

About the Tensions between Theatre and Political Power in Turkey

Dr. Pieter Verstraete

(Ankara, 2 September 2016.) On 15 July, Turkey experienced its most intense night in a long time. A failed coup attempt startled the country. Some critics believed it was all 'staged'. Indeed, there was no lack of theatricality. For the first time, we saw the president via FaceTime on television. This created an illusion of interaction, which stands in stark contrast to most of the orchestrated interviews and monologues of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. After the coup was knocked down we were bombarded with heroic images of citizens who following Erdoğan's call railed against soldiers and tanks, while high-level militaries were being arrested. While de Gezi protests on 2013 did not receive any airtime (since 'the revolution will not be televised'), the coup today was a televised spectacle for many Turks. For some time now, news channels use dramatic strategies and also top politicians make good use of the media spectacle for mostly propagandistic goals, particularly now to keep the country in the spell of a Turkish nationalism.

Theatricality is omnipresent in Turkey. You could speak of a true 'theatrocracy' instead of a 'democracy', after Plato's *The Republic (Politeia)*. However, there was still something called sovereignty of the audience, the people, in those days. The fact that theatre had the potential to be subversive and could disturb the established order with its traditional authority was paradoxically dangerous to the ancient philosopher in view of the 'truth', because it could be abused by the wrong people. Theatricality had split from the theatre – the 'theatre' as social and political site according to Samuel Weber (2004: 36) – and spread in all areas of the society. Today we are seeing something similar in Turkey. It is the intellectuals, academics, critics, journalists, authors, activists and also the artists – those who dare to criticise the established order – who have to give into the theatricality of the regime and the media spectacle that needs to keep the average citizen captivated. This theatricality operates particularly as a form of symbolic politics in a climate of intimidation, fear and (self) censorship.

The pressure has definitely increased after the coup. Every day, we see people being arrested: first militaries, then civil servants from the education ministry, teaching and academic staff who are claimed to have so-called ties with the 'Gülen network' – a group of people who follow the Sunni teachings and ideas of the influential Muslim cleric and billionaire Fethullah Gülen. According to recent figures, 76.597 Turks were suspended and 4.897 fired, among which about 3000 militaries. Today 2.346 academics were also laid off in the state universities. Recently also authors, journalists and artists have their turn. In fact, the same rules and faith apply to all theatre practitioners and technical staff who work at the municipal and state theatres under a fixed contract. Among them, similar fears exist of being screened and arrested.*

* Update 6 November 2016: In the meantime, not insignificantly in the eve of the Turkish Republic Day on 29 October, another 10.000 civil servants have been dismissed due to the latest decree (KHK) under the present state of emergency. Around 100.000 had been already sacked or fired, 37.000 were arrested since the putsch.

As of 1st August, twenty permanent artists (among which, 6 directors, 1 dramaturge, 1 musician, 1 choreographer and 11 actors) of Turkey's oldest theatre in Istanbul (the 'Darülbedayi') were sacked with a simple phone call. They were apparently already being investigated by the police, although they had no clue how or even why. Most of them are very well known with the broader public; many received theatre prizes and had clearly nothing to do with the coup. One of them, Sevinç Erbulak, is on the stage for over 25 years and told in an interview: "I wish this mistake to be corrected as soon as possible. Art exists because life is not perfect. And art is not a profession for cowards ..." (quoted in Silahsizoğlu 2016). In the meantime, 11 of the theatre artists have been re-employed but a precedent has been made that keeps the fear high. And this is only a small example of how the state of emergency is being abused by the regime to accuse any critical thinker of terror and to remove them of their public functions, without jurisdiction and without consultation of the Parliament.

The saying that Turkish theatre artists are 'no cowards' was already evident during and after the Gezi Park occupation in the summer of 2013. The 'Gezi spirit' gave hope and creative inspiration to artists to experiment with performative forms of protest. The 'standing man' (*duran adam*) is perhaps the best-known example, but a lot of aesthetic protest actions followed and gave rise to new forms of sociability and representation in sometimes very precarious situations. They gave the protest culture in Turkey a new image for the younger generations. But today that energy is finished. There are no 'performative' protests in the current state of emergency. The witch hunt intensifies something which was already happening before: critical thinkers are taken bit by bit out of 'the system' or are being kept afraid by means of legal procedures so that they would be more careful in their public expressions and influence their environments. The selection of those who are taken out seems, however, very random.

