

The Quest for Identity in Turkish Theater Amidst Western Influences

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Abstract

The contemporary landscape of Turkish theater, particularly in Istanbul, is characterized by vibrancy; however, it has not yet achieved a fully realized national identity. The innovative productions frequently draw upon Western theater traditions, resulting in a challenge for the establishment of an original theatrical ethos. This predicament can be attributed to the Republic's brief century-long history, which has similarly rendered modern theater a nascent concept. The Republic's reform trajectory, which has a pronounced orientation towards the West, has prioritized theater as a vehicle for cultural enlightenment. Instead of merely mirroring contemporary society, the early Republic's objective to forge a transcendent cultural identity suppressed artistic creativity. The imposition of Western paradigms often overshadowed the celebration of the inherent richness found in traditional Turkish theater. Subsequent sections will illustrate how the style of theater evolved during the Westernization movements of the 19th century within the Ottoman Empire, during which traditional forms were frequently marginalized.

Keywords: Turkish Theatre, Ottoman Theatre, Westernization

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Introduction

This study aims to investigate the quest for theatrical innovation in Turkey before and after the Republic, through a detailed analysis of the era's shifting dynamics. It will explore the reasons behind the failure to cultivate a national identity in modern theater, primarily attributed to the overshadowing influence of Western culture. Rather than framing national theater in terms of nationalism or the predominant values of a given populace, this examination assesses it as a detrimental factor impeding the transmission of contemporary, original, and distinct theatrical concepts that transcend divisions of religion, language, or ethnicity. Furthermore, the inability to establish a popular theater is examined in the context of historical developments.

The historical oscillations between periods of artistic flourishing and stagnation are inherently linked to broader social movements. Therefore, significant socio-political events have been categorized into specific periods for this study: the Tanzimat Edict of 1839, the Constitutional Monarchy of 1908, the Republic's establishment in 1923, the Single-Party Era of the 1940s, the Multi-Party Period of the 1950s, constitutional amendments following the military coup of May 27, 1960, the 1971 Military Memorandum, the 1980 coup, the Turgut Özal administration, and the rising prominence of the AK Party beginning in 2002. Additionally, the adverse effects of urban relocations, shifts in societal entertainment paradigms, economic challenges, natural disasters such as earthquakes, and social phenomena including migration have also been analyzed for their influence on theatrical evolution.

Stages of Change in Turkish History

Cultural transformation in Turkish history can be divided into four primary stages. The initial stage pertains to the Turks' conversion to Islam, followed by their settlement in Anatolia, wherein they engaged with preceding and contemporaneous civilizations. The third stage is marked by the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and its governance over diverse religious and ethnic groups, fostering significant cultural exchange. The final stage encapsulates the desire for Westernization and the ensuing initiatives aimed in that direction (And, 1972). Furthermore, "substantial remnants of the Turks' ancestral homeland in Central Asia and shamanistic beliefs are discernible in the culture of the Anatolian Turks" (And, 1983). The arrival of the Turks in Anatolia in 1071 coincided with their adoption of Islam. According to Metin And, the dramatic arts among the Anatolian Turks emerged from five crucial factors: geographical context, lineage, imperial dynamics, Islam, and the influence of Westernization. Although the prominence of the Turkish language during the Seljuk period (10th-11th centuries) is underscored, it is noted that Islamic culture perceives theater as a barrier between the creator and the creation, with the primacy of a singular divine creator superseding human creative expression. This ideological framework has contributed to the stagnation of theater in the Western sense. The Ottoman Empire, founded in Anatolia in 1299, witnessed the predominant development of traditional theater forms. The Karagöz shadow play, grounded in the philosophy that divine creation manifests through human representation, emerged as a popular entertainment genre from the 17th century onward. Additionally, Meddah performances, renowned storytelling traditions devoid of written scripts, thrived in coffeehouses—social venues of the period—by employing techniques such as imitation and characterization, akin to modern stand-up comedy. Another facet of traditional Turkish theater, Ortaoyunu, involves structured improvisation and is performed sans text. In rural contexts, village spectacle plays rooted in specific rituals are observed, although these performances lack dramatic narratives and are primarily presented on special occasions. The period of Ottoman territorial expansion

following the conquest of Istanbul in 1453 and concluding with the Treaty of Zitvatorok in 1606 was pivotal for intercultural interactions.

