

MODERN ARMENIAN DRAMA



Scene from G. Sundukian's *Pepo*. Diocese of the Armenian Church of America Players (1975). Director, N. Parlakian; (left) as Pepo, G. Achian and as Giko, S. Kilerciyan.

MODERN ARMENIAN DRAMA

AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY
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PREFACE

By Armenian drama this anthology understands that body of plays originally composed in the Armenian language, and hence it excludes works in other languages written by playwrights of Armenian descent. The selections for this volume were arrived at in consultation with theater critics Professors Levon Hakhverdyan and Henrik Hovhannisyan of the Institute of Fine Arts in Erevan and in light of the judgment of its editors, who had experienced the dramas by reading, viewing, or staging them in both Armenia and the United States. The two interlocking principles that have guided the present choices are, first, the establishment of modern professional theater companies in the 1860s and the continuing popularity of plays within that repertory up to the present. The seven plays published in this collection span the years 1871 to 1992. The first four emanate from the rapid development of the pre-Soviet Armenian stage, and the next two represent the early and later phases of the Soviet period. The final item exemplifies the current era of transition to democracy and a market economy being charted by the post-Soviet Armenian republic. All but one of these pieces was written expressly for theatrical performance. Though Baronian's *Medzabadiw murats-ganner* [Honorable beggars] appeared in novel form, the portions in dialogue outweighed the narrative frame, so that soon after its author's death the work was readily adapted for the stage, where it has enjoyed widespread success ever since.

The translation process, of necessity, involves a creative tension between the idiom of the original and target languages. The plays comprising this anthology present a particular challenge in that they span a wide diversity of linguistic levels. The register of Demirchyan's farcical *Nazar the Brave*, for example, is obviously slangy and colloquial, whereas that of *Ancient Gods* is elevated for the most part. In others, such as *For the Sake of Honor*, all the characters possess their own idiolect, depending on their personality traits. Often the unity of the spirit and the letter innate in the original cannot be re-created in the transfer, and hence the translator must devise some compromise to cope with this disjunction. In the present collection every attempt has been made to remain as faithful as possible to the thought of the original, and so we have often been constrained to recast its form. On occasion, when the sociopolitical and cultural gap between a play's Armenian ambience and that of projected English readers demanded it, the editors had recourse to adaptation of the original scripts. Humor being one of the great human imponderables, not all jokes in Armenian are funny in English. Roman transliterations of Armenian terms follow a modified version of the system employed by the *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* obviating the use of diacriticals, as laid out in the equivalency table at the end of the volume.

One of the goals behind the present endeavor has been to make available for performance in English representative plays of the Armenian repertoire that should appeal to theatrical groups of all levels. Consequently the editors considered it appropriate to insert supplemental stage directions in square brackets in an effort to facilitate readers' visualization and for assistance in stage production.

It is our pleasant obligation to acknowledge the kind permission of the playwrights Perch Zeytuntsyan and Anahit Aghasaryan for their works to be translated and the valuable comments of Professor Kevork Bardjakian of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, at the project's initial stage. Aris G. Sevag and Aram Arkun of the Zohrab Information Center, New York, provided bibliographical assistance, and Dr. Nona Manoukian shared her linguistic expertise in certain nuances of translation. Our thanks go as well to the faculty of St. Nersess Armenian Theological Seminary, New Rochelle, for their hospitality and the use of their computer resources. John Taveras, computer expert at John Jay College of the City University of New York, also offered important advice. Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, formerly primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America and currently Patriarch of Jerusalem, is to be credited for having created an interest in staging Armenian drama in the 1970s and 1980s, which has borne fruit in this volume. The editors express their appreciation for a grant from the Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Fund, represented by co-trustee Suren D. Fesjian, to facilitate publication and for the interest of Ms. Jennifer Crewe of Columbia University Press. Lastly, the editors would like to express their thanks for the patience and generosity of time lent to this effort by Anahit Tutunjian and Florence Parlakian.

INTRODUCTION

Armenian literature arguably has one of the longest and most varied dramatic traditions of Eurasia, though it has not been continuous. By its nature, drama, in contrast to poetry, is an urban art dependent on the institution of a theater and associated groups of actors, as well as the existence of a sizable and relatively sophisticated audience. For Armenian theater, these conditions were met by the cities of Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman Empire, and Tiflis, administrative center of the Russian viceroyalty of Transcaucasia. By the second half of the nineteenth century both possessed large Armenian communities with a burgeoning middle class, developed educational system, and significant socioeconomic and cultural contacts with Western Europe.

Similar conditions prevailed in Armenia during the Roman period, which witnessed a significant degree of urban construction. Some of these cities were equipped with theaters, for example, Artashat, capital of King Artashes I (188–c.160 B.C.), and Tigranocerta, capital of Tigran the Great (95–56/5 B.C.). The historian Dio Cassius records a memorable performance of Euripides' *Bacchae* in 53 B.C., in which the skull employed at Agave's dramatic entrance with her son's head was that of the Roman general Crassus. The production was overseen by King Artawazd II (55–34 B.C.), who also composed tragedies in Greek, which were valued by the writer Plutarch (A.D. 50–125) but have not survived.¹

Although from that time until the second half of the seventeenth century no dramatic text exists, spectacle and theatrical performance of various kinds maintained their appeal. Despite the conversion of the Armenian court to Christianity in the early fourth century A.D. and the increasing importance of the new religion as a significant element in Armenian identity, the recitation of legends of ancient deities and heroes, orally transmitted by the bard (*gusan*) to instrumental accompaniment and improvised gesture, continued well into the medieval period over the opposition of the church. Court performances of mime and dance paralleled the dramatic elaboration of ecclesiastical ritual, for example, in the Palm Sunday *Drnbatsek* [The opening of the doors] and the Washing of the Feet on Maundy Thursday.² In the early modern period, Armenians were also involved in shadow theater (*karagöz*) and various types of farce, such as *orta oyunu* (central staging), about which more will be said later.³

Jesuit school drama exercised a marked influence on Eastern and Western European theater. Under its impact, the school became the first institution to nurture a new movement in Armenian dramaturgy. Its first fruit was a neoclassical tragicomedy of 1668 at the Papal Academy in Lvov on the role of the Roman martyr St. Hripsime in the Christianization of Armenia. The work is emblematic of Counter-Reformation proselytism among Armenian merchant communities in different parts of the Middle East and sought to advance the union of the Armenians of Poland with Rome. During the next century and a half this tradition became firmly rooted in Armenian culture through the efforts of the Armenian Catholic Mkhitarist Brotherhood of San Lazzaro, Venice.

This religious community played a major role in the development of Armenian publishing through the support of merchant munificence, issuing a series of grammars, dictionaries, and translations, as well as inaugurating the literary movement of Armenian classicism and producing the first modern critical history of the Armenian people. These Mkhitarist dramas were in-house productions at Mardi Gras and other holidays. Mainly drawn from biblical and ecclesiastical themes and composed in classical Armenian, the tragedies also treat episodes of secular history, for example, *The Perfidious Death of King Khosrov*. Plays of Metastasio, Alfieri, and Corneille were also performed in translation. The comedies, in contrast, were lively farces mostly written in the Armenian vernacular of Constantinople, involving

1. For a somewhat dated overview of preclassical Armenian theatrical activities, see V. Arvanian and L. G. Murad, *Two Thousand Years of the Armenian Theater* (New York: The Armenian National Council of America, 1954).

2. See H. H. Hovhannisyan, *Tatrone mijnadaryan Hayastanum* [The theater in medieval Armenia] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1978).

3. See L. S. Myrsiades, *The Karagiozis Heroic Performance in Greek Shadow Theater* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988), pp. 3, 7–8.

stock characters drawn from the motley Ottoman capital (Jew, Greek, Albanian, etc.), supplemented by works of Goldoni and Molière.⁴

In 1808 Mkhitarist school drama was brought to Constantinople and in 1820 to the Crimea, where in the 1860s the former Mkhitarist, Khoren Kalfayian, wrote the tragedy *Arshak II* and the rollicking farce *Alafranka* critiquing Armenian xenophilia. The Armenians of Tiflis, capital of Georgia, passed from Iranian to Russian rule in 1801, to be followed, in 1828, by those in the Khanate of Erevan. This period witnessed a significant expansion of Armenian educational establishments in what was now called Transcaucasia, the most important of which was the Nersisian school, whose first director was the Moscow-trained cleric Harutiwn Alamdarian (1795–1834). He introduced drama in a more Romantic vein, which influenced the sentimental work *Theodora or Filial Love* (1841) by his pupil Khachatur Abovian, more famous for his novelistic treatment of the Armenian struggle for liberation from Iran in *Wounds of Armenia* (1858).

The second social institution to promote Armenian drama was the voluntary association. Founded in a number of cities during the nineteenth century with the aim of fostering educational and cultural projects, these organizations performed plays such as Mkrtych Martirosian's comedy *Physiognomist of Duplicity* written in Calcutta in 1821 and works of Romantic nationalism written by the Mkhitarist-educated playwrights of Constantinople Mkrtych Beshigtashlian and Tovmas Terzian in the 1860s. Soon after the entry of the Khanate of Erevan into the Russian Empire, an Armenian amateur group there also premiered Griboedov's hugely successful comedy *The Woes of Wit* in 1827.⁵

The first step toward creating a professional theater in Tiflis was made by the dramatist Galust Shermazanian, who, in 1836, turned the first floor of his house into a hall where he staged plays satirizing social ills such as bribery, clerical backwardness, and tsarist bureaucracy. This more realist, secular approach is also manifest in the first works of serious Armenian drama criticism by Sargis Tigranian in the introduction to a translation of Racine's *Athalie* (1834) and in the writings of the social revolutionary Mikayel Nalbandian in the 1850s. During that decade students at Moscow University such as Nikoghayos Pughinian and Mikayel Ter-Grigorian began to write and produce vaudevilles in the Armenian dialect of Tiflis, making fun of the manners of the city's Armenian mercantile class, transferring these to the Caucasus upon graduation. Out of this matrix emerged the first East Armenian theater company in 1863, which staged in the same year *Sneezing at Night Is Good Luck*, the first work of Gabriel Sundukian. Though his predecessors' works have

4. See L. Zekiyan, *Hay tadroni sgzpnakaylere* [The initial steps of the Armenian theater] (Venice: St. Lazar's Press, 1975).

5. See V. A. Parsamyan, *Griboyedove ew hay-rusakan haraberutyunnere* [Griboedov and Armeno-Russian relations] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1947).

passed into oblivion, Sundukian's oeuvre is continually reprised on the Armenian stage.

GABRIEL SUNDUKIAN

The incorporation of Transcaucasia into the Russian Empire introduced a more developed money economy into the region, which gradually transformed many of its social mores. Over his dramatic career spanning half a century, Sundukian was to explore realistically the effects of incipient capitalism and modernism on urban life in the tradition of Gogol and Ostrovsky, as the novelist Perch Proshian had done more romantically for the countryside. One of the best illustrations of his approach is provided by *Pepo* (1871), which has established itself as probably the most popular work in the whole Armenian dramatic repertoire.⁶ Composed under the inspiration of Molière's *Le Mariage forcé*, the play highlights changes in business practice through the clash of the chief characters created for Chmshkian and Amerikian, two of the most talented Armenian actors of the day. This contrast in values is immediately evident from the details of dress and the décor of their respective houses, Pepo the fisherman, Sundukian's only lower class hero, appearing in traditional Caucasian garb, while the moneylender Arutin Zimzimov follows European fashion in his dress and domestic furnishings.

