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The Quest of Young Turkish Playwrights: In-Yer-Face Theatre

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Abstract

In-er-face theatre, which emerged in Britain in the 1990s, became extremely popular on the stages of Istanbul in the new millennium. Some critics considered this new outburst as another phase of imitation. This phase, however, gave way to a new wave of playwrights that wrote about Turkey's own controversial problems. Many topics, such as LGBT issues, found voice for the first time in the history of Turkish theatre. This study examines why in-er-face theatre became so popular in this specific period and how it affected young Turkish playwrights in the light of Turkey's political atmosphere.

Keywords: Contemporary Turkish theatre, in-er-face theatre, political theatre, Turkish playwrights, performance, DOT theatre, censorship.

Over the last fifteen years, major changes have taken place on the stages of Istanbul. The cultural atmosphere has been enlivened by a considerable increase in the number of black box theatres, which began to emerge at the beginning of the new millennium mostly in the area of Taksim, Beyoğlu. Young artists, some of them still university students, reconstructed old garages and flats into small theatres for fifty to one hundred people, and they started running their own venues on small budgets. Some of the popular black box theatres are İkincikat, Kumbaracı50, Asmalı Sahne, Tiyatro Karakutu, Tatavla Sahne, Beyoğlu Terminal, Sahne Aznavur, Toy Istanbul, Galata Perform, Craft Tiyatro, and Talimhane Tiyatrosu. Today, these venues play a very important role in Istanbul's cultural life. Considering the ticket prices, about 30 to 60

Turkish liras (approximately €13) and the 8% tax paid on each ticket, the courage and enterprise of these young stage entrepreneurs deserves praise. They stage a variety of productions, organize workshops, and host public discussions. They have been cooperating with each other on issues, such as social responsibility projects, and organizing panels on subjects related to contemporary Turkish theatre.

At the beginning of this vigorous period, many theatre companies staged translations of in-*yer-face* plays, which were mostly written by British playwrights such as Philip Ridley, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, and Sarah Kane. After a few years, however, Turkish playwrights began writing plays that addressed Turkish issues. A variety of plays are performed, and some issues have found voice for the first time in the history of Turkish theatre, such as Kurdish and LGTB issues. This article examines the factors that gave rise to this transformation and why in-*yer-face* plays became so popular in Istanbul. Was it just another phase of imitation in the history of Turkish theatre as some critics argued? And most significantly, the number of Turkish playwrights has increased remarkably in the past ten years. Why did they emerge in this specific period? This article explores these questions in the light of recent political developments and gives an insight into what kinds of plays these young theatre practitioners are performing in Istanbul and into the difficulties they face. These developments will be analyzed relative to three phases. The first phase begins with the creation of DOT theatre, an independent theatre company. The second phase transpires with the establishment of a great number of black box theatres, and the final phase blooms as young playwrights write Turkish plays that appear on the stages of these small black box theatres.

DOT Theatre

In-*yer-face* plays, which are described as “rude and crude, sexually explicit, and often violent plays by young and (usually) male writers” (Sierz, “Cool Britannia” 324), originated in Great Britain in the 1990s, and reached the stages of Istanbul in 1999. Istanbul State Theatre initially

staged an in-er-face play by an Irish playwright—Martin McDonagh’s *Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1999–2000). One of the most rooted theatres in Istanbul, Kenter Theatre, staged in-er-face plays for three seasons: Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2003–2004), Patrick Marber’s *Dealer’s Choice* (2004–2005), and Rebecca Lenkiewicz’s *The Night Season* (2005–2006). Even though many of these productions were a success,¹ they did not significantly influence Turkish theatre practitioners to begin writing and producing their own in-er-face plays. It was with the establishment of DOT, an independent contemporary theatre company founded by Murat Daltaban, Özlem Daltaban, and Süha Bilal in 2005, that in-er-face plays suddenly became popular with audiences in Istanbul. Though there were many significant differences between DOT and the theatres staging in-er-faces at the time, DOT’s fundamental difference was its small-scale venue that allowed the audience to be much closer to the performance.

