

Press DAILY SABAH EMWAP festival 2015

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MEET EUROPEAN MIDDLE WEST ARTS PROJECT, a new performance festival in Istanbul

KAYA GENÇ , ISTANBUL , Published March 20, 2015

Organized by four international arts institutions, Istanbul's new performance festival European Middle West Arts Project explores 'the hybrid space between east and west'

Five years ago I traveled to Anvers, Belgium to watch performances at 0090, a festival devoted to promoting contemporary Turkish artists in Europe. On my first day there I saw Mesut Arslan, the artistic director of the festival. Determined to present an alternative vision of Turkish art and question prejudices and presumptions of European audiences, he stood outside the Monty Theatre at the heart of Anvers, watching with pleasure crowds as they entered the theater.

Arslan and his vision make an unexpected come back this week with a brand new festival titled "EMWAP" (European Middle West Arts Project). Featuring six productions that focus on "the hybrid space between east and west," EMWAP is a welcome addition to Istanbul's performing arts scene which seems to have become smaller after its peak in 2010 when the city was the European Capital of Culture. Running until April 5, EMWAP's performance venues include Salt Beyoğlu, Moda Sahnesi, Tiyatro D22 and Talimhane Theater.

Arslan describes the term "Middle West" in the festival's title as an "artistically defined space" which he hopes the performances at EMWAP will thoroughly explore. "It is a space between stereotypical spaces," Arslan said. "Thanks to orientalism, self-orientalism and auto-orientalism, most contemporary art has lost its quality and weight. The 'Middle West' artistic space we talk about asks for more contact and exchange between artists. We want to facilitate encounters between them." Arslan hopes to see this interaction result in "artistic dialogues and reflections on the concept of the Middle West, a hybrid space between east and west." EMWAP's first performance, which took place at Salt Beyoğlu at the end of the week, was Curating Space by Erki De Vries, Pieter Huybrechts and Kris Delacourt.

"The starting point of Curating Space was some pictures of Istanbul," Arslan explained. "This was the result of the first residencies we had in Istanbul. You can find lots of materials from Istanbul in Curating Space."

De Vries, Huybrechts and Delacourt "connect the boundaries of three different generated worlds to merge in an engaging journey," according to the festival program. "Through their own individual artistic language, a scenographer, a photographer and a musician manipulate the space surrounding the audience. The spectator meets with a myriad of images, changing and changeable spaces, and an altered reality. While moving through a constructed city, it appears to disintegrate and become abstract - an inward movement through a mental space, pushing to the present time on stage." This week's performances at Moda Sahnesi include Schwalbe Cheats by Schalbe (March 23 and 24, at 8:30 p.m.) and Autonomous Sceneography by Meryem Bayram (March 25, at

8:30 p.m.)

The latter is based on Bayram's fascination with pop-up books. "She developed a series of forms made of sheet cardboard which can be unfolded from an apparently empty flat surface to a whole repertory of evocative scenic elements. Different artists were invited to use their imagination

on the material. In this way, the project demonstrates what happens when the scenography does not rely on a story or choreography, but the other way around. How can the performance artists, sound and light designers contaminate these various scenic elements? In a sensitive yet evocative game of forms, spaces, objects and worlds are set up, revealing to what extent our perception of reality is determined by personal associations."

Arslan and the festival team discovered that "the artist" could be the starting point of EMWAP. "We found that we are interested in producing sustainable dialogues between performance arts, artists, environments, managers, critics and the public," he said. "Our project focuses on the contemporary European art scene. It explores migrations and movements active within that scene. Our main focus is the nomadic status of the artist. We want to initiate artistic processes, with a special focus on research, residencies and performances."

Funded by the European Cultural Program EMWAP features works by artists who work in different countries and tackle issues that exist within different countries. "How does this influence their work?" Arslan asked. "Does bringing together artists with different backgrounds result in a hybrid production? Is there a difference in the way the public receives the work according to the context of the location of the performance?" Arslan's Platform 0090 is based in Belgium and has a decade-long experience in working with partners, including Productiehuis Rotterdam in Netherlands, Arcola Theater in the U.K. and Talimhane Tiyatrosu in Istanbul. "I didn't select the EMWAP performances by myself," Arslan said. "I suggested the idea and we worked with our partners right from the beginning. We chose the artists and struggled to transform our synergies into artistic processes."

One of the partners of the festival is the Arcola Theatre. Founded in 2000 by Mehmet Ergen and Leyla Nazlı in London, Arcola is famous for its sold out performances and is acknowledged as one of the most prestigious arts venues in the U.K. The Arcola is producing Anders Lustgarten's "Sharapnel: 34 Fragments of a Massacre" performance. Taking place in December 2011, the month when Turkish Armed Forces dropped bombs on a group of unarmed smugglers with mules, killing 34 civilians, the performance explores one of the most controversial episodes in the war on terror.

Another highlight of the festival is "We need to move urgently," a performance by Taldans. Offering a way to "test new artistic, social, scientific models of acting together in an open spirit" the performance was created by Filiz Sızanlı, Mustafa Kaplan and Vania Rovisco and will be presented on March 31 and April 1 at Moda Sahnesi. An Istanbul graffiti that has inspired Taldans seems to encapsulate the spirit of EMWAP festival. "There is a beautiful mess outside," it reads, "how can you stay in?"

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