

# From Self-Effacement to Confrontation: The Emergence of Queer Theatre in Istanbul

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Received: June 21, 2016

Accepted: July 5, 2016

Online Published: August 25, 2016

doi:10.5539/ach.v8n2p126

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ach.v8n2p126>

*Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the original Turkish are the author's.*

## Abstract

Over the past ten years, the number of alternative theatres run by young artists in Istanbul has increased significantly. Political theatre has become an important part of this new cultural milieu. This article explores the emergence of queer theatre as part of this trend, especially in the last five years. It also examines the developments that gave rise to this theatre and elaborates on the topic by analysing two plays *Cadının Bohçası* (Sack of the Witch) and *80lerde Lubunya Olmak* (Being a Transsexual in the 80s).

**Keywords:** Turkish theatre, queer theatre, LGBT movement

## 1. Introduction

‘Queer solo performance is booming. The field is so diverse – diverse in terms of its artistic form and content, and diverse in terms of the identities of those performing – that it challenges any effort to define it’ (Roman in Hughes and Roman, 1998) This ardent introduction to Hughes and Roman’s *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* is a reminder of how long it has taken LGBT individuals to find a voice on the stages of Istanbul. Portrayals of lesbian gay bisexual and transgender lives or any mention of homosexuality in earlier plays were scant. When such lives were represented, they were often depicted as amusingly libidinous stereotypes.

This began to change at the dawn of the new millennium as LGBT individuals began to engage more with theatre to express their problems, and with the emergence of a new style of drama, “in-yer-face” theatre. Originating in Britain in the 1990s, “in-yer-face” became popular in Istanbul after 2000. These plays are characterised by filthy language and characters who “talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each other, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent” (Sierz, 2001). Among the many in-yer-face plays staged during this period were Bryony Lavery’s *Frozen*; Joe Penhall’s *Love and Understanding, Some Voices*; Anthony Neilson’s *The Censor, The Wonderful World of Dissocia*; Tracy Letts’s *Bug*; David Harrower’s *Blackbird*; Simon Stephens’s *Pornography, Wastwater*; Mark Ravenhill’s *The Fastest Clock in the Universe, Some Explicit Polaroids*; Philip Ridley’s *The Pitchfork Disney, Vincent River and Mercury Fur*. These plays, with their intense sexual and violent content, were initially startling to Turkish audiences. Yet a group of theatre practitioners as well as younger audiences embraced this type of drama, and from around 2005 many black box theatres in Istanbul staged a great number of in-yer-face plays. Issues considered taboo by Turkish audiences were explored in a very challenging way.

This gave many young Turkish playwrights the courage to try the same approach in relation to the problems in Turkey. Several of them began to write and stage challenging texts about political issues, including the problems facing LGBT individuals. Some of these texts are based on real events. It was Esmeray Özatik who took the lead in sharing her personal experiences as a transgender person in her solo performances. The venue İkincikat, which hosted many in-yer-face plays at the time, welcomed Esmeray’s most famous play *Cadının Bohçası* (The Sack of the Witch) in 2007. This bold move opened up new avenues for the voices of the marginalised. Other documentary plays based on the real lives of transgender individuals included *80’lerde Lubunya Olmak* (Being a Transsexual in the 80s) and *90’larda Lubunya Olmak* (Being a Transsexual in the 90s).

A second category of plays that wholly or partly explore issues related to LGBT individuals are fictional. Included among their number are: *Kimsenin Ölmediği bir Günün Ertesiydi* (After the Day Nobody Died) by Ebru Nihan Celkan, *Garaj* (Garage) by Kemal Hamamcıoğlu, *Bakarsın Bulutlar Gider* (Maybe the Clouds may Disappear) by Özen Yula, *Diva* (Diva), *Kadınlar Aşklar ve Şarkılar* (Women Amour and Songs) by Şamil Yılmaz, *İz* (Trace) by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, *Dokuz Ay Son Gün* (Last Day of Nine Months) by Sermiyan Midyat and *Limonata* (Lemonade) by Sami Berat Marçalı. This list may not be long, but the very airing of such issues on stage has marked an important turning point in Turkish theatre.