DOT’s first venue was at the Mısır Apartment, a historic building in İstiklal Street Beyoğlu, where they staged many in-er-face plays. Their first performance was Bryony Lavery’s *Frozen*, which took place in September 2005. DOT went on to stage many in-er-face plays including Joe Penhall’s *Love and Understanding*, Anthony Neilson’s *The Censor*, Tracy Letts’ *Bug*, David Harrower’s *Blackbird*, and Simon Stephens’ *Pornography*. DOT became extremely popular with young audiences, especially after the production of Philip Ridley’s *Mercury Fur* in 2007. Due to the conservative political atmosphere in Turkey, staging these provocative plays was a risky venture, and artistic director Murat Daltaban was well aware of this. This atmosphere also transformed the field of theatre. Most of the productions became safe and non-experimental. Daltaban mentions the state of Turkish theatre at the time they were establishing DOT in the preface of the Turkish translation of Aleks Sierz’ book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*:

In 2005, due to the problems rooted in the past, theatre was not something that was enjoyable anymore. On the contrary it had become something that was despised. We established DOT in a time in which the audience and the artists were having complicated feelings about theatre... It was like a great turmoil. When we announced that we would be staging plays at a small

stage in Mısır Apartment, people were shocked ... Now in 2009, DOT has its own audience and crew. It has gained recognition as a theatre that is developing. (9)²

Even though these provocative plays were extremely boundary pushing for the Turkish audiences, DOT's director, Murat Daltaban, worked with young talented actors and captivated a young audience within a short period of time. These innovative productions marked a new period in the history of Turkish theatre. DOT expanded the horizons of audiences and theatre practitioners and their great success triggered other theatre companies to stage courageous plays.

As expected, not everyone was impressed by DOT's new venture; some rejected these plays due to their vulgar and sexually explicit material. Daltaban defended their choices in an interview for *Radikal* by stating, "I am against conservative minds, and conservatism in art. To look at a Roman statue and to see only its penis is a bit unfair, and reflects an ignorant disposition." Considering that he began staging such controversial plays at a time when showing too much cleavage on television series was considered to violate moral and religious values, Daltaban's courage deserves praise.

The controversy, however, was not restricted to the provocative content. Some critics and theatre practitioners perceived this outburst of in-yer-face plays as another phase of imitation in the history of Turkish theatre. Mehmet Zeki Giritli, a theatre critic in *Mimesis*, rigorously attacked in-yer-face theatre:

In recent years, the greatest fraud on the stages in Turkey is the in-yer-face nightmare. I don't know when this incubus will disappear but what I know is that in a country like Turkey ... seeking help from a strange movement which emerged 30 years ago and has lost its influence even in Britain, is the result of commercial concern, lack of theatre knowledge and the failure of creating anything new.

This argument over imitation is not new and has a long history in Turkish theatre. For many decades, critics have debated about the influence of western theatre, and some strongly believe that this is the reason why Turkish theatre lacks a unique voice. Historically, the

Ottoman Empire had acquired a western orientation during the Tanzimat period in the 19th century, and western theatre was introduced for the first time in its history. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, traditional types of performances, namely ortaoyunu, karagöz and meddah,³ were abandoned. Many plays were imported from western countries and western theatre techniques were practiced. A group of intellectuals promoted this transition while others voiced their concern. As these arguments continued, the view against traditional theatre began to predominate for various reasons. This sensitive debate, however, was reiterated over the years. Haldun Taner, a prominent Turkish playwright, wrote in the late 1970s about the situation of Turkish theatre:

We have actors who can perform foreign roles as well as they are performed in their homeland. There are stage managers in Turkey who can create the exact “mise-en-scene” that they had seen in Europe and they are appraised for doing this. We have writers who are considered “great writers” to the extent they are similar to the writers of the west. Let us assume this is all okay, but then what can be considered as Turkish acting, staging, literature and perspective? (12)