The more widespread utility of the usurer's services is indicated by Pepo's father depositing a large sum with Zimzimov to secure his daughter Kekel's dowry, one of the largest expenses the family would have to incur. The promissory note had been entrusted to Giko, the play's chief comic character, who indulges in long-winded stories interrupted by stuttering and snuff taking and peppered with proverbs and apothegms.

When the note is temporarily lost, Zimzimov exploits this technicality to deny any record of the debt, even forswearing himself before Pepo, who holds the traditional view that a man's word is his honor, and chides him with the question: "Don't you have a record in the ledger of your heart?" When Pepo remonstrates, the other has him removed from the premises and charged with trespassing and aggravated assault. However, in a powerful reversal triggered by the note's miraculous reappearance, Pepo idealistically ignores the pleas of his friend (and foil) Kakuli, a typical carefree representative of the Tiflis bazaar, to accept the usurer's bribe, preferring instead to bring his adversary to trial and expose him, as he tells his mother, Shushan, in the following speech:

6. Some notion of its charisma and magnetism can be measured from entries of its performances recorded in a commemorative log of the Erevan State Theater. See *The Sundukian Theater, 1922–1972* (Erevan: Hayastan, 1972).

Shall I give it [the promissory note] to him [Zimzimov] so he can make a fool and liar out of me in public? Shall I sell my soul for fear of prison? No Mama! This note is a sword handed to me by God and with it I shall lop off his head . . . People have to know that the man they bow to, honor and respect, and magnify and exalt to high heaven is really someone for whom there is nothing sacred in the world!

Pepo's conduct provokes Zimzimov's comment: "The distinction between great and small has gone now . . . A beggar without a bean to his name has the nerve to bawl me out!"

The fisherman's resolute defiance echoes the liberalism of the era of Alexander II's reforms, which led to the abolition of serfdom in the Tiflis province in 1864 and the integration of local courts into the imperial system in 1866. Other social changes of the time are also significant for the background of the play, such as the unprecedented mass protest of the Tiflis merchants and artisans against, and successful revocation of, an unpopular new tax in 1865. The growing impact of capitalism manifest in *Pepo* also emerges in *Ruined Family*. There the merchant Parsigh Leprunts sets about destroying his rival's business by making an immediate court-ordered call on a huge debt that he was honor-bound by word and handshake to delay for a month, with devastating effect on the other's family.

By the end of the nineteenth century, money had also loosened rigid class distinctions that had previously been determined by land tenure and breeding, fueling a new movement for upward mobility. Thus in *Ruined Family* Salome, wife of merchant Osep Gulabints, over her husband's objections, desires to marry her daughter Nato to the civil servant Aleksandr Marmarov. Similarly Pepo promises a large dowry to raise his sister to the middle class by marriage to a merchant, despite Kakuli's insistence that he is wading out of his depth.

Many of Sundukian's other dramas treat other aspects of the mating game. Thus *Khatabala*, for example, highlights the lack of contact intending couples had before their wedding. Margrit is an "old maid" daughter unable to attract a suitor because she is unappealing, if not ugly. Georg Masisiants, a suitor who has been love-smitten by a distant window view of the beautiful Natalia, is lured into the household by Garasim Yakulich Zambakhov, who deliberately misconstrues the situation and plans to offer his ugly daughter to the young man. But at the climax when finally introduced to Margrit, the young man is horrified by her appearance. As a result, a pleasant, humorous drama suddenly takes on near tragic proportions in an excruciating reversal.

These various social changes also impacted the structure of the Caucasian family. The old aunt Khakho, in *Ruined Family*, waxes lyrical on the living conditions of former days when several brothers would live under the parental roof, contrasting it with the current weakening of such ties. Similarly, in *Pepo*, we are struck by the cohesion and solidarity of the main character's extended family against the

marriage of convenience contracted by Epemia and Zimzimov. The wife has all the characteristics of a gold digger, enticing money and favors from a sugar daddy. The husband so craves to relive his youth with his young bride that his embarrassingly elderly billing, cooing, and kissing is a delight to behold. Their scenes together afford the dramatist the opportunity to reveal something of the human frailty of the usurer, who otherwise might appear a veritable monster.

Sundukian's plays also contribute to the contemporary debate on the status of women and their eligibility for higher education, employment, and increasing social emancipation. Epemia has such control over her husband as to alienate him from his daughter, and Salome, in *Ruined Family*, flouts her husband's wishes in arranging Nato's dowry, while in *Spouses* (1888) Margarit actually has the self-confidence to leave her husband. Nonetheless, many of Sundukian's female characters, particularly those of the lower class, are presented in more passive roles. Hence Kekel succumbs to a deep melancholia when her suitor rejects her after kissing her in public, while her mother, Shushan, is beside herself with grief and constantly appeals to divine intervention to impact her condition indirectly.

Dramatically Sundukian's works tend to follow the traditional mold. In particular, he deftly uses the device of soliloquy in plays like *Pepo* as a means of conveying to the audience the innermost thoughts of the principal characters in speeches of great power and memorable effect. Similarly he underlines the significance of certain episodes by halting the action through the convention of tableaux adopted from melodrama. As noted by Arnot, the Ibsenesque quality of Sundukian's *Ruined Family* is striking.⁷ Dealing as they do with middle-class morality, a number of Sundukian's works are somewhat reminiscent in structure and theme of several of Ibsen's realistic social plays (1879–1890), but the tone in the Armenian works is often lighter—a bittersweet mixture—not at all in the style of the stolid Norwegian playwright.

HAGOP BARONIAN

In contrast to the German and Russian influences that predominated in Transcaucasia, the cultures of Italy, and more particularly France, had far more of an impact on the Armenian and Turkish intelligentsia of Constantinople. Touring Italian operatic groups performed there periodically from the eighteenth century on, and French plays were staged under the later Tanzimat period in which the Ottoman Empire became more amenable to European influence. Thus Hagop Baronian's early adaptation of Goldoni's *A Servant of Two Masters* (1865) reflected the artistic

7. R. Arnot, "Special Introduction," *Armenian Literature*, rev. ed. (New York: Colonial Press, 1901), p. vii.

predilections of the time. The dramatists Beshigtashlian and Terzian, encountered above, were also active during the same decade in making works from those cultures available to Armenian audiences. Indeed, the repertoire of both early Armenian drama companies, the Arevelean Tadron [Eastern Theater] and Gedikpasha Theater, relied so heavily on translated material that they provoked the censure of critics like the short story writer and legal expert Krikor Zohrab.⁸ In contrast to the penchant for Romantic tragedies manifested by the Armenian poets of Mkhitarist training, Baronian's natural genius lay in comedy. There, as his output clearly indicates, his greatest inspiration was Molière.⁹

At the same time, some of Baronian's works bear a certain similarity to the indigenous theatrical tradition of *orta oyunu*, or central staging, mentioned above. Like the Italian commedia dell'arte on which Goldoni drew inspiration, the form consisted of typical scenes involving a lively range of stock characters.¹⁰ It is likely that Baronian would have witnessed such performances either outdoors or in some of the large coffeehouses. Moreover, the repartee between its chief characters, the clever conjuror Peshikiar and the trader, comic, artisan, servant Kavaklu, seems reminiscent of features in the satirist's novel *Honorable Beggars*, although the work's main literary models are Molière's *Les Fâcheux* and *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*. However, its opening scene exploits the same topos as Kavaklu's narrative in *The Sorcery* of begging for alms from travelers disembarking from small steamers at the pier.¹¹

From the time he wrote *Honorable Beggars* Baronian was precluded from producing plays to be staged because of a general ban on Armenian theater imposed by the reactionary sultan Abdülhamid II. Nevertheless, a number of his works were later adapted for the theater and have been continually reprised in the homeland and in different parts of the Armenian Diaspora.

Like Sundukian, Baronian explores the changes occurring in urban Armenian society of the later nineteenth century. Some of his satirical writings focus on the central Armenian political figures and issues of the day, such as the power struggle between the *amira* establishment of bankers and influential civil servants, on the one hand, and the guilds and European-educated intellectuals. The latter's success led to the promulgation of the Armenian National Constitution in 1860 that assured much greater lay participation in the deliberative process regarding the af-

8. For further details, see T. S. Halman, *Modern Turkish Drama* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976), pp. 30–36, and the literature cited there.

9. For further details, see K. B. Bardakjian, "Baronian's Debt to Molière," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 1 (1984): 139–62; and E. Alexanian, "19th Century Armenian Realism and Its International Relations," *The Review of National Literatures* (Armenia) 13 (1984): 50–51.

10. N. N. Martinovich, *The Turkish Theatre* (Boston: Benjamin Blom, 1968), p. 14.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 49

fairs of the Armenian *millet* in the Ottoman Empire.¹² However, two of his works, *Eastern Dentist* (1869) and *Brother Balthazar* (1886–87), are satires on adultery, focusing on the contemporary clash between traditional sexual mores and the introduction of more liberal European attitudes. The first depicts a philandering dentist who rendezvous at the homes of women “patients.” His suspicious wife chases after him through his shenanigans on a given day, including a hot session at a costume party, before resolving their marital problem.

The second relates to the infidelity of a wife who is bored by her rather boorish, older merchant husband and has assignations with a sophisticated, savvy family friend ironically named Kibar (lit., upright, honest). The piece also satirizes the venal, perfunctory hearings by members of the Armenian judicial council of Balthazar’s suit to divorce his wife. In conclusion, it highlights the contrast between the older position of a wife’s fidelity to her husband regardless of his treatment of her and a woman’s right to greater freedom of action in her love life, as asserted in Srpuihi Diwsap’s controversial novel *Mayda* (1884).

Tame from a sexual point of view, *Honorable Beggars* deals with every other vice and folly known to man, especially the cardinal sins of vanity and greed. The play opens as the rich provincial land owner, Apisoghom Agha, arrives at Constantinople from Trebizond, hoping, at age forty, to find a decent girl to marry in the capital. Baronian directs satire not only at the city slickers he encounters there but also at the agha himself for his philistinism in neglecting Armenian culture, unless his name is prominently displayed on any publication. He creates laughter by the use of the age-old comedic techniques of derision, incongruity, and automatism.¹³ In other words, the agha is ridiculed as a country bumpkin, shown to be out of his element by his supposed betters, and turned into an automaton with machinelike responses, lacking the ability to communicate intelligently.

The method of each beggar—editor, poet, writer, priest, doctor, matchmaker, barber, or photographer—is to shower the agha with flattery. For example, in trying to get Apisoghom to subscribe to his newspaper, an editor pretends to know his entire family history. Lying through his teeth, he starts a syllogism. Major premise:

12. The term *millet* relates to confessional communities within the Ottoman Empire outside the Islamic majority. The Armenian *millet* was constituted by communicant members of the Armenian Apostolic Church under the jurisdiction of the Armenian patriarch of Constantinople, who as ethnarch represented his community at the Sublime Porte. As a result of the constitution a greater measure of lay participation was introduced into the *millet*’s deliberative process. During the second half of the nineteenth century the community’s profile gradually changed from one determined by religion to one increasingly influenced by nationalism. For further details, see M. Ashjian, *Armenian Church Patristic and Other Essays* (New York: The Armenian Prelacy, 1994), pp. 227–51.

13. See T. Hatlen, *Orientation to the Theater*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1992), pp. 125–38.

Your father was a subscriber (unlikely in view of Trebizond's distance from the capital). Minor premise: He was a very good person. Conclusion: The agha will also be a good person, if he subscribes. But the agha is being deliberately dense so the editor tries flattery.

EDITOR: You can speak Turkish I believe?

