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Andre Antoine and the Establishment of Darülbedayi

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ABSTRACT

With a big fame in Europe, the French dramatist André Antoine also has a privileged place in the history of Turkish theatre, especially in modern Turkish dramatic history. He pays several visits to Turkey with his ensemble Le Théâtre Libre within the scope of his tour around Turkey. Cemil Topuzlu Pasha, the Mayor of Istanbul of those times, has a dream of establishing a theatre and music conservatory in the western sense. In 1914, he presents his project to the municipal assembly. Upon the request of the director Rıdvan Resit Bey, the famous André Antoine who is the manager of Paris Odéon Theatre is invited to Turkey for this project. Antoine accepts the invitation, comes to Istanbul to work for the project. He, however, encounters with a lot of difficulties in the early days of establishing the conservatory which he tries to model according to La Comédie Française. The conservatory starts its training and education with 56 students at Letafet Apartment in Şehzadebaşı. The conservatory is named Darülbedayi (Ottoman Fine Arts House) upon the request of Ali Ekrem, the son of the famous Turkish writer Namık Kemal. This article is intended to discuss Antoine's role in the establishment of Darülbedayi and his contributions to the contemporary Turkish theatre during his short stay in İstanbul.

Key Words: Darülbedayi, Antoine, Cemil Pasha, İstanbul, theatre, tour.

1. Introduction

One of new literary genres that entered our country during westernization period starting after the proclamation of the Edict of Tanzimat in 1839, theatre progressed rapidly until 1876. Ottoman society tried to get used to the plays translated and adapted to the new western type. However, later in the period of autocracy, which started with Abdul Hamid II, the perception of "the implementations of the sultan, which restricts all kinds of freedom, affects theatre which is under the pressure of censor" came to existence (Kocabay, (20 pp. 2-p.3). While serious thematic plays were being removed with the reason that they have the "danger of promoting freedom", the tradition of "improvisational theatre" saved its place. However, theatre started to revive in 1908 with the proclamation of Second Constitutionalism. Thinking that they had more freedom than before, the society showed interest in theatre. New theatre communities were established and especially the plays which interpreted the theme of freedom were liked. However, there was no professionalism, unity and order in all of these efforts. Institutions that would train an actor professionally did not exist. Actors were trained by the period's leading theatre

¹ Title, University/Organization, e-mail.

actors. In those times, getting on stage was very shameful for men and nonethical for women (Topuzlu, 2002, p. 116). No material or moral support for the theatre communities, which were struggling for their own existence, came from the state or municipalities. There was scarcely any translations of quality plays. Theatre activities were only limited to İstanbul. All of these issues made the establishment of a fully-equipped theatre school a necessity (And, 2014, pp. 120-123). Even if lots of people developed a reaction towards this field of art, there were many people appreciated it. One of them was Yahya Kemal. He wrote articles about the coming of Antoine and supported this initiative of Cemil Pasha with heart and soul. According to him, Antoine was a master who gave life to anything that he touched and he was important for Turkish theatre (Uysal, 2004, pp. 335-336)². In his work titled *Edebiyata Dair* (On Literature), he expressed his thoughts on Turkish music and theatre by appreciating the things that Antoine had done and would do:

Antoine "is trying to make us think like him... Reşad Rıdvan Bey and his friends, who dedicated their lives to the stage, gave a shape to the representative committee of Darülbada'yi Osmani whose foundation was laid just yesterday. The French master will assort these young people for their virtues... Our musical lovers were also gathered and adapted themselves to the new situation... From this day, instead of rambling music schools, Turkish music has a national gathering-place... The subjects of spectacle and performance are regarded as the most important. Because in us the bodies of both are fictitious. There are no perfect examples of spectacle in Turkish. Performance is very primitively high flown..." (Kemal, 1971, p. 244).

Cemil Topuzlu Pasha, the Mayor of Istanbul of those times, who was aware of everything, had a dream that he wanted to come true for the development and professionalization of the theatre: establishing a Conservatory in the Western sense, because, according to him, theatre was a field which was very far behind with no well-trained artists and no building other than fusty ones in Beyoğlu and Direklerarası. In his memoirs he expressed his feelings as follows:

"In İstanbul we did not have either a theatre building except for a couple sheds or an artist who would get on the stage. I was feeling very sorry about this. I had a project prepared by Mr. Orik (M. Oric), who was consultant of engineering committee of Municipality, for making a theatre building and a Municipality building in Sultan Ahmet Square." (Topuzlu, 2002, p.131).

