

LE THÉÂTRE ÉTONNÉ

presents

the armenian concert, or the turkish proverb

musical and theatrical odyssey

a play written and presented by

gérard torikian

co-written by

isabelle guiard

staged and directed by

serge avedikian

set design

michel ambert

lighting design

jean-frédéric beal

music

gérard torikian

poster design and graphics © clo chapel



*"Never let an Armenian get started,
words always fail him."*

(Turkish proverb)

WHERE IS THE TURK IN ME ?

When a man looks his future development square in the face, he can choose to silence for ever the past that he carries within him – or else embrace it.

My past is rooted in the Armenian soil, which has since become Turkish. This land witnessed the birth of my elders who bore the name of Khatounian. For various reasons associated with their immigration process – some petty and others tragic – this name got changed to Torikian, the name I have had since birth. Come to think of it, I could have been landed with one like Shitian or Thingian, as some people were..

Tragedy and Comedy are often Fellow-Travelers...

I got the idea of this play one day when I came across an amazing pile of drawings that I did as a child. They illustrated the adventures of Ulysses attempting to get back home to Ithaca. Intrigued by this obsession, I decided to dig into the underlying reasons behind it, and the way this 'Odyssey' had somehow echoed in me. Very soon my exploration turned into a journey within myself, and just like Ulysses I began meeting a succession of characters, some of whom were delightful while others terrified me.

Where did this terror come from?

At one point, when planning a trip to Istanbul, it began to show up more clearly. I envisioned myself setting foot in the airport there, and began to feel a host of shadowy figures coming up inside me that I could not pin down.

So just who were these ghosts?

Suddenly it felt crucial for me to find answers to this question.

How does a tragedy from the past affect me – or us?

What is its impact when it goes unacknowledged?

What sort of person would I be if History had not turned out this way?

How can you avoid falling into the trap of perpetrator/victim consciousness?

How can you block your ears to the tempting Siren Song?

What about forgetting, making amends, forgiving...?

This musical play came into being because I wanted to share these reflections with people.

SYNOPSIS

A composer with Armenian roots is about to give a recital of his *Odyssey Suite* for piano. Locked away in the world of his composition and the automatic rituals that go with it, he thinks he can escape the ghosts that possess him and keep plunging him back into his past.

He just plays his piano, as if it were a link that ties him to the present.

But Homer's *Odyssey* – the inspiration for his piano Suite – resonates strongly with the ghosts that haunt him, and rather than taking his mind off things, keeps bringing them back to him relentlessly, conjuring up a gallery of vivid, wacky or disturbing characters that flit through him, churn him up – and enlighten him.

One thing is sure:

To be at peace with the past,
you have to laugh at it.

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The character swings from cheerful to sad, seemingly miles away, half mad...

While rehearsing for his concert he ends up telling us stories, and even enacting them...

When he cannot find a way through words, he sits down at the piano and goes back to playing his compositions, which are as eccentric as his stories.

And gradually he gets more mixed up, since he is peopled with a crowd of characters talking amongst themselves – and through themselves, so to speak...

Is he actually talking to us, to himself, his ghosts – or to everybody at once?

The text is bizarre, passionate, fragmented, and zips around through a jumble of different languages in an attempt to express what cannot be expressed.

The music is a dizzy mixture of classical and barmy, evoking pictures and characters.

And when words are no longer enough for the characters, music takes over, in a constant to-and-froing between these two forms of expression.

It creates a space halfway between the inner and outer worlds, full of images from far away that somehow hit home with a vengeance.

One note is enough to plunge us out of the real world, straight into the imagination.

This concert will sweep you off into wacky spaces, an inner maelstrom, on a journey where you do not have to travel, with the return of Ulysses interwoven with exile and columns of deportees on the road. It's like generating mental confusion in order to see more clearly, or a game you play with yourself, to achieve more harmonious relationships with others.

It is a round trip made up of a succession of notes and strings of words, gathering speed until in the end it becomes a celebration of forgotten childhood – and of renewed hope.

PRESS REVIEWS

Sonata In Hay Major

Gérard Torikian, who composes music for movies and documentaries, called on his filmmaker friend Serge Avédikian to direct his Armenian odyssey-style play.