Instead of emphasising these plays as queer plays, I see them as part of political theatre. Their emergence in the new millennium is more related to the reactions to the authoritarian government than to the emergence of a vocal LGBT movement. That movement, along with many other oppressed groups in Turkey, has been part of the strong socio-political resistance to the oppressive policies of the AKP government. The Gezi Park protests demonstrated that groups with different agendas, even those whose ideas clash, came together for one ultimate purpose. In today's political situation, in which artists are intimidated, political theatre such as Kurdish theatre, feminist theatre and gay/queer theatre hold on to one another in order to survive.

The term gay/queer theatre is strongly associated with Western socio-political and cultural factors. Gay and lesbian theatrical practices, with their origins in the 'post-Stonewall liberation' movement, 'galvanized lesbians and gay men to come out and demonstrate to the world that they are everywhere' (Miller & Roman, 1995). Queer theatre, on the other hand, is identified with 'post-AIDS consciousness' and 'with radical, direct-action groups' objecting to 'a perception of "gay" as white, middle-class, affluent, and assimilated...' (Roberts, 2000). Today, talk of mainstream gay theatre and a gay bourgeoisie in Turkey is simply unrealistic. Thus, the term queer used in this article should be understood as defined by critic Charles McNulty. Queer 'seeks to encompass that which has been excluded, ridiculed, oppressed'; in other words, 'life caught in the margins' (McNulty, 1993).

The emergence of these plays and performances by other theatre companies with similar political agendas are slowly but surely creating change. As Jordan Schilderout points out about the US context, 'the initial struggle was simply between visibility and invisibility. Once LGBT characters gained some foothold in the theatre an additional tension was between "positive" and "negative" representations ...' (2014). The same is true of the plays staged in Istanbul: the initial struggle is about surviving long enough to become visible. In today's political atmosphere in Turkey, I evaluate any such effort in theatre as constructive. Taking this into account, I now briefly explore the history of LGBT movement in Turkey to understand what the factors were that triggered the emergence of such plays in Istanbul, and analyse two plays *Cadının Bohçası* and *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* to examine what issues are being challenged.

## 2. Brief History of LGBT Movement in Turkey

The first organised groups of LGBT individuals were established by Ibrahim Eren in the 1970s. Working at the Environmental and Health Organisation in Izmir, Eren initiated support groups and conversation sessions. This was, however, a private endeavour and never sparked a collective movement. In any event, the Turkish political situation at the time was too chaotic for such a concerted initiative to succeed. Political violence and student clashes between right-wing nationalist groups and left-wing student groups were escalating in the 1970s. The statistics illustrate the extreme level of unrest that existed during this period. A total of 9,795 armed attacks occurred during this period and as a result of which 4,040 people lost their lives and 11,160 people were injured (Gunter, 1989). As the number of violent attacks increased, the military mounted a successful coup on September 11, 1980.

Ibrahim Eren's organization was shut down and he emigrated to Germany to escape repression. The coup was especially repressive for LGBT individuals. Many lives were ruined and many people were subjected to state violence. 'During the "cleansing" of the 1980 military coup, they shaved off the hair of transsexuals and gays and exiled them to different cities ... The fact is, victimisation of LGBT individuals has been the issue that has been least spoken of' (Öz, 2009). The repressive environment of the 1980s induced LGBT individuals to search for new social, cultural and political outlets.

In the mid-1980s, Eren, who had by then been living in Europe for several years, came back to politicise the LGBT minority. He established the Radical Democrat Green Party, one of the key events in the politicization of gay identity in Turkey, even though the party was never accorded official status. Its main aim was to change deeply rooted social belief systems and champion the rights of ethnic, gender and religious minorities. However, in an interview with Kuzey Yıldız, Eren pointed out that even though the party stood up for the rights of all oppressed people, the media deliberately highlighted the presence of gays in its ranks. Eren mentions as an example one of the antimilitarist protests in front of the Greek embassy, during which the protestors carried banners bearing the slogan 'peace' and a picture of a white dove. Next day, as Eren reminds us in his interview, the media reported that

'Gays protest in front of the Greek embassy.' Of the approximately 20 protestors, only three were gay, and although all party members supported LGBT rights, there were those who still felt uncomfortable in being labelled gay. As he went on to explain to Yıldız, the media bear the main responsibility for their loss of support: 'From the point when we said that gay people should also have rights, it became evident that this party could never become a political movement. We were the laughing stock of the media.' Such media manipulation persisted and by 1988 the party was defunct. Even so, to some extent LGBT individuals had found political voice.

