



**Performing Loneliness:
Towards A New Experience of Collectivity in Turkish Theatre**

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Introduction

“Performing loneliness” refers and explores a remarkable change by the experimental works of new theatre groups appeared in post-2000’s Turkish theatre: It is the increasing monodrama, mono-performance, or the single-person narrative. So, the question arrives: Why do young theatre directors and actors adopt the Turkish short stories, novels, poems written after 1970? Why do playwrights and directors working for the new theater groups stage the story of those who are named “others” as being repressed, unheard and also living at the margins? Above all, why do they transform this sort of narrative into a monodrama form which presents the story of an isolated and lonely person in the society, performed by an actor alone on stage? These are the questions which have not been yet asked and investigated in contemporary Turkish theatre by theatre researchers. It would be an oversimplification to explain this concern for the economy, maneuverability, and adaptability of the form or as a symptom of the socio-political condition of Turkey such as because, ‘today individuals are becoming more and more lonely, ‘there is little possibility of dialogue both in social and political life’, ‘monodrama is easier to stage,’ ‘young artists are not given adequate financial backing by the culture minister.’ These justifications can be reproduced more provided that their validity is subject to scrutiny. But to receive monodrama just as a symptom of socio-political crisis and mono-cultural, self-centered life leads us to misconceive what changes and is being produced on Turkish stages. However, one major consequence is the theory the Turkish theatre began to reproduce: On one hand, the stage (both geometrically and methodologically) becomes more and more narrow, introverted and isolated in a traumatic way by the narrative of an isolated character performed by a single actor. On the other hand, it becomes clear that theatrical reality is undetachable from social,

political changes than ever before. Is this narrowness or isolation a sign of closure and obstruction, or is it a sign of opening up new possibilities in Turkish theatre studies?

My purpose is to approach this concern as a new theatrical and performative experience in Turkish theatre by the works of new theatre groups and to show while monodrama giving an opportunity to the actor and audience to experience a transformation, how it also points a new aesthetics turn which produces and is produced by a sense of *communitas*, in other words, a sense of being singular-plural, to borrow a phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy.

In what follows I will trace this “transformative power” of the monodrama in three steps. First I will present the current mono-dramatic landscape and try to find out what lies behind it. Second, I will analyze a few recent examples of this mono-dramatic turn by focusing on the most-known and most-watched performances. Then, finally, I will propose to explore what it produces between the performer and audience and also among the audiences, and then discuss how the “performing loneliness” might lead to a new experience of collectivity in Turkish theatre.

I. Towards a Theatre of Monodrama

The term monodrama which is derived from the Greek word ‘monos’ (one) is, as Patrice Pavis states in his book *Dictionary of Theatre*, “a play with a single character, or at least a single actor (who may take on several roles)” and “is centered around one person and explores his innermost motivations, subjectivity or lyricism” (Pavis, 1998:217). In his definition of monodrama, Evreinov explains that by monodrama he refers to “a kind of dramatic presentation which, while attempting to communicate to the spectator as fully as it can the active participant’s state of mind, displays the world around him on stage just as the active participant perceives the world at any given moment of his existence on stage” (Evreinov, 1981: 187). To sum with the another points of view, we can say that monodrama has the individual concerns such as subjectivity, interiority, selfness, sincerity, being one’s own self, isolation, feel of loneliness, especially, peculiar to twentieth century.

Today in Turkish theatre, monodrama is the common theatrical form which we can attend various staging examples during the recent theatre seasons. These examples are related to a sense of loneliness and isolation which is also a contemporary concern. What I mean by this is we the audiences are shown an actor who is alone on an almost empty and gloomy stage and at the same time who also tells and performs a lonely character in a conflicting society. I will try

to discuss under which terms whether we can describe this concern both as a typical model of living experience in Turkish socio-cultural climate and as a theatrical form peculiar to Turkey. If we close look at them, just as I will do in 'second step', we may see easily a common experience in Turkey's cultural life: It is the otherness or being other, feeling one's self as other. Before explain what these monodramas tell, first I would like to present some outstanding theatre groups and try to understand what lies behind their theatrical intention.