The Tanzimat Era and Westernization in the Ottoman Empire

The Tanzimat Era marks the commencement of Westernization within the Ottoman Empire, initiated by the Tanzimat Edict of 1839. Influenced by the 1789 French Revolution, this edict aimed to safeguard citizens' lives and possessions, provide equitable rights to minorities irrespective of religious, linguistic, or ethnic affiliations, reassess tax and military duties, and facilitate reforms within the legal and educational domains (And, 1972). The Tanzimat period was also crucial for theater, as the increased construction of theatrical venues catalyzed a novel concept of theater. However, while Western theater flourished, traditional forms began to decline. Prior to the Tanzimat Era, traditional Turkish theater—such as the Ortaoyunu—was performed in public spaces, not requiring formal stages or auditoriums. This improvisational form of theater was devoid of scripts. Yet, as the Ottoman Empire began its westernization journey during the Tanzimat, it gradually adopted scripted performances. The establishment of new theater buildings facilitated the influx of foreign communities in Istanbul, giving rise to unique theatrical experiences, including bilingual performances.

Contemporary historians and researchers assert that the last recognizable adaptations of Ortaoyunu solidified in the 19th century, coinciding with the rise of Western-style theater during this period. This historical convergence has been deemed an unfortunate hindrance to the progression of traditional Turkish theater, as it stagnated during a time of potential creativity (Sevengil, 2015). Religious minorities, including Jews, Greeks, and Armenians, actively contributed to theatrical life in Turkey, exemplifying a vibrant European lifestyle. Jews fleeing persecution in Portugal and Spain were instrumental in pioneering puppet theater during the 15th and 16th centuries, making significant contributions to the evolution of traditional theater (And, 1972). It is noteworthy that early Turkish theatrical productions were heavily influenced by Greek artists (And, 1983). The contributions of Armenians, both in Istanbul and other regions of Turkey, will also be discussed. The rights accorded to minorities during the Tanzimat period enhanced the visibility of their theatrical cultures. Many Armenian artists were pivotal in establishing theater troupes in Istanbul, while records indicate the emergence of the first Muslim male actor on stage in 1847 (And, 1972). Although some play texts were purportedly composed prior to the Tanzimat, historians recognize Şinasi's "Şair Evlenmesi," written in a Western style in 1860, as the first significant play. The 1872 production of "Vatan Yahut Silistre," which resonated with nationalist sentiments, prompted public demonstrations fueled by a renewed passion for homeland advocacy in the wake of military defeats. The political ramifications of theater were underscored by the exile of the playwright, Namık Kemal. As Turkish theater transitioned to scripted forms, the prominent artist and troupe director Güllü Agop secured exclusive rights to perform scripted theater from the state. In response, other troupe leaders, concerned about employment prospects, exploited loopholes in Agop's privileges to establish the tülüt theater trend, which retained elements of traditional Turkish performance. This genre, originating in İctepise, became a defining characteristic of theatrical practice during this period. Moreover, Güllü Agop's lack of exclusive rights over musical productions allowed operas, operettas, vaudevilles, and variety performances to flourish. Concurrently, adaptations of Western theater—particularly those based on Molière—were staged by Tomas Fasülyeciyan's company in Bursa, setting a precedent for Western adaptations that would dominate the early Republic's theatrical landscape. Güllü Agop's troupe performed their select works at the Gedikpaşa Theatre, which opened in 1868 as the Ottoman Theatre. Following the expiration of the lease in 1880, Ahmet Fehim's troupe, one of the few Muslim

actors at the time, took to the stage. However, the addition of the play "Çerkes Özdenleri" to their repertoire led to its prohibition on grounds of inciting Circassian independence. The playwright, Ahmet Mithat, was subsequently arrested, and Gedikpaşa Theatre was demolished overnight by palace orders. This theater stands as the first to be dismantled for political reasons, although it was unfortunately not an isolated incident. The Tanzimat Period, which created a relatively free environment in the Ottoman Empire, ended in 1876. Thus, the visibility of theater diminished, becoming more concentrated within the palace, and while artists produced under the patronage of the palace, they became victims of an intense censorship policy, as seen above.