According to Taner, after fifty years of imitating western theatre, Turkish theatre was still lacking a national voice. The initial attack on in-*yer-face* plays was based more on the history of Turkish theatre imitating western theatre than ethical concerns. Many theatre critics emphasized the need for creating unique plays that reflect Turkey’s own socio-cultural background. Theatre was in such a state when in-*yer-face* plays became such a hit in Istanbul. In 2006 theatre critic Robert Schild analyzed this issue in his article “Suratımıza bir Tokat ile Tiyatromuz Kurtulabilir mi?” (Can Our Theatre Be Saved by a Slap in the Face?). Schild argued that there is a chance that in-*yer-face* plays can actually reinvigorate Turkish theatre. He maintained that three important factors were necessary for this to occur. First, theatre companies should choose foreign plays with topics that are familiar to the majority of Turkish audiences. Second, Turkish playwrights should be encouraged to write plays, and if that is accomplished, the number of black box theatres should increase. Over the years, all these points materialized in a natural course.

Black Box Theatres

Over time, DOT situated itself into a more mainstream context. Accordingly, DOT moved from Mısır Apartment at Beyoğlu to Maçka G-Mall in 2011, and then in 2015, moved to a more exclusive shopping mall at Kanyon. Even though they still take part in international experimental projects, today they can be categorized within the boundaries of commercial theatre. As a new audience became interested in DOT's plays, other practitioners found courage and established their own black box theatres. Many of the young Turkish theatre practitioners, most of whom were born in the 1980s, were intrigued by the plays DOT had staged but many of them did not want to be part of a commercialized culture like DOT. As these small venues became active, the number of theatre companies also increased as it was less costly for them to rent small venues. Today there are at least 200 different performances in one season in Istanbul.

The venue İkincikat (Second Floor) was one of the first venues that preferred staging in-yer-face plays. *Some Explicit Polaroids* (2010) and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (2011) by Mark Ravenhill, *The Pitchfork Disney* by Philip Ridley (2010–2013), *Some Voices* by Joe Penhall (2010–2011), *Wastwater* (2011–2012) by Simon Stephens, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2011–2012) by Anthony Neilson, Philip Ridley's *Leaves of Glass* (2012) and Martin McDonagh's *Lonesome West* (2012), Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Philip Ridley's *Vincent River* are only some of the in-yer-face plays staged at this venue by different theatre companies.

But what was it that made in-yer-face plays so relevant and interesting to young theatre practitioners? I do not think this trend was coincidental. In-yer-face plays which originated in Britain "reflect the specific historical forces of the Thatcher era and its aftermath, and they point to the way in which this era's events and trends shaped their individual and collective political subjectivities" (Kritzer 30). The post-Thatcher generation was defined by the neo-liberal policies of the 1980s, and in-yer-face theatre in Britain in the 1990s was an avenue to speak out

against these conservative changes of the 1980s. Likewise, this young generation in Turkey was born during the neo-liberal economic transformation in the late 1980s under the leadership of Turgut Özal. While Özal did open the door to external markets and mass consumerism, the traditional values were still promoted:

He [Özal] seemed to argue for a traditional society, a social structure that could still be dependent upon moral-religious (Sunni) values of the past, while simultaneously proposing dramatic changes to the economy and prosperity of the country. The majority would still be Allah-fearing, mosque-attending souls, taking pride in the competitive strength of their companies in the international market, and caring for the downtrodden through charitable contributions to the newly established autonomous funds of the state. Özal wanted a *modern* society held together by conservative values. (Kalaycıoğlu 46)

Economic and political chaos continued in the 1990s, especially due to the clashes with Kurdish militants. In 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), an Islamic conservative party, came to power in Turkey. Even though AKP rejects being defined in religious terms and its members promote themselves as conservative democrats, their religiously inspired policies had a remarkable impact on the newly emerging artists. In this respect, in-yer-face style of theatre was an immediate outlet that young artists could use to express their feelings on stage. The neo-liberal conservatism after the mid-2000s brought about similar experiences making in-yer-face plays more effective. The cultural policies of AKP and its impact on the society and the arts is the topic of further research, but the great dissatisfaction on the part of many artists was revealed by the Gezi Park demonstrations. The increase in the number of alternative theatres and their political agendas indicated that political institutions have not been responding to the concerns of the artists for a long time. Thus, while the trend of in-yer-face productions may have started out as a phase of imitation, these plays were so well suited to Turkey's young theatre practitioners that they ventured into the realm of playwriting.