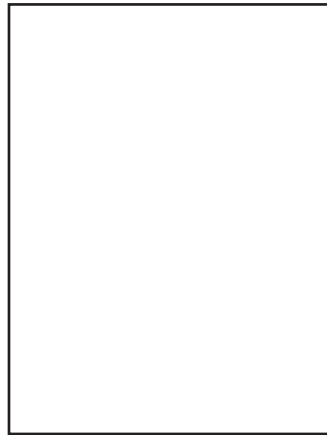
Never let an Armenian get started, words always fail him.”

This so-called Turkish proverb, made up by Torikian, is likely to draw a smile from anyone who knows the Armenians, and particularly anyone who has had the opportunity to meet director Serge Avedikian and his actor-composer friend Gérard Torikian.

Mentioning the Genocide

Words tumble out of their mouths – about their plans, passions, childhood, and especially the show they have both put together, *The Armenian Concert, Or The Turkish Proverb*, which starts on January 24 at the Berthelot Theatre in Montreuil. It is a musical play, interweaving Homer's *Odyssey* with the Armenian tragedy, through a character who keeps bringing in the Genocide while talking about Ulysses.

This highly unusual 'concert' resulted from a lengthy physical and mental adventure, and “an encounter between my Armenian origins and Homer's *Odyssey*,” explains Gérard Torikian. “A few years ago, I came across some drawings I did at kindergarten. I



D.R.

was surprised to see that most of them were about the story of Ulysses. The teacher had told us about it, but as I got older my fascination for it gradually faded from my mind.”

So Torikian, a film music composer, started exploring the subject, to figure out why he had felt drawn to it, and link up the two stories, that of Ulysses' epic journey and the return to his homeland against cruel odds in a harsh world, and the Armenian tragedy, which three generations later still haunts people's minds.

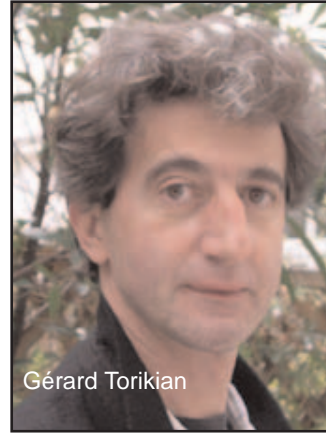
Armenian ghosts

“I got a second insight when I was planning my first visit to Turkey,” says Gérard, who in the end never went there. “I felt scared at the thought of setting foot in Istanbul airport, afraid of being overwhelmed by shadowy ghosts.”

After delving into the *Odyssey*, he started exploring the history of the end of the Ottoman Empire, looking for first-hand accounts, mainly from non-Armenians. He also consulted many researchers, such as Yves Ternon, for further details on this “descent into hell”, as he puts it. This material appears in the play in the form of a sequence dealing with various genocides.

Keeping the Right Distance

Gérard Torikian and Serge Avedikian deliberately wanted



Gérard Torikian

D.R.

this musical-theatrical odyssey to be universal. Right from the start they felt the tone had to be humorous. “We had to cover heavy-duty, tragic stuff while making it bearable for the audience, i.e. keeping a distance between what is being said, which is extremely serious, and the way it is said. A clown has the privilege of being able to say anything. There's a sort of agreement that he's entitled to do whatever he likes,” explains Torikian. Being basically a composer at heart, he decided to mix music and words, which is why his 'hero' is a composer. He is on stage to play his *Odysseus Suite*, but keeps going off into digressions about his life and the collective unconscious.

“He's completely wacky and schizophrenic,” smiles Serge Avedikian. “In different corners of the stage, with a Turkish rug, a small theatre or a table with a keyboard on it, whatever, he gets inside a Turk, or a mother, or Talaat Pacha. Then he comes back to the music and the *Odyssey*.”

And so it goes. Expect a lot of laughs, but maybe some slaps in the face, too. “I imagine some Armenians will be shocked at our acid, off-the-wall humor. Actually, I hope so,” declares the director. *The Armenian Concert, Or The Turkish Proverb* does not claim to convey a particular message: it just asks questions

and takes the audience on a journey within themselves, like the one taken by Gérard Torikian. He actually plays the only character, but inside that character there are a number of others.

