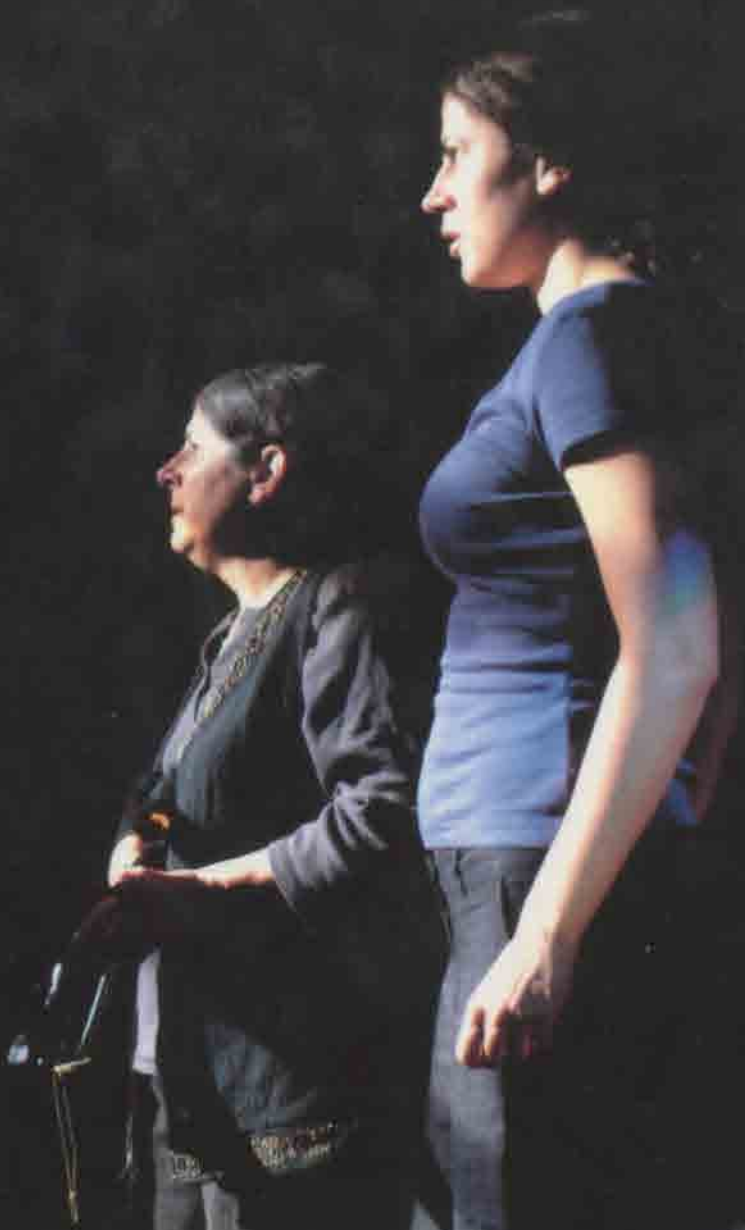
CONTEMPORARY ARMENIAN AMERICAN DRAMA

AN ANTHOLOGY OF ANCESTRAL VOICES



EDITED BY

NISHAN PARLAKIAN

A scene from Joyce Van Dyke's *A Girl's War*, New Repertory Theatre (2003). Director Rick Lombardo; Bobbie Steinbach as Arshaluis Sarkisian (*foreground*) and Mason Sand as Seryozha Sarkisian; photo by Craig Bailey.

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Barbara Bejoian, one of our playwrights—wife of Newell Thomas and mother of two young children, Casey and Ian—who passed away shortly before publication.

CONTENTS

In putting this anthology together, it was gratifying to learn that a number of produced and published contemporary Armenian American dramatists had written plays on their ethnic interests. For more than half of the last century it seemed that the theatrical marketplace eschewed plays with Armenian themes or that Armenian American dramatists, small in number, had few if any ethnic plays to offer the theater. In time, however, the best of our playwrights began to command professional attention for their ability to create dramas with universally appealing plots and characters (Armenian or otherwise). One need only point to dramas by writers such as Saroyan, Ayvazian, and Arzoomanian (included in this volume) who drew praise for their works on Broadway and in various prestigious regional theaters throughout America. Even at the time of this writing, two works herein are having staged readings and presentations in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, drawing accolades from critics and the general public.

It was a pleasure for me, in preparing this volume, to review the theatrical activities of Armenians during the past century in the United States and, even earlier, in the homeland. It became very clear that Armenians had an abiding interest in theater, as we know it today, as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, when modern Armenian drama began to manifest itself. The freedom of the theater in the early twentieth century—with the birth of Armenia

after World War I—however, became circumscribed with the Sovietization of the new nation. Under communism, playwrights lacked the freedom of unfettered expression because of governmental censorship. In America early in the last century, Armenian American writers, despite hearing their parents' dramatic tales of Turkish depredations, seemed more often than not to favor writing about them in the novel and story genres rather than in plays. It has been argued that the excitement of the theater, with its potential to galvanize mass audiences by creating "unacceptable" propaganda against Turkey, would have threatened the well being of Armenian "hostages" still uneasily residing there. Powerless, Armenians had little if any voice to command attention in the halls of international justice. But in the last thirty years—with significant action on the part of Armenian lobby groups in this country, who have demanded world attention to past Armenian tribulations and new favorable scholarship on that subject—our writers began giving both joyous and doleful expressions of their ethnicity, past and present, through dramaturgy.