The well-known groups with their monodramas such as Mek'an Sahne, Seyyar Sahne, Şermola Performance point out an interest in what is or can be the "essence" of theatre. They refer to a search of theatrical form which can be established between stage and actor. However, this quest is by no means not an aesthetic search detached from the cultural and political situation of the society in which they live. On the contrary, in the performances, different socio-political dynamics are intertwined with the suppressed and visible cultural context related with the formation of modern culture in Turkey. Mek'an Sahne, for example, sees this "essence" as a moment (the Turkish word, 'an') in narrative (The Turkish word, anlatı) shared by the spectator and the actor, and seeks to treat this moment as both a theatrical and a real encounter between two, helping to understand and explain the "other voices" or the "voices from others" excluded from the history. Seyyar Sahne which investigates the dramatic and theatrical possibilities of a non-theatrical text such as novel, tries to get out of the two choices that see the theatre either as a "museum" or an "entertainment". Thus, they position the theatrical scene as a dynamic field of activity that provides leaks in the flow of everyday life. To do this, they blend traditional storytelling forms and physical theatre practices –for example that of Grotowski's- as an embodiment of lonely actor on an empty stage. Ba-Disiplinlerarası Tiyatro Topluluğu (The Ba-Interdisciplinary Theater Group), on the other hand, is interested in describing what is unnarratable, as well as telling with the intention of producing mono-performative works where all the elements of the staging are of equal value. The Sermola Performance Group, which is concerned with Kurdish question, is a community interested in developing possible ways for a new acting and storytelling style as a monodrama form in order to present a theatrical experience that pushes the possibilities of the staging.

Therefore, the sociological, economic, political arguments mentioned above cannot fully explain the changing face of Turkish theatre. However, they are not completely out of the scope of this concern. In other words, can there be a transformative aesthetic in terms of Erika Fischer Lichte puts it (Lichte, 2008), which will translate these impossibilities listed above -which are

signs of a conflicting oppressive cultural-social field- to the theater, and thus to the creative possibilities on the stage?

II. Performing Loneliness

Here, I will exemplify some monodramas by above-mentioned theatre groups with a particular attention to the motif of both character's loneliness in society and performer's loneliness on the empty stage.

My first example is *Dangerous Games*, a stage adaptation of Turkish novelist Oğuz Atay's novel under the same title, performed by Erdem Şenocak and staged by Seyyar Sahne since 2009. It tells the story of the main character –or mostly referred as an anti-character-Hikmet Benol who lives alone in a slum in a very poor condition and continuously speaking with his imagined friends, neighbours whom he blames, ridicules and sometimes shares his innermost. Among them Hüsametdin the colonel is the person whom he tells his story. However, we do not know whether they are real or fiction but through his imagined dialogue with them what reveals in this performance is not only the conceit, passion, ambition, defeat, unsuccessfulness, humour, and not only the cultural history of Turkish Republic but rather how it was shaped and has been still shaping the lives. These are also very affective elements for the audience. For example, after the performance most audience shares similar experience and say apart from seeing a brilliant actor, they find it mirroring themselves.

During the performance we are shown two swings and one performer, as the title of the performance implies. It is a theatrical demonstration by performer Şenocak/character's Hikmet's "dangerous games" with the swings. He uses certain narrative techniques while performing Hikmet. He doesn't tell the story directly to the audience but besides during the performance he makes the audience feel performer's own existence, his own body, and personality. For example, he many times has breaks to drink water, at the beginning he welcomes the audiences and shows them places to sit, or he informs them about the performance. During his nearly three hours taking performances without any sound effect, without changing lights design, he performs the story using all parts of his body, even at the same time he performs different characters surrounding Hikmet's life, wiggling his own toes and fingers.

Other example is *It's Never Gonna Be the Same: Wipe Your Tears (Artık Hiçbii'şii Eskisi Gibi Olmayacak Sil Göz Yaşlarını, 2013-2015)* written by one of the leading playwrights, Şâmil