Constitutional Period

The evolution of theater in Turkey from the Tanzimat Period to the Republican Era reflects a complex interplay of cultural reforms, societal changes, and political contexts. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ottoman Empire's shifts brought both newfound freedoms and restrictions for artists. The end of the Tanzimat Period in 1876 marked a significant turn, as theater became more centralized within palace patronage and was subjected to intense censorship. With the establishment of the Constitutional Era in 1908, an expanding freedom allowed for the greater involvement of women in the arts, which was a progressive step in Turkish society. However, incidents like the removal of Afife Jale from the stage in 1920 highlight the continuing tensions surrounding theatrical expression and gender roles during that time.

Republican Era

The Republican Era in Turkey marked a significant cultural transformation, driven by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's vision for a modern, secular nation. Atatürk implemented reforms that included not only political and educational changes but also profound shifts in cultural expression, particularly in the realm of the arts and theater. The establishment of the People's Houses aimed to foster a cultural identity aligned with Western ideals and to promote the tenets of the new Republic. By focusing on theater as a vehicle for reform, these institutions encouraged artistic expression while serving an educational purpose—disseminating the Republic's ideals through dramatic narratives. The involvement of Atatürk himself in shaping theatrical productions underlined the importance placed on theater as a means of influencing public perception and depicting a modern image of Turkish society, especially regarding the representation of women. The transition from the Darülbeydi to the State Theatre represents a continuity in efforts to professionalize Turkish theater while incorporating Western influences. Ertuğrul Muhsin's leadership was crucial in this evolution; he sought to cultivate a serious theater culture by introducing significant Western works and focusing on local narratives. The early involvement of women in theater was groundbreaking, as it challenged prevailing norms and played a crucial role in the burgeoning discourse on gender within the cultural landscape. However, the cultural landscape was not without its tensions, as illustrated by the pressures faced by Armenian actors and the imposition of new standards on the artistic community. Despite these challenges, the overall trend of the Republican Era showcased a burgeoning national identity through the arts, reflecting a blend of tradition and modernity that would influence subsequent generations of Turkish artists and playwrights. As theater continued to develop through institutions like the Ankara State Theatre, it became a space not just for entertainment, but also for the exploration of national identity and the complexities of social change in a rapidly evolving society. The impact of Atatürk's reforms reverberated through cultural expressions, shaping the trajectory of Turkish theater and artistic production

for decades to come. The founding of the Republic in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk brought about sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing Turkey, including significant cultural efforts that encouraged the development of a national theater reflective of Western values. Institutions like the People's Houses played crucial roles in this cultural revolution, aiming to disseminate the ideological messages of the Republic through theater.