New Playwrights

In time, many theatre companies set aside foreign in-her-face plays and realized the need for new Turkish plays. The political climate provoked young artists to try playwriting for the first time. Some of the laudable new plays written during this period are: *Limonata* (*Lemonade*), *Sürpriz* (*Surprise*), *Küçük* (*Little*), *Altı Buçuk* (*Six and a Half*), and *P*rk* by Sami Berat Marçalı, *Şekersiz* (*Without Sugar*), *Sen İstanbul'dan daha Güzelsin* (*You are More Beautiful than Istanbul*), *Sevmekten Öldü Desinler* (*Let Them Say I Died of Love*) by Murat Mahmutyazıcıoğlu, *Cambazın Cenazesi* (*The Funeral of the Acrobat*), *Hidrellez* (*Hidrellez*) by Firuze Engin, *Poz* (*Pose*), *Medet* (*Aid*) by Deniz Madanoğlu, *Kar Küresinde bir Tavşan* (*A Rabbit in a Snow Globe*), *İz* (*Trace*), *Hayal-i Temsil*, *Zakir* (*The Speaker*), *Sherlock Hamid* (*Hamid the Sherlock*) by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, *Kasap* (*Butcher*), *He-go* by Halil Babür, *Kabin* (*Cabin*), *Garaj* (*Garage*), and *Kaplan Sarılması* (*Tiger's Hug*) by Kemal Hamamcıoğlu, *Nerede Kalmıştık* (*Where Did We Leave off?*), *Kimsenin Ölmediği bir Günün Ertesi* (*It Was the Day after Nobody Died*), *Kabuklu Süprizli Hayvanlar* (*Surprising Shelled Animals*), *Evim! Güzel Evim!* (*Home Sweet Home!*), *Babil* (*Babel*), *Biraz Sen Biraz Ben* (*A Little Bit of You a Little Bit of Me*) by Ebru Nihan Celkan, *Kargalar* (*Crows*), *Disco 5 No'lu* (*Disco Number 5*), *Aç Köpekler* (*Hungry Dogs*) by Mirza Metin, *Öğüt* (*Advice*), *Parti* (*Party*), by Cem Uslu. Some of these new plays have similar characteristics to in-her-face plays while others have their own style. In an interview, playwright and director Murat Mahmutyazıcıoğlu told me how in-her-face plays influenced him as a playwright:

Yes, I believe that what caused me to begin my journey in playwriting and what gave courage to many of my friends to write plays had a lot to do with the effect these plays had on the audience. It made me think that we could talk about our own issues and tell our own stories. The first play I directed *Limonata*, which was written by Sami Berat Marçalı, was created under such an influence...

Indeed, in-yer-face plays gave great impetus to these writers, and communication technology allowed them to break barriers and create cultural awareness. When asked to compare the new plays of the young generation to the old ones, Cem Uslu, a proficient young actor and director, states:

The main difference of this movement is that its representatives are able to engage easily with the world due to rapid globalization and development of communication technologies. Thus they are able to master what is happening in the world in the fields of art, politics, economy and they reflect these to the content and form of their plays by relating them to their own country. The playwrights of our time courageously and confidently write about issues that used to be covered up or just tacitly stated before.

It should be noted that some of these playwrights had already been writing plays before this trend and not all of these names were influenced by in-yer-face plays. However, what is noteworthy here is that, after in-yer-faces attracted so many audiences, playwriting increased significantly. With new Turkish plays, the issues of concern shifted to different topics. While British playwrights interrogate topics like drugs, pornography, rape, incest, abuse, pain, torture, and paedophilia, Turkish playwrights focus on minority and LGBT issues, family ties, media, and confronting past events such as the military coup of 1980. To get a better idea about the concerns of this period, here are the themes of a few plays explored by Turkish playwrights.

