



# Master of Grand Theater

## Gerard Avedissian in the Cultural Landscape of Lebanon

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

**P**laywright, actor, director and producer Gerard Avedissian, 55, is one of the most sought-after artists in the Middle East. A regular guest on the Lebanese television talk show circuit and the cultural scene, Avedissian is the master of the grand theater. "People expect something big and something well done," he says, when they see his name associated with a theatrical production. In 1997, when he wrote, directed and co-produced *Ghadat Al-Camilla*—a

musical play inspired by Alexandre Dumas Jr's *The Lady of the Camellias*—some 55,000 people saw the production in one season.

Lebanese-born Avedissian was among the first few Diaspora students who, back in 1964, studied in what was Soviet Armenia. In 1969, he graduated as actor and director from the State Drama and Fine Arts Institute in Yerevan. While studying in Armenia, he played roles in several Armenian and Soviet films, among them the lead role in Arman Manarian's *Garineh* (1965), the award winning musical version of *Leblebiji Horhor Agha*, for which

Avedissian received the "Best Young Actor" award; the role of a poster boy in Henrik Malian's *Yerangiun* (1967), a social drama, for which he received the Best Supporting Actor award; and the role of a Georgian Prince in Sergei Parajanov's *Color of the Pomegranates* (1968), the delirious lyrical biography of troubadour Sayat Nova. He has also appeared in various roles in other Soviet-made films.

But Avedissian is most known for his dozen-plus original and adapted plays in Arabic, among them *Hayat wa Alam Cahfica Al-Obtia* [Life and Passion of Chafica, the Coptic Dancer]; *Ah! Ya Ghadanfar*, a loose

adaptation of the Armenian folk tale *Kach Nazar*.

"When I returned from Armenia, I immediately started to work in the Arab theater," says Avedissian. "My life was not directly involved with the Armenian community." However, in 1971, he wrote, directed and produced a major Armenian play called *Getseh Arkan* [Long Live the King] and then returned to Arab theater.

"Whenever I've done Armenian theater it has always been on a large scale," explains Avedissian. "My *Getseh Arkan* consisted of 60 actors in an outdoor theater. It represented Armenian history with songs, dance, marionettes, fire and lights. It was a very large popular piece and was staged in the playground of an Armenian school in Burj Hammoud. It played all summer long. If you don't gamble big, you don't make it big. For me grand theater is much more important than intimate or private subjects. In fact, I wouldn't do Armenian theater if the subject were not a patriotic theme. I wouldn't translate English or American plays into Armenian," he says, referring to a common trend in Lebanon.

"I believe there is a market for such big productions today," continues Avedissian, "but it has to be high quality production. When you tell Armenians this is a very costly and large production; you have to wear your best dress to come; they will. But if you tell them it is a \$10-ticket in a Burj Hammoud theater, they won't come. I understand this."

Avedissian points out another important aspect of the Armenian audience. "With Armenians you have to touch their hearts—with national themes, with big productions; it doesn't have to be a tragedy. For example, *David of Sasun* is not a tragedy, but you can tell them that perhaps this is from your past. You're not sure, but you can make a connection. When you brighten their eyes and fill their ears with music, with beautiful dresses and sets, they will bring others and feel proud that this is an Armenian production."

Avedissian's first acting role after gradua-

tion was a 1970 French play by Gabriel Boustany. "I was lucky enough to have the leading role in it," he says with excitement. "While my first acting role was in French, I wasn't convinced that I should work in French theater, despite the fact that in those days French theater was fashionable in Lebanon and the intelligentsia was very involved with it."

As a young actor on the road to building a career, Avedissian made a crucial decision. "I realized that unless I quickly get into Arabic-language theater, I would fall into either the French ghetto or the Armenian ghetto. If I had to do Armenian theater, unfortunately, I would have had to be affiliated either with an Armenian club or a political party. This was out of the question for me," he says decisively.

agency with networks around the world. Since 1987, he has had his own TV/film production company.

Four years ago he returned to Lebanon and wanted to immerse himself in Lebanese theater and television. "In fact, currently my major projects are in the Arab theater," he says. But, on the side, he has two serious projects for Armenian theater, too. "The first is *David of Sasun*, which will be performed as part of Beirut Festival next year. I have written the play in three languages—Arabic, Armenian and English—and it will be a very big production performed outdoors," Avedissian explains.



Gerard Avedissian (opposite page) directed *Sakhret Tanios* (above) in Masrah Al-Madina in 1995

Instead, he found a place for himself in Arabic avant-garde theater, where novel and open approaches to artistic creativity and perspectives were appealing to the budding artist.

Avedissian's long career in theater and the entertainment industry has taken him to Europe, North America and around the Middle East. He has worked as creative director and TV producer at Impact/BBDO, an advertising

The Festival is sponsored by Solidaire—the construction company responsible for rebuilding downtown Beirut—and LBC, the largest and most influential television broadcasting company in Lebanon.