Cemil Pasha, as a result of his research, decided that André Antoine, the manager of Paris Odéon Theatre with a big reputation in Europe, was the one who could bring this project to life in the best way possible.

Antoine came to İstanbul several times during his European tour between 1894-1897. He performed his plays in Petit Champs Theatre in Beyoğlu. In the year 1894, in his second visit, he performed six shows. Antoine, who considered theatre directing as a profession and play directing as an art, had been acknowledged as the first play director in the modern sense in contemporary French literature. Also, according to most critics, the modern era of the French theatre started with Antoine. With the thought that theatre must give a new direction to itself, he established a community called Le Théâtre

²Yahya Kemal, who worked as a literature teacher in Conservatory's theatre department, was a member of the Literary Committee and then even presided it. But he did not mention these in his memoirs (Uysal, 2004, p. 336).

Libre (Free Theatre) and put the works of important foreign writers like Ibsen, Tolstoy, Dostoyevski on the stage, though they had never been performed before (Sevengil, 2015, p. 795). The plays that he put on the stage were described as “a hard nut to crack that people cannot tolerate” by Mahmut Yesari (Sevengil, 2015, p. 795). But with the ability and effort of Antoine, these hard nuts turned into candies (Sevengil, 2015, p. 795).

It was decided in the Municipal Council that Antoine was to be given 3000 gold and 12 000 francs between June 25 and June 29 for the establishment of the Conservatory. The following letter was sent to Antoine via the Paris Embassy:

“To the Supreme Office of the Paris Embassy: It is pleaded that the two copies of the interviews with Monsieur Antuvan, the former director of the Odeon Theatre in Paris, assigned by the head of the state (sultan) for the establishment of the Conservatory in Istanbul, must be given in two copies signed by Monsieur Antuvan, one to him and one to me (Cemil Pasha)” (Ertuğrul, 2007, p. 196).

One of the leading figures of the Conservatory project was Reşat Rıdvan Bey who was appointed by Cemil Pasha for not leaving Antoine alone, informing him on every subject, completing formal procedures about the building and making a work schedule. According to Muhsin Ertuğrul, “Reşat Rıdvan Bey’s personality is the thing that carries the first garbage and mud of this art house which will greatly serve for this country in its theatre life in the future” (2007, p. 196).

Reşat Rıdvan Bey made all necessary preparations with great care before Antoine came: Letafet Apartment, which was chosen for the Conservatory, was furnished. He paid a special care for preparing a comfortable and bright study room for Antoine. Meeting and study rooms were also ready. The furniture was chosen from the famous furnisher of the era, Keçecizade’s Vienna (Thonet) seats. The apartment was so beautifully arranged that it looked like an institution that would make other Conservatories in Europe jealous. The Conservatory would be the first well-funded theatre of its time. Cemil Pasha again wrote in his memoirs as follows:

“On the other hand, I invited Mösyö Antuvan (M. Antoine), director of the Odéon theatre in Paris and one of the most famous artists in France, to train actors and actresses in Istanbul, to the establishment which I gave the name Darülbedayi in the Letafet Apartment in Şehzadebaşı and I assigned him as the manager of the Theatre School” (Topuzlu, 2002, p.131).

Both the French and İstanbul press followed the coming of Antoine to İstanbul very closely. *Sabah Newspaper* drew attention to his works and visiting period, *İkdam Newspaper* wrote as follows: “Monsieur Antuvan’s, who was summoned from France for the conservatory to be established in our city, contract was approved by the municipality yesterday and sent to the French Embassy. M. Antuvane Frenci will come to our city on the 25th of June” (Nutku, 1969, p. 18). Also *İkdam Newspaper* closely followed the next stages.

The French Press wrote that Antoine would teach Turkish people about Mirbeau, Brieux, Anatole France, Porto-Riche and Jules Renard, and that people called Antoine as Antoine Pacha. An establishment which is a one hundred percent Turkish Conservatory would be strange and interesting. With Antoine’s help there would be lots of changes in Turkish theatre, but it would not be easy. (Antoine, 1965, pp.55-56).

