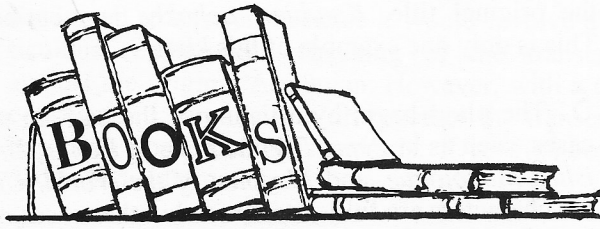


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A QUARTERLY VOL. XLII SPRING 2001 No. 166 \$24.00 A YEAR \$7.00 AN ISSUE





AN IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENT

by Rubina Perroomian

MODERN ARMENIAN DRAMA—AN ANTHOLOGY.
Edited by Nishan Parlakian and S. Peter Cowe. New
York, Columbia University Press, 2001. 447 pp.

The book under discussion today presents a selection of seven Armenian plays in English translation; that is the main corpus of this anthology. Each play has a different translator and is preceded by a brief biography of the playwright and a discussion of his works mostly by the same translator.

The book begins with a preface by the editors explaining the principles and criteria that led to the selection of these particular plays and the time period they span. It provides information about the translation process, the system of transliteration, and the overall purpose of embarking on such an extensive project. Acknowledgments are made here.

The introduction briefly discusses the history of Armenian drama. The main concentration, however, is on the discussion of the plays that will follow; therefore, the seven subheadings, each devoted to one playwright, actually, include not the biography of that author but an analysis of the play, its sociopolitical background, and its principal characters. The play is viewed in comparison with other works of the same author as well as against the backdrop of specific works of international dramaturgy whose influence the play bears. The introduction also provides further explanation on the mission of this enterprise. The volume ends with Notes on Contributors and a Table of Transliteration.

This is a bird's eye view of the book in terms of physical organization and structure. By raising some questions and discussing some points, I intend to further illuminate this important endeavor and provide you with a critical view of it as well.

1. The first sentence of the preface is an important explanation right at the beginning, well put and nec-

essary. It limits the broad spectrum of meaning the title suggests, *Modern Armenian Drama*, denoting an overall category of this literary genre in Armenian literature no matter what the medium of expression, the language. This anthology, on the other hand, understands a selection of modern plays originally composed in Armenian, and, as the explanation goes, "works in other languages written by playwrights of Armenian descent" are excluded.

2. It may not be appropriate to try to find a purpose in a literary expression or a work of art, as this anthology represents as a whole. We are all familiar with the theory of intentional fallacy by Wimsatt and Beardsley. But here since the editors themselves lay out their objectives, it behooves them in a critical discussion to examine and evaluate the accomplishment. "One of the goals behind the present endeavor," the preface indicates, "has been to make available for performance in English representative plays in the Armenian repertoire that should appeal to theatrical groups of all levels." This statement should be the vantage point whence to view and judge this anthology.

3. While we are in the midst of discussing the purpose or objectives of this work, let us also dwell upon an important illustrative point that the editors make about the mission or the goal of this anthology. As suggested in the introduction, the goal is obviously not "to convey a fully comprehensive impression of the vast range and diversity of plays composed in Armenian" during the 121-year period (1871-1992) the anthology covers. That would have been an impossible task. Apparently, the main thrust, successfully accomplished by the selection and translation of these plays, is to provide a schematic view of the evolution in the Armenian theatrical art and dramaturgy and to underline their main characteristics and major themes. The introduction lays them out and leaves to the reader to follow them through the anthology of plays presented in chronological order.