"They've accepted the concept of *David of Sasun*, but have asked for Armenian participation in funding the \$300,000 project. They said if Armenians put up one third of the funds,

we will feel they are serious about the program," affirms Avedissian, who has applied to the AGBU for possible funding. Funds permitting, David of Sasun will play in Arabic one night, in Armenian another night; and when it's edited for television broadcasting, an English soundtrack will be added.

David of Sasun "is dance theater not a musical," he says. "It is a mixture of songs, dance and elements of expressive theater. I have already written the script and it has a very spectacular approach, something that would be appropriate for a big festival."

Avedissian explains his second project. "I want to make Paruir Sevak's *Anreli Zangakatum* [The Endlessly Ringing Belltower] into a stage performance, with voices, chorus, recitations and the entire cast working with their bodies." As for funding, "I'm keeping my fingers crossed. I don't know!" he says.

In addition to regular appearances on television, Avedissian has made a series of short films for LBC on controversial issues in Lebanese society. While six films passed Lebanon's media censors, eight others did not because they dealt with such issues as rape, homosexuality, drugs, suicide and infidelity.

Avedissian is well known for his direct, uninhibited and pleasant style on television, but most viewers appreciate his political incorrectness, especially in a multiethnic and complex political society like Lebanon.

Given Lebanon's experience with the 17-year civil war, Avedissian reflects on issues from a broader cultural perspective. "There is a certain cultural milieu in the Middle East. You cannot tell the Lebanese that they have fallen from a tree onto this land. He has to know why he's in Lebanon; how the boundaries of Lebanon were drawn; and what does it mean to be Lebanese. These things have to be explained to the people. Otherwise, what difference does it make whether you're Lebanese or Syrian or something else. Now, these differences are interpreted differently by different people. The Christians explain it in a certain way and the Shiites explain it in another way. So I feel a responsibility to explain to people that Lebanon is not just politics; Lebanon has its cultural, artistic and social values, which can spread throughout the Middle East. This approach makes more sense to me than leftist or rightist or religious or political approaches."

In a society where religious sensitivities have led to conflicts and wars, Avedissian is critical of politicized religion. "I'm anticlerical when they start screwing around with politics or when they start to play with people's

minds," he says bluntly. "Every time I'm on a talk show, I criticize the clergy for their political meddling. And every time, most callers to the show side with me, because I do not approach things politically. I don't mind whether someone is Moslem or Christian. It doesn't make a difference to me."

As for Armenians in Lebanon, Avedissian reflects: "If we take Armenian history in the last one hundred years and fast forward it, there would be people who are going to look ridiculous. But it doesn't mean that this is black and that is white. Everyone is in the same boat. What happened in 1915, in the 1920s, the 1930s is the same thing. At one time this side was wrong, at another time the other side committed mistakes. This is how it should be told, especially to the youth, the new generation. We should not fill them with false nationalism."

Avedissian has a more realistic view of the situation of the Armenian youth in Lebanon and the Middle East than what the Armenian "establishment" is ready to admit.

"We have to realize that the new generation of Armenians in Lebanon, and the Middle East, too, is going to be Arabized very quickly, faster than in the last 50 years. The integration is going to be very fast. Armenians in their 40s are connected in one way or another; Armenians in their 30s are lost a bit; and young people in their 20s don't even know how to write their names in Armenian. If our new generation remains in the Armenian ghetto, they will stay ignorant and closed. If they come out of the ghetto, they will make something of themselves, but possibly at the expense of losing their 'Armenianness.'"

He recognizes that, unlike today, in the 50s and 60s there was a certain level of quality in the "Armenian ghetto, especially in terms of literary and artistic talents."

"Look at our newspapers today," he points out. "How many copies do they sell every day? Who is reading Armenian newspapers today? If there are no Armenian readers, Armenian writers, Armenian actors, what is there? Singing Turkish songs in Armenian? Today you go to any Armenian banquet and all you hear is Turkish and Greek music."

Avedissian laments the fact that the new generation in Lebanon is somewhat removed from their Armenian identity. "I meet many young Armenians and would find out that they are Armenian half an hour into our conversation; they don't tell me they are Armenian and they don't speak Armenian. It is not important for them."

The question is "How do we make the Armenian sexy, attractive?" says Avedissian. "I don't have an answer," he admits. ■



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Lübnanlı ünlü tiyatrocu Jirayr Avedisyan gelecek için ümitsiz konuşuyor

# 'Yeni nesil kimliğini kaybediyor'

Oyun yazarı, aktör, yönetmen ve yapımcı Gerard (Jirayr) Avedisyan, Ortadoğu'nun en çok tanınan tiyatrcularından. Lübnan'da otoriteler tarafından "tiyatronun efendisi" olarak lanse ediliyor.