Tetikçi (Hitman), written by Ebru Nihan Celkan, is about the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink who was murdered on January 19, 2007. Dink was known as a vocal advocate of human and minority rights and defender of democracy in Turkey. Ogün Samast, a 17-year-old ultra-nationalist, and his accomplice were apprehended and convicted for the murder, but many argued that Dink's murder was carried out by organized crime. When the court decided that the incident was not a result of organized crime, many accused the state of protecting the ones responsible for the murder. Celkan's play explores this issue by questioning how innocent teenagers are tricked by organizations and turned into violent criminals. In the play, İbrahim, the head of such an organization, hunts for young people and makes them think that they are

serving their country by carrying out violence. The play exposes how young and innocent teenagers are used by such organizations and how their system works.

Üst Kattaki Terörist (The Terrorist from Upstairs) was staged by İkincikat. The story is based on Emrah Serbes' story and was adapted into a play by Sami Berat Marçalı. The story is about Nurettin, a 12-year-old boy whose brother was killed during the clashes with the Kurdish soldiers in Southeast Anatolia. The boy hates Kurds, but when a Kurdish university student Semih moves to their upper flat and the two begin to know each other, he begins to change. At first Nurettin is enraged to find out that he has a Kurdish neighbour but in time Semih becomes like a brother to him.

Limonata (Lemonade) is a family play. Özlem is the mother of three children who was abandoned by her husband twenty years ago. She raised her children all by herself and now deals with dementia in her old age. Despite her illness, we witness her great effort to keep the family together while her adult children struggle with other problems. Ege, her son, is a veteran who had lost his legs during military service while he was clashing with Kurdish militants in the east of Turkey. Özlem accepts neither his handicap nor the fact that he is a homosexual. When Özlem's other son Melih, who had also abandoned the family, suddenly shows up, things take a different turn. Melih has no idea about Ege's situation. His homecoming brings the whole family together and opens up issues that had been buried for a long time. Through this family tragedy, Sami Berat Marçalı questions family ties, mandatory military service, conscientious objection to military service, and war.

İz (Trace) was performed at Galata Perform in 2013. Written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, the play takes us to an old Greek house in Tarlabası. *İz* focuses on three topics: the Greek minority in Turkey, the military coup of 1980 and the lives of two outcasts, a young Kurdish man and a transsexual. We meet people who have lived in this Greek house during three different time periods. First there are two Greek sisters, Markiz and Eleni, who had to abandon their sick mother and house due to the mob attacks that took place on 6-7 September 1955 against Istanbul's Greek community. Then there is Ahmet and Turgut. Ahmet is running

away after the military coup of 1980 because he is a member of Dev-Yol, which is a revolutionary left-wing organization. He takes refuge in the same apartment, which is then owned by Turgut. Ahmet lies to Turgut by saying that he is hiding because he is a Christian, but Turgut learns the truth and eventually betrays his friend. Finally, we meet Sevengül, a transsexual, and her Kurdish lover Rizgar who were living there in the 2000s. The play does not focus on the Kurdish question through Rizgar, but it does give us glimpses of life in the east of Turkey and of Rizgar's struggle for survival in Istanbul. While the play shows how politics engenders biases, it also exposes how these biases can lead to brutal violence. As in the story of Markiz, who was savagely raped in a church while trying to run away from the attack,

Only the walls of the church were solid. Four walls... Everything was broken. The windows... Everything was in pieces... I didn't pray. Someone could have heard me. Only the walls and I stood erect. I shouldn't have turned back. I know. He was there. The bear had detected my scent. His giant shadow covered the Virgin Mary... He could have done a good deed by killing me. But he didn't... I said God help me as he was growling on top of me. (Özbudak)

Even these few examples demonstrate how young Turkish playwrights are exploring political topics and shattering taboos by voicing issues that have never been questioned in depth on stage before. Similar to in-*yer-face* plays, Turkish playwrights have also challenged social conventions, which is considerably new. Though Turkish theatre was extremely political during the 1960s, the issues that are explored today are markedly more varied than before.

