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### **3D vs. 2D: Impact of Duality on Authenticity of Turkish Theatre**

“It can be said that our theatre with its playwright, director, stage designer, lighting designer, composer and player has been in a search.”<sup>1</sup>

*Prof. Dr. Sevda Sener*

This paper aims to investigate the understanding and use of space and scenic symbols in Turkish theatre under the influence of the Western theatre. Since Turkish theatre can be observed under two main titles as Traditional Turkish theatre and Westernized Turkish theatre, in other word European theatre, first of all, it is necessary to briefly explore the historical background of the relationship between Turkey and Europe. In the second part, the paper analyzes Turkish visual art form, *miniature*, and traditional performing art forms *Karagoz* and *Ortaoyunu*. In the third part the newly constructed authenticity of space in Turkish theatre is determined referring some certain Turkish plays staged by *Turkish State Theatre* and *Istanbul Municipality Theatre*. Finally, it is concluded that Turkish theatre in the Western context is a unique instance for having been constructing “authenticity” for more than a hundred years.

Turkey and Europe are culturally and historically different. This crucial difference and Turkey’s desire to be a “civilized” or European country has caused an inevitable conflict that is the very result of a still-continuing traumatic transformation period called Turkish “modernity” or the Westernization project or European Union membership process. Whatever it is named, there has been a confrontation of European and Turkish identity with their all public, politic, cultural and economic institutions. "The identity of ‘Europe,’" Professor Meltem Muftuler-Bac has written, "is based on a common cultural heritage, with foundations in ancient Greece, Christianity, and Europe of Enlightenment.." <sup>2</sup> Turks have been a part of Europe geographically since their arrival in the 11<sup>th</sup> century; economically since the expansion of trade routes in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; and diplomatically since the inclusion of the Ottoman Empire in the Concert of Europe in 1856, <sup>3</sup> when European theatre started to glimpse to Turkish people thanks to the visiting European troupes and some theatre companies mostly founded by Armenian minorities such as Gullu Agop, Istepan Eksiyan, Dikyan Cuhaciyan, Bedros Magakyan and Tomas Fasulyeciyan. *The Ottoman Theatre* under the direction of Gullu Agop that was the first theatre company supported by Ottoman authorities in Turkey

had to stage its plays in Turkish in accordance with the concession agreement for 10 years in 1870<sup>4</sup>, but it is known that this company staged plays in Armenian as much as Turkish ones. Beside this, other minorities such as Greeks and Bulgarians found their theatre companies in Istanbul at that time. For example, Bulgarian students studying at the Faculty of Medicine staged *Ivanko* by Vasil Drumov in Gedikpasa Theatre on December 27, 1874<sup>5</sup>. However, these instances cannot be accepted as a starting point for Turkish national theatre, although their contribution cannot be denied.

In the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century Turkish playwrights couldn't employ the problems of Turkish traditional family in their plays because of the censorship. As a result of this, the playwrights in order to break the censorship had to concern either surface problems of the society, in my opinion these plays were nothing but adaptations of *Ortaoyunu* and *Karagoz* plays, or install their plays into a non-Muslim society in remote lands, mostly in a European country. More importantly, the plays about political issues took place in Eastern countries such as India and Afghanistan. The only Turkish play which could be accepted as an example of Turkish national theatre in that time was *Vatan yahut Silistre* (*The Motherland or Silistra*) by Namik Kemal, a patriotic play about the war between the Ottoman Empire and Russia at the gate of Silistra, Bulgaria. Namik Kemal in the play assumes the motherland was a part of a militarist composition. Although this play was banned since it was provocative, it is important in terms of theatrical space because the conflict between the East and the West explicitly was on the stage for the first time. Hereafter, Turkish playwrights have taken this conflict into consideration from various points of view to build their plays and unintentionally they determined the new "authentic" space for Turkish national theatre.

In the Turkish history another turning point came with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Until that point, the cultural aspect of the Westernization project had been carried out by Europe-educated intellectuals and there had not been a total rejection of the past, especially by the state. However, from that time onwards, the state took on the task of converting Turkey into a modern Westernized nation.<sup>6</sup> Theatre was an important tool to spread the Reforms of the newly founded Republic all over the country. That is why; theatre activities in *the People Houses* between 1932 and 1951 did not only gave the opportunity to the spectator to be accustomed to European theatre masterpieces but also Turkish Government tried to convert the people's way of life by pointing out the accepted citizen prototype on the stage.