Teamwork

“I wrote the music first, and went to tell my pal Serge about my idea.” The film director Avedikian immediately felt he could relate to the story and the experience, which was similar to how he had felt on arriving in France to discover that one could not talk about the genocide. He suggested Torikian work on developing the texts in greater depth, and Gérard's wife Isabelle Guiard also took part in the project. “Her point of view as a non-Armenian helped me a great deal,” stresses Torikian. “We all dovetailed together brilliantly.” The second phase was about developing the dramatic structure. The two men are currently refining what they call “the aesthetic presentation”. “This show will continue to evolve. It is tricky to find just the right balance between laughter and tragedy throughout the play. We are hoping to perform it in Paris and various other places in France, and in the long term, why not abroad ?” says Serge Avedikian. That way they can prove to the whole world that the Armenians have plenty to say.

Mélanie Courtois

from *Nouvelles d'Arménie* [a French Armenian News Magazine] N° 115

An Odyssey Within

Serge Avedikian is staging a musical play dreamed up and performed by the composer Gérard Torikian. This soliloquy with tragicomic overtones reflects what goes on inside a man dealing with the stubbornly persistent ghosts of his Armenian roots. It's an unlikely concert against a backdrop of Homeric legend.

France-Arménie : How exactly did this play come about ?

Gérard Torikian : It all started one day when I was leafing through some drawings I did as a child. I discovered they were actually a series depicting Ulysses' odyssey in great detail. It made me want to re-read Homer and, to my surprise, this ancient legend reawakened ghosts inside me from my Armenian origins. I began to see Ulysses, whom I had thought of as a model of the perfect hero, as an extremely cruel person, pillaging, destroying and massacring innocent people... Intuitively, I felt it might be interesting to compare this violence with similar behaviour during the Genocide : seen through my eyes, the Cyclops Polyphem took on the features of the Turkish threat, while Anticlea, mother of Ulysses, who was lost in the Kingdom of Hades, gradually came to symbolize my own ancestry wandering around in the Kingdom of the Dead. This split-level interpretation led to a text, then a musical play in which Homer's characters bump into both historical figures and some from Armenian daily life.

F-A : How did you structure Gérard Torikian's text and music for the stage ?

Serge Avedikian : The play is a soliloquy. Gérard appears alone on stage with the perpetual suitcase of the wandering Armenian. As the play progresses, he takes out of the case his past, his anguish, and his concert piano. Against the backdrop of the legend of Ulysses, his stage character begins to split into other iden-



Gérard Torikian

tities: there is of course Khatoun Khatounian der Aintèp, the musician with his indelible Armenian accent, but in particular there's his double, the chatterbox clown who, from behind his buffoon's costume, is no longer scared to tackle the ghosts of this collective tragedy. Through this double-faced protagonist, Gérard acquires a freedom of speech and in acting which enables him to assume one by one the various roles of his inner demons, an elderly Turkish lady chatting with other lady friends, and Enver Pacha accompanied by Talaat, not forgetting his own Armenian mother, lost in the gloom of Hades. This show is actually the ravings of a composer trying to unravel his links with the history of the Armenians through his music.

F-A : As a composer, you created the *Odysseus Suite of this Armenian Concert*. What part does music take in this play ?

Gérard Torikian : My music is pretty eclectic but personally I feel closer to compo-

sers such as Stravinsky, Bartok and Prokofiev. Initially I imagined orchestrating it with a mixture of sounds from Ancient Greece and those of traditional Armenian instruments. But since resources were limited, I chose to write the *Odysseus Suite*, made up of seven movements, for voice and piano. The *Alla Turca Overture* is a modern-day version of the famous *Turkish March* by Mozart. It reflects the whimsical nature of the whole play. Next come harsher themes like *The March of Polyphem* and *The Spell Cast by Circe*, a piece in which the piano accompanies a woman singing and a pig solo. *The Siren Song*, *Aquatica Inhumana Cantos*, comes just before a concert of voices entitled *In the Kingdom of Hades*, which includes a text dedicated to the memory of peoples who have endured genocide. This passage is spoken in French and in four symbolic languages (Armenian, Yiddish, Cambodian and Kinyarwanda), because I wanted to go further, beyond

the frontiers of what might have been perceived as something that only concerns Armenians. I feel it is important to stress that genocides affect the whole of mankind.

