

Reports from the Field

Critical Endeavours: Experimental Searches in Contemporary Performance Criticism in Turkey

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This essay traces my search for new critical models in the face of the current politically polarized atmosphere in Turkey.¹ I look for possible ways to experience criticism as a collective activity and find ways of resisting and changing the polarized social-political landscape in my country. Together with my colleagues, I developed various critical models to foster collaboration during the critical process. In doing so, my intention is to understand the crucial role criticism can play in fighting societal polarization and resisting the isolated single voice of 'critique'.

As a theatre critic, I believe in navigating the movements between theatre, politics, and criticism and try to go beyond the practice of a limited mode of the solitary performance review. Collaboration is the only way to build a renewed and resistant life practice in the face of the oppressive politics of a country like Turkey. My critical endeavours, therefore, are an attempt to organize more inclusive and collective forms and languages that will soften the polarization which has become a feature of every-day life in Turkey. The motivation behind this is to respond critically to what I see as a lack of dialogue in the cultural life of my country.

In the following, I will introduce two examples of these critical endeavours.² The first one is a collective conversation fostered by the

1 I would like to thank Turkish Scientific Research Council (TÜBİTAK) for supporting my PhD studies, within the 2211-A National Fellowship Programme.

2 Other examples of critical endeavours include: 'Theatre Correspondence', which discusses a current performance via letters exchanged between two critics (for the examples, see 'Tiyatro Üzerine Mektuplaşmalar' (Ejder and İpşiroğlu); 'One Performance Three Views', which brings together the director, a critic, and an audience member to jointly write about the same performance; 'Inquiry', which collects at least three critical essays on a single performance and asks the director to respond to them all.

writing group ‘Feminist Endeavour,’ a group of four women theatre critics, of which I am one of the co-founders. The second example is a mode of criticism in the form of an interview, which I called ‘Inter(Re) view’. It traces a conversation between a critic and an imagined audience member. In order to contextualise these practices, I will first give an overview of the contemporary political situation in Turkey today, outline the contrasting landscape between politics and theatre, and introduce modes with which resisting (with) theatre becomes possible.

Contrasting Landscapes: Politics, Theatre and Criticism in Turkey

Over the last decade, Turkey has been through a substantial change in its theatrical and political life. Despite the socio-political crisis—authoritarianism and censorship in art—current theatre and performance practices in the country present a dynamic and hopeful landscape, which questions and wrestles with ideological and socio-political problems. A contrasting landscape has emerged between the official politics and the contemporary art scene. Turkish society has (been) polarized into two sharp poles of conservatives versus secular elites; or religiously influenced nationalists versus liberal republicans; or more generally and recently, people who support the president (and his ruling party) versus those who do not (cf. Cagaptay).

The list of events that bore witness to this polarization is long: In 2013, Occupy Gezi gathered together people from various backgrounds that were previously though unlikely to mix: such as Kemalists, Islamists and radical leftists (cf. ‘Turkish Spring’). There have been many bombings and other terrorist attacks on people at peace rallies, such as the ISIS attack in Ankara in October 2015 which killed 103 people (cf. ‘Deadly Bombing Attacks’). In 2016, a failed coup attempt led to many people being persecuted by the regime and a state of emergency being called, which lasted over two years (cf. Abdul-Ahad and Kingsley). In 2017, the new presidential system was introduced (further expanding President Erdogan’s authority), prompting many speculations about shifts from a republican regime toward an authoritarian, one-man regime (Çalışkan 5-13). Critical

journalists have been and are being arrested. Academics who signed the declaration called 'Academics for Peace' were dismissed from their institutions and some have even been arrested (cf. Weaver). Recently, the Supreme Election Council cancelled the Istanbul local election (on 31 March 2019), following an appeal of the AKP (cf. 'Everything Will Be Fine'). All these events speak of the social and political unrest in the country.

Although most commentators draw attention to the problems and describe this situation as a crisis in political, social and economic life, the government not only rejects these claims but brands any detractors as traitors (cf. 'Erdoğan: Kriz Yok'; 'Bahçeli: Ortada Bir Kriz Yok'). In such a situation, everyone, not only artists, academics, and journalists, are exposed to increased scrutiny. A number of official directors of the state-sponsored theatres have already been dismissed or forced to resign from their positions (cf. Akyol). In the last theatre season, Barış Atay's long running solo show *Only A Dictator* has been banned in almost every city in the country for allegedly criticising the president (cf. Acer). All this leads to a paradoxical and even paranoid position, where the similarly rooted 'crisis' and 'criticism' is simultaneously highlighted and denied. In such a divided, conflicted, and frightening environment, the possibility of real dialogue, mutual tolerance, respect for diversity and, not least, the possibility for engaged criticism is fundamentally lost.