Antoine's visit to Turkey was reflected in German press, as well. In German press, the steps that Turkey was about to take and the preparations for establishing a national theatre were mentioned; reactions from some people were also touched upon with an emphasis on the superiority of France as well as what could be done as a matter of curiosity and the difficulties that Turkish people will face: Turkey is a country which was not ready for this kind of theatre understanding and it was "virgin, religious, moral and their habits" outweighed. Despite everything, there was still hope for success (Nutku, 1969, p. 16).

Finally, on June 28, 1914, Antoine came to the Sirkeci station by Semplon Express. Antoine was welcomed by Ziya Bey on behalf of Cemil Pasha, translator Mustafa Bey, Reşat Rıdvan Bey acting as the director of the Conservatory, on behalf of Ottoman National Theatre committee Muhsin Ertuğrul, and the ladies Madam Felekyan, Sara (Mannik) and Nivart. (Nutku, 1969, p.18). Regarding the arrival of Antoine, there was a comment in *İçtihad* newspaper as follows:

"We do not know how Antoine will create a stage out of nothing for us. We hear that the actors and actresses who are acting now will be engaged with the training and try to educate the young people and the young copt girls. We will wait for this great Western artist's service without saying anything" (Ertuğrul, 2007, p. 200).

Antoine was amazed when he saw the arrangement in Letafet Apartment. Reşat Rıdvan Bey remembered even the tiniest details. He even put his portrait on the wall by having one of his pictures enlarged by the famous photographer of the era Phebus.

The Conservatory was named "*Darülbedayi Osmani*" meaning the "Ottoman Fine Arts (Pulchritude) House". There were two different views about this name: the first proposed by Ali Ekrem, the son of Namık Kemal, and the second proposed by the poet Hüseyin Suat (Nutku, 1969, p.18). Another point that drew Antoine's attention was that the table of Dar-ulBedaye (Art House) with Turkish letters and prayers posted in the Conservatory (Antoine, 1965, p.26). In his work *Chez les Turcs*, in the chapter titled Dar-UIBedaye, he wrote about the Conservatory as follows:

"It was necessary to find a wide area for about thirty classes and 200-300 students in the envisaged Conservatory. Municipality chose an old and broad palace in Şehzadebaşı in the middle of the old neighborhood... After 15 days of work, there were rooms for every art and literature committee's meeting rooms and rooms for the presidents" (Antoine, 1965, p.25).

On the date July 7, 1914, İstanbul Municipality advertised in the daily newspapers that they would accept students for the Conservatory. On this, a total of 197 people, 8 of them being women, applied. First among the men was Muhsin Ertuğrul (Ertuğrul, 2007, p. 200). Each candidate signed a "written contract". To the examination, big names of the era also applied: "*Ali Naci (Karacan), Peyami Safa, Halit Fahri, Behzat Haki (Butak), Celal Sahir, Emin Beliş (Belli), Ahmet Muvahhit, İ. Galip (Arcan), Fikret Şadi, Raşit Rıza, Faik Bey, Nivart, Sara Mannik, Mari Mineyan, İda, Rosa, Efraz, Beatris, Adriyen and Eliza Binemeciyen ladies*" (Nutku, 1969, p. 24).

All women who applied to the entrance examination were from the christian minority. Antoine wrote a five pages long letter to the Municipality to address these issues. Three of the eight women who applied did not come to the examination. The other five applicants were the Armenians working in the theatre and only one of them looked promising. Also, in that period, the number of actresses in

İstanbul was approximately thirty and all of them were Armenians. And four or five of them looked promising and they worked in theatre communities as contracted actresses. And this situation created a problem for Antoine. However, he was not late to find a solution for this problem and delivered this to the official authorities. Artists who did not have the Conservatory document would not be able to work in theatres. İzzet Melih Bey proposed a way for the solution of the problem of Muslim women's getting on the stage: *"Gypsy women who spoke Turkish better than Armenians could be given place on the stage with training"*.(Nutku, 1969, pp. 25-26).