AGHA: No.

EDITOR: French?

AGHA: No.

EDITOR: German?

AGHA: No.

The robotlike repartee is pure Molièrian automatism.

Eventually he is outraged by having to treat several sycophants who join his restaurant table. Cheated by everyone under the sun, and all but pulled apart physically by a clergyman and a matchmaker with eligible women to offer him as a wife, Apisoghom Agha decides to leave. Even then, his landlord, who has harassed him with the latest gossip from the Armenian National Assembly, demands a huge loan. When his wife ups the request by a hefty sum, the agha finally packs and heads for the steamboat back to Trebizond. With Apisoghom's departure, the dog-eat-dog world is brought into temporary quiescence and, one hopes, a time to reflect on human shortcomings. Baronian has performed the work of the satirist in seeking to cleanse society of its foibles and follies with a word rapier of the sharpest quality.

ALEKSANDR SHIRVANZADE

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century Transcaucasia underwent rapid change. We have observed the impact of incipient capitalism on Tiflis in Sundukian's plays. However, Baku became the hub of the region's industrial development from the 1870s with the opening of the oilfields to long-term leases. This paved the way for large-scale mechanized production, which sets the scene for Shirvanzade's masterpiece *For the Sake of Honor*. Foreign investment was involved from early on, attracting the interest of the Nobel brothers of Sweden and the Rothchilds of Paris. With the expansion in the job market, rail and steamship links were forged to ease worker transportation. Baku became a city of contrasts ranging from the poverty and inadequate conditions of the slums to the flamboyance and vulgar ostentation of the nouveaux riches. By the 1890s trade unions were formed to curb the owners' exploitation, and in 1903 a strike was organized that concluded in December 1904 with the first labor agreement in the Russian Empire.

In that very month Shirvanzade's play opened in Baku. Its enthusiastic reception there led to a successful run in Tiflis in 1905. That same year its script was published in the newspaper *Lumay*, as well as in book form. Its 1908 staging in Con-

stantinople was viewed with approbation by the critic Krikor Zohrab, who later commented that “the structure of the play is superb in its simplicity and reminds one of the construction of northern literature.”¹⁴ By 1911 it had enjoyed three hundred performances, a record unprecedented in Armenian theater history.

Zohrab’s allusion presumably relates to Ibsen, many of whose plays were translated into Armenian and performed in the 1890s, for example, *Ghosts* in 1891 and *A Doll’s House* the following year. And indeed Shirvanzade adopts an Ibsenesque psychological approach in his plays, realistically presenting his characters’ positive and negative traits and adopting an ironic stance toward the convention in melodrama of identifying with the hero and vilifying the villain. The plot construction of *For the Sake of Honor* also owes something to the dramaturgy of the Scribean “well-made play,” whose impact on Ibsen is well established, to generate suspense through carefully placed foreshadowing, discoveries, turning-point crises, and ironic climaxes.

The dramatist’s increasing involvement in social and political causes manifests itself in his commitment to the improvement of women’s rights, already featured in the play *Princess* (1891). This was followed by *Evgine* (1901), *Did She Have the Right?* (1902), and *Armenuhi* (1909). The second of these seems particularly dependent on Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*. Like the latter, it suffered critics’ affront over a mother who abandons her children to escape a husband who has made her life unbearable. Shirvanzade directs an ironical apologia at his conservative detractors: “You would instruct Shirvanzade to have his heroine motivate her leaving by saying something patriotic such as ‘Goodbye, my children, I’m going off to fight the Turks and preserve Armenia.’” He ends by observing that a true understanding of the situation will only result from future enlightenment.¹⁵ *For the Sake of Honor* also promotes women’s greater independence of thought and action in society in the characterization of Margarit.

That play sketches three generations of a dysfunctional family of provincial origins that had become caught up in the “get rich quick” atmosphere of the time. Intermittently we hear of one of the grandfathers who, as a village priest, embodies the traditional values of Transcaucasian agrarian life. In his novel *Namus* of 1885 Shirvanzade had treated the fiercely held code of sexual propriety maintained in that milieu. In a more cosmopolitan context, however, the concept of honor is capable of multiple constructions. In the present work the family represents society

14. A. B. Kaghtzrouni, ed., *Alexandre Shirvanzade* (New York: Armenian National Council of America, 1959), p. 18. For some negative criticism the play generated, see H. S. Tamrazyan, *Shirvanzade* (Erevan: Haypethrat, 1961), pp. 449–50.

15. *Shirvanzade: amboghjakan erker* [Shirvanzade: Collected works] (Erevan: Haypethrat, 1950), vol. 6, pp. 232–33.

“writ small,” each of its members interpreting the term *honor* with significant nuance.

The patriarch of the current generation is Andreas Elizbarian. Something of a family man from his origins, he misses the affection of his children, who seem to him cold, calculating, and highly individualistic. A self-made pragmatist, he has not been above lying and cheating when this served his purpose. Now, though, he enjoys esteem as a philanthropist and pillar of society, an honor he safeguards by burning documents incriminating him of defrauding the family of his deceased business partner Otarian.

The other two figures of that generation, Andreas’s wife, Eranuhi, and her brother, Saghatel, act as foils for each other. Eranuhi’s sense of honor owes much to her formation in a priestly household. She opposes the moral relativism around her but maintains a subordinate silence. Her brother, in contrast, is a self-centered, small-minded, unscrupulous rogue. Totally devoid of any finer feelings, he steals from his brother-in-law, for whom he works as a clerk, and appears ready to countenance any action to increase his hoard, assisting Andreas in destroying the documents in order to blackmail him.

The siblings of the younger generation are also presented as foils. Of these, the elder son Bagrat is a chip off the old block. Building on his father’s achievements, he nurses ambitious plans to expand the family business into a much larger complex. Consonant with this, he observes a greater distinction between manager and workmen, and holds the latter (even his uncle) to a much stricter code of accountability. In keeping with the times, he praises engineers over the old professional elite of lawyers and doctors, and supports science against religion, about which he favors skepticism. Fearing his credit would be damaged by scandal, he urges his sister, Margarit, to destroy the documents in the family’s interest.

Bagrat’s younger brother, Suren, has a more delicate, artistic disposition and affects the lifestyle of an upper-class beau. Despising the business of making money, he prefers to squander it on love affairs with opera stars and by gambling. According to this code, one must honor one’s debts, and so he borrows large sums from his uncle in anticipation of his inheritance.

Although Rozalia, like Suren, has a penchant for extravagance, whereas the latter splurges on others, his sister is a materialist. Playing the socialite, she loves being driven in a carriage but, typical of her *nouveau riche* status, overly insists on distinctions between herself and the servants. Rozalia’s sense of honor seems based on family expectations. As she says to Margarit, “I’m my father’s daughter. I have to love and protect him-if you wish-even if he’s a thief.”

Margarit takes after her mother in the significance she accords to ethics. However, where Eranuhi derives her values from religion, her daughter, as Saghatel remarks, “talks like a philosopher,” a propensity nurtured by her more extensive education and voracious reading. Her role in the play is that of a bourgeois Armenian Antigone, pitting principle against authority in confronting Andreas: “Father . . .

I'd die for your honor. But what about mine? Must I defile it for your riches? Spare me this shame. That's your duty as my father. Give me my honor. Without it I cannot live."

Having little experience of the world, she is prepared to sacrifice her life to maintain her sense of integrity, which she perceives as compromised by her father's destruction of the papers she had faithfully promised to guard. It is the mood of what Hegel calls "abstract right" that drives those who suffer its loss to seek satisfaction in the subjective depths of conscience. A shot heard offstage alerts us to the suicide. The melodramatic effect tempts modern audiences to smile. But, as in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, the temptation is quickly dispelled in the genuinely tragic denouement.

LEWON SHANT

Shant's early plays (*The I Man*, 1901; *For the Sake of Others*, 1903; *On the Road*, 1904) coincide chronologically with those of Shirvanzade and maintain the same approach of treating contemporary problems in a realistic mode, despite differences in political philosophy. The former adhered to the more nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation founded in Tiflis in 1890, whereas the latter belonged to the social democratic Hnchakian Revolutionary Party organized in Geneva in 1887. His seven-year study of philosophy and psychology in Germany left its imprint in those works on his handling of the exercise of the will. However, his next play, *Ancient Gods*, written after a four-year hiatus, while exploring similar questions, did so within a radically different mise-en-scène and from an entirely new dramatic perspective. The work was totally epoch making. When staged in 1913, it took the Armenian literary and theatrical world by storm. Controversial in its subject matter, no less than its arresting sensual appeal, it became a runaway smash hit and a best-seller overnight, the debate it engendered spilling into Armenian newspaper columns for several years.

As a potent force in Europe and the Middle East during the nineteenth century, nationalism played a major role in Armenian culture. At its core lay a new definition of Armenian identity, explained no longer in terms of affiliation to a religious community but by ties to a common homeland, shared history, and collective symbols. Interest in folklore and ethnography led to a more serious preoccupation with Armenian mythology, both in the pre-Christian Armenian legends recorded by the historian Movses Khorenatsi and the living oral epic of Sasun. In the first two decades of the twentieth century this lore inspired a coterie of writers in avant-garde journals to renew Armenian literature by appealing to the powerful pristine symbols of the pagan era. One of the first of these, *Anahit* [goddess of nature], was begun in Constantinople by Arshag Chobanian in 1898 and continued in Paris. Another, *Mehean* [temple of Mithra], was founded by a group

of writers, including the poet and novelist Gosdan Zarian, the novelist and critic Hagop Oshagan, and the poet Taniel Varuzhan (1884–1915), whose seminal collection *Hetanos erger* [Pagan songs] appeared in 1913.

It is against this background that Shant, seeking a broader canvas for his dramatic creation, began to mine the deep veins of Armenian myth. In *Ancient Gods*, an elemental dichotomy subsists between the ascetic, world-denying life of the monks on their island desert and the celebration of strength and beauty in the pagan temple scene, in which the young monk is moved to join. That scene, which culminates in the awesome epiphany of the deities Vahagn and Astghik, is one of impressive visual pomp and splendor, suggestive of the cinematographic treatment of a Cecil B. De Mille film epic. Its extravagant spectacle is characteristic of the playwright's heightened use of music, song, and dance in the play, as well as greater sophistication and elaboration in stage sets and lighting, commensurate with the richness of his theme. The overall effect is reminiscent of Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, uniting all the arts in the service of drama.

As in the rest of his mature dramas, Shant based the plot of *Ancient Gods* on an episode of the Armenian past, in this case, the founding of a monastery on the island (now a peninsula) in Lake Sevan in A.D. 874. According to historical accounts, the project was undertaken by the future catholicos,¹⁶ Mashtots, and commissioned by Princess Mariam Bagratuni, wife of the local prince Vasak Siwni. This setting was particularly appropriate since, by report, Mashtots had had a liaison with a high-born lady before becoming a monk. In the play the motif is developed to powerful effect in the father superior's encounters with Princess Mary, creating dramatic tension by the juxtaposition of opposites: male and female, clerical and lay, sacred and profane, this-worldly and other-worldly.

In most sexually overlaid dialogue, the princess seeks to rekindle the flame of passion between them. Confessing she is largely a stranger to her two offspring, she confronts the abbot with the fact that the monastic church they have been laboring over is actually their "child," dedicated not to Mary, Mother of God, but to herself, Princess Mary. The revelation devastates the cleric, who determines forthwith that their common edifice must be destroyed, as an abomination to his faith.