4. The introduction is short, 24 pages only, but to me an important component of the book. It starts with a brief overview of the history of Armenian drama beginning from the 2nd century B.C. and theatrical activities in Artashat and Tigranakert. (Parenthetically, it is inspiring to see such evidence of high culture and level of civilization in Armenian courts 2200 years ago.) But this is the picture in pre-Christian Armenia with different standards, moral values, and influences. The Christian era is characterized by absolute devotion to religion and the Church as the lifeline

outside of which other cultural activities were scolded. A brief discussion of the popular theatre in the introduction, recitations and varied bard performances, fill the gap of the absence of theatrical activities until the second half of the 17th century. The fact remains, however, that dramatic texts are non-existent in this period, and it is not only Christian scholasticism that hindered this specific cultural expression, but also the dark ages of Armenian social, economic, political, and cultural history that the Ottoman and Persian domination brought about.

I would have liked to see the first two-and-a-half pages of this introduction expanded further and this valuable analysis of the history of Armenian drama treated with a more multidimensional approach. The rest of the 24 pages, as was mentioned before, are dedicated to the analysis of the plays. Since each play is accompanied with biographical notes on the playwright and some explanations about the play itself, repetition is inevitable, except when the editors themselves have penned the biographies (as in the case of Perch Zeytuntsyan and Anahit Aghasarian.) On one occasion, for example, there is even a discrepancy in translation: Hagop Baronian's *Arevelian atamnabuizh* is rendered *Eastern Dentist* in the introduction and *Oriental Dentist* in the biography. In my opinion "oriental" would have been a better choice, although it has changed connotation in American reality to mean the Asian population. In other cases the biography complements information that is lacking in the introduction and vice-versa, like in the discussion of Gabriel Sundukian's works, we come across the play titled *Ruined Family*, and it is in the biography that

the original title, *Kanduats ochakhe* is mentioned. This is only one example of this kind.

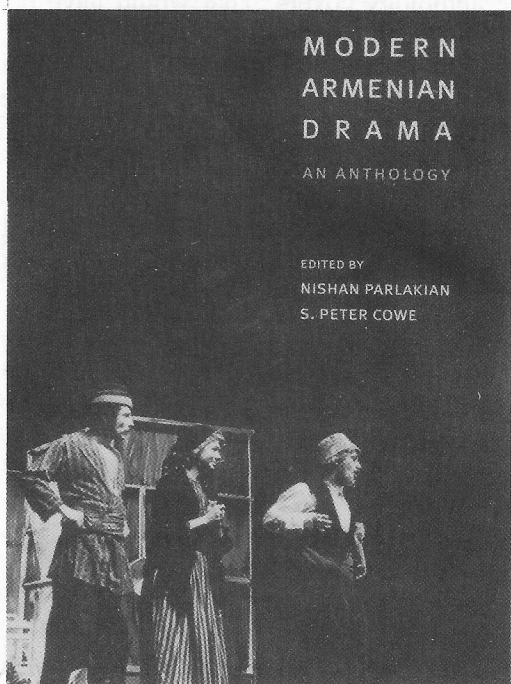
5. The plays begin by a listing of the cast. In some cases, such as in *Pepo*, *For the Sake of Honor*, *Unfinished Monologue*, and *Madmen of the World, Unite!* the characters are fully described. In other cases, such as in *Honorable Beggars*, *Ancient Gods*, and *Nazar the Brave*, the physical characteristics are described within the play as the actors are introduced. I believe this difference in the format comes from the original, but since the editors have taken upon themselves the task of facilitating stage production, uniformity in format, and especially introducing the cast and laying out their physical characteristics right at the beginning would have been preferable.

6. I do not want to spend time on the biographies of the playwrights that have come before the play, but let me point out two things in these biographies that bothered me.

a. In Hagop Baronian's biography by Bedros Norehad, one of his works, *Hoshosi tseradedr* is translated as "Notes on this and that" (p. 63). *Hoshos* is a pejorative name, meaning small-minded or light-headed, that Eastern Armenians used to call Western Armenians and is taken from the word *hos* (meaning here) that Western Armenians use for the Eastern Armenian *aystegh*. *Tseradedr* means journal.

b. Discussing the circumstances that gave birth to Lewon Shant's *Inkats berdi ishkanuhin* [The princess of a fallen castle], Anne T. Vardanian points to Shant's deep disillusion "with the fall of the Armenian Republic as a result of internal discord" (p. 187). This kind of interpretation for a complex historical event such as the Sovietization of Armenia is out of place to say the least (it is not only simplistic but preposterous).