Yılmaz and staged by Mek'an Sahne after Occupy Gezi which tells Gezi's story through the eyes of an alone street child called Avzer (performed by Ahmet Melih Yılmaz). Şamil Yılmaz and his theatre Mek'an Sahne, say that everything we see and experience on the streets will be on the stage, that there will be no gap between the two. This is why we the audience see or witness in his monodramas street performances with arabesque rap music, a character smoking weed, cursing, speaking the street language like Avzer. This play is a palpable example of the narrative of loneliness. Avzer lives alone in the streets. He is both a familiar person and a stranger, an "other" to us. People can also encounter someone like Avzer in everyday life but however this is not a real encounter. What the new theatre in Turkey, particularly Mek'an Sahne tries to do is to transform this daily and ordinary encounter with the named 'Other' to both a theatrical and real encounter on an empty stage. To do this, Avzer directly tell his story to the audience by introducing himself as "me, Avzer". While sitting on a chair during the performance, he tells his story and sometimes asks questions which are cannot be answerable easily both himself and to the audience. What he shares with the audience is to describe a turning point in his life with an occupy in the city center, in the parks where he lives. The playwright Yılmaz never refers in his play to Occupy Gezi or Gezi Park Protests in 2013, when all the 'others' gathered at Istanbul and spread to other cities. These all-pervasive protests in every city of Turkey were not only against Turkey's current ruling party, but also the whole ideological stance of the Turkish Republic which rejects and represses differences, alterity, and otherness. Thus, we the audiences know this performance tells the story of Gezi and also what people shared in common during that occupy. When Avzer meets with the people gathering in the parks, sees some are writing graffiti, especially when he meets with "the girl and the boy", he begins to change just all of us begin to change, all become the "other". What this performance does is to carry a sense of being together, being in common, through the loneliness of the individual.

III. Encounter with Self/Other: A New Experience of Collectivity

In this regard, it is worth to think about how the recent monodramas in Turkey, or as I termed the "narratives of loneliness", produces and is produced by a sense of being togetherness, a sense of community. What does it mean to share an experience in/by the performance? How a performance can open a common, shared space for its participants?

In fact, all those narratives of loneliness present the gaps between individual and society, between individual and ideological pressures, and also the social differences. This gap leads a

sense of loneliness, isolation as much as it presents individual and social conflicts. Gender inequality, question of identity, otherness, one's being deprived of mother language, minorities such as Kurds and Armenians, transgendered persons, the situation of women are common concerns that shape the content and form of these monodramas. These are both the playwright's or the performer's own concern and social concerns. Moreover, they constitute a kind of subtext of Turkish modern culture. The important thing in this view for us is to experience an identification in theatre with a person whom are written above and we almost never identify ourselves with, or to find a piece of us in it. So the stage of monodrama happens to us some putative impossible encounters. Because while the actor performing loneliness, he not only reflects the relationship between individual and community, rather makes a new interpretation which enables the audience to feel, to discuss what lies at the heart of the performance. It is not only for the audience but for the performer also. For example, when an audience asked to Ahmet Melih Yılmaz, performed the street child Avzer, how he created his role, whether he observed the street children or not, Yılmaz answer the question as saying "I only think my childhood, how I spent my time on Sunday's. I was an alone child but on Sunday, so many guests, everybody were coming to our home. So, I remembered what I was feeling in that times. When everybody went their own home, I was feeling myself again alone at home" (Mek'an Sahne, 2018:21). Then he states that it should be the same for Avzer whom was alone all the time in the street but after the occupy in the streets, in the parks that take a few months he was with others. But, he got alone again when the occupy ended. Similarly, an audience describes her own experience: "The performance touches our social memory, it reminds me the days we left our loneliness behind and meets other, realize, and feel other even before thinking of ourselves". (Ejder, 2018: 68).

Another monodrama performed by the same actor Ahmet Melih Yılmaz and staged by Mek'an sahne, which tells the transgendered women's story towards to death, *Women, Loves, Songs*, the old woman says to audience "When I say you, you, you can not realize that what I say as *you* is you. You think that I do not know you since you know that you don't know me. And you say yourself, she is not talking to me, but to another person. No, it's you whom I talked to. It's you whom I have been waiting for. Perhaps, we are waiting here for you, for one thousand years" (Mek'an Sahne, 2018:23). It is an open invitation to the audience to meet, to encounter in the theatre's shared space. Thus, it can be said that "performing loneliness" provides to its performer, audience, to all its participants, "a community of those who have nothing in common". What I mean by this is to understand, to feel, to realize, to share a common

experience at a moment/ during/after the performance, we do not need to gather based on a same idea, same feeling, same ideology. So, to say, the space of the shared experience does not mean a single and unified, same experience. It requires the plurality of experience. In fact, the condition of the collectivity in this regard is not only to feel each other but to have a capacity to produce a co-meaning and co-experience based on plurality and differences.

It is my opinion and experience to assert that the recent monodramas in Turkey have a prosperous loneliness landscapes based on the different storytelling forms; and these performances encounter the audience with the “other” who is both a familiar and stranger, and finally transforms the narrative of loneliness to a sense of collectivity since new meanings, feelings and experiences are being appeared by the audiences.

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