As I fulfilled the quota of plays for this volume, others of high quality by new dramatists came to my attention suggesting, perhaps, that more publications of this order will be welcomed in the future.

My interest in Armenian and Armenian American drama began with a request in 1972 from the Diocese of the Armenian Church (Eastern), headed by Archbishop Torkom Manoogian (now the Patriarch of Jerusalem), to serve as artistic director of the Diocesan Players. I thank the patriarch once again for his confidence in me and for setting me on a new and exciting course. I am indebted to the Delores Zohrab Liebmann Fund for again supporting my efforts in publishing our significant dramas. The attention of M. Haigentz, Esq., fund administrator, was both remarkably patient and solicitous. The cooperation of editorial director at Columbia University Press, Jennifer Crewe, and her assistants was essential to the formulation of this volume. The comments of the various authors and the sound advice of Aram Arkun of the Diocesan Zohrab Center and Aris Sevag, managing editor of the *Armenian Reporter*, were highly useful. A number of friends helped me assess the importance of Armenian drama in the homeland. Dr. George Dermksian had much to report on his association as an actor with Elia Kimatian, one of the earlier directors of Armenian ethnic theatre in this country, and he put me in touch with 102-year-old Sooren Papazian, who reported on Kimatian's work as a stage director in Turkish Armenia. Anne Vardanian, actor and theater scholar, also gave me her professional view of ethnic theater activity during the mid-twentieth century. Other stage enthusiasts acting in ethnic theater here, too numerous to name individually, informed me of their lively theatrical experiences in the homeland or the near east. In particular, Setrak Terpanjian, a member of the Diocesan Group, gave witness to his theatrical work in Istanbul. Dr. James Tashjian, a former editor of the *Armenian Review*, reported on the publication of plays (or lack thereof) in that journal. And Dr. Dickran Kouymjian, holder of the Armenian Chair at California State University, Fresno, was helpful in connecting me with the Saroyan Foundation. There are others who

assisted in the creation of this volume, some with technical expertise and others with knowledge of the background of this work. Finally, I owe much to my wife Florence, for bringing stability into our lives as I moved toward the consummation of this work.

NOTE ON "ARMENIAN" TRANSLITERATION

In the plays that follow, the playwrights include in their dialogue brief expletives or short phrases in "Armenian" transliterated into English. These idioms are not critical for understanding the plays and are meant to enhance the ethnic ambience of the mise-en-scène. Transliteration from the Armenian, however, is often imperfect because each Armenian American writer speaks the dialect of his or her forebears, and these various ancestors may have originated from different homeland regions. Phonetically, their dialects might be dissimilar, and there is no one definitive method of transliteration for all of them. An English-speaking reader can have difficulty deciphering the sound of the Armenian language because many phonemes in the original have no counterpart in English (and vice versa). Fortunately herein, except perhaps for simple expletives, the meaning of the transliterated Armenian phrase is given in English in square brackets. In the case of one play, the author suggests in parentheses that the phrase following can be spoken in Armenian. And in that piece, as in every one of the plays, the feeling for Armenian ethnicity is suggested by allowing deliberate misuse of English grammar, syntax, and vocabulary by characters in the homeland or first-generation immigrants in America.

CONTEMPORARY
ARMENIAN AMERICAN DRAMA

INTRODUCTION

NISHAN PARLAKIAN

The contemporary full-length Armenian American dramas and the brief curtain raiser of this volume were created in English largely by artists of Armenian extraction during the last third of the twentieth century. Newspaper accounts and reviews and recommendations from literary colleagues and playwrights helped in finding them. There was no effort to select works on the basis of genre. As it turned out, the dramaturgy herein represents admixtures or blends of farce, comedy, tragicomedy, and tragedy. Perhaps the best overall description of genre for most of our plays would be the term "*drame*," a work generally of serious theme, but lightened by relevant humor.

Although our experienced dramatists have written on various subjects of general interest, the plays here specifically reflect the shared or common experiences in Armenian group and family life in Armenia, Turkey, and America. These include the joy of being with kith and kin in a free society in which Armenians can practice their faith and enjoy their ethnic customs; the turmoil and travail of transplantation from the Anatolian homeland to the diaspora; the feared dissolution of Armenian racial identity through assimilation; the loss of hegemony over ancestral lands; and the chaos and agony associated with the genocide of the Armenian nation.