One of the most striking protests during this period took place in 1987 at Taksim Gezi Park, and was against police harassment. The protesting group, most of whose members were transgender individuals, began a hunger strike during Ramadan (Güneş, 2014). Many had been the victims of violence and they wanted police persecution to end. Sevda Yılmaz, who was one of the participants in the hunger strike, described the extreme oppression that led to the protest (Güneş, 2014). Tension had peaked earlier in the month of Ramadan when police raided the protestors' homes, evicted them and sealed up the doors for days. The hunger strike was intended to bring an end to this situation. It started with four people, but many others joined after hearing about it on the news. The protest lasted ten days. Yılmaz points out that they made the headlines internationally and were heard for the first time. This protest was the first public action taken by the Turkish LGBT community and is considered a milestone in their history. After the hunger strike, the police stopped the oppression for a year. Yılmaz makes the interesting observation that during this period most transsexuals were very religious and many of them were deeply perturbed by the support they received from atheists, with whom they did not wish to collaborate. These people were thus adhering to the very order that they were fighting against. Moreover, according to Yılmaz, the movement fell apart because the oppression stopped for some time. At one point, there were only 6 or 7 people still involved. However, when a new chief of police took over, the repression resumed and the groups got back together again. For some time, the LGBT community refrained from founding another political party and gave up their political endeavours, focusing instead on environmental matters by establishing the Green Peace Association.

Nonetheless, during the 1990s a few important developments did take place for this community. In 1993 a group of LGBT individuals wanted to organise a gay parade. Initially, the local government consented, only to reverse itself and ban the parade in response to a smear campaign in the media. This prompted outrage and led to the creation of Lambda Istanbul, a LGBT advocacy organisation. Today, Lambda remains one of the most active and prominent such organisations in the country. A year later, a group in Ankara gathered and established Kaos GL. Both organisations have survived, despite being taken to court on the grounds that they were at odds with the morals of the society. (Gecim, 2009)

Crucial changes occurred with the new millennium. LGBT individuals found more channels of communication as internet became more widely available in Turkey. As a result, the LGBT organisations became more readily visible. The first gay pride parade finally took place in June 2003, when 50 LGBT individuals marched along İstiklal Street in Istanbul. In their press statement, they spoke of their 'right to live proud' (Gecim, 2009). Though the protestors were few in number, the protest was still significant: LGBT individuals had finally gone out into the public sphere to proclaim their existence. In ensuing years, the campaign would change significantly.

Since 2002, Turkey has been ruled by a government with Islamist tendencies. From the 2000s, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) tried to adopt various democratisation measures in order to gain membership of the European Union. When the parliament passed the Law on Associations in 2004, "queer associations were quickly founded as legal persons" but as Çetin points out "this development was only attributable to the EU accession process and did not indicate that the AKP had taken a tolerant policy toward queers" (2015). One example that demonstrates the government's anti-queer policy is the hostile speech made by Aliye Kavaf, the minister of state for women and family affairs at the time. In March 2010, Aliye Kavaf proclaimed: 'I believe homosexuality is a biological disorder, a disease. It needs to be treated. Therefore I don't support gay marriage. Our ministry is not doing any kind of work for them. Moreover, they haven't communicated any demands to us' (Bildirici, 2010). Many civil society organisations quickly responded to this homophobic utterance, which had the effect of triggering a dialogue on LGBT rights. Both the Turkish Psychology Association and the Turkish Medical Association declared 'that homosexuality is not a psycho-sexual disorder but a sexual orientation just like heterosexuality and demanded that the minister apologize' (Baba, 2001). Until 2007, AKP's approach was both positive and negative for the queer movement but "during AKP's second term, conflicts between the AKP and queers heated up" (Çetin, 2015).

