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Reflections on Turkish Theatre Introduction

SEDA ILTER

The sociopolitical turbulence in the recent history of Turkey has radically affected the theatre and performance scene. In a climate of fear and repression, performing arts have been fighting for survival and developing ways to endure the dark times, to achieve freedom of artistic expression and open platforms for critical communication. This collection of articles considers contemporary theatre and performance in Turkey, reflecting on some of the complex issues that practitioners, academics and institutions have faced in the current political environment. Each author presents a part of the complex picture of theatre and performance culture in Turkey, and hopes to start a conversation about this oppressed, yet fertile, artistic landscape.

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.

Bertolt Brecht[1]

Turkey, often described as the bridge connecting East and West, Asia and Europe, Orient and Occident, has also been known as the land of political turmoil and of the silenced. The country has a long history of putting criticism and free speech on trial, imprisoning journalists, academics, artists, writers, students and politicians. However, the oppressive act of silencing has outrageously peaked under Erdoğan's AKP government and now presidency (July 2018), particularly intensely since the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the attempted coup in 2016. Turkey is now the world's leading jailer of journalists and persecutor of academics and artists.[2]

Where do theatre – the foundation of democracy – and the performing arts sit in Turkey's dark picture? What has been happening in the space of gathering where *communitas* emerges, and artists and audiences voice their opinions? Who is acutely made (in)visible, (in)audible and (un)imaginable in performance? Can theatre and performing arts survive when caged in a fear factory and censoring mechanism, and can they liberate repressed dissidence in Turkey? There has been a limited number of detailed discussions on artistic and academic platforms of such and similar questions despite the increasing curiosity and concern about the condition of performing arts and their academic dimension in Turkey. This dossier is a collective endeavour that aims to draw attention to such questions from

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multiple perspectives, and to shine some light on the diverse and complex issues that theatre and performance institutions, artists and academics encounter during these unstable times in Turkey, particularly following the introduction of the presidential system in July 2018 and its de facto control over state theatres. Hence this collaboratively produced piece contains various voices ranging from theatre- and performance-makers to scholars, living in Turkey and abroad, discussing different as well as overlapping topics about the oppressed, yet fruitful, theatre and performance scene in Turkey today.

As the editor of this shared output, who has been living in the UK for more than a decade now and is witnessing events in Turkey from afar, my approach to my motherland and the condition of its arts in this time of turbulence is based on an amalgam of an onlooker's critical distance and a native's longing and rage for her homeland. Here, I identify with how journalist–author Ece Temelkuran, writing abroad about her homeland, defines her position in *The Insane and the Melancholy*: 'Ultimately, as difficult as it is to love one's homeland without shame or pride, it is just as difficult to describe one's suffering because of it on foreign soil without fury or an absurd zest.'[3] On the one hand, I despair at the repercussions of continually increasing repression of artists, art institutions and audiences, and on the other hand I cannot help but hope that cultural practices in performance and other fields will contribute to the un-silencing of the oppressed and the dissident. As the reader will see, most of the authors in this piece share this blend of worry and hope to different degrees.

Turkey's state theatres today stage productions in more than sixty venues in approximately twenty-one cities. The National Opera and Ballet produces works in venues located in six cities, and it regularly tours to different towns. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Theatre, which is also funded by the state, stages performances throughout the city. Besides fully subsidized performing-arts bodies, there are numerous private theatre and performance companies often located in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. While the general tendency in state-run theatres and opera/ballet is to stage classical examples of Western performing arts, the independent initiatives enrich the scene by producing inventive works. For example, Şermola Performans makes original theatre in the Kurdish language with Turkish subtitles, and productions by Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş focus on gender and women's issues in Turkey, while the Yeni Metin Yeni Tiyatro (New Text New Theatre) initiative of GalataPerform provides a platform to support playwrights, and publishes, archives and circulates new texts through an online platform. Elaborating on this overview, Özlem Hemiş's piece provides an overview of the origins and evolution of contemporary theatre in Turkey.