It is difficult to make generalizations, but comparing some of these new Turkish plays to general characteristics of in-*yer-face* plays is useful in understanding how Turkish playwrights are seeking their own voices. In-*yer-face* plays are characterized by a language which is "usually filthy" and characters who "talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each other, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent" (Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre* 5). The language of *İz*, for example, becomes only slightly vulgar in scenes where Rizgar and

Esengül argue. At first, Rizgar appears as a swearing vagabond who deals drugs and causes all kinds of trouble for Sevgül:

Don't get me started you fag! You are the whore here not me! Whoever pays for you can fuck you as they wish. Who do you think you are following me like that? You can't question me. At least I fuck around with my honour. (Özbudak)

But at times his filthy language changes to a nostalgic poetic expression:

I used to go hunting with my dad in Doğubeyazıt.⁴ I still remember the white endless great plains... It snowed night and day. Night and day... When you get there, the first thing that happens to you is that your skin thickens. How I loved it there but I was also bored. A white eternal void... You look at it endlessly... (Özbudak)

This abrupt shift in language reveals that Rizgar is more than just a vagabond. We even begin to empathize with him as he explains why he had to leave his homeland. Despite its rich history and natural wonder, Doğubeyazıt is void; it is void of job opportunities, adequate living conditions and education. We begin to understand that deep down inside Rizgar is actually a vulnerable man. The ebb and flow in language reflects the shift from the personal to the political. Inherently he has the potential to be good but circumstances have polluted his character. This marks a great difference between Turkish and British playwrights. Most of the British in-her-face plays "portray victims as complicit in their own oppression" (Urban 354). Most contemporary Turkish plays also point to the victims' flaws, but they also expose the sociopolitical factors that induce the fall of the characters. In *İz*, for example, violence is nourished by various sociopolitical factors. Rizgar cannot survive in Istanbul if he does not get involved in illegal business, and he tells Sevgül that the same is true for a transsexual: "Can you become someone just by working? Look at yourself before you give me advice. You yourself don't have a chance. Just like me. Just like me. Can you become a businesswoman? An artist? This is the nest of losers" (Özbudak).

As more is revealed about the background of the characters, they become less hateful. Rizgar knows that neither Sevgül nor he can attain

money and power by working hard. As outcasts, they have no other option but to sell drugs or become sex workers. This does not mean they are innocent, but the play touches upon the complexity of their situation. Thus, as in many political plays, *İz* also shows “the relationship of individuals to their society, how social relationships shape individuals” (Nikcevic 264). The plays therefore reflect the sociopolitical elements, but they do not lack psychological depth.

Another recurring issue for Turkish playwrights is the strong connection between the characters and their families. Sierz points out that characters of in-*yer-face* plays are “rootless” and their “relationships are acutely problematic” (*In-yer-face Theatre* 238). In a collectivist society like Turkey, however, many characters deal with their deep roots that chain them to their families and usually bring about their tragedy. As in *Limonata*, Marçalı tries to answer where to set the limits in family matters and how much family members are responsible for one another. For example, the mother Özlem and her only daughter Müge are so immersed in the family that they cannot even feel their own pain; instead they experience a kind of collective pain.

Overall, in comparison to foreign in-*yer-face* theatre, the level of violence, sex, and use of vulgar language in contemporary Turkish plays is quite moderate, but new playwrights have become more daring than before. In general, it can also be said that the amount of violence is higher than the amount of sexuality shown on stage. Despite the moderation, Turkish audiences may experience a greater degree of shock. For example, seeing an actor in underwear was enough to cause discomfort for some of my students. The usefulness of the shock technique in in-*yer-face* plays has been questioned by many critics: “...Yet the question remains whether, in the end, its strategy of using shock as an instrument in its own reception is productive” (Defraeye 95). From my interaction with my students, the shock is the first phase of transformation. Yes, such plays do lose their effect in time, but it is because they have fulfilled their function. After watching several daring plays like this, those students who could not even utter the word “homosexual” in class began discussing topics that were even new to me. Next time they might not be shocked by a play that deals with a similar issue because they have already explored that area

which used to be discomfiting for them. This will not apply for all, but these plays have not only tested “the boundaries of acceptability” (Sierz “Still in-yer-face?” 19) but also changed the strict boundaries of many young people in Istanbul. As Sierz points out, “they show a world which is invisible to a typical audience and thus they might come across as disturbing or dangerous” (“Still in-yer-face?” 49). Yet as these daring issues became more and more visible to my students, the plays stopped being so disturbing, not in the sense that they became numb, but the issues turned into a source of critical thinking and not of shame.