F-A : What is the message behind a play like this ?

Serge Avedikian : I hope this musical and theatrical odyssey will encourage the general public in Turkey to ask questions of their elders, to reawaken the collective memory. This aside, I really hope the show will encourage the Armenians to put the issue of the genocide behind them and make a fresh start. This definitely does not mean we should forget the past, but rather that the best answer lies in choosing to move on.

F-A : Is it meant to be therapeutic ?

Gérard Torikian : It's true that everything in the play, right through from its conception to the way I act the part, reflects my personal questioning. As a third-generation Armenian, I'm affected by the tragedy our people experienced, and have thought a great deal about our past. This play is actually an inner journey happening on stage in front of the audience. Performing will probably bring me some answers, but for catharsis to happen, the experience of this odyssey will have to be shared by others, whether they are Armenian or otherwise.

Florence G. Yérémián
from France Arménie [a
French Armenian News
Magazine] N° 267

To... Totori... Torikian Th-Th...The-Thea...THEATrr...
THEATRICAL MASTERPIECE

THE ARMENIAN CONCERT, OR THE TURKISH PROVERB

Without piling it on, or trying to tug Armenian heartstrings and serve up sweet charm, rosewater-flavored Turkish delight or whatever, this highly stimulating one-man-show from Gérard Torikian and Serge Avedikian, with its ever-changing scenery and variety of characters, is truly extraordinary when it comes to theatrical inventiveness.

For instance, when would you find a pianist (and composer to boot) acting and orchestrating his own memories through sounds, shadows and words?

Only Torikian could present this text and the musical items that he himself has come up with.

What is exceptional, too, is the way he simply *is* all the characters he portrays, since the figures swarming out from the unconscious and from History are so much part of him, bursting to get out into the open and be spotlighted by the theater.

The spectator is never lulled by a nice predictable linear plot, or having one single character sketched out before him. Curious, therefore, the eye looks deeper, exploring the lively, inner chaos that makes up the depths of our psyche.

The actor portrays a series of lives, myths, ghosts, and indirect hints forming as a whole not so much a plot as an incoherent hell, carefully wrapped up tight in words that convey all the inner worlds of a man constantly haunted by tragic misfortune.

And since the misfortune of a fellow in chains gesticulating in vain provokes laughter...

Well, you laugh.

In short, a novel take on the Genocide, which keeps a certain distance, while remaining intrinsically warm-hearted.

Denis Donikian
(review posted on www.yevrobotasi.org 01/22/ 2006)

The Armenian Concert, Or The Turkish Proverb

"Never let an Armenian get started, words always fail him."
(Turkish proverb)



On stage, we see a man standing among trunks and wooden crates that seem to indicate he's leaving... To go where? What treasures do they contain? This man is a composer, about to perform his *Odysseus Suite*, inspired by Homer's epic. As he introduces his work, he mentions Ulysses' lengthy travels and ordeals on the way back home to Ithaca.

Soon, the two stories begin mingling, and ghosts from the past reappear in his mind. Ulysses' journeying becomes a path that leads him back to his past as an Armenian. Terrifying, or sometimes magical figures show up, and the shadow of a column of deportees stretches to become an endless exodus of people on the road. Words come tumbling out, multiplying and bouncing off each other, on an inner quest to try to assess and release the marks left on the individual by a tragedy from the past that has never been acknowledged.

No pathos here, however: the tone is one of self-derision, and the humor comes from the pace of the

delivery, the actor's swiftly changing facial expressions, and his wacky look and wild musical compositions. This highly inventive play demonstrates that if we can laugh at the past we feel more alive, and guilt-free. It presents us with one long swirl of words and music in a theatrical and musical odyssey. The last-but-one musical piece, *In the Kingdom of Hades*, is dedicated to the memory of all peoples who have been victims of genocide, and includes a text called "Conversation with the Mother", read out in Armenian, Yiddish, Kinyarwandan, Cambodian and French. This extract in particular brings added impact to the work as a whole.