In spite of this somewhat hopeless outlook, current theatre and performance practices present a dynamic and hopeful landscape, which productively negotiates these ideological and socio-political problems. In Istanbul alone, more than one hundred and fifty productions perform every single evening is.³ Not only has there been an increase in the number of new groups, playwrights, new venues, and independent theatres producing work, but these new outlets address current political issues and tell the difficult stories in new and experimental ways.⁴ As

3 My colleague, Tijen Savaşkan, a member of theatre prize jury, told me that jury members attended 173 different productions that premiered in 2018 in Istanbul, and there were other productions which she couldn't see.

4 During the last theatre season, subjects include women's and transgender issues, problems with language and identity, migration stories, as well as narratives of war

a consequence of this increased theatrical activity, there has been a gradual expansion in the number of theatre critics, new online-theatre magazines, websites and blogs focusing on current performances alongside more traditional print journalism.

This diversity and expansion—especially on digital media platforms—however, leads to a disorganization (or discontent) among the critics. Thus, as a member of International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC), I have tried to play an active role in reflecting the current critical landscape by co-editing the theatre magazine *Oyun* (Play), the quarterly printed magazine of IATC-Turkey since 2008. I have endeavoured to gather theatre critics from different age groups, disciplines, and institutions (universities, journals, publishing, or festivals) in order to meet, share, and think together within space of *Oyun*. This attempt was a reaction to what I saw as disorganization among critics, a lack of detail and critical approach to theatre practices parts of the cultural landscape, and to give voice to women by women critics, who have remained silenced for so long. The same concern can be seen among theatre practitioners. Therefore, with my colleagues, I aim to make *Oyun* not only the voice of new theatre collectives and a record keeper of contemporary practices from a critical perspective, but also a bridge between scholarly approach and new kinds of experimental writing.

Invigorating Criticism

This hope-inspiring theatrical diversity in the face of the political turmoil, thus seems to me, to demand a new approach to performance criticism that will bring out new critical forms which have the potentials to create a larger and more inclusive conversation about theatre. Turkish literary critic Orhan Koçak argues ‘criticism is one of the tools of being a different kind of speech, writing and being like others, and its aim is

and political brutality. Theatrical forms involved musicals, ‘in-yer-face’ drama, feminist theatre, queer theatre, performance art, storytelling, monodrama, monologues, solo performance, and new adaptations of classical texts. (For the examples see: Eider, ‘Contrasting Landscape of Theatre in Turkey’).

to make visible as many aspects of the work as possible to incorporate it into the world of meaning that is consisted of ongoing questions and ongoing answers' (Koçak).⁵ Similarly, the prominent Turkish literary critic Nurdan Gürbilek thinks 'criticism is an endeavour to make the work speak about its response to the world' (Gürbilek), and argues it is 'a conversation with the work, which makes unheard voices heard'. Inspired by Koçak and Gürbilek, I have begun to think about theatre criticism as a plural conversation, that talks to, through, and via the work. This approach sees theatre criticism as series of possibilities that offer us an experience of creative transformation, brings with it a sense of being togetherness, and provides a chance to think about how the world might be instead of as is;⁶ this, therefore, is an endeavor to think and imagine criticism as 'something other'. Criticism as 'something other' is inspired by two concepts: The first is Peggy Phelan's contemplation that '[p]erformance's only life is in the present'; that it 'cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so it becomes *something other* than performance' (Phelan 146, emphasis by the author). Inspired by Phelan's definition and the blog 'Something Other', which aims to have interdisciplinary conversations about art, I understand criticism as the creation and reflection of this 'something other'. Secondly, I refer the well-known poem *Değişik (Different)* by Turkish poet Can Yücel, that begins as 'Başka türlü bir şey benim istediğim (*Some other* thing I want...)' (Yücel 5). Here, by approaching criticism as 'something other', one accepts it both as being already *something other* and transforming into *some other thing we want*. It is a utopian vision instead of a given, established way of seeing. In this light, criticism oscillates between the 'as is' and 'what if' of a critical endeavour.