During this period discrimination and oppression were not experienced only by LGBT individuals but also by many other segments of the society. When a small group of protestors began in the summer of 2013 to demonstrate against the AKP's plans to demolish Gezi Park, the government responded violently. Many people were already dissatisfied with the ruling party's authoritarianism, and this incident triggered rebellion around the country.

LGBT individuals became a crucial part of the Gezi Park resistance. Bade Okçuoğlu (2013) recalls how a LGBT bloc was formed and a rainbow flag was hung from a tree in Gezi Park so that LGBT individuals could find each other easily in the crowd. During the protest, the group provided first aid services, free food and beverages and organised film screenings. They united with everyone during the protests even though ‘their memories were replete with “non-recognition, denial, hatred and murder” Okçuoğlu (2013). Gezi, however, provided them a different experience. Okçuoğlu tells of the trans activist Şevval and her unique experience of being out in the teargas. People she didn’t know took her by the arm during the turmoil and helped her out. ‘From this point of view, the experience of the Gezi resistance may have made a transformative contribution to the collective memory of LGBTQ people in Turkey. It may have opened up the possibility of thinking about what was previously “unthinkable”’ (Okçuoğlu, 2013). They were able to talk to journalists and share their ideas with others who camped out with them in the park. When they clashed with the police, they resisted alongside everyone else. Right after the Gezi Park protests in 2013, about 50,000 people attended the gay pride parade in Istanbul. Over the course of a decade, a modest parade had become a grand celebration.

Yet despite growing awareness, visibility and support, abuse and discrimination are still common. What has changed, however, is that the LGBT movement has managed to get such issues on the public agenda, and they can no longer be dismissed as trivial and rare expressions of intolerance. Theatre in Istanbul was greatly influenced by these political developments, especially the Gezi protests. It has become one of the key avenues for making the transgender experience accessible to a wider audience.

### 3. The Sack of the Witch

In her article *The Stage: a Space for Queer Subjectification in Contemporary Turkey*, Eser Selen (2012) views Bülent Ersoy (1952), Seyfi Dursunoğlu (1932) a.k.a. Huysuz Virgin and Zeki Müren (1931-96) as ‘the pioneers of contemporary Turkish queer performance.’ Ersoy and Müren are known as two iconic singers of Ottoman classical music. Seyfi Dursunoğlu, on the other hand, is a drag queen who performs under the stage name of Huysuz Virjin (Cranky Virgin).

All three people have, in different ways, had to fight to survive in a secular Muslim country. Selen (2012) speaks of how ‘these performers sacrifice their queerness’ in their daily lives in order to validate their performances onstage. Bülent Ersoy doesn’t fully conform to Selen’s description, but it does apply to her in a different way. While Dursunoğlu and Müren refrained from revealing any details of their lives offstage, Ersoy has been more forthcoming, and has had a different way of avoiding rejection. Unlike the other two figures, Ersoy has underlined her Muslim identity. She refers to Allah repeatedly in her interviews and performances. Despite the oppression she has lived through, Ersoy has always accepted heterosexual norms and has never joined her voice to those of the oppressed.

Selen considers this sacrifice as ‘detrimental to Turkish queers existence offstage’ (736). However, she also acknowledges that ‘in contemporary Turkey the stage represents the only space where queerness can safely be embodied’ and that the stage therefore offers ‘a potential opening up for the recognition of queer subjectivity offstage as well’ (745).

This personal sacrifice became less evident as more radical activists began to appear on small stages. A transgendered performer who has sacrificed everything but her queerness on and offstage is Esmeray Özadikti. She is one of the leading figures in the LGBT movement and is a solo performer. She was ascribed a male identity at birth in a small conservative village near Kars, a city in northeast Turkey, and moved to Istanbul when she was only 15. However, being a Kurdish transsexual in Istanbul was not easy, and for a long time she had to work as a sex worker. In time she became a feminist, a columnist, a playwright, a radio broadcaster and a tenacious fighter. Today she proudly declares herself in all her interviews to be a Kurd, a transsexual and a feminist.

