more and more courageous. When I go to bed sometimes, before I sleep I dream about doing something much more substantial with much bigger organizational and financial support. The slightest chance of this dream come true always

motivates me.



*Vordonisi* (2019). Installation performance by Onur Karao?lu. Photo: Atakan Gür.

**E.E:** Before ending up talking, would you like to talk about your coming studies. What do you have in your mind to do? Do you have the same hope for future in the way we found in your works?

**O.K:** I choose to be hopeful to a certain degree. Under any circumstance we need some form of hope. That's what keeps our body and brain functioning. Hope is closely related with imagination or fantasy too. Imagining is as beautiful as hoping. However, when you hope and imagine, you are on your own. In this world we live in, isolating yourself from the realities around you feels like a betrayal somehow of your responsibilities for others. Then you again come to the question: What is my responsibility as an artist? To live a meaningful life or to make work that will help the world to be a better place... I really don't know. Probably I make work since I don't have an answer for this question. So I work by being hopeful. At the moment there are several projects I am working on. Just before pandemic started in March I was working on the production of a theatre play I recently wrote. It was very strange but the play takes place in the near future and it is about three young artists who find themselves all of a sudden making unexpected plans because of a recent event. So somehow it is about now. I am looking for ways of digitally conceiving this piece now. I am working on the second season of *Read Subtitles Aloud* in Turkey along with its first season's American adaptation. I also reside at the moment in a big old Istanbul house. Along with my partner Kathryn Hamilton, Alper Turan and Ar?n Ar?man, we have a fantasy to start an

art space here. Since during the pandemic, places will not open soon, we are planning to have little events here just like The Salons of Paris where a small group of artists and audience came together, shared work and had conversations. We plan to do it soon. This is the least we can do at this time I guess.

**E.E:** Onur, it was a pleasure for me to talk to you. Thank you for the conversation.

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