5 'Yapıtın mümkün olduğu kadar çok yönünü görünür hale getirmek, anlam dünyasına dahil etmek, sorular-cevaplardan oluşan, süregiden sorulardan ve süregiden cevaplardan cevaplardan oluşan bir anlam dünyasına davet etmek yapıtı, mümkün olduğu kadar çok yönünü, ayrıntısını [görünür kılmak]'.
6 Here I am inspired by Jill Dolan who searches for the utopian potentials of the theatre and asserts that utopian performatives imagine and embody the world as 'what if' rather than 'as is' (Dolan, 128).

‘Feminist Endeavour’: Critics in Conversation

‘Feminist Endeavour’, which takes its name from the idea of feminist perspective on theatre and life, is a writing and research group, which I have co-founded with three experienced women theatre critics who are also editorial members of *Oyun (Play)*: Zehra İpşiroğlu (emeritus theatre professor, the founder of the department of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy at Istanbul University), Tijen Savaşkan (editor of magazine *Oyun*), and Handan Salta (former vice president of IATC-Turkey section). We organize dossiers for the journal *Oyun (Play)* that focus on topics like gender, feminist theatre, migration, adaptation, storytelling and solo-shows. We also put on post show discussions which gather together audience members, casts, and critics. We particularly focus on performances dealing with women’s issues which highlight being a woman in a conflicted, male dominated society.

Alongside organizing post show discussions and making oral criticism, we also engage in a particular model of print criticism published periodically in the *Oyun*. The process is multifaceted and involves voices of critics and practitioners. In a first stage, we record our own email conversation about a particular production, which we then edit and publish in the journal *Oyun*. One of us, as a moderator prepares critical questions for the production and others reply and comment. Since it is a collaborative work, each of us can be the moderator and take responsibility. To discuss a production via e-mail allows the participants to have more time to think and formulate a reply than during a face-to-face conversation. In addition, the dialogical form enables the participants to get in touch with each other and revisit earlier points. In a second stage, we ask the theatre group or director of the performance to write an essay about his/her work. Ultimately, we combine the Feminist Endeavour email conversation and director’s piece into the same volume of the journal. This allows the reader to see the performance in conversation from different perspectives on the page.

As a collaboration between women theatre critics, Feminist

Endeavour gives weight to power of solidarity between women in a society and in performance. Since we believe in the power and critical role of criticism, it is important which performance we select to discuss and how to discuss it. Our last work, a conversation about *The Song of Resentful Hearts* (*Küskün Yüreklerin Türküsü*), is a good illustration of this practice because it shows the reality of the activist movement led by women. The performance features the activists Saturday Mothers, a group of women who gather at Galatasaray Square (a central square in the city of Istanbul) at 12pm every Saturday and sit-in protest for half an hour. The group has been meeting since 27 May 1995. They hold photographs of lost loved ones, who fell victim to political murder during military coup in 1980 and the late 1990s. In the last 24 years, they have repeatedly been exposed to violence, been detained and even banned from the square many times. On 25 August 2018, after police shot tears gas, water cannons, and plastic bullets at these old women, national and international public outrage was directed at the government (cf. 'Tear Gazes at Mother's Protest').

In reaction to these events, the documentary play, *The Song of Resentful Hearts* (*Küskün Yüreklerin Türküsü*), written and directed by Metin Balay at Tatavla Sahne, with reference to Berat Günçikan's biographic book based on interviews with the Saturday Mothers, premiered in Istanbul on 3 October 2018. The performance uses lyric and ballad forms to presents the stories of some of well-known members of the group. Four actresses sitting on chairs, each tells her own story about how her son or husband had been tortured, detained and died in detention (see Image 1).

At Feminist Endeavour, we approached this production by questioning what the play's structure reveals about gender, patriarchy, and politics of violence. For *The Song of Resentful Hearts*, our main focus was to understand how the ballad form of storytelling can enable the unfolding of political movements and expose the power relations lying behind the collective trauma and loss at the heart of the performance and activist groups. Although we found 'it was bravery [sic] and exciting

to carry this silent and long-running protest to the stage' (Feminist Çaba 26) in a time when the group's demands were being ignored by the government and members of the group were exposed to police violence, we thought it failed to reveal the real perpetrators inflicting loss, trauma, and death, i.e. the ideological systems of nationalism, misogyny, xenophobia, and militarism behind this political murders. Each mother's monologue ended with the same expression: 'it is the devil who does this (torture)'. However, as İpşiroğlu says in the discussion, 'to make a critique of the political system in a society through such performance, where democracy cannot be settled, means to swim in dangerous waters. This is unfortunately a reality. In this respect, we can understand the director's choice' (34). Feminist Endeavour placed the political tensions at the centre of the discussion while the performance itself largely neglected to do so. And by doing this, we, too, take the risk of swimming in the dangerous waters of politics in our country.

