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An Obscure Performance in Life and Education

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After the military intervention of 1980, Turkey's intellectual and social democrats were devastated – imprisoned, escaped to exile, silenced, killed – in the hands of the *coup d'état* and all the prohibitions that came with it until the first half of the 1980s. Then the famous Turgut Özal government with its unprecedented liberal economic policies came into the picture. Towards the end of the 1980s, a new generation of theatre and performance artists started to stage their response to all this madness and became visible to older generations who had long lost hope and vitality in terms of artistic and humanitarian production. I had the chance to get involved in this artistic endeavour through some of the emerging initiatives, such as Green Grapes Dance Company,[1] Bilsak Theatre Company, Şahika Tekand, Kumpanya, Dance Factory, DAGS (Interdisciplinary Young Artists Association), Hüseyin Katırcıoğlu and Assos Theatre Festival. The works were relentless and new. Bodies were in need of fresh air, and artistic expression in performance did not follow the traditional routes or accepted notions while fully embracing the possibility of not being seen. Actually, the emerging artists did not give a damn. Interestingly – or obviously – enough, most of them were outcasts coming from other fields such as sociology, literature, engineering, law and so on. In relation to this, the artistic and performative visions they put forward were truly interdisciplinary. The contemporary visual art scene and performing arts were in an honest conversation perhaps for the first time in Turkish art history.

Therefore, the 1990s in Istanbul were extremely colourful and exciting in terms of the performing arts followed by an educational burst in this field. New departments were established in dance and theatre in order to accommodate succeeding newcomers. Mimar Sinan University launched their Modern Dance programme, which was supervened by Yıldız Teknik University. In addition, the newly founded private universities, such as Bilkent, Sabancı, Kadir Has, Bilgi, Yeditepe, Maltepe and Okan, challenged the theatre departments in state universities.

Unfortunately there is always a backlash in the Turkish context and this one was the Turkish state's army being at war with the Kurdish population of south-east Turkey in the 1990s. The western part of the country has ignored this so deeply that when the Gezi Park protests occurred in 2013,[2] a huge number of educated city dwellers encountered the horrible and most tragic events of the south-eastern Kurdish regions for the first time in their lives. A much-awaited confrontation was swept away again recently in the tragic events in Sur, 2016.[3] In response, thousands of academics signed a petition to raise awareness about the recent horrendous deaths in the south-east of Turkey. As a reaction, the state sentenced some of these academics to imprisonment and others were made redundant.[4]

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Notwithstanding this tragedy, one must admit that in recent times there has been a mind-blowing range of independent theatre and dance productions accompanied by large number of theatre graduates – at least six hundred – each year nationwide. Unfortunately for dance we cannot state the same in terms of university education. There is only one functioning dance department (at Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul), and recently a new one was founded at Dokuz Eylül University, Izmir. The limited number of dance departments in the country is mostly due to the lack of vision of the Council of Higher Education, and also because of negative employment and working conditions in the field of contemporary dance. Furthermore, the regression of the contemporary dance scene is obvious after the '2010 Istanbul – Cultural Capital of Europe' disaster.[5]

So, what is the actual picture regarding performative genres in Turkey? In the 1990s, despite the lesser number of artistic productions in dance and theatre, one can argue that there was much intellectual interaction and critical questioning between the audience and the artists, as well as among artistic milieus. Having experienced both contexts in performing arts as a director and performer with the Movement Atelier Company,[6] and serving as the head of the Theatre Department at Kadir Has University (Istanbul), I notice a lack of critical freedom in performing-arts fields and I question the level of critical thinking and creativity. It has been clear that theatre graduates today have more opportunities to find work and support themselves financially in comparison to previous times. They also have more options for independent artistic initiatives than before. However, I have ongoing questions regarding the content of productions, audience reception and interaction, and the politics of artistic productions. Despite the high number of new productions staged every season and the opening of new artistic spaces every month, which attract more and more viewers each time, one can argue that very few of them are really searching for an intelligent and sincere connection with the audience. Therefore it is hard to arrive at a solid judgement regarding the quality of artistic works since also there are numerous productions obviously giving way to higher artistic results, and, further, there are many well-educated actors constantly exploring new territories. Yet in the educational framework one of the challenges is definitely to deal with the diminishing quality of high-school education in Turkey resulting in the tremendous effort to bridge the gap at university.

To finish this short intervention, rather than giving an affirmative opinion I would prefer to express my sense that we are in the midst of an extremely chaotic and very dusty phase of 'performance' in Turkey. In five, perhaps ten, years' time one can hope to arrive at a clearer picture, when all the dust is settled and the fog is dispersed. Then we may hopefully argue about the artistic endeavours of ours with a clear conscience.

NOTES

1 See the audio file 'Yeşil Üzümler Dans Tiyatrosu [Zeynep Günsür, Mustafa Kaplan, Emre Koyuncuoğlu] 1992–1996' under 'Ses Kayitlari', at https://saltonline.org/en/1590/manastir-istanbul-sanat-merkezi, 30 September 2016, accessed 3 March 2019.

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2 For further information see Antimo L. Farro and Deniz Günce Demirhisar, 'The Gezi Park Movement: A Turkish Experience of the Twenty-First-Century Collective Movements', *International Review of Sociology*, 24, 1 (2014), pp. 170–89.

3 See David Lepeska, 'The Destruction of Sur: Is This Historic District a Target for Gentrification?', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2016, at www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/feb/09/destruction-sur-turkey-historic-district-gentrification-kurdish, accessed 29 October 2018.

4 Almost all of the professors at the Theatre Department at Ankara University were sacked. See http://atcainternational.blogspot.com/2017/03/report-theater-trouble-in-turkey.html, accessed 3 March 2019.

5 A complete personal view regarding the usage of the cultural-capital budget and its hazardous consequences is the subject of another article, but permit me to state my perception as such: grand events are only useful if the citizens are allowed to build social and artistic structures that can be prospectively convenient. In Istanbul's case it was the opposite and the whole event fleeted away in a second, leaving not even the slightest trace.

6 See http://hareketatolyesitoplulugu.blogspot.com, accessed 3 March 2019.

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