Political Edge and Censorship

Sierz notes that in-yer-face plays do not offer a possibility of change and, compared to traditional political drama, they do not “inspire audiences” for a specific desired alternative and “traditional categories of left and right politics” do not seem to apply to the many more (*In-yer-face Theatre* 240). In-yer-face theatre deals with social concerns, but “what disturbs critics of ‘in-yer-face’ theatre is that it does so without any moral framework or ideological certainty” (Urban 354). Young Turkish playwrights also do not pursue right or left politics and they also do not promote a specific ideology, but most of them still inspire hope for understanding, accepting diversity and attaining peace. Most of these playwrights born in the 1980s are considered as the Y generation, and they seem to show a more inclusive and deeper understanding of peace and unity. This is also reflected by the Gezi Park protests which many were part of:

The Gezi Park protests represented the largest political sighting of a Generation Y segment in Turkey to date ... The Gezi protesters are distinguished first by their pluralism. Among the organizations flying their flags in the Turkish streets were feminist, LGBT and human rights groups, environmentalists and trade unions. There were Alevis, self-described “anti-capitalist Muslims,” students, soccer fans, professionals, academics, artists, nationalists, liberals, left-wing revolutionaries, Kurds and “white Turks”—as the Western-oriented city elites are known. The coalition was highly diverse ideologically, its constituent elements pursuing wildly disparate agendas. (Patton 30–31)

Similarly, many young Turkish playwrights do not force a specific ideology to the audience, but they yearn for peace and understanding. It should, however, be noted that despite their collaboration, Turkish playwrights are not wholly free of the tremulous political conditions in Turkey. Sierz points out that "...theatre in Britain is technically uncensored, so everything is allowed. You can stage things that would be impossible to show on television or in the cinema—this gives writers the chance to explore the darkest sides of the human psyche without compromise" ("Still in-yer-face?" 19). Such an atmosphere is impossible to achieve as the growing scale of censorship in Turkey has become alarming over the past few years. Many artists have had their work suppressed, or they have been prosecuted on trivial grounds. Some theatre companies have been so intimidated that they have cancelled plays.

Several methods have been used to censor the arts. The most frequent stratagem for legitimizing random censorship has been by emphasizing the sensitivities of the public. Conservative media caution of the need to take note of the values of the public. The conservative media supplied the government with justifications for arbitrary censorship by attacking plays they did not find proper. *Yala ama Yutma* (*Lick but Don't Swallow*), a play by a prominent Turkish playwright Özen Yula, was targeted by conservative media before it was even staged. The play was supposed to be performed in February 2010 at Kumbaracı 50, but was cancelled as a result of serious intimidation. Directed by the Biriken Group, the play tells of an angel sent to earth in the body of a porn actress. On 2 February 2010, the Islamist daily newspaper *Vakit* reported in an article headlined "Messages Full of Provocation from the Immoral Play" that "right-minded Muslims want this immoral play to be banned before it is performed at all." This criticism was based purely on the synopsis of the play. Shortly afterwards, the theatre company received many email threats and telephone calls and demanded protection from the police. Ironically, however, on the very day this protection was requested, the venue for the performance, Kumbaracı 50, was shut down by Beyoğlu municipality on the grounds that it lacked fire-escape ladders. The venue reopened shortly after this incident, but the company eventually decided to cancel the play.