However, as Ismail Hakki Baltacıoglu stated “it is necessary to build arena stage for [Turkish] traditional folk dances and performing art forms such as *Ortaoyunu* and peasant plays”. Baltacıoglu also argued that national theatre forms cannot suit Italian stage and they require arena stage where actors can move without facing to the audience during the course of play. Baltacıoglu summed up the situation: “they [Turkish traditional theatre forms] are different in terms of style and nature”<sup>7</sup>.

What is the essence of this difference? To answer this question, the style and nature of Turkish visual art form, *miniature* and performing art forms, *Ortaoyunu* and *Karagoz* should be examined.

Turkish miniature has 2D nature. Also, it is possible to create a linkage between stage design and *miniature* since it was generally used as specific visual instructions supplementing the information provided in written form in the manuscripts. It would not be wrong to define miniature art “as instructional design, in addition to calling it information design”<sup>8</sup>. Artists, therefore, are not restricted by the constraint of having to conform to a doctrine of strict realism. Components creating character or incident are identified and symbolize in an extremely minimalist manner. Artful and skilful visual arrangements are achieved through the use of these symbols in order to help the audience better understand the character or the incident.

The basic representation in miniature art is a map. None of the visual data “superimpose” any of the rest. The three-dimensional world is illustrated as the extension surface of a prism, or in *parallel orthographic perspective*. The most typical figure is the man sitting on a carpet. Since the carpet is drawn as a plane, the sitting figure is drawn in profile. The figure is generally superimposed upon the plane, and in those compositions, in which space is defined, the front wall is placed at the bottom of the illustration, the plane is in the middle, and the back wall is placed at the top. Side elevations are shown through two methods in the composition: either they are laid down (eg. a wall), or they are visualized through the technique of *parallel oblique perspective*. The artist would use this technique when there was an important relation between the facade and the sides of a structure. Others are illustrated either in extension surface or not shown. This tendency reveals that in miniature art, recording data accurately is more important than aesthetic considerations in Figure 1. But “the world view of scenography” as Pamela Howard stated “reveals that space is the first and the most important challenge for a scenographer”, who should fully understand “dynamics of space”

and “recognize thorough observing its geometry, where its power lies-in its height, length, width, depth or the horizontal and vertical diagonals<sup>9</sup>”.



**Figure 1** an example of mapping from the manuscript, *Tercume-akaik-i Nu'maniye*

In this regard, the very difference between Western stage design and its Turkish would-be counterpart *miniature* differs from each other: the former is illusionistic and the latter is presentational.

This difference, also, determines the core of Turkish shadow theatre: *Karagoz*. The *Karagoz* play always begins with a brief explanation by *Hayali*<sup>10</sup>, the *Karagoz* puppeteer:

Setting up the curtain, lighting the candle  
I present shadow of illusion  
This curtain is the curtain of reality  
Don't think that it is baloney

*Karagoz* mainly consists of three technical devices: curtain, candle and figures of stereotypes. In the first two lines above, *Hayali* talks about the two technical devices of *Karagoz*, the candle and the curtain. Informing his spectator of what they see on the curtain is just an illusion, *Hayali* ironically deconstructs the illusion he builds via these technical devices. Also, the figures are far to create an illusion because animated figures are bigger than unanimated ones. Hence, what is left on the curtain is simply the pure reality of the play but the life. *Hayali* doesn't aim to urge his spectator to think about a common problem in the society but just entertain them and give a moral lesson. Moreover, spectator already know what they see on the curtain: *Hacivat*, an intellectual and educated man, summons *Karagoz*, a witty common man; *Karagoz* rejects to appear on the curtain; *Hacivat* continues to call him and at last

Karagoz comes to curtain and fights with Hacivat in a farcical way. Then the play begins when Hacivat reveals a problem. For example, one of his friends is lost his job or looks for a new house to move etc. Everything happens and ends in the course of the play. Neither does the problem have past nor does it seem to continue out of the play. Various plots can be employed but the setting remains unchanged: simply the neighborhood or a quarter of Istanbul, where Karagoz lives in and all stereotypes have the opportunity to meet and talk about the problem. Interior space is evoked by off-stage dialogs mostly between Karagoz and his wife.

