

TURKIC DRAMA

The period from 1859 to 1923 marked the emergence and vigorous evolution of dramatic writing in Turkish. İbrahim Şinasi, poet, author, and translator, wrote the first Turkish play, *Şair Evlenmesi* (The Wedding of a Poet; 1860). A few earlier texts by others are probably not original plays, but translations or adaptations from the French. A play that is possibly an original, *Vakaayi-i Acibe ve Havadis-i Kefşger Ahmed* (The Strange Adventures of Ahmed the Cobbler), presumably written in the first half of the nineteenth century by an unidentified author, lacks unassailable authenticity. Şinasi's play, *Şair Evlenmesi*, which was commissioned by the imperial court, is thoroughly Turkish in style, characterizations, dialogue, and dramatic devices. Nüvit Özdoğru, a well-known man of the theater and translator, summarized the play's basic features:

A one-act farce, it ridicules the custom of arranged marriages. This was a very advanced

idea for the Turkey of that period. The play also reveals the corruption of some Muslim priests who did business by accepting bribes and suggests that people should not blindly follow the priests' teachings. The characters, more types than real persons, spoke in the vernacular of the day. With its broad humor and swift development of theme, the play is not altogether removed from *Karagöz* or *Ortaoyunu*. The form, diction, and the satirical content of the play set the pattern for other playwrights to follow.

With his six plays, Namık Kemal spurred interest in the legitimate stage and dramatic writing. His *Vatan yahut Silistre* (Fatherland or Silistria) is a patriotic play based on an actual event. When it was premiered on April 1, 1873, it aroused enthusiasm and nationalistic excitement. His other plays range in topic from an episode of early Turkic history, to the suffering caused by forced marriages to rebellion against tyranny to tragedy in an Indian palace to moral turpitude.

After İbrahim Şinasi's pioneering work, Ahmet Vefik Pasha (1828-91) and Âli Bey (1844-99) offered Molière adaptations; Ali Haydar (1836-1914) and Şemseddin Sami dramatized myths and legends; and Ahmet Mithat Efendi, following in Şinasi's footsteps, turned out many plays exposing the folly of antiquated social mores. These playwrights were acutely aware of their functions to educate the public, introduce progressive ideas, criticize social and political institutions, and satirize the types who were responsible for backwardness—for example, the religious fanatic, the bureaucrat, and the rabid conservative.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century, however, were marked by censorship and suppression of works considered dangerous to the sultan and his regime. Plays dealing with revolutionary topics such as strikes, overthrow of government, and uprisings, were banned. The mere use of such terms as freedom, anarchy, dynamite, constitution, and equality could lead to the prosecution of authors and directors.

Under this censorship, innocuous light comedies flourished. Popular taste, too, was a major factor. Molière dominated the scene in nineteenth-century Turkey. Most of his plays were translated or adapted and served as models for scores of new plays by Turkish writers. Molière's principal characters found their counterparts in authentic Ottoman types. The misers, the misanthropes, and the hypochondriacs—Molière's anti-heroes—became the butt of Turkish satire. The comedy of manners and satirical plays exposing foibles and frailties reached popularity that was to become pervasive and perennial. Light comedies were characterized by slapstick, clowning, malentendu, horseplay, practical jokes, sight gags, fleeing, infidelity, dialects and accents.

The earliest specimens of European-style tragedy written by Turkish playwrights made their appearance in the 1860s. The evolution of the genre was to remain under the influence of Racine, Corneille, Shakespeare, and others. Greek tragedy seems to have wielded very little, if any, influence during the last decades of the Ottoman state. But Elizabethan and French tragedy offered nineteenth-century Ottoman playwrights effective models that were assiduously studied and, in some cases, partially plagiarized.

Abdülhak Hâmit Tarhan, one of the dominant figures of Turkish poetry and literary Europeanization, owes much of his fame to the plays he wrote between 1872 and 1918. His early plays were melodramas steeped in sentimentality. Of his twelve tragedies, ten are in classical or syllabic verse either in full or in part. Rhymes and the metric structure give the diction of these plays a forced and contrived quality. The plots are based on intrigue,

impossible loves, heroism—all depicted in romantic terms—and often set in cultures and periods unrelated to the Turkish experience: Assyrian, Arab, Mongolian, Greek, Macedonian, and so on.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were action packed for Ottoman Turkey—domestic strife, independence struggles, limited wars, emergence of a new constitutional

regime, party politics, World War I, the Dardanelles campaign, occupations, national liberation. In culture, the period was one of quest, ideological discords, Europeanization versus Islamic traditions. Literature served as the voice of conflicting ideas and ventures.

The Second Constitutional Period, inaugurated in 1908, ushered in freedoms that nurtured literary explorations. While the Servet-i Fünun movement stood on its laurels, the Fecr-i Ati group introduced new aesthetic principles based mainly on individualism and introspection. The members revealed Parnassian, symbolist, and Impressionist influences.

Other notable groups included the Nev Yunaniler (Neo-Graecians) poets and novelists, principally Yahya Kemal Beyath (1884-1958) and Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, who incorporated into their work many themes and aesthetic values from the Greek and, to a lesser extent, Roman traditions. Emerging as an alternative and in opposition to the Nev Yunaniler, another group embraced the heritage of the entire Mediterranean basin and sought to create a synthesis of the West and the East. They called themselves Nayiler, literally “Reed-Flute Players,” but figuratively “Virtuosos of Music.” Making melodiousness a prime creative asset, they stressed the ideal of “inner harmony” through Yahya Kemal Beyath’s influence.

The closing decades of the Ottoman state witnessed an abundance of translations and adaptations from Europe. This period was also the heyday of polemics and criticism. With great energy, the stage was set for the revolutions that the young Republic of Turkey would launch.

20th CENTURY

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 Yıllık 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.