The play, directed by Serge Avedikian and written by Gérard Torikian in collaboration with Isabelle Guiard, is performed by the author himself. Torikian also composed the music for it and produced the graphics that are projected on the backdrop. This is an opportunity for people to discover an all-round artiste, actor and musician who feels comfortable

with all forms of expression and can convey all sorts of emotions. After performances at the Berthelot Theatre in Montreuil, the show moves on to a run at Suresnes in March. Definitely not to be missed...

Anahid Samikyan

from *Achkhar* [a French Armenian News Magazine]
N° 2049, February 2006

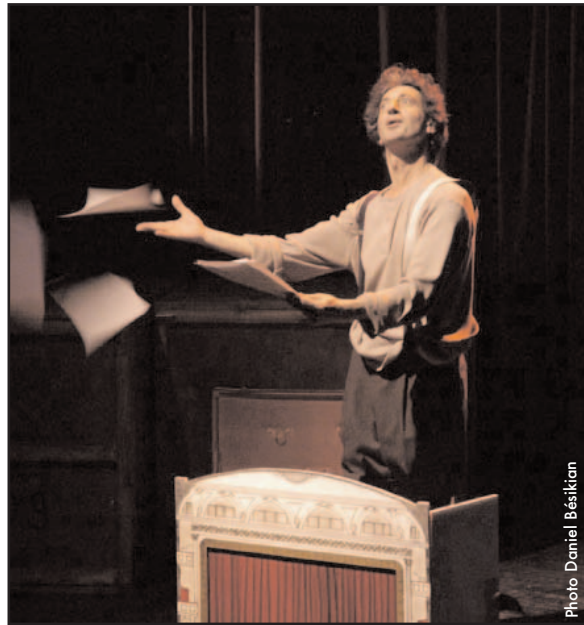
The Armenian Concert, Or The Turkish Proverb

It's hard to pronounce "Thank you" in Armenian. Not being Armenian myself, I won't even try to tackle the spelling. Let's just say that even a phonetic version, like *sh'norhakal em*, is a mouthful in itself. So just 'merci', in French, to Gérard Torikian and Serge Avedikian for this musical play with its universal appeal, guaranteed to tug at the hearts of everybody, whether they are Armenians or not.

Having gone along out of curiosity and more or less by chance, at the invitation of an Armenian girl friend, I was not expecting this play to bring back distant memories, like some books I read as a child, the Greek legends, of course, which molded my imagination, or a book on the history of "Our Vendée" which, as my grandfather put it, was "nothing like what you read in text books". As a Frenchwoman, in Khatoun Khatounian der Aïntep's odyssey I saw a reflection of history as my

grandfather had told it to me over many summer vacations, the story of his Catholic ancestors in the Vendée area who were persecuted and massacred by the republicans' "Infernal Columns".

Of course, comparisons are not always useful, but this is actually



what the play is about. And yet there is nothing dismal about this highly original, whimsical show full of humor, which says, "One thing's for sure: to be at peace with

the past you have to laugh at it." Inspired by Homer's epic *Odyssey*, this musical play co-written by Gérard Torikian and Isabelle Guiard takes us off on a journey that intermingles references to the legend of Ulysses and various Armenian and Turkish figures, against a backdrop of music. Gérard Torikian is a composer. He is also an actor with tremendous poetic power. Alone on stage, as he moves through a succession of characters built up from practically nothing, he manages to sweep the audience from one world to another with a light, humorous touch - and enormous depth.

As the Turkish proverb puts it, "Never let an Armenian get started, words always fail him."

Sylvie Blanchard

from *France-Arménie* N°270
(*France Arménie* is supporting this theatrical event : March 15-16 2006 at Suresnes, near Paris).

THE ARMENIAN CONCERT, OR THE TURKISH PROVERB

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LE THEATRE ETONNE

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