Therefore, many want to leave the country, although the relationship to the country and its people has never been so deep and strong. Brain drain and fear for free expression will diminish the total cultural experience and artistic production. And the theatre practitioners are standing powerless against the government as well as against a big portion of the society that has accepted the blinders, which the pro-government media make them wear.

Interaction or not exactly?

The connection between theatre and politics in Turkey has a long tradition, although its history is rather fragmentary and not known to many. Often critics would refer to the incident that was rather innocent at first when Sümeyye Erdoğan, daughter of the then-Prime Minister, in April 2012 came to visit the Ankara State Theatre for a staging of *Genç Osman* ('Young Osman') by Turan Oflazoğlu. Her presence was not announced, but apparently she ran annoyed out of the auditorium when a state actor, Tolga Tuncer, may have offended her in an improvised skit. In fact, the incident was merely caused by an annoyance on the part of the actor because Sümeyye was chewing gum, after which Tolga copied her movements as part of the performance. But Sümeyye's

story reached the press, first as an item on Oda-tv, and then through a letter¹ of her own hand in which she denounces the arrogance of the Turkish theatre artists. She referred to an old myth that the – mostly Kemalist - theatre establishment would be against her headscarf.

In hindsight, it is of no surprise that the play is about a young, reforming sultan Osman who rails against the old military and religious leadership in favour of the security of the Turkish people, a theme that resonates with the current political climate. Perhaps Sümeyye felt inspired by the theme to perform her symbolic act because her father deems himself also somewhat as a reformer who at all times pushes back the militaries into their barracks. The opposition has often accused him of using an autocratic legal system that is a remnant of the old military leadership to undermine the secularist tradition instead of defending it. Moreover, we see ever more infiltration of Sunni Islam and political expressions in the media. In this way, you could read Young Osman perhaps as a criticism, though this debate was ignored entirely at the time. In one of the monologues, Osman makes a provocative speech:

“In ordinary speech, we are the world's richest and most powerful state. A state where people are dying of hunger, while others hold parties where people stuff themselves to the point of explosion. A state in which those who are naked must shiver, while others wrap themselves in furs. And the man responsible for all this is hailed as the world's most powerful leader. How shameful for that leader and how shameful for those who applaud him” (quoted in “Sümeyye Erdoğan”).

The result of Sümeyye's action is pure symbolic politics and myth manufacturing which contributes to today's stance of Erdoğan's AK Party towards theatre artists. The then-Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, said that theatre artists had 'no right' to 'interact' with their audiences. He emphasized that the AKP is in favour of artistic freedom, but that this freedom does not mean that artists have the right to disrespect the rights of others or act without proper 'decorum'. Today, the Sümeyye-incident looks perhaps more of an anecdote, and certainly it is flawed as a founding narrative given the much longer history of discord between artists and the state; but Turkey's culture war still continues below the surface. The speech of the cultural minister claiming that theatre artists have no right to interact with their audiences certainly speaks volumes about the vision regarding culture. Erdoğan, who in his student years dabbled in amateur dramatics², made further efforts in railing against the artists, actors and the establishment who 'would bite the hand that feeds them' (quoted in Gibbons 2012). He would drastically cut the subsidies and the state infrastructure.

To tell the truth, the financial means for the sector are already limited and artists are being restricted by means of mechanisms of control and (self) censorship. The repression after the Gezi protests made artistic freedom difficult and this is not any different after the coup, in a country that suffers from a witch-

¹ See for further explanation and a shortened version of her letter: <http://ufilter.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/sumeyye-erdogan.html>.

² He also wrote a play, entitled *Mas-Kom-Yah*, which premiered in 1975 but which *Der Spiegel* considered to be anti-Semitic.

hunt and a crackdown on all opposition. The artists also fear for the structural changes that were announced in 2013 – just before the Gezi protests – under the name TÜSAK ('Türkiye Sanat Kurumu'), which would become like the British 'Arts Council' but which has not come into effect yet. This is perhaps fortunate, according to many theatre artists, since it would abandon the state operas, state ballets (DOB) and state theatres (DT) and make a small specimen dependent on the direction of the TÜSAK: an administrative and financially independent council with an executive that is directly appointed by the council of ministers. This would restrict any further autonomy of the artist.