Most of Esmeray’s plays explore gender and identity through autobiographical solo performance pieces. She has staged *Cadının Bohçası* (The Sack of the Witch), *Yırtık Bohça* (Torn Sack) and Dario Fo’s *The Rape* and *A Woman Alone*. Esmeray describes both of Fo’s plays as being like snapshots of her own life. She stated in an interview with Özkartal (2010) that while staging *The Rape*, she added her own experiences and performed her own rape:

*The Rape* is a very powerful play. You are narrating your own rape. It’s very different. There are many people who cry during the performance. What I want is for people to ask themselves: how are you responsible for this? They shouldn’t escape reality. I was 11 and 16 when I was raped. One of our relatives raped me when I was 11.

In reply to a question about whether she told her parents of this event, she states the horrifying truth that ‘they would not have believed me. They would either kill me or believe the one who raped me. The one who is raped is eradicated and the one who rapes goes on wandering around among us.’

This was a powerful play but the one that has made her more widely known is *Cadının Bohçası*. Esmeray wrote *Cadının Bohçası* on the basis of her own experiences. It was, however, a feminist company, Theatre Boyalı Kuş (Theatre Painted Bird) that helped her give the play final form. She didn't want to use patriarchal language and so turned to the company for help (Gündüç, 2007). Throughout the play, we journey through Esmeray's life, beginning with her childhood. She presents her troubled family history. In one of her stories, she tells of how, when she was a boy, she wanted to do all the things the girls around her did. So when the girls gathered to show off their knitting skills, she covered her hair with her mother's scarf and began knitting. Her father and brothers became furious and beat her. When she thought about why they had done so, she finally decided she was a real girl, since most of the women around her were being treated in this way. Her childhood ended cruelly when her father sent her to work in Istanbul. She lived with an uncle for some time and tried to find work.

Esmeray shares with the audience her sharp and humorous observations on gender discrimination, sex work, isolation and personal growth. What makes this a gripping play is the fascinating moral debate it offers. She recounts her first days in Istanbul as a naïve youngster of 16. The day she sat in a park by herself, more than 30 men approached her with sexual intent. She shows how those who disapprove of her most are those who are the most hypocritical. Because we know Esmeray's stories are based on real life, this moral theme takes on added weight. As Hughes has remarked, when we realise that the performer is the writer and the stories are real, 'there is some level of safety that disappears for the audience: we can't hide behind "it's only art"' (Hughes & Roman, 1998). Moreover, her stories make you realise that they are less about her than they are a critique of the community.

Esmeray brilliantly evokes the gender discrimination with what she experienced after she decided to change her appearance altogether. When she dressed like a man, her boyfriend and his friends treated her as she was one of them, but when she summoned the courage to change her appearance, they started treating her differently. She started making tea and food to serve them. When they moved to a new house, she was not allowed to carry any of the furniture, since as she says in the play "this was a man's job"! She laughs at the memory of this and observes that she was twice as big and strong as they were because of the hormones she was taking, but because she was dressed as a woman they wouldn't let her help. In time, she read more about feminism and educated herself about political issues. Tired of living by prostitution, she struggles to find a new job, but no one obliges. So she bakes pastry, knits sweaters and sells them to survive. She lives half-starved for a long time. Her illiterate Kurdish landlady is so naïve that she can't understand why no one is willing to give her work. Esmeray keeps repeating that she is transsexual and that is why no jobs are forthcoming. Finally, the landlady exclaims: 'So what! Mashallah you are as strong as a man!'