This interchange is paralleled by another between the young monk and the prince's daughter, Seda, who are united by a storm on the lake, from which the monk rescues the girl. Afterward, he is obsessed by fantasies of her, which disturb his devotions. The broad outline of this incident echoes that of Krikor Zohrab's short story *Potorige* [The storm] of 1889 in which a young man becomes withdrawn and delusional after sharing physical intimacy with a beautiful widow while on a boat in a storm at sea. Moreover, Shant had already constructed a similar scenario

16. The term *catholicos* designates the highest office in the Armenian ecclesiastical hierarchy.

in his novella *Dartse* [The turning point] of 1897, in which a monk embraces a young woman in order to assist her across a brook. Their physical contact arouses new emotions in him, which affirm his manhood and ultimately cause him to abandon his life of celibate austerity.

When the young monk divulges his innermost thoughts, the blind monk, a Teiresias figure, informs him that these elemental stirrings within himself are demonic apparitions, against which he must contend in spiritual warfare. However, in the midst of the long monastic office in church, the young man drifts into a reverie, his imagination spiriting him off to participate in pagan rites and renounce the ascetic struggle for the instant gratification of the senses. In another quasi-dream sequence he sees a hermit, whose only sense of value comes from a pit he has been digging. In keeping with the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, the latter avers that “all is vanity.” However, in a crucial transformation of the scene, the hermit disappears, the pit is filled up, and the monk’s beloved Seda appears on top of it, only to vanish again. Finally, she appears mermaid-like and beckons him to unite with her once more in the sea. In the end, the other monks scramble to retrieve his body from the waves to give him burial at the threshold of the church, one already acknowledged as the dwelling of the ancient gods, not that of the new faith.

Shant is the first Armenian dramatist to employ such expressionistic techniques. In this play he puts them to effective use in objectifying the residual worldliness in the mind of the father superior and the blind monk in the person of the man in white. They are even more evident in the onstage representation of the workings of the young monk’s unconscious in his fantasies of Seda, the natural elements of the winds and the waves, and the hermit.

These parts of the play contrast significantly with the linear realism of the main plot. In the latter, the abbot decides that the church must be demolished, as we have noted, and informs the brotherhood of his decision. The majority oppose him, citing its external beauty and traditional form, their lack of ability in construction, the offense that such a move would cause to their patrons, and the possible repercussion of having their food rations suspended. Hence the father superior leaves on his own to embark on a continuous process of building and destroying on a higher plane, stating: “This shrine shall have my reason as foundation, my will for columns, my faith its dome!”

This section of the drama is reminiscent of the conclusion of Ibsen’s romantic tragedy *Brand* of 1866, in which the main character abandons the church he is having built in the town, regarding it as corrupt, and leads the townspeople up the mountain to worship in the natural Ice Church. However, half way up, the exhausted community are easily won over by the mayor and his collaborator, the bishop, to return to their homes, after falsely promising them a redistribution of wealth on their return. The Armenian dramatist’s keen interest in Ibsen’s work is evident from his translation of the latter’s *Enemy of the People* (1882). Although more prevalent in later plays such as *The Master Builder* (1892) and *When We Dead*

Awaken (1899), already in *Brand* Ibsen utilized elements of symbolism to convey his dramatic message.

In *Ancient Gods* Shant follows Ibsen in his depiction of what might be called the Apollonian and Dionysian principles of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in contrasting the father superior's more cerebral path with the young monk's sensuous journey, which had provoked the former's retort: "Through you speaks primitive mankind." The young monk's susceptibility to fantasy, full of nostalgia for a previous world beyond the strictures of the critical mind, parallels the mood of other symbolist playwrights of the time, such as Hauptmann or Maeterlinck. Indeed, the love scenes in the latter's *Pelléas and Mélisande* of 1893 bear comparison with the passionate exchanges between Seda and the young monk in the present play.

The decade and a half separating *Ancient Gods* from *Nazar the Brave* (1923), the next work in the anthology, witnessed unprecedented turmoil internationally, which was to engulf the Armenian communities of both the Ottoman and Russian empires. In the course of World War I and its aftermath, the first genocide of the twentieth century was perpetrated against the Armenian population of the Ottoman capital and the eastern provinces, causing widespread death and destruction. Large numbers were deported from their traditional homeland into exile in Syria, thus precipitating the creation of the current worldwide Armenian Diaspora. The immediate impact of this catastrophe is reflected in the dramatic works of Suren Bartewian (1876–1921), such as *The Eternal Flame*.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the collapse of Romanov rule in Russia offered Armenians in Transcaucasia the opportunity to declare independence. However, squeezed between the advancing Kemalist Turkish forces in the west and the Red Army from the north, the government of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation capitulated to the latter in December 1920. Heralded by poets of the revolution like Eghishe Charents (1897–1937) and Shushanik Kurghinyan (1876–1927), the first years of socialist rule inaugurated a period of intellectual ferment resulting in the foundation of the Institute of Science and Art, and of artistic experimentation, which led to the establishment of the State Dramatic Theater in 1922, a music conservatory in the following year, and a film studio in 1925. The atmosphere in the Armenian capital

17. More recently, dramatic reflections of the Genocide include Perch Zeytuntsyan's *Mets Lrutuyune* [The great silence] (1984), depicting the life of the poet Taniel Varuzhan, and *Otki, Datarann e galis* [All rise, the court is in session] (1988), dealing with the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian. The latter was produced under the impact of glasnost, which permitted greater freedom of speech on nationalist issues. Moreover, the past decade has seen the proliferation of four treatments, in English, of different facets of the subject in America: (1) *Grandma, Pray for Me*, by Nishan Parlakian (1990); (2) *Beast on the Moon*, by Richard Kalinoski (1995); (3) *Mirrors*, by Herand Markarian (1996); and *Nine Armenians*, by Leslie Ayvazian (1998).

is vividly captured in Zabel Esayian's travelogue *Prometheus Liberated* of 1926. By the following year, however, the situation started to change as deviation and dissension from the ascendant Stalinist position began to be purged from the party and positions of authority in public life.

DERENIK DEMIRCHYAN

One of the first Armenian dramas of the Soviet period treats the common folkloric motif of the rise of a total nonentity to kingly power. Armenian tradition had embodied the theme in the story of the ne'er-do-well peasant Nazar. One day he strikes dead several flies in an incident reminiscent of the delightful tale of "Seven in One Blow." In an English version of the latter, a tailor swatted dead one fly and the number was overblown to seven. In the Armenian tale Nazar is too lazy to count the number killed, and so he rounds out the figure to a thousand.¹⁸ This folk tale received its first literary adaptation at the hands of the poet Avetik Isahakyan under the title *Agha Nazar* in 1911. A year later another important poet of the time, Hovhannes Tumanian, produced a second version, also close to the folk idiom. Demirchyan's play *Kaj Nazar* [Nazar the brave] of 1923 represents a more independent handling of the material. First appearing in the literary magazine *Nork*, it was subsequently published several times in Armenian and Russian, as well as in Turkish and Georgian. Its immense popularity secured its transformation into other artistic media, first as an opera by Hamo Stepanyan and then in 1940 as a film.

Although the main character seems doomed to failure, thanks to a fortuitous series of events he realizes the fantasies of the man in the street, living in palatial luxury like the tyrant of Plato's *Republic*. What is laughable is that his glorious achievements are always dependent on inadvertent actions, which at first seem to be ridiculous and potentially harmful. When Nazar retreats, this is viewed as a subterfuge to cut off the enemy at the flank. Carrying his banner into Zorbastan, he escapes a tiger, which strays into his ranks, by climbing a tree. Accidentally falling onto the beast's back, he seems to be fearlessly riding the animal. In the Land of the Giants he must fight to displace the king. This time his willful horse foils his escape plan by charging into the fray. Nazar grabs a tree limb to stop his forward movement, but, the limb being dead, it snaps off. His enemies think he has uprooted a tree in the fierceness of his attack, and the king abdicates in his favor.

In keeping with the earlier legend, Demirchyan's Nazar is thus a potent embodiment of the workings of fate and fortune, having had "greatness thrust upon"

18. The Armenian rhyme between the hero's name, Nazar, and the number one thousand (*hazar*) is aptly exploited in the jingle the hero creates to celebrate his feat: "I'm Nazar the Brave, I'll have you know. I slay a thousand with a single blow."

him quite literally by Lady Luck. So uncanny is Nazar's winning streak that he ends up believing implicitly in his unassailability. Reassuring his wife Ustian, who had earlier driven Nazar out of the house but has now rejoined him after hearing of his precipitate prosperity, he promises her, "We'll live a comfortable and secure life."

The human face of his unprecedented advancement lies in the effective use of publicity, or, in current parlance, "spin." The credibility of the written account on Nazar's banner of his slaying a thousand creates an aura about Nazar, predisposing people to show him deference as an intrepid warrior. Others then jump on the bandwagon of Nazar's increasing fame, fabricating memories of common exploits to ingratiate themselves.

In the Tumanian account, it is Nazar who goes to the village priest as the only literate person around, and the latter humors him by emblazoning his watchword on a piece of cloth, merely as a joke. However, Demirchyan expands the episode into a somewhat anticlerical satire. The idea of publicizing Nazar's achievements arises from a wacky, decrepit subdeacon, who mutters incoherently about their forming part of a larger picture of eschatological speculation, vouchsafed to him in dreams and visions. Then, in token of divine protection, he gives the peasant a few specks of earth in a charm and sends the coward off, saying, "Go vanquish your enemies."

Tumanian's Nazar is merely pitiful and timid and reigns as a *bon viveur*. Demirchyan's character, however, is more complex, acquiring the attributes of guile, opportunistic aggression, and flamboyance. In the course of acts 4 and 5, he becomes corrupted by the adulation of the courtiers and the absolute power he wields, and he begins issuing preposterous commands: that "the sun rise in the east and set in the west," that "people are to be born and die." In his overweening ambition, he aspires to "liberate the entire world from unworthy kings." He has learned that "people are so stupid that they will put up with anything." Exploiting this, he has himself proclaimed a saint, sharply increases taxation, and insists on putting civilian recruits in the front line of battle. People fight and die for him. If they win, he gets the credit. If they lose, "I am not to blame, what do I care?" he cynically remarks.

Man's gullibility and its power to facilitate tyranny are thus central to the play's theme. As Hakhverdyan contends, the work is on a par with Bertolt Brecht's caricature of Hitler's rise to power in *The Career of Arturo Ui*.¹⁹ Nothing in English compares to it except, perhaps, Henry Fielding's *Tragedy of Tragedies, or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1730), which was inspired by the digit-sized hero of folklore. Just as that play contains political overtones, so in *Nazar the Brave* we

19. See L. Hakhverdyan, "Armenian Classical Drama and Its International Context," *Review of National Literatures* (Armenia) 13 (1984): 193.

note allusions to the troops' refusal to fight for Nazar latterly and the people's fomenting revolt. His luck finally runs out, however, when he tries to send Ustian away in order to ennoble himself by consorting with queens of the blood royal.

Ustian, that last vestige of his real-life self, is provoked to expose him as the poseur and fraud he really is, by venting her ire at him as she had done in act 1. His imploding fall is as mercurial as his rise. Immediately the courtiers begin plundering the palace fixtures, dismantling Nazar's glory before his very eyes, while the common people laugh and scorn him for his being pusilanimously hen-pecked. The motif of an authority figure facing the consequences of his actions adumbrates the main focus of Demirchyan's play *Phosphoric Ray* of 1932.

