

THE ROLE OF THEATRE IN TRANSFORMING THE SMALL OTTOMAN TOWN OF ANKARA INTO THE WESTERNIZED CAPITAL OF MODERN TURKEY

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the close social and cultural relationship between the transformation of Ankara into the modern capital of the Republic of Turkey and the emergence of modern Turkish theatre in this city. The main focus will be on the unique model Ankara represents as a city which did not rise from a clearly definable aristocratic or feudal background and which lacked a courtly theatre from which modern bourgeois theatre evolved. The fact that Ankara was made the capital of Turkey and that Turkish theatre in its most advanced form was first established in Ankara can be explained as the outcome of the social, political, and cultural policy of "reform" held by the leaders of the young Republic, proclaimed in 1923.

The city of Ankara is situated in the central part of Anatolia on the main caravan roads which joined the east and the west in ancient times. Ankara has been the home of many civilizations, including those of the Hittites, Lydians, Phrygians, Galatians, Romans, Byzantians, the early Turks in Anatolia, Ottomans and the Turks of modern Turkey. Its history of theatre must be as old as the city itself. We know that peasant plays which were originally based on ancient fertility rites are still alive in villages near Ankara. We also know that the city of Ankara had a theatre and an amphitheatre in the time of the Romans. We have enough data about the improvisational acting and dances of the Ahi organization, which was a society of craftsmen of Turkish origin, who governed the city for some years before the Ottomans. We can guess that certain forms of traditional Turkish theatre were known in Ankara during Ottoman times. Yet, we have no records telling us that Ankara had ever been a great center for theatrical activities.

The Ottoman regime which lasted for seven centuries was based on central administration. The Empire held a state-owned land system and there was central control over the main economic activities. During

the "rise" of the Empire in the 15th century, Ankara gained importance as an administrative unit of the Empire and a commercial center which exported "sof", the fine woollen material made from Angora wool obtained from the famous Angora goats. With the decline of the Empire in the 19th century central authority weakened and Ankara lost its importance as a commercial center. Europe had gone through its industrial revolution and various sorts of woollen material could now be produced cheaply. Ankara had no industries. Her traditional manufacturers and tradesmen had not been able to evolve themselves into middle classes (Kongar: 1986, 27). Nor had they been able to create their own culture. Ankara had reached prosperity with the rise of the Empire; she deteriorated with the fall of the Empire. The social order maintained by the Empire had hindered the development of Turkish society. This was mainly due to Islamic dogma which was allowed to dominate all political, social, cultural and economic spheres of the Empire, since the Sultan-Caliph of the Ottoman regime "took his legitimate political authority from Islamic institutions" (Kongar: 1986, 27). The Turkish War of Independence was fought against this regime as well as against the European powers which aimed at getting into the Middle East which had been under the control of the Empire for such a long time. He was the sole "ruler" and all the rest was the "ruled". Religious conservatism obviously had negative effects on the development of culture. Besides, Ottoman society was divided into two cultural worlds: "court-culture" for the ruler and "folk-culture" for the ruled.

In 1920 Ankara gained a new significance, for now it was one of the centers from which the Turkish War of Independence was conducted. It had a railroad connection with the western part of Anatolia and facilities provided by the cable system. The central position of Ankara and the hearty support its native dwellers gave to the War of Independence made this city the meeting place of the Turkish patriots.

When the War of Independence was won and when the Republic of Turkey was proclaimed in 1923, Turkish life took a new direction. The leaders of the War of Independence and the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, wanted to build a brand new society which enjoyed political and economic independence, which had a common cultural background and common aspirations for development and prosperity. The new regime had to look for an alternative to the Islamic way of life. The alternative was western positivism, which necessitated a series of reforms in society.

With his principle of "secularism", which made Turkey the only secular country in the world of Islam, Atatürk separated religion from legal, educational and cultural life. Since the "model" chosen for the young Republic was that of western civilization, direct "imitation" of European culture had to be avoided. That is why the leader laid emphasis on the foundation of a national culture which would reconcile "the patterns of western civilization with Turkish culture" (Kongar: 1986, 34), the culture of the Turks of Anatolia. The effort to eliminate the cultural dualism of Ottoman times produced the principle of "populism" which meant that the new national culture would be formed by the collective efforts of the people and cultural change would never out-balance the dominant ways of thinking and behavior of the Turkish people (Erdentuğ: 1974, 74).

Ankara, then a dismal and neglected city with a population of 20,000, was chosen as the capital of modern Turkey for various political, military, social, economic and cultural reasons. The overall aim was to form a national economy, to establish a "model" city where the modern western way of life could flourish, to develop in this city the model way of life for the newly created national bourgeoisie, and to make this model city the symbol of the achievement of the young Republic (Tekeli: 1982, 323-25).