The new art council would perhaps mean a redistribution of capital, but the support from the state cannot be more than half of the real costs, while the Prime Minister retains the privilege to allocate any amount to a project as he pleases. Many fear that the abolition of the theatre profession as state position and the diminishing of the state infrastructure will deprive many regions – except for Istanbul and Ankara – regarding culture, while the current Ministry would prefer projects and activities that support 'cultural tourism'. The new TÜSAK law would mean a complete redrawing of the landscape, producing more damage than breathing space. In fact, this whole TÜSAK law means a move towards more privatisation of the theatre arts and a degradation of its institutes (Ada 2014). Or as Erdoğan suggested after the whole Sümeyye-incident: if you want to be really free and play what you want, you should not beg for money from the state.

Actually, this whole culture war against the state theatres and its staff is only a political feint that is rather meant as a symbol, but which brings a lot of damage to the artistic climate. It concerns a deeply rooted hatred of a political elite against intellectuals, especially within Kemalist opposition circles, which is now being extended to anybody who positions himself critically towards the regime. Besides, the state theatres in Turkey are perhaps the most visited in the whole of Europe. But the theatres of 'high culture' did not reach much further than a Brechtian period in the 90's and ever since, the critical content diminished, because for a long time there is fear for a real interaction with a sovereign audience. The independent theatres mostly in Istanbul, on the contrary, do seek interaction, particularly through new texts and dramaturgies. But they usually only reach a small, appreciative audience. Here one can see a discrepancy between a tradition of making theatre – a style of acting that is taught at all state conservatories and an invariably 'safe' repertoire – which is not considered to interact in any emancipating way with the audience and a rather young generation that searches for a new theatricality in the independent, so-called non-profit scene.

It is in this context that we should understand the sharp criticism of theatre legend Genco Erkal:

"Many fellow [actors] comply with terms imposed by municipalities just so they can receive funds. ... They make changes to their texts, they make adjustments to the costumes, they leave out certain scenes ... and make their [plays] non-controversial [for the government]" (quoted in *Today's Zaman*, 19 November 2014).

Also in the 'free' sector the government imposed restrictions. This happened for instance after Gezi when from day one many independent theatre artists were part of the original occupation. The first 'standing man' was dancer and choreographer Erdem Gündüz from Çatı Çağdaş Dans Sanatçıları Derneği ('contemporary dance artists association'). Erdoğan railed against him in a tweet:

"Some people produced standing men. You may all stand still... But us, we say, no stopping on that road, we say go on" (quoted in Öztürkmen 2014).³

Such a tweet says a lot about the direct, mostly provocative stance of politicians in Turkey towards so-called dissident artists. This is not only limited to Twitter. The pro-AKP press tried many times to individualise the causes of the Gezi protests: in this way, Mehmet Ali Alabora (also then-President and founder of the Turkish Actors' Union) was suggested as a scapegoat for the protests. On 10 June 2013, pro-government newspaper *Yeni Şafak* accused his staging of the newly written play *Mi Minör* for 'preparing the revolution' because of its use of social media on stage and the partial financial support it received from the United Kingdom, whereas no subsidy was given by the Turkish Ministry. Coincidentally, there was also a 'woman in red' on the stage who could remind of the legendary 'kırmızılı kadın' from the first Gezi images that went viral. Ankara mayor Melih Gökçek said: "the state will persecute Memet Ali Alabora with God's permission, and I'll see him behind bars." Afterwards, Islamic newspaper *Yeni Akit* published a list of names of artists and intellectuals who supported the anti-government protests with the aim to expose them. We have seen such public lists of dissidents in newspapers and on social media increasing ever since.

Such lynch-campaigns give a lot of visibility to the artist who willy-nilly still wants to keep making art. Therefore, many try to guard themselves against possibly bad consequences by censoring themselves. Alabora fled afterwards to Frankfurt and also the author of *Mi Minör*, Meltem Arıkan, is staying nowadays in the U.K. while their court cases are pending. With this, they try to remain outside from the spotlight as a form of self-control. But now with the state of emergency, it does not look like the situation will be getting any better for them and so many others.

Perspective in self-censorship?

According to the Turkish-German theatre director Nurkan Erpulat of the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, who also experienced the knockdown of the coup from close by, there will be no theatre in Turkey anymore in three years. He said in a recent interview: "They are trying to criminalise the stage, to exchange the protagonists bit by bit, to make it redundant and eventually to silence it" (quoted in Burkhardt 2016; my translation, *PV*)⁴. In February, even in his staging of

³Actually, 'stopping man' is a better translation for the Turkish phrase, 'duranadam'. The original tweet goes like this: "Biz ne diyoruz; Durmakyokyaladevam. Onlar ne diyor; Duran adam!" https://twitter.com/RT_Erdogan/statuses/348058441094406144.

