

## TURKISH DRAMA – 20th Century

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A most remarkable development in the Turkish arts has been the explosion of theatrical activity and the strides made in dramatic writing. Very few cities in the world have a broader spectrum of plays or superior performances presented than Istanbul. In 1960, Istanbul audiences had a choice of fewer than ten plays on any given day, but of more than thirty by the end of the decade; the increase in Ankara in the same period was from five to about twenty. In the second half of the twentieth century, an amazing diversity of foreign plays was including Hamlet (four separate productions), My Fair Lady, Marat / Sade, South Pacific, Antigone, French vaudevilles, The Caretaker, The Odd Couple, Tobacco Road, The Diary of a Madman, Mother Courage, The Miser, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Fiddler on the Roof, The Physicists, and Oh Dad, Poor Dad. The Turkish theater fared well not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of the quality of production and performance: many observers, comparing Turkish versions to their European, British, and American originals or counterparts, testified that Turkish theaters often did just as well and sometimes better.

The spectrum of dramatic literature by Turkish playwrights is now impressively broad: from well-made family melodramas to Brechtian Works such as Sermet Çağan's Ayak Bacak Fabrikası (The Orthopedic Factory) and Haldun Taner's Keşanlı Ali Destanı (The Ballad of Ali of Keshan, 1970); from light comedies to Güngör Dilmen's scathing drama of innocent people brutalized by capitalism and imperialism; from striking village plays by Cahit Atay and Necati Cumalı to an Albee-like black comedy by Melih Cevdet Anday; from Aziz Nesin's modernized version of Karagöz, the traditional shadow play, to Refik Erduran's Shakespearean tragedy about Justinian the Great; from a musical drama by Turgut Özakman and Bülent Arel depicting city youth to A. Turan Oflazoğlu's towering tragedy in verse about the Ottoman Sultan İbrahim "the Mad"; from Orhan Kemal's prison drama to Orhan Asena's dramatizations of history and legends.

A remarkable talent emerged in the closing decades of the twentieth century—Memet Baydur (1951–2001), brought new visions and vitality to playwriting with imaginative innovations. His premature death deprived the Turkish theater of stimulating works that might have found their way into many theatrical capitals abroad as well.

The foremost pioneer of the study of the history of modern Turkish theater, Metin And, devised an encompassing typology in his books A History of Theater and Popular Entertainment in Turkey and 50 Yılın Türk Tiyatrosu (The Turkish Theater of the Past Fifty Years): plays about idealistic heroes, social reformers, political leaders battling against corruption, political tyranny and social injustice; plays depending largely on character portrayal; plays on dreams, memory, and psychoanalytical themes; plays depicting women's and artists' problems; plays about the eternal triangle and marital problems in general; plays on social injustice, bureaucracy, urban-rural conflicts; detective plays, murder mysteries, suspense thrillers; family dramas, including those about the generation gap; verse melodramas; village dramas and plays about life in shantytowns; plays about the previous civilizations of Anatolia; plays about the maladjusted; dramas dealing with abstract concepts and hypothetical situations; light comedies and vaudevilles; satires of traditional values and current life; the play-within-a-play; modernizations of shadow plays and *comedia dell'arte*; plotless plays; dramas based on folk legends and Turkish history; expressionistic plays; sentimental dramas; epic theater; cabaret theater; plays based on Greek tragedy; theater of the absurd and musical drama.

Another major scholar-critic, Sevda Şener, has observed the following about aspects of Turkish playwriting:

The most conspicuous achievement of contemporary Turkish dramatic writing and production has been the conscious effort to create original native drama by making use of the formal and stylistic elements of traditional spectacular plays in a way to satisfy modern taste and contemporary intellectual needs. The main challenge to such an attempt is to preserve critical sensitivity and to discriminate between the easy attraction of the spectacular and the pleasure of witnessing the true combination of form and content.

From the middle of the twentieth century on, according to Dikmen Gürün, a notable theater critic, “the [Turkish] playwrights’ quest was focused on the issues of rural migration, feudal social order and life in the slums . . . [T]he system was questioned in all its aspects. In later years, influenced by the current political theater in Europe, the Turkish playwrights began to deal with the issue in a similar form and content. They employed the episodic form of epic and merged it with the traditional Turkish norms.”

Theater in Turkey, all its shortcomings and weaknesses aside, can still legitimately boast of remarkable achievements that have enabled it to move far ahead of theater not only in all developing countries, but also in many advanced countries that have a longer theatrical tradition and substantially greater resources. The record of Turkish dramatic arts is, by any objective criterion, impressive.

Talat S. Halman, *A Millennium of Turkish Literature: A Concise History*, ed. Jayne L. Warner, rev. ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011). First edition published by Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2008.