In the years preceding our contemporary period, if Armenian Americans wrote plays on the themes noted above, they seemed to have been few and far between and rarely achieved notable public

recognition. But for the most part, after the first wave of Armenian immigration and even to the present, it is noteworthy that the same motifs emerged mainly in prose and poetry. These literary forms remain, to this day, the dominant genre of literary expression for Armenian American writers, several critically admired ones in the last century being Leon Surmelian (novel, *I Ask You Ladies and Gentlemen*, 1945); Marjorie Housepian (novel, *A House Full of Love*, 1957); Diana Der Hovanessian (poetry, *How to Choose Your Past*, 1978), Nancy Kricorian (novel, *Zabelle*, 1998), and Peter Balakian (memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*, 1999).

Early in the last century, fledgling writers, the offspring of immigrant parents, put pen to paper to "connect" with the literary world through fiction and poetry that often imitated abundant examples in journals and magazines. Indeed, these writers aspired for literary recognition by submitting their works for publication to such periodicals. This is not to say that zealous beginners eschewed the dramatic form completely, but they anticipated that recognition in that genre required stage production, more often than not, before publication. This tradition—production before publication—dates back in English drama to the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, most obviously typified by Shakespeare's dramatic output, especially in quarto form.

It is germane to note, also, that dramatic writing requires an aptitude quite distinct from writing stories and poems. In his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry," T. S. Eliot discusses the three variant writing forms as they applied to his *verse* composed as lyric poetry, story or epic, and drama. Early in his career, Eliot observes, he wrote lyrical poems and verse epics and only later found his way to crafting verse drama such as *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*. He explains how he *developed* from writing in the first or lyric voice (poems in which the writer addresses himself or one other person), to the second or epic voice (verse epics or stories in which the writer addresses a reading audience or reads his work out loud to a group), to the third or dramatic voice (verse plays in which the author is *"everywhere present and everywhere invisible"* [italics mine]). In short, a play most often depicts characters with various points of view that often create conflicts through face to face argument resolved in a climax and denouement giving us the drama's theme *without necessitating the author's presence in the action as a spokesman.*[1] The lesson for the neophyte writer is that poetry and stories more often than not *require* the author's presence by way of his personal thoughts, sentiments, and opinions. In drama, for the most part, that presence is lacking. In no manner does this argument ascribe superiority to writing in any one of the voices over another. Homer's epic greatness is not diminished by similar themes developed in the soaring tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; Shakespeare's sonnets by themselves define him as a major poet.

For the skilled Armenian American storyteller and poet, artistic recognition came expeditiously from three exceptional "ethnic" publications of the early and mid-twentieth century, namely *Ararat*, *The Armenian Review*, and *The Armenian Weekly* (previously called *The Hairenik Weekly*), whose readership was not limited

solely to Armenians. Apart from inspiring younger generations to write and contribute, the excellence of the published material went a long way in establishing the viable presence of Armenians in America.

James Mandalian, editor of the *The Review* and *The Weekly*, was eulogized by Lawrence Terzian in *Ararat* in 1974 as having promoted

> with unfailing zeal, the discovery of new writers who will vitalize all communications. . . . More than anyone else in Armenian-American letters, he was the single receptive editor, the mentor, for a group of short story writers in English just emerging in the 1930s and early 40s. In this golden period of the American short story . . . he published and enthusiastically supported the first writings . . . of William Saroyan, Leon Surmelian, Jessamyn West, [and] A.I. Bezzeride.

Edward J. O'Brien, editor of the annual *Best Short Stories* "consulted *The Hairenik Weekly* for his yearly selection of good writing and included [it] in the company of *Story*, *Esquire*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Yorker*, *Southern Review*, and *Harper's Magazine*, for publishing the greatest number of 'three asteriks' stories of distinction for the year 1939." For these published young artists, Terzian's observation concludes, the "writing process . . . was both an intense Americanization and a hyphenation of cultures."[2]

In a 1969 anthology of selected works from *Ararat*, which dated back to its inception ten years earlier, Jack Antreassian, its founding editor, noted the need for the periodical. He observed in his introduction that "in spite of their long life as a nation, Armenians remained a mystery to much of the world, with very few having an awareness of their history, geography, even of their existence." He invited non-Armenian contributors to submit their works to avoid the impression "that Armenians were talking only to Armenians." "Our community had concerns other than Armenian," wrote the editor, "and anything that was to be of interest to them had to be of their world. Similarly our history and culture could have meaning to non-Armenians only if they were relegated to an environment real to them." What inspired the new generation of Armenian American writers to submit works to *Ararat* was exactly the hope that the world beyond Armenian readers would recognize them. A score of *Ararat* stories, Antreassian informs us, "have been cited in Martha Foley's annual anthologies as among the best published in America. Our poetry, fiction and articles have been subsequently reprinted in books and anthologies. Young writers have gone from our pages to gain general recognition of their work."[3]

Following up in equally sanguine terms, Leo Hamalian, editor of *Ararat* after 1969, in his introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of selections from *Ararat* since its inception (1959–1985) reaffirmed the eloquence and high quality of writing in the journal. "Such a gathering of writers," he observed, "creates a sense of national literature, with one foot in Armenia and the other abroad." As he con-