Ustian had always mistrusted her husband's intrinsic belief in their luck. Considering that their rags-to-riches story had a dreamlike quality, she braced herself for fortune's fickle turn. Now that the bubble is burst, she joins in the scrimmage to salvage some valuables to take back with her. As is often the case in folk tales, the moral is underscored at the end, in this case by the house manager's epilogue. Characterizing the play as a "bad dream," he denies that this is the effect of luck but rather the result of people allowing themselves "to be hoodwinked by scarecrows," inspiring Muradyan to argue that the work unequivocally sounds the alarm against despotism.²⁰ However, he concludes the comedy on a lighter note, by a theatrical analogy. Just as he plunges the stage in darkness to indicate that the performance is over, so he expresses his hope for the future by affirming that the real-life "dream" is also over: "There's no more king, no Nazar now."

In transposing the material from narrative to dramatic voice, Demirchyan renders the characters virtually Hirschfeldian caricatures set into motion. He had to write a hyperbolic travesty of reality, an outsized burlesque, a circus with a linear plot not dissimilar to the comedies of Aristophanes. The play's grotesque and phantasmagorical aspects are reminiscent of Gogol's *Revizor* [The inspector general] of 1836. The latter's plot is similar in poking fun at the provincial townspeople for fettering a member of the lower classes as a visiting official. Small wonder, then, that the master farceur Danny Kaye played the protagonist in a film version of Gogol's work a few decades ago. Indeed, Kaye would have made a great Nazar!

PERCH ZEYTUNTSYAN

The 1920s marked a significant cultural transition for the Armenian Republic. Traditional classics, European and Armenian, shared the stage of the Erevan State Theater with newer works like Demirchyan's *Kaj Nazar* and Shant's *Ancient Gods*,

20. H. Muradyan, *Derenik Demirchyan: Kyankn u gortse* [Derenik Demirchyan: Life and work] (Erevan: Armenian SSR Academy of Sciences, 1961), p. 300.

despite the latter author's political views, which subsequently kept his oeuvre off the repertoire until the final years of the Soviet Union.²¹ At the same time, other writers like the poet Eghishe Charents experimented with novel theatrical forms, improvising large-scale spectacles with mass nonprofessional participation on the theory that the new society demanded a radically new kind of art.

With the growth of Stalinism, the role of ideology, centrally formulated and implemented by the increasingly encompassing organs of the Communist Party, began to obtrude more palpably on the republic's cultural milieu. Strict censorship imposed limits on artistic freedom, harnessing it to the tenets of socialist realism. This tended toward the publication of rather two-dimensional works, unmasking the bourgeois enemy within Soviet society or extolling the virtues of exemplary citizens in the factory or collective farm, while overlooking societal faults and inspiring confidence in the future. Similarly, during World War II, the arts were pressed into service in support of the defense of the homeland against Nazi aggression (e.g., Aramashot Babayan's play *Our Struggle Is Just* in 1941). In the aftermath they also had their role to play in the cold war.

Significant change did not occur until the thaw under Krushchev and its aftermath, when a new generation of writers and artists like the poet Paruyr Sevak and the film director Frunze Dovlatyan were allowed to explore topics previously taboo, such as nationalism and the significance of the individual. Examples of this greater latitude on stage include Aleksandr Araksmanyan's *Sixty Years and One Hour* (1965), treating Stalinist purges in Siberia, and Zhora Harutyunyan's *Your Last Haven*, on two brothers who emigrate to Armenia from the Diaspora after the war, one of whom resettles in the United States because of the degree of corruption he finds in his homeland. Social criticism was also more incisive, as in Zhirayr Ananyan's farce *My House Is Not Your House*, which pokes fun at the rigors of Soviet bureaucracy in allocating city apartments.

Perch Zeytuntsyan is a younger contemporary of these playwrights, who began his literary career in the 1960s. His drama *Unfinished Monologue* (1981) provides a panorama of three generations of Soviet society from its pioneers to their offspring, who led its postwar industrial expansion, and their children, who are now growing up under its moral decline in Brezhnev's era of stagnation (1964–82). The work thus anticipates Gorbachev's belated appeal for perestroika, or reconstruction, in its critique of the widening gulf between sociopolitical rhetoric and actual practice.

It focuses on a traditional Armenian household where grandfather, father, and son live under one roof. Arsen Avetyan, now a pensioner, has a large circle of friends on whose behalf he continually appeals to his son, Rafayel, to circumvent

21. In contrast, the play was recently revived in Erevan during an International Day of Theater before an audience including President Robert Kocharian. See the report in *Marmara* (Istanbul), April 1, 1999.

bureaucratic red tape.²² Rafayel, in turn, grew up under wartime deprivations to become the director of a construction works, a responsible position, in which he is constantly called on to make decisions. Consequently he yearns for the reassurance of a bygone era of greater idealism and sharply defined moral judgment on “how to live, how to tell good from evil, white from black. After all, there are so many shades in between.” Obsessively he asks his father to retell the story of the trial of a coworker for stealing four biscuits from a Russian supply train in the 1920s. He is also anxious about his son, Vigen, who is on the threshold of adulthood, making the transition from school to university. His son is street-smart on the importance of cronyism and a “sweetener” to facilitate acceptance into higher education. Like a dutiful father, Rafayel has made the necessary arrangements, yet his conscience is not at peace. He apologizes for his action, when on the phone about it in the presence of colleagues, and insists on going through the motions of congratulating Vigen on attaining his goal by his own efforts.

Hard work and dedication are the essence of Rafayel’s life, as he says about himself in his final monologue: “He came into the world as a laborer and that’s how he lived and died.” So devoted is he to what he perceives to be his public duty that he has totally neglected his individual needs and those of his family. Striving to do what he feels is right has led him to take a stand against the ministry’s rigid command structure over a rail link to service an industrial complex. Perceiving the inadequacy of the partial four-kilometer track, which has been approved, he sets about the necessary wheeling and dealing and finessing of the accounts to extend it to thirteen kilometers so that it connects the plant directly with its workforce in the neighboring villages.

Although even his superior, Markosyan, acknowledges that right may be on Rafayel’s side, the latter has exposed himself to censure by disobeying orders and abusing his office. Laboring under this tension, Rafayel disintegrates physically and emotionally: First he suffers a heart attack, and then, when it appears that proceedings will be brought against him, he tries to commit suicide. Frail and vulnerable in his stream of consciousness confession, which he tapes for his family, he is perhaps honest with himself for the first time since the age of ten, when he forced himself to wear the mask of a strong man at the expense of his real nature. Admitting his mistakes in allowing himself to “float with the current,” he sees himself and the surrounding society careening out of control without a sense of common purpose. In keeping with this, the pace of the play in performance is absolutely frenetic. In productions by the Sundukian Theater, use of the revolving stage had the effect of melding scenes together into a single forward thrust.

22. The main character’s name sheds light on his role. His second name is based on an Armenian root signifying good news, while his first name is that of an angel (“God has healed”) familiar from the apocryphal book of Tobit on.

Although a conservative at heart, striving for the selfless pursuit of justice, he has also compromised his principles, as when he bought someone else's winning ticket to surprise his wife with winning a Zhiguli make of car in the lottery. At the same time, while insisting she give up her career and stay at home to assuage his male jealousy, he is prepared to indulge in assignations with married women, ostensibly to solicit their intercession with their husbands to further his projects at work.

In indicting himself with failure, Rafayel questions the health of the culture in which he lives. Straining to bring together rhetoric and practice has ripped him apart, fragmented his identity, and brought him to the verge of self-negation. In the brief final scenes, however, the dramatist pulls us back from the edge. The impending disaster has not yet arrived, and in the interim there is time to commend the heroism of Rafayel's moral struggle and searing self-scrutiny, leaving us to ponder its broader implications.

ANAHIT AGHASARYAN

One of the most significant, if unintended, results of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost was to provide an outlet for pent-up nationalist tensions, which hastened the downfall of the Soviet edifice. Armenia was one of the first republics to take advantage of the new freedom of speech. From the autumn of 1987 on, meetings, often numbering in the thousands, would be convened at Opera Square (now renamed Liberty Square) to protest ecological issues, as well as the situation of the ethnic Armenian majority in the region of Nagorno Karabagh located in Azerbaijan. This proved a training ground for the new cadre of the first post-Soviet government. The Republic of Armenia declared independence on September 23, 1991, and proceeded to set in place the apparatus of a democratic society, holding parliamentary and presidential elections in the same year and drafting a constitution.

A vital element in the construction of civil society is the tolerance of political satire, the genre to which the last play in the collection, Anahit Aghasaryan's *Madmen of the World, Unite!* (1992), belongs.²³ Focusing on the novel electioneering process, her work captures excellently the instability of the transition charted above, highlighting its potential either as a vehicle for real change or simply as political business as usual but under new management. She pointedly contrasts the

23. Though present in Armenia under the Soviet period in periodicals like *Vosni*, the satirical genre has burgeoned since independence, resulting in such popular rambunctious farces as Mikayel Poghosyan's *Khatabalada*, a lightly veiled parody on the Faust legend applied to the career of the poet/politician Vano Siradeghyan, who has been indicted on charges of corruption in office.

narrow interests of the political parties jockeying for position with the demands of the wider electorate for a more responsive administration, a radically democratic style of government truly representative of the people. Tracing the movement from a grass-roots to a national level, the playwright envisions its global implications, as the center of attention moves from Erevan's Liberty Square to New York's Statue of Liberty. Its charter of human rights becomes a new ideology replacing the discredited Soviet shibboleths. In keeping with this, the play's title is a spoof on the socialist watchword "Workers of the World, Unite!"²⁴ Consequently, though the scene is set in a manifestly Armenian environment, the fundamental issues it raises are of universal concern.

The representatives of the two sides, the officials of the five parties contesting the election, on the one hand, and a former suicidal maniac named Mher, who has committed himself to a psychiatric facility, on the other, have more in common than first meets the eye: Both are professional con artists. As an actor, Mher is a master of disguise, while his counterparts display the prevarication of career politicians. Although they are drawn as two-dimensional caricatures, Mher's character undergoes significant growth as he becomes more politicized.²⁵ The uncertainty of whether he will allow himself to be corrupted in the process is the main engine of suspense until the last scene.

The portrayal of Mrs. Amatuni's misandric barbs and use of feminine wiles to seduce her opponent pokes fun at platforms like that of the actual Armenian feminist party Shamiram. Meanwhile, Hasratyan, a socialist leader, comes across as a party hack with a shady past, who tries to divert voters' attention by appealing to serious-sounding imponderables like *Realpolitik* and the *Zeitgeist*. Shamamyan, a member of the sitting government, is ruthless in silencing the opposition with his sinister hit squad. Brtuyjan, in contrast, represents the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the party that governed Armenia during the first republic (1918–20), now reestablishing its base in Armenia. Not to be outdone in stealth by his colleagues, the Communist Party representative disguises himself as a statue prepared to adorn Mher's grave. The image of the gravestone implies the death of the party and its message, belonging, as Mher states, in Erevan's Historical Museum, where the statue of Lenin, which used to dominate the eponymous central square, now rests.

24. The idea had already been applied by the political satirist Aramayis Sahakyan in an article entitled "Armenians of the World, Unite!" (1989). See his *Khorhrdavor khorhrdaran* [Mysterious parliament] (Erevan: Parberakan, 1992), pp. 11–16.

25. Their names already reveal a great deal about their characters. Shamamyan derives from the root of muskmelon and suggests the incumbent politician's rotundity from overindulgence in the high life. The significance of Hasratyan is yearning and desire, suggesting his driving ambition for office. The root underlying Brtuyjan signifies bluster and bombast, a stereotype of political rhetoric.