Feminist sociologist Pinar Selek talks about this issue in a 2009 documentary about Esmeray called *Bir Direniş Öyküsü* (A Resistance Story). Selek notes that when people, including bookstore or café owners, needed to show that they had transgendered friends, they would invite Esmeray, but none of them would employ her, even when her circumstances were desperate. Esmeray notes in the play she was not embarrassed at being a sex worker, but she was disturbed by the fact that this job was forced upon her. After she gave up sex work, she tried to sell stuffed mussels on the streets of Beyoğlu. People were shocked at this and some were uncomprehending, because for them being a transsexual meant being a sex worker. As Esmeray observes in her play, being a transsexual is not considered an identity, but an occupation.

One of the highlights of the play is her frequent interactions with the audience. She makes her entrance with stuffed mussels in a tray and gives some to the audience. After she has broken the ice, her spontaneous questions become more daring. With both grace and sarcasm, she asks questions about sex and gender. When people prove reticent about answering, she says that everyone in the audience is a proper heterosexual. By this she is implying that the audience is also secretive because of the norms of the society. Her witticisms about the audience and their questions contest stable identities and she defies political correctness with her confounding stories about appearance and reality.

Sharing her stories with a wide audience has become a form of activism for Esmeray. She has performed *Cadının Bohçası* in many cities and universities. For her, the performance at Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi (Middle Eastern Technical University) was especially meaningful, as the university's chancellor was opposed LGBT rights. He had told a group of students who wanted to form a gay organisation that 'there are no gays here' and another group seeking to form a woman's club that 'there are no women here but only girls' (Vardar, 2008). Today Esmeray stands as a powerful figure in challenging such people. Her shows enable many people to explore new perspectives on community and the identity struggle.

#### 4. Being a Transsexual in the 1980s

The play *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* (Being a Transsexual in the 1980s) was directed and adapted by Ufuk Tan Altunkaya from a book of the same title. This book was published by Black Pink Triangle Association which had been founded in 2009 to fight discrimination against LGBT people. The book contains stories of the lives of nine transsexual people. They talk about various topics but particularly about what they went through after the 1981 military coup. No questions were directed at them so the stories are narrated randomly and are therefore somewhat fragmentary. The play, performed by Tiyatro Artı (Theatre Artı) distils these nine transsexuals into four characters, three of whom are as they appear in the book and the fourth is a composite of the others. The only fictional element in the play is the setting. Altunkaya places these women in a *pavyon*, where they work. Pavyons are cheap low-class nightclubs where women engage in *konsomasyon*, that is, selling conversation and drinks, although most of these clubs also encourage sex work. The choice of setting is highly apposite, since audience members become part of the play. Those in the front row have in front of them small round tables upon which there are candles and glasses. A waiter stands near the stage, to help the performers in various ways, such as passing them the microphone. The audience is not separated from the performance and its members are no longer mere observers. A friendly, humorous atmosphere is created by the interactions, which, however, also enhance the critical perspectives. The audience, by becoming potential customers in a *pavyon*, also become accomplices. There may be shiny clothes and entertaining songs in the show, but the fact that the four characters have been viciously abused remains obvious.

The play begins with the entrance of Ahu. She is greeted with flowers by the waiter and begins her performance with an arabesque song “Dert Bende Derman Sende” (I am in pain and you have the cure). The audience immediately picks up on the atmosphere by joining in the singing of this well-known song. One by one, each character takes to the stage and relates her story in front of cheap flashy gold curtains and red lights. The performers are biological women. Their hair is glamorous, their accessories riveting and their make-up overwrought. It’s a challenging for the actors to keep the same tone of voice while they sing and speak, a practice that requires great effort and concentration. Their singing performances are not especially fine, perhaps intentionally, because transsexual singers in cheap *pavyons* are seldom really there to sing. Most were merely sex workers. All four characters recount their stories, which, and even though very different, have one thing in common: all the characters have experienced terrible acts of violence. The stories are randomly intermingled: a comic turn may follow a tragic tale; a sad love story is followed by a joke or an uplifting song.