7. The challenge of rendering into English such a wide diversity of linguistic levels not only from one play to another, but also the dialectal twists, the slang, the sophisticated literary expressions within one play, is a serious one. Have the translators been able to keep with the original and exhibit all these nuances and, at the same time, sound idiomatically correct, for the sake of presenting a play that can be staged today and understood by the audience? And since this task is almost impossible, how much liberty have the translators allowed themselves to make the play palatable to today's audience and to remain faithful to the original spirit? These are tough questions, and I do



not intend to answer, because it would involve a meticulous reading and checking of the translation against the original Armenian. However, with a clear conscience I can say that all together the translation has been done to high standards: it runs smoothly, and sounds idiomatic.

Translating Gabriel Sundukian's *Pepo* is not an easy task, although the example was set long ago. *Pepo* was performed in Georgian, Russian, and Azerbaijani languages. It was also translated into French. Ervant D. Megerditchian has done a great job. Sundukian's genius prevails. The spirit of the time is genuinely conveyed. The English version closely reflects the original idiom, except in a few cases when the translator has gone overboard in trying to make it sound authentically English. One example is: "Impossible, Pepo! If every Tom, Dick, and Harry came in and said I owe them money, ten million rubles—if I had them—wouldn't last me one day." (This is Arutin talking, and Tom, Dick, and Harry sound outlandish among Kekel, Gaguli, and Giko).

Madmen of the World, Unite!, the last piece in this volume, was the first one I read. I was interested to read a play that was written and performed seven years ago and I had not heard about it. But more than that, I wanted to see how successful, in general, English versions of Armenian plays can be and my being unfamiliar with this particular piece in the book would make the piece a good testing ground for this inquiry. The title was catchy, reminiscent of the famous communist slogan, "Workers of the world, unite." It turned out that the qualifier used in the title is not just a figurative form of speech or an allegorical reference. The madhouse is real and is the locus of the main events occurring in the play. In fact, as the protagonist, a madman, or a presumed madman asserts, "This is the only place where the real's really real" (p.420).

When reading the play, I placed myself in the seat of an Armenian or a non-Armenian English speaker in a theatre-house watching an exotic play with a topic adopted from the political events occurring in a far away country, a small corner of the former Soviet Empire. There are, of course, numerous political insinuations, allusions to certain political players of the time in Armenia, some of which are clearly identifiable, others more ambiguous, rather, a mixture of several personalities. There are allusions to characters and events in international drama, especially Shakespeare's works, even passages highly reminiscent of this and that particular play. There are also references

to or situations molded after episodes and passages in Armenian literature, folklore, epic stories, and mythology. And these are hard to grasp for an average viewer and someone unfamiliar with the sociopolitical situation in the first years of Armenian independence after the collapse of Soviet Union. However, even with that handicap, the viewer is up for an elevating and amusing experience. This play is endowed with universal merits and treats issues of universal concern despite its purely Armenian setting. And the perfect translation, almost sounding like authentic English writing, bolsters the fact.

The piece basically makes fun of the political parties in competition during some presidential election in Armenia. The author lays bare the crooked means, perfidy and stealth the party leaders use to reach their goal. Out of the five political parties involved in that dirty race only the Communist party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation are mentioned by name, and the all-women party in all likelihood is Shamiram. Why are only the two named? I am not sure. The character representing the Communist party is better developed and gives evidence to the demise of the Communist ideology. The presence of the representative of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation is not substantiated.

I can go on and talk about each piece, but examples suffice to indicate the weight of this serious endeavor. This anthology is a very important and timely addition to the history of Armenian drama, a valuable introduction of this genre to the Western world, and an achievement in the practical purpose it pursues.