The final figure of significance is Aramyan, who, despite his amiable appearance as the unwilling stooge compelled to perform dirty work, ultimately emerges as the consummate Machiavellian *macher*, a political parasite ready to lend his services to the highest bidder. His connivance with Davtyan to procure a similar victim willing to immolate himself at Mher's inauguration powerfully encapsulates the eternal struggle between means and ends in the political process.

Aramyan's counterpart among Mher's ranks of seeming misfits at the psychiatric facility is the professor. In combining astronomy with religious speculation, he resembles the "mad scientist" of science fiction, expatiating on the metaphysical dimension of the evil at work in political machinations. So firmly does he espouse his principles that compromise is impossible, and hence, perceiving himself betrayed, he commits suicide rather than sully his integrity. Although the professor does not live to see the arresting play-within-a-play opening of act 3 in Betelgeyze, it certainly manifests his utopian ideals of purity and harmony unattainable in the real world of politics.

Mher, in contrast, develops into more of a political animal. Dazzled at first by the unheard of sum offered for his services to the opposition parties, he seizes the initiative on realizing his marketability and determines to undermine the system from within by mounting his own campaign for the presidency. The symbolist scene of the operation to remove his heart potently suggests the impact of the political process, which might leave Mher "heart-less," callous, and uncaring. However, like the invincible cock of the folktale, remarkably he survives, invigorated to advance his crusade for justice.

His comeback is a kind of resurrection from which he emerges as a savior figure somewhat larger than life, in keeping with the professor's apocalyptic speculation. His second name Astuatsatryan already indicates that he is the bearer of divine favor. Moreover, a previous scene prepares us for his role by alluding to his namesake, Little Mher, of Armenian legend, who, after being enclosed in Raven's Rock near Lake Van, will reappear at the end of time when evil has been dispelled from the world.²⁶ By triumphing over venality and narrow party politics, Mher ends up vindicating his championship of the professor's principles, highlighting the "prophetic" sociopolitical role of the artist and intellectual, so important a theme in modern Armenian literature.

In overall technique the play invites comparison with the American drama *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* in stage and film versions. In it the world of the insane has a logic that operates as well in its own context as does the ostensible clear logic of an alleged sensible world. Aghasaryan develops the theme of the theatri-

26. It is significant that Shant employs the parallel Armenian legend of Artavazd and Zabel Esayian, as has been stated, the related Greek legend of Prometheus regarding the downfall of the Russian Empire and the new era of constructing socialism in the 1920s.

cality of life, especially the political process, along with the interplay between illusion and reality. In doing so, she has not only exploited various absurdist techniques to good effect but has liberally drawn on the works of Shakespeare, which, in the translation by Mahseyan, have exercised an enormous influence on Armenian culture.²⁷ She liberally employs *King Lear* to assist in her project of subverting the polar opposition between madness and sanity, monarch and fool, in addition to Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci*. Similarly *Hamlet* serves as a model for avenging corruption in high places by a hero with theatrical affinities. All in all, while making a serious comment on the absurdities of democratic governance, Aghasaryan provides an exciting, provocative theatrical extravaganza.

It is impossible for an anthology of this kind to convey a fully comprehensive impression of the vast range and diversity of plays composed in Armenian within the century and a half surveyed in this volume. Nevertheless, the seven examples selected here include some of the best known and best loved works from that repertoire, all of which have been tried and tested on stage. Hence they may provide a reliable insight into the characteristic themes of the Armenian tradition, its historical evolution, and its particular contribution to Western drama.

Sharing in the many upheavals and dislocations of Armenian history during the modern age, the theater continues to play an important cultural role both in the communities of the Diaspora and in the homeland. Surviving the transition from state funding in the Soviet period to increased private sector sponsorship, theatrical companies in the capital and provincial cities of the republic are restructuring for the future, and a new generation of dramatists is entering the field, vying with more established names to propel Armenian drama into the new millennium.

27. See N. Parlakian, "Shakespeare and the Armenian Theater," *Council on National Literatures Quarterly World Report* 5, no. 4 (1982): 3-12.

MODERN ARMENIAN DRAMA

GABRIEL SUNDUKIAN

Gabriel Sundukian was born in Tiflis, the administrative center of Russian Transcaucasia, on June 29, 1825. His father, Mkrtum, was a merchant who had settled there as a convenient hub on a trade axis between the North Caucasus and Iran. He had also traveled to different parts of Europe. Mkrtum died when Gabriel was six, leaving him and his two siblings, Mikayel and Hripsime. Gabriel received his early training from his mother, before attending the private school of Hakob Shahan Jrpetian, later first incumbent of the professorship in the Armenian language at the *Ecole Pratique des Langues Orientales Vivantes* in Paris. During the five-year course of study Sundukian learned classical and modern Armenian, as well as French and Italian from Jrpetian's French wife. Subsequently he attended the Arzanov brothers' school for the gentry for two years, where he developed greater skills in Russian to facilitate entry to the Russian gymnasium in 1840. On completion of the six-year curriculum there, Sundukian was selected as one of six youths sent to attend the University of St. Petersburg to train as official translators for the Transcaucasian viceroyalty.

During his course of study at the imperial capital (1846–50) Sundukian majored in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian and submitted a dissertation on the principles of versification in the latter language. While there, he came under the influence of Russian literary experts like Nikitenko and read widely in the works of Shakespeare, Schiller, and Hugo.

His interest in drama was whetted by attending performances of works such as Gogol's *Inspector General* and Griboedov's *Woes of Wit*, as well as French plays at the Michael Theater.

Back in Tiflis he entered the civil service, as artists often did to earn a living (e.g., Rimsky Korsakov). Additionally, he volunteered as a teacher of geometry at the Nersisian School, established by Nerses Ashtaraketsi, activist bishop of the Armenian community of Tiflis in 1824. Two years later he was relieved of his position along with M. F. Akhundov, founder of modern Azerbaijani drama, and was sent on an assignment to the North Caucasian port of Derbent as an engineering and architectural inspector. In part as a result of the intercession of the Georgian aristocratic poet Grigol Orbeliani, Sundukian was reposted to Tiflis in September 1858 and given a position in the development of rail communications in the region. He remained in the civil service till 1907.

The year 1863 proved extremely significant for Sundukian in several ways. First, it marked his marriage to Sopia Mirimanian, with whom he had five children. In the same year, a regular Armenian theater company opened in Tiflis through the efforts of a group that had been involved a few years earlier in student theatricals in Moscow. That year also saw the staging of Sundukian's first work for the stage, *Gisheruan sabre kher e* [Sneezing at night's good luck], inspired by the zany vaudeville *Dalal Ghalo* by Nikoghayos Pughinian, one of the theatrical enthusiasts. There is a hint in this light farce of a theme to be developed in the dramatist's later major plays, those on the subject of marriage and social mobility. The local paper *Meghu Hayastani* [Bee of Armenia] critiqued the play, highlighting, among other things, weakness in characterization, which gave him reason to pause for three years before writing again for the stage.

The rest of his production in the sixties continues the trend of light, humorous representations of the life and manners of the Armenian community of Tiflis. *Khatabala* [Quandary] (1866) focuses on the issue of dowry, the role of the match-maker, and the lack of any real courtship between the bride and groom. *Oskan Petrovich en kinkume* [Oskan Petrovich in the afterlife] of the same year is another farce. *Ev ayn kam nor Diogenese* [Et cetera or the new Diogenes] (1869) also treats the topic of marriage but from the intended groom's point of view. He and his father differ as to who should be his bride, the former seeking to elope with his lower-class fiancée while the latter insists he marry the daughter of the wealthy Brilliantov.

With *Pepo* (1871) a new phase begins in which the dramatist starts to handle the same overall themes of bourgeois domestic drama with more maturity, probing more deeply into the underlying social trends that gave rise to the problems and the inequalities facing his main characters. A more serious discussion of the impact of incipient capitalism followed in *Kanduats ochakhe* [Ruined family] (1873). Consonant with this, a more critical rewrite of *Khatabala* was staged in 1879.

His next three plays, *Amusinner* [Spouses] (1893), *Baghnesi bokhcha* [Bath

bag] (1907), and *Ser ew azatutiwn* [Love and liberty] (1910) continued the theme of matrimony inaugurated by *Sneezing at Night's Good Luck*. Of these, two should be of considerable interest to the modern reader. In the first of the three, which is Sundukian's only play written in the new standard East Armenian rather than the local dialect of Tiflis, the heroine actually leaves her philandering husband, who ultimately divorces her. Preceding by some eight years Shirvanzade's play on the same theme *Did She Have the Right?* it enunciates the idea that mutual love is the most important quality in a marriage. It also advances the cause of women's rights by commenting on the inequality of local law, which favors the husband in divorce cases.¹

Bath Bag is a more bitter satire of the impact of capitalism in Transcaucasia and its negative influence on personal relationships. It seeks to explore the circumstances that might draw together figures like the moneylender Zimzimov and his beautiful young, status-conscious wife, Epemia, from his play *Pepo*, concluding that poor men look for rich wives, whereas rich men want beautiful wives.

Not only was Sundukian devoted to the Armenian theater, but he was also quite closely associated with the Georgian stage. Moreover, he would often direct Georgian troupes of actors in Tiflis and the second city of Kutaisi for productions of his works in Georgian translation, in which his critique of contemporary social mores was equally appreciated.

Sundukian's plays were performed in the Tiflis State Theater until it burned down in 1874. Subsequently productions were staged in various clubs and educational institutions, as well as in parks during the summer. In a letter to an intimate friend, he writes, "My plays have been presented and published many, many times, but I have never received a kopeck in profit from them." A man of great compassion, by all reports he gave much of his income to charity and helped the needy families of actors. Many of his satiric articles appeared in daily and weekly publications under the name *Hammal*, a pseudonym meaning street porter. Popular with his fans, very often he received ovations after performances of his plays and was carried home on the shoulders of adulatory members of the audience.

Sundukian's intrinsic interest in dramatic writing was such that in his last years he became involved in reinterpreting some of his works for the new medium of film. Though he did not live to see his plays in cinematographic adaptation, in due course some of them did find their way onto the screen. Of these, his masterpiece, *Pepo*, had the honor of being selected as the first Armenian talkie in 1935 under the doyen of early Armenian directors, Hamo Beknazaryan.

1. The inequality of women's rights in divorce law figured in a speech to the Ottoman parliament by the Armenian jurist and short story writer Krikor Zohrab in 1911, which marked a significant *volte face* from his earlier reactionary stance. See Rita Vorperian, "A Feminist Reading of Krikor Zohrab," Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1999.

Gabriel Sundukian died on March 29, 1911, at the age of eighty-five, retaining his mental acuity to the last. Only a few days before his death he was correcting printer's proofs of his ironically written comedy, *Ktak* [Testament], which appeared the following year.

E.D.M.

PEPO

(PEPO, 1871)

Translated by Ervant D. Megerditchian

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ARUTIN ZIMZIMOV: A rich merchant, sixty years old, medium height, stocky build, ruddy complexion, round face, heavy eyebrows, and trimmed mustache. His short gray hair is dyed jet black. He wears a European costume, white shirt, colored collar, vest and trousers, black coat, derby hat, watch and chain, and carries his pocketbook inside his vest pocket. He sports a colored silk handkerchief and worry beads. His speech and motions are slow, and he appears to be an honest man.

EPEMIA: ARUTIN's second wife, thirty years old, a handsome woman with auburn hair. She wears a beautiful European-style sky-blue dress, Georgian hat—a flat cap from which a white veil, attached with a silver pin, hangs to her waist. She is adorned with a gold watch and chain, many rings with precious stones on her fingers, and a red band round her neck. Her speech and motions are quick and full of life. She walks smartly and quickly.