The four characters mainly focus on what they experienced after the military coup of 1980. Brothels were closed and they were pushed out on to the streets. Those who worked in *pavyons* as singers were forbidden to take to the stage again. Torture was common and, as the play makes plain, the police made no effort to hide their ruthlessness. One of the characters, Belgin, states that when she was taken to the police station, there was a sign at the entrance that said: ‘There is no god here, the prophet is on holiday.’ After the coup, transsexuals had their arms tattooed. Each of Turkey’s seven regions had its own mark. A transsexual bearing the mark of a specific region could not enter that region for five years. The four had become so desensitised, they spoke of torture as if it were routine practise. One especially moving story is told by Belgin:

So we were scattered like sand in an hourglass. But I never forget the summer of 1981. The oppression was stronger than at any other time. There was hunting. They arrested us wherever they found us. Our streets, our homes our workplaces. They took us to that infamous place, Sansaryan Han. They gathered 40-50 of us. We were oppressed and tortured heartlessly. They kept us in custody for two or three weeks. Our beards grew back and our hair and dresses were a mess. They made us get on a train while hurling insults and curses, some attacking us physically as well. They locked the doors. After a trip on those trains, they kicked us out somewhere outside the city. We ran though the fields to get somewhere (Note 1).

The director deliberately keeps the narrative simple, since the pain inherent in the stories is powerful enough to hold the audience’s attention. Whenever the mood becomes too intense, it is lightened with a song. The stories, with their powerful insights and memorable moments, rarely become tedious or tiring for the audience. Moreover, the play explores not only the plight of transsexual individuals but also the brutal treatment of other political prisoners. Belgin, for instance, speaks of a time when they were taken to a police station. Inside were some 80 cabinets, each standing about 70-100 centimetres tall. They looked like filing cabinets. She wondered what they put into them. When she asked, she was told not to touch the cabinets, because they held prisoners, members of Dev-Yol and Dev-Sol (revolutionary left-wing organisations). She insisted that they open the cabinets. Inside were people who could neither sit nor stand. Belgin and her friends helped them by giving them water and allowing them to breathe some fresh air. They got the phone numbers of the prisoners’ families and wrote them on their

bodies with eyeliner. She says she called every one of those contacts and so her conscience is clear. As she points out, it mattered not to her if they were members of Dev-Yol or Dev-Sol or were counter-guerrillas. All she knows is that they were human beings. In this play, we hear countless stories about the personal lives of these four characters, yet many of the anecdotes also arise directly out of Turkey's socio-political circumstances.

All the plays performed by Tiyatro Artı are political and explore issues ignored by the mass media and even by many other theatre practitioners. As already noted, the media have been instrumental in inciting prejudice and hatred against LGBT people in Turkey for many decades. The director of the play *Ufuk Tan Altunkaya* points out that 'media politics of the 1990's, displayed transsexuals and transvestites as nonhuman creatures who provoked fights out on the highway. They were totally isolated and ignored. This is why these kinds of projects are crucial, especially after increasing disputes over gender identity and LGBT rights in the constitution. Such projects enable people to understand them' (Tekin, 2013). Tiyatro Artı's efforts in this respect deserve acclaim. Even though the company has been struggling with financial difficulties, it has managed to stay afloat and continue its performances.

While both plays raise uncomfortable questions, are documentary and based on the testimonies of transsexuals, Esmeray's play fosters greater subversion and resistance. This is because Esmeray not only recounts her experiences but also interprets and comments on them. For example, when she informs us that she sold stuffed mussels to survive, she also remarks on how people reacted to her and stresses that being a transgendered person is considered not an identity but an occupation. Thus she analyses the issues more deeply. As a self-taught feminist and a political activist, Esmeray has a unique critical perspective. In her performance, she addressed the dominant hierarchical structures of sex and gender, not to mention class as well. In *Being a Transsexual*, the monologues are drawn exactly as they appear in the interviews in the book. Some of the interviewees are not as politically conscious as Esmeray, and their stories as narrated by the actors are not as sharply critical as Esmeray's. *Being a Transsexual* conveys striking insights on many levels but at times the characters themselves subscribe to a patriarchal hierarchy. There is a sense in which these characters would happily fit into a patriarchal hierarchy as domesticated, even submissive partners if they could. Esmeray's performance, by contrast, is poignantly confrontational and refuses to establish any monolithic identity.