Hacivat is always bound by the moral principles of the upper class and can easily adapt himself to these principles. He sometimes becomes instrumental in providing pleasure for the upper classes and is always worried that Karagoz's tactlessness will spoil these pleasures. Karagoz, the traditional symbol of the little man, on the other hand, finds that his tactless behavior generally upsets most intrigues. Usually Hacivat offers useful advice to others, aiding them in their schemes. Because of his knowledge of etiquette and language and his opportunism, he is a most desirable, likeable character in the neighborhood. He is not only the local headman but is looked upon as counselor, especially by the neighborhood spendthrift. When he partners Karagoz in various undertakings, he prefers merely to find the clients and share the profit. Conversely Karagoz is not respected. He is always insulted by the dandies, is a target for the anger of the opium addict, a victim of the village idiot's practical jokes and the threats of the neighborhood drunkards.

With a realism which nothing can distort, *Karagoz* scene reproduces the very image of the traditional neighborhood (mahalle) as it existed up to 1908. Neither caricature nor satire can obliterate its ever recurring secular stamp. Neighborhood represents the only true unit of social life under the Ottoman Empire.



**Figure 2 Karagoz and Hacivat**

It is also possible to have the same observation for *Ortaoyunu*, fully-fledged, distinct and original improvisatory Turkish traditional comedy, very much like the Italian Commedia dell'Arte. The *Ortaoyunu* "stage" consists of an open space around which the spectator sat, the women on a side obscured by a temporary lattice. In rare instances, a low fence marks the playing area. There is no curtain, and the actors dress and wait for their cues while sitting among the members of the orchestra, remaining visible to the audience during the course of play. The setting is very minimalist. A folding screen can stand for every building in the play such as house or shop. The rest is left to the imagination of the audience, which displays great forbearance in regard to the naïve improbabilities of the *mise en scène*. A word or gesture is sufficient to transform the playing area.

The main character, *Pisekar*, who is also the director and manager of the company, comes onto the stage first. After bowing to the audience on all four sides, he announces the name of the play and from then on remains continuously onstage. He meets *Kavuklu*, who usually enters in the company of a dwarf or hunchback costume. *Pisekar* and *Kavuklu*, the endmen—who much resemble *Hacivat* and *Karagoz* in shadow theatre proceed to a dialogue, a battle of wits in which *Kavuklu* tells a farfetched story which he tries to make the audience believe. Eventually it is discovered that *Kavuklu* is merely relating a dream. *Ortaoyunu* takes place in a neighborhood in Istanbul just as *Karagoz*.



**Figure 3 Ortaoyunu (Kavuklu Hamdi and Kucuk Ismail Efendi)**

Under the light of the observation about Turkish *miniature*; *Karagoz* and *Ortaoyunu*, one could easily conclude that Turkish traditional theatre is anti-illusionistic and presentational; in other word it has 2D nature that Brecht introduced it (epic theatre) to European spectator years after European theatre had emerged in Turkey. Thus, partly as a result of the Westernization project, there has been a conflict between 3D natured European theatre and its counterpart traditional Turkish theatre. In order to solve this problem and reach a synthesis

theatre makers, including Muhsin Ertugrul accepted as the father of Westernized Turkish theatre, followed the pathway of Ahmet Vefik Pasha, who had adapted Moliere's plays into Turkish culture. Ertugrul staged some certain European masterpieces in Istanbul. For instance, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* premiered Istanbul in 1953 long before its London premiere. In that time, realistic plays by Ibsen were very popular on Turkish stages but the stage design, costumes and atmosphere were totally European so they were just binoculars in the hand of Turkish spectator to observe Europe from Turkey.

Most of the plays written in the Republic Era had a social-realistic or critical tendency. However, a generation of effective and dynamic playwrights emerged after 1960. The playwrights managed to produce plays in the contemporary sense during this period. In fact, Haldun Taner, who contributed significantly to efforts in bringing about a national identity to playwriting in Turkey concerning content and style, was the creator of political cabaret which often has a critical tendency and in which all elements of traditional Turkish theatre are evaluated. His domestic epic musical, *Kesanli Ali Destani* (*The Ballad of Ali of Kesan*<sup>11</sup>), which was first staged in 1964 is an example of this.