PEPO: A fisherman, thirty-five years old, tall, strong, muscular, broad shoulders, regular features, short black hair growing low over his forehead, thin eyebrows and mustache. He has two suits of clothes. One for everyday use, like that of a Georgian workman, is dark and plain with wide trousers, tucked in woolen leggings, and

a narrow silver girdle. He wears a reddish brown Caracal hat (with bent top), made of the fur of the Asian lynx, and carries a red cotton handkerchief. The other, his best suit, is in the same style, made from more expensive material. His walk is firm, his voice sweet but forceful, and his speech and personality very pleasant. Most often he wears a hat.

SHUSHAN: PEPO's widowed mother, fifty years old, medium height. She wears a Georgian ladies costume, black mantilla on the back of her head, a plain black dress, cut high in front, and a simple black shawl. When outdoors she wears a sable wrap.

KEKEL: PEPO's sister, eighteen years old, medium height, long black hair, fresh attractive features, a sweet voice and modest demeanor. She wears a handkerchief and veil on her head.

GIKO: PEPO's relative, sixty-five years old, medium height, slightly bent, has gray hair and a mustache, and is close shaven. He wears a Georgian costume, white shirt with black edges, wide blue trousers, plain woolen belt, black shoes, and Caracal hat dyed black with its top bent back. He always carries a cane, a snuffbox, and a large blue handkerchief. His walk, speech, and all his motions are very slow. He stutters profusely throughout.

KAKULI: PEPO's friend, twenty-five years old, a bit shorter than PEPO with a ruddy face and handsome features, dark hair combed over his forehead, thin eyebrows and mustache, and sparse short beard. He wears showy clothes like a carefree Caucasian redneck young blood, a large Caracal hat dyed Baku-style blue, and a loose-fitting red silk shirt, wide blue (or black) trousers, tucked-in woolen leggings, and a broad silver girdle embroidered with gold thread. His handkerchief is as beautiful as it is large. His voice is gruff and speech coarse. Very often he keeps his hat on.

GIGOLI: ARUTIN's store salesman, twenty-five years old. He wears a white Georgian costume buttoned in front, a narrow silver girdle, and a skullcap that is often in his hand.

SAMSON: ARUTIN's butler, eighteen, with long black hair combed in the latest style. He wears a Parisian shirt open in front, a white bandoleer slung across the shoulders with five silver cartridges on each side, close-fitting trousers, a silver girdle with dagger and small box on the side, black shoes in the latest mode and nicely polished. He is always hatless.

TWO OTHER SERVANTS: Employed in ARUTIN's house, hatless, wearing white gloves and dress suits.

The action of the play takes place in Tiflis, Russian Transcaucasia, 1870

Act 1: PEPO's house, at noon.

Act 2: ARUTIN's house at 1:45 P.M.

Act 3: PEPO's house, the next morning.

ACT 1

The scene is set in a multipurpose room in an old-fashioned house. Poorly furnished, it contains a china closet with shelves, one window, and three doors—right, left, and back center. At left, there is an immovable high takht,² covered with a rug and cushions. At corner right is a kitchen table with a colored table cloth and a clothes-line hanging above it. On the china closet shelves are old-fashioned copper, wood, and clay pots, and various shaped wineglasses. A few chairs complete the room's furnishings.

Scene 1

SHUSHAN (*seated on the sofa, knitting stockings*): Didn't you hear me?

KEKEL (*KEKEL, seated on the chair near the table busy sewing, takes another thread from her scrap bag*): Just let me finish this first, Mama.

SHUSHAN: Leave it, rest a while; finish it later.

KEKEL: I can't, Mother. The customer will be here soon.

SHUSHAN: Devil take him! It'd be okay if only he were a more generous man!

KEKEL: That's the way it is, Mama. If I don't have things ready before he comes, he won't pay in full. You know he's a man without a conscience.

SHUSHAN: You're going to go blind. You didn't sleep a wink last night, and then you started work before dawn.

KEKEL: What can we do, Mama? It's not easy for poor people like us to make a living.

SHUSHAN: That's enough, Kekel! Damn our luck! We'll get by somehow.

KEKEL: Right this minute, Mama. As God's my witness, there's only a little more.

SHUSHAN: I couldn't sleep, thinking about you and your brother. You with your problems and your brother with his worries. (*Pause, then to herself*) I wonder why he's so late? I hope nothing's happened to him.

KEKEL (*anxious to placate her*): You mean he's never been out all night before, Mama?

SHUSHAN: He usually comes home by early morning. But it's almost noon now, and there's no sign of him.

KEKEL: Maybe he's busy in the market.

SHUSHAN (*sighing*): God willing, you're right, my child! My heart's uneasy. Who

2. A Middle Eastern form of rectangular couch/table suitable for lying on, dining, or performing various household tasks. Traditionally set in a hole dug in the ground, in which a fire may be kindled, family members would slide their legs under it for warmth during cold weather.

knows? Maybe the river rose and swept him away. Maybe he jumped in to save someone and drowned.

KEKEL: Now Mama, why are you talking like this?

SHUSHAN: If anything happens to him, we're lost.

KEKEL: In God's name, Mama dear, stop worrying. He's not a child. All your talk's only upsetting me.

SHUSHAN: What kind of a life is this? (*She looks up.*) Oh, Arutin! May Almighty God be your judge.

(*Footsteps are heard offstage.*)

KEKEL: I think he's here, Mother!

SHUSHAN (*listening*): Is that really him? (*Shaking her head*) No!

KEKEL (*also listening*): Oh, it's only Giko!

Scene 2

The Same, GIKO

GIKO (*He enters by center door, wearing a hat and with cane in hand, stuttering.*):
G-good m-morning to y-you!

SHUSHAN (*sadly*): Good morning, Giko! Come in!

KEKEL (*She stands and nods to GIKO. To herself*): I dropped a dish towel this morning. I knew someone was going to come. (*She sits and resumes her work.*)

GIKO (*sitting on a chair close to SHUSHAN*): How are y-you? A-Are things g-good?

SHUSHAN: Thank God, we're still alive!

GIKO: Thank G-God! Where's Pepo? Isn't he home y-yet?

SHUSHAN: No! Any news?

GIKO: Y-yes! I have.

SHUSHAN: I knew it. May I go blind! What news have you brought?

GIKO (*soberly*): What news?

SHUSHAN: Yes!

GIKO: It isn't such good news, Sh-Shushan!

SHUSHAN (*more frightened*): What is it? Has he drowned?

(*KEKEL drops her sewing and stares at them, more frightened.*)

GIKO (*calmly*): Who's drowned? What are you talking about?

SHUSHAN: He hasn't drowned then?

GIKO (*crossing himself*): For the love of God, I don't know what you're talking about.

SHUSHAN: Last night, around midnight, he took his net and went to the river, and he hasn't returned since.

GIKO: G-God bless your soul! You frightened me for a minute! He's not afraid of drowning. A river wilder than our own Kura couldn't drown him.

SHUSHAN: Then what news were you talking about?

GIKO: What n-news?

SHUSHAN: Out with it, for the love of God!

GIKO: W-wait a minute! Have a little p-pa-tience! The Lord have mercy on your mother's soul. God has written a lot of things on people's brows, sometimes h-happiness, sometimes s-sadness. *(He takes his snuffbox from his vest pocket.)*

KEKEL *(to herself)*: Whatever he says is always disturbing.

SHUSHAN: Sadness! That's what God gives us, morning, noon, and night.

GIKO: What can you do, Sh-Shushan? Our fate's in God's hands. Both s-sadness *(yawning)* and h-happiness. *(Yawning again, he inhales some snuff.)* Hum, hoh. A man's affairs go as G-God wishes.

SHUSHAN: So be it! What can we do?

GIKO: That's so, Sh-Shushan. This morning I heard some bad news. I was uneasy so I went to see your future son-in-law and talked to him face to face. *(To KEKEL)* He asked about you and sends his compliments, Kekel!

(KEKEL bows her head slightly to GIKO, dries her tears and continues sewing.)

He said he misses you a lot. *(He inhales more snuff and splutters.)*

(KEKEL wipes her eyes again.)

SHUSHAN: You've worn us out waiting for you to get to the point. In Heaven's name! Tell us what you've got to say and be done with it!

GIKO: Okay, okay, Shushan! *(Inhaling snuff)* Heavenly, believe me! Hum! When God created men, He gave them patience, too. *(Wiping his nose with a handkerchief).*

SHUSHAN: Oh, you and your sayings!

GIKO *(inhaling snuff again)*: Hmm. I was going to say that . . . *(building into a sneeze)* that . . . *(He sneezes.)* Achew! *(About to sneeze again)* A-a-a *(He sneezes.)* Achew. Oh, ho, ho, ho, some snuff this. You s-see, I sneezed twice. That's a sign of good luck.

SHUSHAN: Bless you!

GIKO: Long life . . . *(About to sneeze)* . . . to, to, to, y-your family. *(He sneezes.)* Achew!

SHUSHAN *(aside)*: Oh, damn you and your gibberish.

GIKO: That one was for good luck and a half more *(About to sneeze)* and this, this,

this. (*He sneezes again.*) That's double luck. At this rate, there'll be no end to my good luck.

SHUSHAN: What are you blabbering about? Luck has nothing to do with sneezing.

GIKO: Luck's in the hands of God, Sh-Shushan. (*He puts snuffbox in his pocket.*) It's real nippy, this cursed stuff. Still it's a thousand to one I'll sneeze with the first pinch. I don't think they gave me the usual snuff. Everybody's in a racket nowadays, Sh-Shushan! (*He again takes the snuffbox out of his pocket and opens it.*) I'm afraid it's been cut with something. (*Examining the snuff*) But I can't see anything wrong with it. Shushan, your eyesight's better. (*He shows the box to SHUSHAN.*)

SHUSHAN (*to herself*): Damn your eyes.

KEKEL (*to herself*): I can't stand it anymore.

GIKO: Take a look, for the love of God!

SHUSHAN (*to herself*): This is just too much! (*She takes the box and examines it.*) It looks all right to me. But, for the love of God, give us the news you have. You're killing us with your stalling. (*She puts the box on the couch.*)

GIKO: Why are you in such a hurry? Let's wait till Pepo gets back so we'll all hear what I have to say. (*Continuing to wipe his nose.*)

KEKEL (*to herself*): I see, now. He wants to join us for dinner! (*To SHUSHAN*) He thinks we've plenty to eat, so he's come to scrounge.

SHUSHAN (*to herself*): Aih! (*To KEKEL*) Watch your mouth or you'll break out in spots. (*To GIKO*) Out with it. Give us your news.

GIKO: I will, Shushan. (*In a low voice*) Send your daughter out for a minute.

SHUSHAN (*softly*): She's busy with her work and won't hear. Tell me quietly.

GIKO: It'd be bad if she overheard, Shushan! You don't know what Khikar (*putting his index finger on his forehead*) says about such things.³

SHUSHAN: Khikar? Who's this old fool Khikar? How did he get mixed up in all this?

(*GIKO bursts out laughing and then begins to cough.*)

SHUSHAN(*to herself*): May you roast in hellfire if you don't tell us.

GIKO (*continuing to cough*): Khikar . . . (*He coughs.*) . . . was a philosopher. (*He coughs.*)

PEPO (*singing the first verse of a song off stage*):

Wine is from Damascus grapes,
Come share with me its rich, full blend.

KEKEL (*running to the door, full of joy*): It's Pepo! Pepo's here!