1950's

Muhsin Ertuğrul's leadership at Darübedayi and later the State Theatre was instrumental in shaping Turkish theatrical practices along Western lines, incorporating modern playwrights and works from the canon of Western literature. The evolution into the 1950s saw further developments, where young artists sought to innovate beyond imitation and to create a unique Turkish theater that honored its traditional roots while engaging contemporary themes. The year 1951 was also significant in the Westernization of Turkish Theater. The entertainment world of the city of Istanbul has shifted from the densely populated area of Direklerarası, known for its traditional amusements, theaters, and operettas, to Beyoğlu. Yapı Kredi Bank also converted the upper floor of a mansion in Beyoğlu, which had long hosted circuses and variety shows, into a theater hall. The general artistic director of Küçük Sahne, which opened on April 3, 1951, with the play "Of Mice and Men," was again Muhsin Ertuğrul. Adopting the Western realism and naturalism of the period, Küçük Sahne, despite staging avant-garde plays like *Waiting for Godot* and formal experiments featuring a female Hamlet, still reflects the mimicry of Western Theater in these experiments. It stands out with its Western imitation in both play selection and acting style. After studying at Yale University in the U.S. and returning to his country, Haldun Dormen criticized the imitation and rote-based theater understanding of Küçük Sahne (Saban, 2022). Dormen also participated in the amateur formation called Cep Tiyatrosu in search of a younger theater. Cep Tiyatrosu, which also provides theater education, adopts a Stanislavski-based method acting approach. Next to Küçük Sahne, Galatasaray High School, which trains students with a Francophone educational philosophy, and Robert College, based on the U.S. model, also attempt to develop an alternative to the period's central theater understanding. Although the selected plays are still examples from the West, more contemporary texts and directorial approaches are experimented with. During the same period, the Youth Theatre, which is Turkey's first university theatre, is established at Istanbul Technical University, and Turkish Theatre participates in the Erlangen Festival abroad for the first time. Although their success at this festival was not overlooked, the reason for not awarding the first prize was cited as their failure to perform a local play. The troupe participates in the same festival the following year, this time with a local play. On the other hand, by inviting university theaters to the theater festival he started in Istanbul, he continues the city's colorful and multicultural tradition. The 13 young people who left the Istanbul Technical University Theater to establish Genç Oyuncular aimed for Turkish Theater to break away from Western imitation and reach the idea of an authentic theater. This step is one of the most important pursuits in creating a national theater. The first views on this subject were introduced by İsmayil Hakkı Baltacıoğlu during the Constitutional Era with the concept of Öz Tiyatro. Baltacıoğlu aimed to strip theater of additional elements such as decor, costumes, and props, reducing it to its essence, and instead of a proscenium stage, he sought to establish every space as a performance area, as was customary in traditional theater. Sevda Şener summarizes Baltacıoğlu's theater philosophy as follows: "A theater play can be performed in any area without a specific stage elevation in a specific place. Our traditional theater is an example of this. The curtain is a product of the theatrical understanding aimed at separating the play from reality, and the stage from the audience. Theater should not become detached from the people and life, just as it was in the beginning. Set design, costumes, and makeup are methods resorted to by those who do

not believe in the imaginative power of art...It is also incorrect to consider the written text indispensable in theater. The written text is a starting point. (Şener, 2011) At that time, although they were not aware of İsmayil Hakkı Baltacıoğlu's thoughts, the Young Players also set out with the same impulse. Another goal of the Genç Oyuncular is to achieve the concept of People's Theatre. To take theater outside the center located in Beyoğlu, they perform plays in schools, hospitals, and minority associations, and, as in the example of Avignon, they organize Turkey's first cultural arts festival in a summer resort town (Alpöge, 2007). Having a life of only six seasons, Genç Oyuncular, were inspired by traditional theater as a source of inspiration. Genco Erkal summarized, this goal: "It was considered that a contemporary theater could be created based on our own traditional theater." The pursuit was to capture the essence that gives rise to traditional theater and reflect today's world through that essence."(Alpöge, 2007) Towards the end of the multi-party period, censorship was imposed on media organizations, and theater also suffers from this censorship and social pressure. However, the master of comedy Muammer Karaca expands the style of political satire in the private theater he established. Plays like Cibali Karakolu and Etnan Bey Duymasın are examples of this. Due to Karaca's closeness to the ruling party, the Prime Minister of the time, Adnan Menderes, also watches the plays. Thus, the government tries to create an image of a tolerant environment. However, this period is short-lived, and a decision is made to impose restrictions on political satire in theater (Saban, 2022).

1960/1971

The period from May 27, 1960, to March 12, 1971, was pivotal in the development of Turkish theater, reflecting the broader socio-political changes happening in Turkey. As democracy began to take root, a rich tapestry of theatrical experimentation emerged, signaling a departure from traditional performances toward innovative forms that drew on local narratives and contemporary themes. Haldun Dormen's establishment of the Dormen Theater marked a significant transition in Turkish theater. By rejecting conventional methods, including the use of a prompter, the theater brought a newfound dynamism and naturalness to performances. Additionally, introducing the first Western musical, "Street Girl Irma," signified an embrace of varied theatrical influences, opening the door for future productions. Gülriz Sururi and Engin Cezzar, who left Dormen's company, pioneered the incorporation of local plays into their work, exemplified by "Keşanlı Ali Destanı." This play, with its portrayal of an anti-hero and a focus on local characters and settings, diverged from the more typical narratives existing at the time and established a national identity in Turkish theater. Sururi and Cezzar's efforts to present local stories injected freshness into the theatrical landscape, embracing Turkish culture in unique ways. The era also witnessed the emergence of cabaret theater with the establishment of Devekuşu Kabare by Haldun Taner, which challenged existing norms and provided a platform for innovative and critical forms of expression. Furthermore, the Ankara Art Theater became a space for revolutionary artists seeking answers to the pressing questions about the social role of theater, leading to the establishment of Genco Erkal as a leading figure in modern Turkish theater, especially with plays like "A Madman's Diary." The search for a national voice continued, as seen in the works of Ulvi Uraz, who focused on folk themes and represented everyday struggles and humor within relatable contexts. This approach drew audiences to the theater in unprecedented ways, cementing its role as a reflection of societal realities. At the same time, the influence of international theater, especially that of Brecht, introduced new theatrical techniques that sparked debate and dissent. The reception of Brecht's works, especially contrasting with more traditional narratives, exemplified the cultural tensions of the time, as established theaters often resisted the newcomers' avant-garde ideas. Overall, the 1960s to early 1970s represented a vibrant yet tumultuous chapter in Turkish theater history,