*Kesanli Ali Destani* is worth examining since it enables scenographers to employ the traditional elements onto Italian stage. Taner was explicitly influenced by Brecht's epic theatre: "In *Kesanli Ali Destani*" Taner stated "I wanted to harmonize old traditional anti-illusionistic elements with modern epic approach"<sup>12</sup>. The play begins with a musical and spoken prologue in which all stereotypes from different classes in Turkish society welcome the spectator and introduce themselves just as happened in *Ortaoyunu*. The setting is full of symbols depicted from the traditional theatre. The play takes place in a neighborhood called Sineklidag, where is higher than the city but the city is faraway as much as it might be in tales. Thus, neither can Westernization reach there nor the people can go down the city. This neighborhood, which is deprived from the merciful hands of the state, needs a hero or a protagonist in terms of European theatre. *Kesanli Ali* is the hero, whom the spectator is familiar from the traditional Turkish theatre such as Karagoz or Kavuklu and the protagonists are the members of parliament who decides to demolish the neighborhood because it is a source of problems in their eyes. They stand for Hacivat or Pisekar. Thus, the neighborhood square is converted into a place where educated intellectual elites, who are definitely products of the Westernization project, versus poor ignorant uneducated ordinary people. *Kesanli Ali Destani* finalized the search of a new "authentic" space for Turkish theatre in 1960s.





**Figure 4 Kesanli Ali Destani (Ankara State Theatre 2006-2007)**

Before *Kesanli Ali Destani* there were a number of plays using neighborhood as conflict monitoring area between elites and ordinary people in Turkish society. For example, *Lukus Hayat* (Luxury Life) by Ekrem Resit Rey and Cemal Resit Rey takes place in the garden of a luxury house, where two rowdies accidentally enter, but the owners of the house misidentify them because of the costume ballot they hold. Also, *Nalinlar* (The Clogs) by Necati Cumali that is a criticism of Turkish customs takes place in a similar setting. In many plays, neighborhood square as an open space that cannot disturb the spectator's sensitiveness about the sacredness of interior affairs of Turkish family is an indispensable setting for Turkish theatre.



**Figure 5 Lukus Hayat**

Yet the houses behind the neighborhood square have rapidly started to appear on Turkish stages after 1970s<sup>13</sup> because of the fact that the neighborhood phenomena had practically collapsed. In other word, 3D has started to be dominant over 2D. Having popped up realistic manner, scenographers have nothing to do except for decorating the stage instead of designing it. When the curtain raised what the spectator saw was just a fully realistic dinning room of a middle or lower-middle class Turkish family, which openly stood for the defeat of traditional



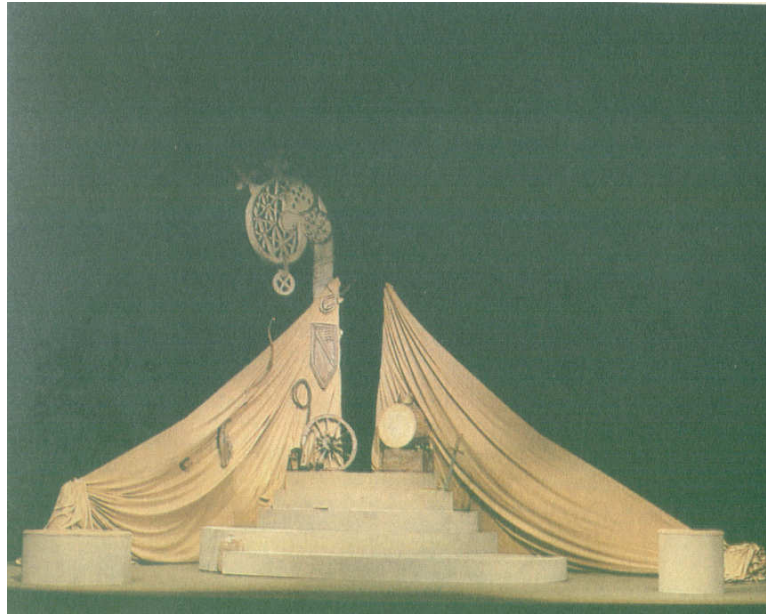
“authentic” space before the newly constructed “authenticity”. The stage characters also had the third dimension that enabled them to be different from their stereotype ancestors, Karagoz/Hacivat and Kavuklu/Pisekar. Because the characters suffered from the rapidly emerged capitalism in Turkey, they were antagonists in these Ibsenian or Chekhovian plays. The protagonist was the capitalist system deployed outside of the house in the neighborhood square where once the antagonists had gathered to struggle against negative impact of the Westernization project. As a result of this, dramatic action for the first time in Turkish theatre accurately was separated into two spaces: the one is the house which is visible space on stage and the other is the neighborhood square which is off-stage space. In these plays whenever the characters go out from the house they come back with a bigger defeat than the previous ones in the course of the play. Unsurprisingly the ending determined their total defeat and Capitalism’s full victory.