See also: http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/06/130621_erdogan_kayseride.

⁴ Original quote: "Sie versuchen, diese Szene zu kriminalisieren, Stück für Stück die Protagonisten auszutauschen, überflüssig zu machen und letztendlich zu zumachen."

Wolfram Lotz's *Die Lächerliche Finsternis*, words like 'Turkey' and 'Erdoğan' were cut to protect the actors.

But the self-censorship goes even further and has a long history under the AKP-regime, partly due to a growing climate in which direct political expression runs the risk to be condemned by a religious and moralistic elite, by the media or just by conservatives in the local community. As such, Ankara-based puppet and children's theatre Tiyatro Tempo already quit their Karağöz stagings in 2008: the traditional shadow theatre, which is notoriously full of contemporary political satire and social commentary, would rather need to serve touristic purposes under the AKP-regime. It cannot function any longer in its original form and purpose.

The regular theatre already knew many internal mechanisms of self-induced censorship. All staged plays in the 'canon' of the municipal and state theatres are selected one year in advance and are being decided by an overarching board that is organised by the sector itself. In this context, it is already clear that 16 plays of the previous season cannot be staged this year anymore. The official reason is that a subcontractor suddenly suspended the temporary contracts of many artists and technicians. The Municipal Theatre Artists' Union İŞTİSAN is taking action and also the Turkish Actors Union ('Oyuncular Sendikası') is preparing a reemployment lawsuit to get the dismissed actors reemployed. There is also a campaign on social media with the hashtag #MeslektaşımDokunma ('do not touch my colleague').

From recent news we learn that a lot of subsidised municipal theatres⁵ prefer 'not to play with fire' during the state of emergency in order not to attract unnecessary negative attention (Silahsizoğlu 2016). On 28 August, the director-general of the general directorate of state theatres, Nejat Birecik, announced that from now on only 'national plays' would be staged, to stir the nationalistic, conservative and patriotic feelings of the audiences. Shakespeare, Chekhov, Brecht and even Dario Fo are temporarily on the black list.

Critique

Censoring oneself and staying outside the spotlight are, of course, all necessary tactics to survive in a regime that has become so unstable that there is only absolute arbitrariness (and abuse) in combatting invisible enemies. Hence, a great deal of the critical thinkers are tired. It looks that the only critique could and should come from outside. A project by Nurkan Erpulat and Tuncay Kulaoğlu at the Maxim Gorki Theatre, *Love It or Leave It*, puts the current situation in a historical, critical perspective. The promo seems already very promising:

"It pokes around in the past unashamedly, questions the melancholy hero on the street with curiosity, comforts the winners of the madness full of understanding, sings dusty victory hymns with incorrigible losers and gives all the country's children sticky-sweet pink candy floss. In this, the innocence and crimes of the present always remain in focus. Because burying our heads in the

⁵ Please note, particularly in the cities where during the last elections the majority voted for the opposition.

sand has always been a dry matter.” (Maxim Gorki program leaflet, August-November 2016; corrected by me, PV).⁶

When artists are being threatened in a country of ever-present theatricality that serves a climate of continuous fear and a suffocating nationalism, other artists elsewhere will have to dare to take charge. Indeed, the cultural landscape diminishes always a tiny bit more with every artist who declares himself as silenced.

Journalist Can Dündar, who has been frequently threatened and convicted due to his critical questions, remarks in his op-ed of 31 August that in the Turkish language, the words *cesaret* ('courage') and *esaret* ('captivity') are separated only by one letter: an linguistic kinship that is appropriate for Turkey's cultural and political climate. Or like Sevinç Erbulak already said: art is no profession for cowards. Neither is theatre.

⁶ Original citation from the program brochure: “Es stochert unverschämt in der Vergangenheit herum, befragt voller Neugier die melancholischen Helden auf der Straße, tröstet verständnisvoll die Gewinner des Wahnsinns, stimmt mit unverbesserlichen Verlierern angestaubte Siegeshymnen an und schenkt allen Kindern des Landes Zuckerwatte in pappsüßem Rosa. Dabeibleiben die Unschuld und die Verbrechen der Gegenwart stets im Fokus. Denn den Kopf in den Sand stecken war immer eine trockene Angelegenheit” (<http://www.gorki.de/en/love-it-or-leave-it#>).

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