The theatre company also issued a press release responding to the allegations in *Vakit*. Playwright Özen Yula stated that the play “is an artistic expression and calls for human rights and social justice” and “not a commentary on Islam and is not speaking against Islam or any religion.” Yula also pointed out that “*Vakit* continues to support violence and intimidation through posting comments on its website and continuing to publish incorrect and mean-spirited articles about Yula and the play.” The minister of culture and tourism at the time, Ertuğrul Günay, discussed the episode on television, but glossed over the underlying issues by reiterating that artists have to respect the values of society.

Istanbul municipal theatre’s production of Marco Antonio de la Parra’s political comedy *Günlük Müstehtecen Sırlar* (*Daily Obscene Secrets*) was also condemned by the conservative media. Iskender Pala, a columnist at *Zaman* newspaper, considered the play immoral and claimed that it offended the audience with its sexual vulgarity. He also stressed that he did not find it appropriate for the state to support these plays financially. Pala later confessed that he had never actually seen the play, and had only read the text. The fact that the play was restricted to the audiences over the age of 16 was referred to many times by conservative writers, but its theme and plot were discounted. *Daily Obscene Secrets* is critical of the human rights abuses in Chile during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Perhaps these commentators were worried that people might draw parallels with current events in Turkey. The same play had been performed in 2006 by Theatre Fora, but it had never sparked much debate at the time. The very different reaction four years later highlighted how much had changed in the intervening period.

The potential provocation of the conservative masses became a key censorship strategy among the conservative media. There have been many other cases where performances or the circulation of artworks have been hampered. The culture and tourism ministry has come under attack over alleged bias in its distribution of funds to private theatres. It is claimed that companies such as Genco Erkal and Dostlar theatre, Altıdan Sonra theatre, Destar theatre and Kumbaracı 50 were denied funding in 2013 because they had supported the anti-government protests that summer (İzci “Muhafif Tiyatroya Tahammül Yok”). DOT and Tiyatro

Kumpanyası are two theatre companies that were due to receive funding. They, however, refused the government funding on the grounds that the ministry required them to sign an agreement that they must respect moral values on stage, failing which they will have to repay the funding within 15 days with interest.

Despite the obstacles, Sierz's hopes in 2009 for Turkish theatre have become more or less true. He wrote:

I personally hope that more courageous people start writing their own plays instead of translating English plays into Turkish. I'd especially like to support those writers who deal with contemporary social and political issues. I do hope that more contemporary and exciting works will be produced in the near future. (Preface to *Suratına Tiyatro* 8)

As the developments show, new plays with or without the influence of in-er-plays have emerged over the past ten years and formed a small lively theatre atmosphere in Istanbul. What these playwrights started doing was new and different. The issues they explored sprang from the streets. With smaller venues, the plays were taken down from high and remote stages and plays were staged closer to the audience. Ongoing censorship also led to greater collaboration among artists. From my personal experience, competition ceased and many artists abandoned their individual ambitions. It may well be that some theatres will fall victim to this government interference and to other circumstances. However, censorship and the recent political atmosphere have also enhanced alternative artistic production by awakening artists and prompting a struggle for cultural freedom. Many Turkish theatre practitioners are ardently searching and trying to create a unique voice. Above all, they are undauntedly interrogating a wide range of political topics. Thus, despite the discouraging political developments, I still have hope for those artists who are trying to create peace through art in this beautiful country. And as David Eldridge says: "Who knows what plays will emerge out of the frightening moment in history in which we find ourselves?" (58).

Notes:

¹ McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* was nominated in four categories and received the best production of the year award at the Afife Jale Theatre Awards in 2001.

² Unless stated otherwise all translations belong to the author.

³ Orta Oyunu is a non-illusionistic performance that is not based on a text. There is a loose plot but the performance is not based on a linear story. Some parts of the performance are totally autonomous. Karagöz is shadow puppet theatre. The performance revolves around the leading figures Karagöz and Hacivat and their arguments. Meddah is a story-teller. He recounts entertaining stories and impersonates various characters. All three have comic elements and are greatly based on improvisation and verbal skill.

⁴ District of Ağrı Province of Turkey, bordering Iran.

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