**Figure 6 Catidaki Catlak (The Crack on the Roof)**

During the same period, playwrights such as Gungor Dilmen, Orhan Asena, Turhan Oflazoglu and Necati Cumali produced poetic plays, the themes of which were based on Ottoman history, national heroes or mythology. These plays took place in indefinable spaces resembling neighborhood square or somewhere in the Ottoman palace whereas the costumes were designed in a fully realistic manner to enable the audience to identify the characters. For the plays under this category, it is enough to set up a point of focus at the middle-back of the stage, where symbolized the domination of main character, a sultan or a feudal lord, in terms of dramatic action. In addition, in terms of dramatic space the point of focus was used to determine the ends of episodes in the play because the main character went back to the point of focus, which can be accepted as a primitive imitation of Appia’s Rhythmic Space. The rest

of the stage was usually empty in order to symbolize the whole Ottoman Empire or the abstract space of mythology.



**Figure 7 Ben Anadolu (I, Anatolia)**

To conclude, the Westernization project in Turkey, without discussing whether it is useful or harmful, has fueled the search of a new identity for Turkish people and radically changed Turkish culture and art. Since it is impossible to talk about a theatre tradition in the Western context before 1870s, Turkish traditional performing art forms have to be the starting point to examine the authenticity of space in Turkish theatre. If it is considered that the Westernized Turkish theatre has emerged in 1908, the new “authenticity” of space is hidden in the differences between these two historically distinct theatres. Turkish traditional and to some degree “authentic” theatre was anti-illusionistic and presentational, when its destiny intersected with illusionistic European theatre. Then, natural development of the traditional theatre nearly stopped and Westernized Turkish theatre with its all elements was constructed from 1923 to 1950s. After 1951, partly because of some political changes in Turkey, not only theatre but traditional anything was remembered and the use of neighborhood as a newly constructed “authentic” space was employed by Turkish playwrights. Because of the severe capitalist system when the middle and lower-middle class people began to suffer from economic difficulties, Turkish theatre visited them in their dining room. This marked the foundation of another “authentic” space for Turkish theatre and indicated that the free-space for people has been getting narrower each day. On the other hand, surprisingly, the use of space in Turkish historical and mythological plays extremely larger than the domestic plays. The more allegoric and historical Turkish theatre become the larger space it needs but the less

illusion. Conversely, the more it become domestic the smaller space it needs but the more illusion. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are two “authentic” spaces in Turkish theatre: the one where the space is as big as the universe and the other where the space is as big as a middle class dining room. As in the former the traditional theatre is the native and the European is the other, in the latter it is just opposite. Finally, it looks as if the two would blend into one in a more abstract space because of the recent absurd tendency in Turkish theatre. But for today the battle between 3D and 2D seems to continue.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Sevda Sener, **Gelisim Surecinde Turk Tiyatrosu**, Alkim Yayınevi, İstanbul, 2003, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Meltem Muftuler-Bac, “Through the Looking Glass: Turkey in Europe”, **Turkish Studies**, Vol.1, No.1, Spring 2000, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>4</sup> Metin And, **Osmanli Tiyatrosu**, Dost Kitapevi, Ankara, 1999, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 196.

<sup>6</sup> John Redmond, **The Next Mediterranean Enlargement of the European Community: Turkey, Cyprus, and Malta?**, Aldershot, Hants, England; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Dartmouth, 1993, p.21.

<sup>7</sup> Cited from Prof. Dr. Nurhan Karadag, **Halk Evleri Tiyatro Calismalari**, Kultur Bakanligi, Ankara, 1998, p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> Oguzhan Ozcan, “Turkish-Ottoman Miniature Art within the Electronic Information Design”, *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 15: 237–252, 2005, p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Pamela Howard, **What is Scenography?**, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> “Hayali” could be translated into English as “Illusionist”

<sup>11</sup> This play was translated into English. Haldun Taner, **The Ballad of Ali of Kesan** (Trans. Nuvid Ozdogru), International Theatre Institute, Ankara, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> Cited from Semih Celenk, **Kalemden Sahneye**, 3. Cilt, Yazi Goruntu Ses Yayinlari, İstanbul, 2003, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

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