## 5. Conclusion: More than just Personal Tragedy

Many of the personal stories we hear in these two plays are highly emotive, yet they also draw attention to the reality of our social role and the flaws in Turkey's justice system. This is why such performances are not welcomed by the conservative media. *Vakit* headlined its attack on Esmeray's play *The Sack of the Witch* as follows: 'Scandalous Play in a Scandalous Venue.' The paper described Esmeray as a Kemalist (Note 2) who will propagandise feminism and stamp on Islamic values. Esmeray responded to these allegations thus: 'I was not surprised since we already know about its previous reports. We were directly attacked. In the article it states that I am a Kemalist. There is now another alternative. I won't be surprised if they start calling me Ergenekoncu (Note 3). It's sad that they also attack the venue. Someone should stop *Vakit*' (Kaos GL 2010). *Vakit* also observed that sensitive Muslims were being provoked. Potential provocation of the conservative masses has become a key censorship strategy among the media in Turkey.

Despite the ongoing criticism and attempts at deterrence, the influence of such plays is significant. Their transformative potential is underrated in countries where gay/queer theatre has become mainstream. In their article 'Preaching to the Converted,' Miller and Roman complain that 'among the many dismissive responses to lesbian and gay theatre and performance in the popular press and even among lesbian and gay people, the accusation that lesbians and gay artists are preaching to the converted is perhaps the most frequent' (1995). The audience in Istanbul does not fall into this category. While many in the audience are university students who are 'converted', audience members are also drawn from other sectors of society. Moreover, many newcomers arrive in the city from conservative areas of Anatolia each year. Esmeray notes that 'at first most of my audience consisted of leftists and students. In time it became diversified. There were many people who just heard about [the performances] out in the street and came to see the plays out of curiosity' (Özkartal, 2010).

Her account of a performance in Karanfilköy plainly demonstrates how her plays create consciousness. Esmeray and her friends were working on a play at a time when the authorities wanted to demolish the district of Karanfilköy. The community, however, resisted this decision. Each year, community members organised activities to protest the proposed demolition, and similar activities were planned for that year, 1996. Esmeray and her team visited Karanfilköy to talk with people about the issue and to gather information for an improvised play. On the day of the performance:

Suddenly they saw us, five or six transsexuals. They did not react. After all, they were an organization and we were there in solidarity but they didn't really want to have anything to do with us. We approached the women, but they ran from us. Then we performed our play. In the play, we made paper carnations [Karanfildköy means village of carnations] and threw them into the audience. When we did this, there was an immediate response. They loved it. These women who were prejudiced against wouldn't let us leave. They kept on serving food until we left. It was a beautiful atmosphere. With the power of art and creation, biases were shattered. They started saying that 'we actually like you.' It was as if they were confessing their sins. (cited in Aşan & Gümüş, 2007)

Esmeray here reveals the healing and unifying power of performance. Despite the opposition of the conservative mainstream media, she has left a deep mark on many people, and I have personally witnessed the transformative effect of her plays on my own students.

Plays like *The Sack of the Witch* and *Being a Transsexual in the 1980s* show that unless people stand united, conflict and violence will continue. Instead of exploring complex personal issues of gender identity, the characters in these plays struggle to point out who they are 'not.' This is a vivid response to the society's brutal prejudices. It is also why these stories are about more than just personal tragic experiences. Both plays show that knowing what is going on around you is not enough. Rather, more action and interaction is needed to address key social and political problems.

There has been great progress but there is still a long road ahead before equal rights for LGBT individuals in Turkey are achieved. Very little of what is happening in Turkey is spoken of in stages. Taboos about gender identity have not shifted significantly through theatre, but at least small steps have been taken. There are still many more voices waiting to be heard.

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#### Notes

Note 1. This extract is from the text of the play provided to me by the author.

Note 2. One who supports the political doctrines of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. His political objective was the creation of a secular republic. *Vakit*, an Islamist paper, uses the term pejoratively.

Note 3. An alleged secularist organization which is believed to be linked to the deep state.

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