characterized by a blending of local narratives with international influences, pushing the boundaries of theatrical expression and reflecting the dynamic socio-political climate of Turkey. This period laid the groundwork for future generations of theater artists and thinkers who would continue to explore and expand the possibilities of theater in Turkish society.

1971/1980

The period from March 12, 1971, to September 12, 1980 in Turkey was marked by significant political and social turmoil, which greatly affected the cultural landscape, particularly theater. The military coup in 1971 instigated numerous changes, including increased instability and a rise in terrorist incidents, which led to a notable decline in theater audiences. Many individuals from minority communities chose to leave Turkey, further impacting audience numbers and participation in cultural activities. Additionally, the advent of television broadcasting introduced competition for live theater, drawing audiences away from traditional performances. Private theaters found it increasingly difficult to survive, leading to many closures, while state-subsidized theaters faced a loss of prestige and influence. Despite these challenges, the establishment of the Kocamustafapaşa Theater stood out as a significant development during this period. This new theater represented a shift towards neighborhood-focused performances, illustrating how theater could adapt and evolve outside traditional urban centers. It offered a fresh perspective on accessibility and community engagement, serving as a valuable example for future theatrical ventures. Ultimately, while this era was fraught with difficulties, it also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of theater within Turkish society. The evolution of theater in Turkey reflects a complex interplay of political, social, and cultural shifts. The periods marked by military coups significantly influenced the landscape of the performing arts, particularly theater, which saw a sharp decline in audiences due to political unrest, the rise of terrorism, and the advent of television. The closure of private theaters and the diminishing prestige of state-subsidized venues during these tumultuous times reflect this impact.

1980's

This situation continued with the military coup in 1980. The most significant step regarding the change in theater in the 1980s was the establishment of the theater named Ortaoyuncular by Ferhan Şensoy, who returned to Turkey after completing his education in Canada. Şensoy, who experimented with different forms in his own written plays, used elements of traditional theater, and freely blended the content of Western theater with the style of Turkish theater, employed a new language in theater and created an original approach. With the intertextual theater concept, he paid homage to Brecht, Gogol, and Karl Valentin, and experimented with cabaret theater and grotesque theater. He also implemented a type of newspaper theater project inspired by the traditional theater's meddah tradition, which continued for years. The establishment of the Ortaoyuncular theater showcased an emerging hybrid form while paying homage to both local and global theatrical traditions. The growth of alternative theater was further supported by initiatives such as the Istanbul International Theater Festival, which nurtured a vibrant arts scene that embraced diversity and experimentation. Advancements in theater education and the rise of black box theaters represented a shift toward more intimate and innovative performance spaces, allowing for greater creative exploration. Overall, this dynamic period reflects a resilient cultural landscape within Turkey, where theater acted as both a mirror and a catalyst for social change amidst ongoing political challenges. The commitment to experimentation, coupled with strong community engagement through

workshops and festivals, laid a foundation for the thriving contemporary theater scene seen today.