This proposed way of life required "cultural change" and the "reformulation of social behaviour" (Erdentuğ: 1974, 69-70). The characteristics of social life in Ankara changed when the intelligentsia of the new Republic, came from Istanbul. PW a while a double life was led in Ankara. The newcomers lived in newly-built apartment blocks near the city center and had modern furniture, while the native city-dwellers lived in traditional houses with gardens and had traditional furniture (G. Nalbantoğlu: 1982, 261). The new modes of urban life were first introduced by ladies from Istanbul, who developed social occasions such as tea-parties, balls, and receptions (Ü. Nalbantoğlu: 1982, 298).

Modes of modern social and cultural life were more aptly promoted after the establishment of new residential areas and buildings for cultural activities in the 1930's. This development owes a lot to the birth of theatrical activity which served as a component of the principles of secularism, populism, and nationalism in culture and social life.

Popular Turkish theatre which was based on improvisation had never grown in sophistication, mainly because of religious conservatism and the despotic nature of the Ottoman regime. It had never been considered to be a proper career for respectable people. Actors and actresses were scorned and the muslim female was never allowed on the stage. When in the mid-nineteenth century, theatre in the European fashion was introduced, it was readily adopted. However, the native body of plays written at the time relied more on mere imitation than genuine artistic creativity.

With the proclamation of the new Republic, theatre has assumed a new significance, for it has become an important agent in bringing about the necessary social and cultural change.

One of the aims of the new regime was the foundation of a people's theatre which would both appeal to them and help to improve their cultural level. In the establishment of modern Turkish culture primary emphasis was laid on the language and culture of Anatolian Turks. In theatre this culture and this language would be developed. The general policy in the practice of arts was that "native content" should be shaped with the developed techniques and form of western theatre (And: 1983, 19). The national Turkish theatre should reflect the skillful use of the Turkish language purified of Ottoman vocabulary and usage. Turkish gestures and mimics as well as the intonations of spoken Turkish would be conceived of in artistic terms and presented on the stage (And: 1983, 61-62). Most important of all, muslim actresses would appear on the stage; men and women would go to the theatre together and sit there together.

The young Republic held that all developments concerning cultural transformation and the establishment of basic cultural institutions were to be supported by the State. Alongside the Turkish History Society, Turkish Language Society, and a Faculty to promote research in culture, an institution named People's House was founded in Ankara. People's Houses were organizations, which, established all over Turkey; would encourage people to try a hand in various branches of art and culture, including theatre.

In the early 30's Ankara had not yet established any theatres of her own. With the aim of making theatre a part of the social life of city-dwellers, companies from Istanbul were encouraged to organize tours all over the country, and in Ankara they were given a special wel-

come. Atatürk attended all the performances and discussed theatre with the actors.

The new regime held that before theatre could be established in Ankara, the city should be equipped with institutions in theatre education and professional practice as well as suitable playhouses. The project was completed with the contributions of both Turkish and foreign experts within the span of thirty years.

In 1932 the drama section of the People's House in Ankara began to give amateur performances in a building designed by the Turkish architect, Arif Hikmet Koyunoğlu. These performances were so popular with the audiences that people ran for invitations. In 1934 females were invited to participate in theatre practice. In 1935 Paul Hindemith was invited to Ankara to work on the project of the music section of the Conservatory and in 1936, Carl Ebert, the German actor-director, who loved "to start things afresh" (Ebert: 1977, 4) came to Ankara to establish the theatre section. In 1936 formal education in acting started with three female and five male students. These students graduated in 1941.

The new Republic held that, aside from preserving national unity and developing the taste of audiences, theatre would also serve to promote the new foreign policy which aimed at forming and maintaining good relations with other countries. Atatürk's famous motto, "Peace at home and peace in the world" had found expression in theatre long before the State Conservatory was established and professional theatre practice started. An opera libretto titled "Ozsoy" was written and composed by Turkish artists in a short time and performed to the Shah of Iran who visited Ankara in 1934. It was the first Turkish opera, and it emphasized the centuries of friendship between the two neighboring countries. The efforts of the leaders of the young Republic in promoting national culture were twofold: to make the nation gain its self-identity and to wipe off the Ottoman image of the "barbarian fighter". What İsmet İnönü, the second president of Turkey, told Carl Ebert in the 40's is significant in this respect:

For centuries we Turks sat on the saddle and perhaps conquered half of the world. During the continuing chain of military victories we took the arts of the nations we defeated as war profit. If the work you are doing one day proves that we have been able to create our own arts with our national

resources, that will be the happiest day of my life (Ebert: 1974, 5)

Carl Ebert's work continued. Between 1941 and 1947 the Workshop theatre of the State Conservatory gave performances in the People's House.

By 1945 the population of Ankara had reached 700,000 and there was more need for new residential areas and new cultural activities. In 1947, Muhsin Ertuğrul, the celebrated actor-director and organizer of Turkish theatre, turned the Theatre Workshop into a professional troupe and started regular performances in the Small Theatre which was built within the complex of modern residential buildings by the Turkish architect, Mahmut Kemalettin in 1927. Ertuğrul produced three native and five foreign plays for adults, three native plays for children and three operas in the 1947-48 season. This marks the time when theatre began to play an important part in the social and cultural life of Ankara. Theatre had now been established as an institution which provided entertainment as well as instruction both in culture and social behavior. Tickets were extra cheap and there were reductions of all sorts.