Avedisyan, Yerevan Drama ve Güzel Sanatlar Enstitüsü'nden mezun oldu, birçok Ermeni ve Sovyet filmde rol aldı. 1965'de başrolünü oynadığı "Leblebici Horhor Ağa" filmi'nin bir versiyonu olan "Garine" (1965), Avedisyan'a "En İyi Genç Aktör" ödülünü kazandı. 1967'de oynadığı "Yerangiun" (Üçgen) filmiyle "En İyi Yardımcı Oyuncu" ödülünü kazandı. Arap tiyatrolarında çalışmaya başladı. 1971'de "Getse Arkan" (Kralımız, Çok Yaşa) adlı oyununu yazdı ve yönetti.

Lübnan'a geri döndüğünde, bu kez LBC televizyonu için ülkenin sosyal yaşantısı hakkında tartışmalar yaratacak bir dizi kısa filmler hazırladı. Bu filmlerden altı tanesi yayımlandı, fakat geri kalan sekiz film sansürden geçemedi. Filmler tecavüz, homoseksüellik, uyuş-

turucu, intiharlar ve zina konularını içermekteydi. Oysa yönetmenin hiçbir yorum katmadan hazırladığı programlar izleyicinin beğenisini kazanmıştı.

Avedisyan'ın Ermeni izleyicilerle ilgili izlenimleri ve görüşleri ilgi çekici: "Büyük yapımların iyi bir izleyici kitlesi olduğuna inanıyorum, ama oyun çok kaliteli olmalı. Eğer halka çok pahalı bir oyun olduğunu ve şık giyinip gelmelerini söylerseniz, oyunu kaçırmazlar. Ama oyunun biletini 10 Dolar'a satarsanız kimseyi oyuna çekmeyi başaramazsınız." Avedisyan Ermeni izleyicisinin diğer bir özelliğini de şöyle dile getiriyor: "Ermenilerin oyundan zevk almasını istiyorsanız onların milliyetçi duygularını kabartacak konular seçmelisiniz. Bunun bir trajedi olması gerekmiyor. Onların geçmişle ilgili bir bağlantı kurabilirsiniz. İzleyiciniz gözlerini yaşlarla, kulaklarını da destansı müzikle doldurursanız, bir sonrakine yanlarında başkalarını da getirirler."

Avedisyan, Lübnan'daki Er-

meni gençliğinin durumu hakkında son derece gerçekçi bir yaklaşıma sahip: "Lübnan ve Ortadoğu'da gençler son 50 yılla oranla hızla Araplaşıyorlar. 40 yaş civarı Ermeniler bir şekilde iletişim halindedir. 30'larda iletişim kopukluğu var. 20 yaşındaki gençlerse isimlerini dahi Ermenice yazamayacak durumdalar. Yeni nesil Lübnanlı Ermeniler bir şekilde kimliklerini kaybediyorlar. Ancak yarım saatlik bir sohbetten sonra konuştuğum gençlerin Ermeni olduklarını söylemiyorlar. Bu onlar için önemli değil. Ermenice'yi nasıl çekici bir hale getirebiliriz? Bunun cevabını bilmiyorum. Günde kaç gazete satılıyor? Kim Ermenice gazete okuyor? Eğer Ermenice okuyorsa yoksa Ermenilik sizce devam edebilir mi?"

Avedisyan'ın yakın gelecek için iki büyük projesi var. İlk olarak Sasunlu Tavit'in bir dans tiyatrosu versiyonu önümüzdeki günlerde Beyrut Festivali'nde gösterime girecek. Oyun Arapça, Ermenice ve İngilizce

olmak üzere üç dilde yazılmış. Bir gece Arapça, bir gece de Ermenice oynanacak. LBC kanalında da İngilizce olarak yayınlanacak.

Bir sonraki projesi Baruyr Sevag'ın "Anreli Zankagadun" (Susmayan Çan Kulesi) adlı eserini sahnelemek. Fakat Avedisyan bu proje için henüz finansal destek bulamadığını belirtiyor.

AIM dergisi Haziran '99 sayısından Arman Süzme'nin çevirisi.



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- 'Yeni Oneriler/ Yeni Onermeler 4' başlıklı sergi Borusan Kültür Merkezi'nde 28 Ağustos'a dek görülebilir.
- Goran Bregoviç ve Orkestrası 12, 13 Ağustos tarihlerinde Harbiye Cemil Topuzlu Açık-hava Tiyatrosu'nda sahne alacak.
- Uğur Yücel'in, "Azınlıkta Kaldık" adlı gösterisi 19 Ağustos'ta Açık-hava Tiyatrosu'nda izlenebilir.
- İllüzyonist Kubilay Tunçer'in kabare gösterisi her pazar saat 20.00'de Kemancı Kültür Merkezi'nde sahneleniyor.

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