3. Khikar (Akhikar) was a legendary sage to monarchs in the ancient Near East.

Scene 3

The same and PEPO

PEPO (*He enters by the center door, with his hat on, in his working clothes, sleeves turned up above the elbows, carrying a net on his shoulder and a red handkerchief full of live fish hanging from his belt in front. He continues singing the song.*):

Wine is from Damascus grapes,
Come share with me its rich, full blend.
Brandy is from Persian grapes.
Raise your glass and drink, my friend.

KEKEL: Heaven help us, Pepo! We've been worried sick wondering where you were.

SHUSHAN: What's the matter with you? You go off and then disappear.

PEPO (*happy*): Ha! If I didn't go off and disappear, we'd need manna from heaven to eat. Ooh, Giko! You've come at the right time. I'm going to treat you to some trout. But if you drop any of your snuff on them, you won't even get a whiff. (*He draws out a big fish from his handkerchief.*) You see! (*Patting GIKO's cheeks with its tail*) Oh boy! Look at that, will you!

GIKO: Hey! What do you think you're doing?

(KEKEL *laughs*.)

SHUSHAN (*laughing*): Take it easy! This is no time for practical jokes! He was about to say something!

PEPO (*retying the handkerchief and laughing*): About to say something? I'd say he was talking like hailstones, showering word after word. (*He grabs hold of GIKO's left hip and shakes it vigorously.*) How are you, Giko? How are you?

GIKO: My, oh my! You've got a hand of iron.

PEPO (*laughing*): Did you think something had happened to me? I'm not decrepit like you. (*Giving handkerchief of fish to KEKEL*) Now! Take those and put them in water. And make a good fire. (*In a low voice*) We've enough wood, haven't we?

KEKEL (*happy, softly*): We've enough for two more meals. (*She takes the fish.*) Shall I fillet them?

PEPO: No! No! No! Kakuli asked us to wait for him. He loves to fillet fish. (*Taking the fish that was in KEKEL's hand*) Look at this frisky one, will you? He must have been hiding at the bottom. Take them away. I'd give my life for those beauties. If the fish weren't free, who'd give them to us? (*Tapping his vest pock-*

et and in low voice to KEKEL) Don't worry, Kekel. You see, I've money, too. I sold ten rubles worth in the market.

KEKEL: That's why you were so late.

PEPO: Yes! I'd like to go fishing tonight, too. You see, God's been good to me lately.

KEKEL: Oh, Pepo! You work too hard and long for us. (*She goes out the door to the left, taking with her the sewing bag and handkerchief of fish.*)

Scene 4

The same without KEKEL

PEPO: What else can I do? Giko! Tell me! What's best, money or health?

GIKO: It's better to have both if God grants it.

PEPO: You've lived all these years, and still you don't know that God doesn't dole out money. If God gives a man health, the money follows. (*Opening the net*) Did I get this with money? (*He slaps his chest.*) Let this heart tick on. (*He bends, examines the net, and laughs.*) What a net this is! I've cast it so many times, but it's still in good condition. The best spot for fishing on the Kura is Peter Morev's place. When I throw my net, zoom, zoom, the frisky fish leap into it. If people had any sense, they'd do nothing but fish. Casting your net into the water and drawing it out makes your heart pound with excitement. Life and death pulses before you. And at night, you converse with the stars, as the moon hovers over your head like a fluttering moth. And when you're done and come home, you feel so good as you lay out your wet net. (*He throws his net over GIKO's head, as he speaks.*) Giko, what a wonderful fish you make! All we need is a big pot to cook you in. (*He laughs.*)

SHUSHAN (*laughing*): What the devil's gotten into you, Pepo?

GIKO (*throwing off the net*): You frightened me, my boy! What sort of joke is this?

PEPO (*folding the net*): We have to have some fun sometimes.

GIKO: You seem so excited today.

PEPO (*spreading the net on the line*): What am I supposed to be? Half-baked stew like you, inhaling snuff all the time and chomping my words like a camel chewing Turkish delight? (*He laughs.*)

GIKO (*sighing*): Ooh, Pepan, my dear boy.

SHUSHAN: No more jokes. I told you before . . . listen! My heart's racing! (*To*

PEPO) He's heard some bad news about your brother-in-law to be, I'm sure.

PEPO (*wary*): Bad news? What is it?

GIKO: Sit down, Pepo! Bless you!

PEPO: I'm okay as I am. Go on, tell us.

GIKO: No! It'd be much better if you sat.

PEPO (*irritated*): Oh, merciful God! (*He takes a chair and sits.*) All right. I'm sitting.

GIKO: Wait a minute! We can't work things out if you're going to get irritated. We've

got to think and plan ahead. (*Looking for his snuffbox*) What happened to my snuffbox? It was right here.

PEPO (*finding the box and handing it to GIKO*): Here! Take it. I know you can't say a word without taking a pinch.

GIKO (*taking some snuff*): You see, Nephew! This morning I smelled a rat. (*Inhaling snuff, to SHUSHAN*) Hmm! Word is, they've found another girl for your son-in-law to-be!

SHUSHAN: Damn our luck!

(*Alarmed, PEPO emits a prolonged cry.*)

GIKO: Yes! And the new fiancée is a very good girl, they say, and her dowry is much more than you promised for Kekel. (*He inhales snuff again.*) Hmm.

PEPO (*angrily*): Heavens! Will you stop taking snuff? (*Snatching the snuffbox, he spills some into GIKO's palm and pushes it up his nose.*) Here, take your fill!

GIKO: Oh, oh! My snuff! What a crazy creature you are! (*He puts the snuff back into the box.*)

PEPO: On my soul, Giko, you won't get out of here alive if you don't tell us everything right now!

GIKO: Just give me a chance.

SHUSHAN (*to PEPO*): Heavens! You're confusing him.

PEPO: Come on! Hurry up!

GIKO: Yes! I was going to say that . . . What was it I was going to say? I've forgotten!

PEPO (*to himself in a low voice*): Oh, what pain and grief you are.

GIKO (*continuing*): Yes! I heard that news this morning!

PEPO: Damn it! What kind of a man are you? You already said that. Then what?

GIKO: Oh yes! Then, I went to confront your brother-in-law to be, but he wasn't at home. Then I went to his store. What do you suppose I saw? That hustler, Mrs. Natale—you know, the matchmaker—whispering to him. Seeing that, I bit my little finger. (*He puts his little finger in his mouth.*) I thought it looked serious, so I waited awhile, and as soon as that devil left, I approached him and grilled him in detail.

PEPO (*impatiently*): And what did he say?

GIKO: Just a minute! I'm telling it in order, don't you see?

PEPO (*raising his fist*): Giko! Watch it! As God's my witness, you're going to get it!

GIKO (*drawing himself back*): Stop mixing me up!

SHUSHAN (*impatiently rubbing her knee during this conversation*): What's gotten into you, Pepo?

GIKO: First, he pretended not to hear, then he broke down and confirmed what I'd heard earlier. I can say by all that's holy, I almost swallowed my tongue.

SHUSHAN: May the earth open up and swallow him!

PEPO (*angrily*): Are you going out of your mind or playing games?

GIKO: Upon my soul it's true!

PEPO: So what did he say then?

GIKO: He said, "I like Kekel very much, but since things haven't come to a head, what can I do?"

SHUSHAN (*striking her knees with both hands and referring to the fiancé*): Just listen to that cad!

PEPO (*angrily*): What does he mean, "things haven't come to a head?"

GIKO: Just that. He said, "Why don't you give me the dowry you promised?" (*Sighing*) Oh, God!

PEPO: Who said we won't give what we promised? Do you mean to tell me he doesn't know why we haven't paid him yet?

GIKO: "How long do I have to wait?" he asked.

SHUSHAN: Is he waiting? Who's telling him to wait? Why didn't he ask for his money? Let him ask. When we get it, it's his! (*To herself, looking up*) May God be your judge, Arutin!

GIKO: What he says is that he wants a girl, not a headache. (*He shakes his head.*)

PEPO: We discussed all this a hundred times. Where to go from here?

GIKO: That's just it, Pepo! He says, "The matter could drag on for a year, and I can't wait any longer. I want to get married, right away. (*He cries.*) I've sinned, Oh, Lord! It's all my fault!

SHUSHAN: In a word, Giko, he's jilting Kekel.

PEPO: So that's it?

GIKO: If we don't come across with the money, the deal's off.

PEPO: Just like that?

GIKO: Right!

PEPO (*He jumps up angrily from his chair, leans forward, strikes his fist to his palm, and speaks out to the brother-in-law to be.*): You'll get what's coming to you. (*He goes to GIKO with open arms.*) What did you say to him after that, Giko?

GIKO (*Drawing back, he stands up.*): Tell me what I was supposed to say.

PEPO (*moving toward him*): Couldn't you get across to him that we're honest?

GIKO (*pulling back*): Ah! Of course I did!

PEPO (*moving forward again*): Then?

GIKO (*eyes averted*): Then? He just repeated himself.

PEPO (*pressing forward*): And you went along with that?

GIKO (*turning away*): Ah!

PEPO (*nearing him*): Why didn't you use your head?

GIKO (*He gradually reaches stage right but finds no way out*): Ah! May your father rest in peace! How could I top what he said?

PEPO: So you didn't say a damn thing?

SHUSHAN: Pepo! Control yourself! That's no way to talk.

GIKO: Oh Pepo, I told him what I've already said. I said, "Wait until Arutin pays up, then you can get married." "Or," I said, "Get married now and then get the money from Arutin yourself."

PEPO: And then?

GIKO: Then he gave me an ultimatum and said, "I've no head for headaches. If you can bring me the money today, I'll marry her tonight. I'm a man of my word.

PEPO: Oh, Giko! As if that's something to boast about. Saying, "I'm a sensible man, I've read the wise man Khikar's writings from beginning to end." Is that all you could do?

GIKO: But (*He coughs.*) What have I done wrong? (*Intensely coughing*)

PEPO: With friends like you, who needs enemies?

SHUSHAN: Pepo! What's gotten into you?

PEPO (*leaving GIKO*): Nothing! I've got to see the man and get the story straight.

SHUSHAN (*She stands.*): Wait here for me, Pepo! Let me go and see that bitch Natale first. (*She puts on her cloak and goes out in hurry.*) Giko! Come with me for the love of God and help me out of this corner. (*She exits by the center door.*)

GIKO (*severe choking cough, to himself*): Working with you's a real headache. (*He follows SHUSHAN.*)

PEPO (*as GIKO leaves*): And we took you for a man.

Scene 5

PEPO *alone, after a brief silence*

So you want another girl! Over my dead body! (*Silence again, then to himself*) No Pepo! You're a decent guy. You like things straight and businesslike. Your brother-in-law isn't in the wrong! You made him a promise. You have to keep to it. That's all! You must give him the shirt off your back if you have to, even if it kills you, but you have to come through. But how am I going to produce that damn money? Who'll lend me such a large sum? (*Looking at the walls*) Who'd give me anything for what's in here? If I mortgage the house and try to sell our furniture and clothing, what would I get for them? Not even half what they're worth. This is it—the end! This is what you wanted, Arutin. You've tormented me long enough, and now I've come to this. That's it! I'll be disgraced in people's eyes. How am I going to face my friends after this? What'll they think of me? (*He throws his hat on the floor.*) I spit on your honor!

Scene 6

PEPO and KEKEL

KEKEL (*entering door left, confused*): What's up, Pepo?

PEPO: Nothing! (*Lifting his hat and shaking it clean*) Nothing! What did you think could be up?