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Origins and Developments: A Brief Overview

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The origins of westernized theatre in Turkey lie in the *Tanzimat* reform movement, which was in turn inspired by the impact of the French Revolution. The institutionalization of this late encounter was made possible by the foundation of municipal theatres (1914) and of state theatres (1949). The municipal theatres have been most influential, and have had more flexible characteristics as they have been minutely connected with tradition. The state theatres, on the other hand, have been on a mission to *educate* audiences through their large-scale productions, which the private-enterprise theatres would not possibly dare to produce. They have also been tightly connected with Western-style theatre in their repertoire, and in their understanding of dramaturgy and directing in their productions. Today it is still debatable whether these enormous institutional theatres function effectively or not. The fact that the municipal and state theatres are consistently offering the cheapest tickets and yet not managing to keep a *loyal* group of audiences is one of the reasons why nearly two hundred plays at independent theatres debut in Istanbul every year. There have been attempts to overcome problems of quality inherent in the structure of these theatres by other theatre groups in premises where more elaborate productions of plays from the mainstream have been performed.

The main trend during the 1960s and 1970s – the most dynamic period after the beginnings of newly emerging Turkish theatre – was the politicization of private theatres (and not the subsidized ones), which included ongoing discussions about the political content of performances. Another discussion concerned the question whether traditional theatre would breathe new life into modern Turkish theatre, particularly in terms of the open form used in traditional theatre and its connections with Brechtian theatre. Consequently, a very limited number of examples appeared; these were mostly playtexts rather than theatre productions. As the political milieu after the 1980s became increasingly localized and the digital revolution in the 2000s set the global agenda, the 1990s were essentially a transitional period. During this time, the globalization of the Turkish economy also had an impact on culture. Funding organizations such as the Theatre Research Laboratory (1988) in the case of the municipal theatre, and the unit theatre (1994) in the case of the state theatre, supported research on different staging languages and different modes of production. Some independent theatres were also involved in exploratory work. The first international theatre festival, which took place in 1991, can be considered of major importance here.

The themes developed in the independent theatres during the 1990s, which were separate from the mainstream theatres, paved the way for the private theatre groups to carry out their research collectively onstage. Their primary focus was on dramaturgy

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and directing, which would today be characterized as post-dramatic. These groups shared their premises from time to time. A significant number of the most productive representatives of this period do not perform today, primarily because the state has not done anything to reduce the financial burden on the dramatic arts. Financial issues as well as the insufficient number of theatre buildings have meant that these groups can no longer survive. Another problem is the difficulty of searching for a new language for the stage before exploring acting forms appropriate to this language. Further associated problems are the lack of adequate training and development opportunities for actors, and the chronic financial difficulties that the theatre faces. Among 1990s theatre groups, only the Studio Players have not been content with merely dramaturgical and directorial renewal, and in response have developed a method of acting appropriate to the research they have carried out. Şahika Tekand, a pre-eminent director internationally known for her *Oedipus Trilogy*, conducted the research for this form at her own theatre school, and defined it as *performative acting*.

In the 2000s, a succession of small theatres opened and, compared to the previous decades, this was a very productive period. Approaching the 2010s, these small theatres established themselves and ensured their survival very differently. These independent theatre groups, such as Altıdan Sonra Tiyatro, 2. Kat, Sahne Hal and Asmalı Sahne, were called alternative, but they did not attempt to produce a new stage language; the only alternative that they offered was performance spaces in office blocks, in blocks of flats in side streets, and in small shops, none with a capacity of more than twenty, forty or, at a maximum, a hundred seats. As in the 1990s, group members kept their day jobs in order to finance the theatre and its often low-budget productions. Unlike the groups in the 1990s, the work of companies in the last decade has focused on a text-based approach. These groups varied among themselves, including political and non-political groups, groups preferring Turkish or translated plays, those adapting films for the stage, and groups staging Turkish versions of the UK's so-called 'in-yer-face' plays emulating the originals or staging the newly translated versions. These professional theatre companies acted jointly in a spirit of solidarity – something that would be seen mostly in the amateur university theatre and drama groups. They enthusiastically collaborated with and supported each other. For example, an owner of one of these theatre companies would contribute to another company a playtext she had written, or would even perform on the stage of another theatre as a player. Therefore I would like to propose that the tendencies towards collectivity and openness which can be considered as having started with the Occupy Gezi Movement (2013) had indeed started earlier. As the adults were surprised to notice, these young, Gezi-experienced members of the theatre groups had already developed a spirit of collectivization. They were already engaged in the reality of collaborative production and practice, which had grown out of their attempts to create a demand for theatre in a context where there had previously been minimal demand for it.

Gezi was not just a protest that arose from mere coincidence, but was a genuine breaking point, the result of a tour de force in which people *literally* blocked both the destruction of Gezi Park and those carrying it out.[1] Those who shared the Gezi

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experience or observed the action closely were aware of the fact that capitalism cracked and was challenged for a moment, and this opened a hopeful space beyond the here and now of the current political predicament. The actions realized 'in time divorced from recorded time' were the trigger for mythical time breaking unholy time, i.e. 'they created a beginning, an event', and thus formed a 'history' or a series of significant events.[2] I had absolutely expected the language created in Gezi to have an impact on the stage: that the phenomenon would produce a symbolic language of its own which would come to fruition through the unfolding of events. In this context, it is necessary to point out that I characterize what happened in Gezi as a real event and propose the characteristics of its collectivist nature as the first such occurrence in modern Turkey, an event which must be considered a critical incident in the history of the creation of dramatic events in this country. I must admit that I had expected a more committed transfer of the experience of Gezi through better considered and produced plays than the speedily written ones that were performed during the protests. These did not attract as much attention as the performance of the Standing Man, Erdem Gündüz. Although some focused and engaging plays have been written and staged since 2013, the spirit of the time was quickly crushed, authoritarian norms prevailed and the undiluted experience I had expected has not come about.[3] Nonetheless, it can be considered that making theatre under the production conditions prevailing in Turkey, as outlined above, has something of the miraculous about it.

NOTES

1 See, for further information, Constanze Letsch, 'Turkey Protests Spread after Violence in Istanbul over Park Demolition', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2013, at www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/istanbul-protesters-violent-clashes-police, accessed 22 February 2019.

2 Mircea Eliade, *Dinler Tarihine Giriş* (Istanbul: Kabalcı Publishing House, 2003), p. 380.

3 I am currently working on an article exploring the plays written during and after the Gezi Movement, forthcoming in 2020.

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