One of the challenges of investigating theatre and performance in Turkey is the limited amount of consistent and systematic documentation of national, regional and private productions, as well as of critical texts on performance. Ayşe Draz tackles the question of archive and memory in her piece presenting her experience of producing work in a small village where there is no historical lineage or collective memory of live performance. The question concerning documentation and memory is certainly

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linked to a methodical and organizational issue. Yet, when considered elaborately, it has its roots in a sociocultural mentality and political tradition that can be characterized as *collective amnesia* – a communally accepted trait in Turkey that is normalized by the state to allow itself to wipe off and disremember its doings. One of the striking historical examples of this is the words of Süleyman Demirel, seven times prime minister and the ninth president of Turkey, who fiercely fought and voted for the death penalty for Marxist–Leninist revolutionary students Deniz Gezmiş, Yusuf Aslan and Hüseyin İnan in 1972: 'Yesterday is yesterday, today is today'.[4] This nationally known statement, which is hard to translate to another cultural context, is ingrained in the collective consciousness and has shaped Turkey's relationship with its past. The axiom suggests that one's past actions cannot be judged from the perspective of the present moment. In other words, the state cannot be held accountable for its past deeds, and things that happened in the past should be forgotten until or unless they are useful for the current political environment. This deep-seated practice of forgetting in Turkey distances the past and legitimizes the present. It is due to this collective amnesia that appalling events such as massacres and imprisonment of journalists and academics are quickly and easily pushed out of the existing agenda.

An important act of shaping collective memory and silencing took place after the attempted coup. While the arrest and dismissal of artists who were openly or allegedly critical of the government and of Erdoğan were relentlessly carried out, certain Kurdish institutions such as municipal theatres in Diyarbakır and Hakkari, as well as the Kurdish theatre company Seyr-î Mesel Tiyatro, were closed down.[5] In this collective dossier, theatre scholar Pieter Verstraete gives a detailed account of the recent turbulence in theatre in Turkey, including the censoring acts of the government of Kurdish art institutions, while Kurdish playwright, actor and director Mirza Metin gives voice to the Kurdish theatre's resistance in Turkey, with a focus on the cultural image of fire. Organized censorship has indisputably targeted both state and private theatres, often through financial threat. The criterion for the subsidy from the Ministry of Culture today is dependent on the submission of the playscript and its suitability in terms of *public decency*. In a 2012 speech Erdoğan made an open threat to theatre-makers, implying a no-funding policy for any performance that dissents from his personal and party politics:

> For years they have belittled our people with caricatures. For years they have belittled them through columns, on their screens. For years they have belittled the true servants of this nation – its clergymen … What do we say now? What we say is, brother, you want to act in theatre? Move freely, be our guest and establish your own theatre amongst yourselves, get into this business privately … Sure, we'll provide the stages, if we should like your play our review committee can sponsor it, we can support this as well. But the mentality that brought you here shall no longer exist. Go out, move freely, be free, be autonomous, be private, but now the state washes its hands of the theatre. Be my guest and stay on your stage![6]

Surely, calling performance-makers to produce their works privately with their own budget on their own stages does not mean that independent companies are entirely

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free from the state surveillance. Independent theatres are certainly less restrained than state-run theatre, opera and ballet institutions. Nevertheless, the warnings such as the above, directly or indirectly, affect art institutions and lead them to self-censor in order to be able to access funding and survive the state vigilance that might lead to closure of shows or of the companies overall.

One senses the atmosphere of fear even when the first worry is not funding, as there is also social scrutiny and media surveillance that performance-makers are cautious about. In 2015, I translated Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009) into Turkish (*Yazar*) and directed it at the Talimhane Theatre in Istanbul. Crouch's play does not show, but merely tells a story that involves, instances of violence, abuse and, in the final scene, child pornography. During the rehearsals, artistic director Mehmet Ergen and the actors were wary about certain parts, such as the final scene in which the boundaries between the real and the fictional blur, and as absurd as it sounds, an audience might think that the actor, playing the role, might have genuinely committed the abusive act. Under the guidance of Crouch we altered a few words in this scene to clarify that this was all theatre, and not real! Throughout the rehearsals, I noticed how alert the actors were to the meanings of words and what kind of troubling reactions they might generate in the audience. Besides the pressure on artists, university departments and academics have been on the radar. The most striking incident took place in 2017 when almost all academic members of one of the oldest theatre departments in Turkey at the University of Ankara were dismissed due to signing the 'Academics for Peace' declaration.[7]