In 1947 Ankara State Theatre was established by law and with the opening of the Big Theatre, it began to operate regularly on two stages. At first it was difficult to find audiences which would fill the 1300 seats available in the two theatres. A subscription system was employed for civil servants and further measure were taken to promote the audiences. By 1956 the State Theatres owned four regularly operating stages and in 1957 three issues of the State Theatre Journal sold 10.000 copies each and were re-issued (Devlet Tiyatrosu Dergisi: No. 35, 1957, 1).

In 1958 the Institute of Theatre Research was founded in the Faculty of Languages, History and Geography and in 1964 the Drama Section which offered formal education in dramatic theory, dramatic writing and theatre practice was opened. Ankara was now a city equipped with all the institutions to promote theatre. The State Theatre, which had also opened other stages in some other towns, had reached its golden age. The quality of productions was high and theatre appealed to almost everybody in Ankara. By the sixties the newly formed middle-class of Ankara, which was mainly composed of beaurocrats and medium-sized businessmen, had developed an appreciation of theatre and was well-informed about the classical and modern examples of world drama. 60's was also a time of great development in Turkish drama. The pre-

viously unpracticed arts of Opera and Ballet were now well-established and Turkey now had native composers of both genres. Private companies also began to play an important role in Ankara.

In the 60's the State Theatre made its first international appearance by conducting tours to Greece, Paris and Italy, The high quality of the State Theatre performances made a deep impression on foreign critics, who neither knew or cared about the political, social and cultural change Turkey had undergone. Some of them confessed that they had not been able to conceive of such artistic achievement from a nation which they still identified with the "barbarian fighter,' and the "Mediterranean Pirate" (Hosca: 1969, 26).

The 60's also mark the time when Ankara began face problems. The "model,' city of the new Republic found it difficult to keep to its image, for she had grown much faster than was expected. Being the center of government, a university town, and a city which offered job opportunities, Ankara had become over-populated. The newcomers from small towns and villages, who made up the poor section of the new population of Ankara built shanty-towns all around Ankara. These people had their own life-style and were not integrated into the urban life in the city which was not ready to cope with their needs. In an effort to reach the potential audiences in the shanty-town areas, the State Theatre opened in 1964 a new stage called Altındağ Theatre. Whether this stage has served and is serving its function is a subject of debate. Yet, it is clear that without the provision of infra-structure to raise their standard of living the people living in shanty-towns will not thoroughly become an integral part of the city.

60's was also the time when an alternative theatre was needed in Ankara, for the State Theatre had reached saturation both in content and form, and the dynamism of social, political, cultural, and economic changes taking place in Turkey, as well as in the whole world was no longer reflected in the state-owned theatres which reflected the policies of the government. Ankara Art Theatre, a private company of young actors, a few of whom had studied theatre in France provided this alternative. Beginning with plays taken from the repertory of T.N.T. (Theatre National de Paris), the company soon developed into one of the most successful companies in the history of Turkey. This company was also the first to introduce socialist thought on the stage. The first productions of Brechtian plays were presented in Ankara by this company, which is

now proceeding through its 25th year. The Ankara Art Theatre has set a precedent to socialist theatre which was represented by quite a good number of companies in the 70's. Most of these groups, however, have not been long-lived due to lack of finances and the low quality of productions. The advent of private companies in Ankara has always led to disappointing results, due to the fact that State Theatres still maintain the policy of selling tickets at much lower prices than private companies can. And the majority of the audiences in Ankara cannot afford to buy tickets at higher rates than those of the State Theatres, since Ankara has mainly remained as a city the majority of whose population stills consists of beaurocrats, small businessmen and students.

Presently, Ankara is a city of 4,000,000, which suffers from rapid urbanization, over-population, air-pollution and traffic jams. Still, in a sense, she has kept to her image of the "model" city for the young Republic of the '20s. She has served as a balancing factor between the newly developing cities in Anatolia and the great metropol, Istanbul, in cultural and social activity, the modern urban style of living, in social thought and social attitude. Most important of all, the living standard of the middle-class in Ankaia reflects the economic level of city-dwellers in Turkey more truthfully than that of Istanbul. In short, so far as the early principles and aspirations of the Turkish Republic are concerned, Ankara has to some extent served its function as a bridge between the east and west of Turkey, as well as one between Anatolian culture and western culture. Surprisingly enough, the life-style typical of a civil society was created in Ankara by people who were not the makers of industry and business (Ü. Nalbantoğlu: 1982, 299). Dr. Emre Kongar, an eminent Turkish professor of sociology, explains this phenomenon as follows:

"Atatürk's reforms were not the natural result of socio-economic and cultural changes, but ideological positions imposed to induce such changes. In other words, the Turkish Revolution is an example of infra-structural changes through superstructural means" (Kongar: 1986, 43).

The development of theatre in Ankara, which now has three generations of regular theatre-goers, and its effect on the social and cultural life of the city has also been produced through a similar process. This is a "miracle" which may never happen again.

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