1990's

The resurgence in the 1990s, particularly during Turgut Özal's liberalization reforms, marked a turning point in Turkish political history. With the establishment of Kumpanya by Kerem Kurdoğlu and Naz Erayda, the concept of theater developed in black boxes instead of proscenium stages. While modern theater education was provided in institutions like Bilsak, alternative plays were produced in the theater of this institution. Playwriting workshops and festivals were organized at Galata Perform. Founded in 2005, DOT has staged many of its projects in places like galleries and garages by creating site-specific theatre. BGST, a semi-amateur community, has produced biographical theatre and documentary theatre with new narrative resources. Dostlar Theatre has also signed a documentary play called Sivas 93, documenting the Sivas massacre that occurred in 1993. Berkun Oya, who returned to Turkey after completing his education in England, stages e-plays in a theatre he created on the Bilgi University campus, sometimes in an aquarium setup, where plays are listened to through headphones, providing a different stream of consciousness by showing the first and second acts of some plays from different angles. Theatre practitioners who cannot express themselves in the artistic policies of state-subsidized theatres establish their own theatres. Kumbaracı 50, established in Beyoğlu, is the best example of this. With the increase of private universities, classmates studying at these schools form theatre groups with a shared aesthetic thought upon graduation. However, a noteworthy point is that the source of these innovations is also Western-based. Throughout the article, it is mentioned with examples that the rise of theatre is parallel to the increase of freedom steps in history. Finally, in 2013, following the attempt to demolish the opera park in the center of Istanbul and convert it into a military barracks, the public took to the streets, initiating a resistance. After the Gezi resistance and some terrorist incidents in Taksim, the Taksim area ceased to be a comfort zone for theatres, with both large and small theatres closing down and relocating. Due to the intensification of television series, theatres struggle to form teams. One-person or small-cast plays increase, the number of plays grows quantitatively, but quality cannot be ensured to the same extent. In state-subsidized theatres, self-censorship increases, and after the Covid pandemic, many middle-aged actors are retired, leading to staffing issues. On the other hand, in large venues, only a few mega musicals and star-focused productions are staged each month.

Conclusion

Throughout the article, it has been emphasized that many of the innovations in Turkish Theater were led by individuals such as Muhsin Ertuğrul, Haldun Dormen, Ferhan Şensoy, Genco Erkal, Haldun Taner, Engin Cezzar, Ali Taygun, and Berkun Oya, who were educated in the West or studied in schools in Turkey that provided Western-style education. It has been observed that Western theatrical forms such as epic theater, cabaret theater, and absurd theater have been adopted. Although there have been efforts to return to the essence, to question the essence of theater, and to blend the traditional with the modern, these efforts have not been permanent due to economic reasons, historical cycles, or teams that could not unite. As seen in the initial rejection of Haldun Taner's play "Keşanlı Ali Destanı," innovative steps have not been fully supported, and those who tried to innovate were left alone. Because theater was positioned more as an educator of society in the early Republican period and there was confusion between the concepts of national theater, folk theater, and authentic theater, the expectation for the artist to adhere strictly to the rules of the play hindered production.

Theatrical education has always been conducted using Western techniques, so the artist could not identify with their own identity and traditions; they were almost expected to create a new world. When looking at the theses and articles produced in academia, this tendency is clearly visible. Because there is a widespread belief that theater is limited to literary production, even though playwrights strive to create original works and directors attempt to innovate on stage individually, this pursuit has not been embraced within the troupes. The concepts of national theater and folk theater have been dismissed, leading to a rootless renewal. The question of what kind of theater and for whom theater exists was not asked for a long time. The state-funded theaters, which should have made the most effort in this regard, left the burden on the non-subsidized theaters, and new steps in theater were accepted to the extent that the audience bought tickets. Throughout the study, the connection between the winds of Westernization in history and social events has been addressed. The positive aspects of the Ottoman Empire's efforts for liberation with the Tanzimat Edict have been addressed. However, as And points out, "the Ottoman Empire's conscious interest in the West began with the treaties of Karlowitz (1699) and Passarowitz (1718)" (And, 1972). From this, we can infer that Westernization was not just a necessity but an obligation. Although the article mentions the contributions of this necessary change to our theater art during the periods discussed, we can conclude that it was attempted to be implemented without being fully internalized, and that the universality and innovation in theater sometimes turned into Western imitation or admiration. Instead of blending traditional theater works with the West in the natural flow of history, the complete erasure of tradition and the attempt to start with new methods created an obstacle to the creation of a unique, distinctive, and singular modern Turkish theater.

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