On the other hand, despite the overbearing environment, there has been a great number of independent performances and artistic initiatives. Even though this seems to be a promising reaction to state policies and measures, it is also important to consider such a boom in relation to the question of the extent to which these numerous productions and artistic attempts in fact offer possibilities for critical and intellectual engagement in and with the audience. Zeynep Günsür Yüceil discusses this issue in her piece, while Müge Olacak considers it with a focus on dance performance. There is no doubt that audiences and artists have the desire to critically question the status quo. In fact, when audiences are given the chance to engage with performance and raise their voices, they can be fearless, as seen in the performance of Berlin Schaubühne's *An Enemy of the People* in 2014 in Istanbul right before the first anniversary of the Gezi protests. The director, Thomas Ostermeier, adapted his production to address the current political climate by incorporating 'the story of Erdoğan's adviser Yusuf Yerkel kicking a protestor following the Soma coalmine disaster'.[8] Noticing the willingness of the audience to speak up against the status quo, the actor, Eva Meckbach, comments,

> In retrospect, I found the Istanbul visit perhaps the most amazing, and most touching performance. It made us feel like we were not just producing entertainment, but like we were in the right place at the right time with a most relevant play. You really got the feeling that you can achieve something by making theatre, and you can express issues that are on the minds of a lot of people.[9]

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The issue, therefore, is the mentality constructed and imposed by the deeply ingrained state policies that have been gradually silencing the stage and the auditorium alike.

As this brief account shows, it is vital to initiate conversations about theatre and performing arts in Turkey to raise awareness in the international community about its state and to support the artists who are constantly looking for new ways to openly express ideas and engage with their audience. Change in and through performance, my hopeful self believes, is possible as long as the stage finds ways to divorce itself from the authoritarian establishment and presents its audience with something radically different and hopeful.

NOTES

1 Bertolt Brecht, 'Motto', in *Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willet (New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 320.

2 See such sources as Elana Beiser, 'Turkey's Crackdown Propels Number of Journalists in Jail Worldwide to Record High', *CPJ Committee to Protect Journalists (Reports)*, 13 December 2016, at https://cpj.org/imprisoned/2016.php, accessed 7 May 2019. Joanna Hong, 'Erdoğan's Turkey: The World's Biggest Prison for Journalists', *Newsweek*, 18 September 2018, at www.newsweek.com/erdogans-turkey-worlds-biggest-prison-journalists-opinion-1125718, accessed 7 May 2019.

3 Ece Temelkuran, *The Insane and the Melancholy* (London: Zed Books, 2016), p. 274.

4 Ibid., p. 39.

5 See such sources as Pieter Verstraete, 'Turkey's Artists at Risk: Dramaturgies of Resistance vs. Politics of Fear', *Textures: Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures*, 5 April 2018, at www.textures-platform.com/?p=4919, accessed 3 March 2019.

6 Temelkuran, *The Insane and the Melancholy*, p. 239.

7 See Yiğit Günay, 'Turkey: A Prolonged Tragedy for Theatre', *Freemuse*, 11 May 2017, at https://freemuse.org/news/turkey-prolonged-tragedy-theatre, accessed 3 March 2019.

8 Peter Boenisch, *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 114.

9 Ibid., p. 114–15.

SEDA ILTER (s.ilter@bbk.ac.uk) *is a lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at Birkbeck University of London. Her research interests include the theoretical and aesthetic implications of new technologies and media culture in theatre, the theory and practice of contemporary theatre, and dramaturgy and new writing for performance. Seda is also interested in the politics of theatre in Turkey and the journey from British theatre to the theatre scene in Turkey. She directed her translation of Tim Crouch's* The Author *in Istanbul at the Talimhane Theatre (2015–16), which then toured to the Theater an der Ruhr, Germany (2015–16). Seda's writing has been published in such journals as* Contemporary Theatre Review, Modern Drama *and* Performance Research. *She is currently writing her monograph*, Mediatized Dramaturgy: Evolution of Playtexts in the Media Age (*Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama Engage Series*).

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