Imagined conversation: Inter(Re)view



Image 1: A scene showing the solidarity of Saturday Mothers in *The Song of Resentful Hearts*, Istanbul, 2018. Photo: Volkan Erkan.

The second critical practice I will illustrate here is a combination of ‘interview’ and ‘review’ by my colleague Handan Salta. Salta sometimes uses the question-answer technique to review performances or festivals as if she is interviewing someone. In her search for new critical models, she arrived at an imagined interview which we call ‘Inter(Re)view’. It is a critical practice where she interviews an imaginary audience member, ‘an imaginary well-read woman friend of her who is fond of going to theatres with no interest in theatre criticism’. Salta calls her Sakine which means ‘calm woman’ or ‘silent’. This projected foil allows Salta to engage with in a performance ‘as if’ she was more than one spectator, ‘as if’ there was more of a collective theatre going and ‘as if’ there were more feminist critics; thus she wills her criticism into being, or more precisely, into being *something other*.

Inter(Re)view is an imagined encounter between a critic and an audience member. This example Inter(re)view concerns the current monodrama *Kader Can* (2018) staged in Istanbul by Theatre BAM. It is about the army memoir of the title character Kader Can (meaning ‘fate’ and ‘spirit of life’), a young rapper living in a poor outskirts of Istanbul. Through rap, he exposes his inner conflict with nationalism, the patriarchy and increased political polarization (see Image 2). The two women’s Inter(Re)view discussion centres around the systems of oppression Kader faces.

Handan: We can grasp the traces of social structure built upon oppositions and polarizations through Kader Can’s personality and reactions; also his immediate use of oppositions like urban – rural, well educated – low educated, rich – poor, men – women, patriot – traitor is highly related to the position he is in in the army now.

Sakine: He is immediately preoccupied with traitors, flag, homeland when his sole concern was singing rap songs and his girlfriend Ayla before joining the army. (...) The last few theatre seasons have hosted several plays about women who are pressured, exposed to violence and helpless in front of the whole set of values designed against her. However, this play sheds light

on the situation of men in the same surroundings, where they are not happy or free either. It hints that nobody is able to make a free choice. (...)—We do not know what’s going to happen to Kader Can either. However, he keeps on singing and this means hope—for all of us! (Salta)

This critical model deliberately plays with polarization. Salta



Image 2: Deniz Karaoğlu in *Kader Can*, written and directed by Murat Mahmutyazıcıoğlu. Istanbul, 2018. Photo: Murat Dürüm.

chooses a woman different from herself, who is not from her social background or class. She attempts to show the transformative power of criticism through a form which toys with opposites. Sakine is the representative of a new audience profile who is fond of going to independent theatres. Since the audience numbers in Istanbul are steadily increasing, we might not yet hear much from these new groups, but Salta attempts to lay the groundwork for including them in critical conversations. Here, the Inter(Re)view embraces the potential of the binary opposition between audience member and critic and abolishes it. In other words, this is an imagined conversation in which no one tries to instruct or dictate to the other; it is an exchange where both critically question the work and also each other. It is an endeavour that

not only searches for answers, but that will also lead to new questions. The reciprocal mode of the Inter(Re)view can be read as a rehearsed emancipation, displaying consensus rather than conflict, and portraying a hopeful outlook for the women and youth of Turkey.

In lieu of a Conclusion

In this essay, I highlighted the prosperous landscape of theatre and theatre criticism in Turkey that thrives in spite of and even as a response to the ongoing political oppression of artists and critics. Feminist Endeavour and Inter(Re)view are critical practices that resist the polarizing mode of everyday politics. Through their form, they reflect the present situation and reveal their feminist potential by focusing on issues women face under the patriarchy. They imagine collectives and multiple voices, where we see a lack of dialogue and too many solitary voices. These new models of critical endeavour are stubbornly hopeful and speak to the prospect that critical practice can be a mode of addressing political crisis. It might be too early to discuss the consequences of these practices or theorize them more analytically, but my aim is that introducing them here has opened the possibility of more creative forms of criticism to develop in Turkey and elsewhere. In her study on contemporary criticism, Duška Radosavljevic remarked that a 'single act of criticism [might not] move mountains or part seas, but a cumulative effect of criticism as a collective endeavour' can have this effect (Radosavljevic 29). I hope that together with other critics, we can unfold the repressed potentials of theatre criticism as well as open new possibilities through which we imagine theatre and life as the *something other* we hope, dream, and fight for.

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