Antoine wrote this to his friend in Paris, Georges Ancey, from İstanbul:

"(...) For a month, I work like a farm labourer, in extremely hot weather for a job which is diversionary. These naive people want from me a national theatre and a conservatory like our Comédie Française. Of course they do not have actors, teachers, decorators or theatres. I am working to prepare all of these until October 1. I falter in the face of the Turkish authorities who understand French only when it serves their purpose" (Nutku, 1969, p. 26).

While mentioning the working conditions and the difficulties that he faced due to lack of theatre in Western sense by vaguely emphasizing his superiority, Antoine mentioned the beauty of İstanbul, especially the tours and bewitching Ramadan nights. In fact, Antoine knew that, when he established the Conservatory, he had to shape it according to the social, ethnic, legal, economic, religious and political conditions and present them in a form that Ottoman society would accept (Bourbonnaud, 2002, p.26).

In Darülbedayi-i Osmanî (Ottoman Fine Arts House) opened on the date October 27, 1914, there were two departments. Reşat Rıdvan Bey was the head of the theatre department. The lessons to be taught were: *"Reading, pronunciation, tajweed-reading poetry, prosody, history, literature and literary history-Haile (Tragedy in poetic form)-Drama-Mudhike (comedy)-Dance-forms of politeness, mimic"* (And, 2014, p.123). There was also a *"literary committee"* consisting of famous artists. Its managers were Abdullah Cevdet, Mehmet Rauf, Tahsin Nahid, Emin Bülent and Ahmet Haşim. Kemal Bey and Asım Bey were responsible for financial affairs (Nutku, 1969, p. 23).

Antoine worked very hard in student elections. He headed juries from morning to night. In the committees there were art and literature men trained in French culture. In fact, choosing texts from French classics for students flattered Antoine and he did not hide the happiness about seeing France's influence.

In the Conservatory, in which there were two music departments as Turkish and Western and a theatre department, the distribution of the roles went as follows:

General manager: Rıdvan Reşat Bey

Deputy Director and Representative Director: Ali Rifat

Teachers of Turkish music department: Zekaizade Ahmet Efendi, Rauf Yekta Bey, Cemil Bey, Leon Hancıyan Efendi, Dr. Suphi Bey, Şevket Gevay Bey, Zeki Bey, Ahmet Kadir Kemali Bey, Saadettin Bey, Hafız Yusuf Efendi, İsmail Hakkı Bey.

Teachers of the western music department: Victor Radeaglia, Jean Avolio, Albert Braun, Furlani, Paul Lange, Aram Sinanyan, Halo Selvelli, C. Carihioponlo, Mescemes and Silvio Kenssy.

Teachers of Theatre Department: Minakyan, Burhanettin, Ahmet Fehim Efendi, Rıza Tevfik, Şahap Rıza, Salih Fuat, Mösyö Rioti, Sadık Bey, Arif Hikmet and Kemal Emin.

Assistant Teachers: Muhsin Ertuğrul, Halit Fahri Ozansoy, Celal Tahsin and Hakkı Tahsin. (Sevengil, 1934, pp.92-94).

Music department in the Conservatory consisted of two cultures but theatre department only focused on Western theatre and this was going to be rightly criticized later. According to us, the most remarkable one of these was Özdemir Nutku's:

"However in those times, despite that the traditional Turkish theatre was denigrated by Western admirer highbrows, there was a Turkish theatre that state could reach and support... The traditional Turkish theatre going on for centuries could take advantage of this opportunity and be raised to an advanced state... Why have other countries established national theatres on which their people were able to put their imprint, why not the theatre studies which are spreading in Turkey cannot take our people's characteristics today and establish a special wording? The first reason of this is, we humiliate our own theatre and set it loose, due to our extreme admiration of the West and forgetting traditional Turkish theatre" (Nutku, 1969, p. 20).

With the outbreak of World War I, Antoine had to return to France before completing his mission in Istanbul. Known for his meticulous and stern personality, Antoine was very courteous and respectful towards everyone who worked in the Conservatory. However, his attitude changed when he heard the war's declaration. Mythology teacher Halit Fahri Bey heard his voice coming from Antoine's room. His door was open, Antoine threw himself out and started to swear, waveringly tried to go down from stairs, he looked like he was out of his mind (Çelik, 2013, pp.61-62). Shortly after that, on the date August 14, 1914, he went back to France : He wrote these just a couple of days before the war:

"Life has been unbearable here since the hostility in Europe. In spite of all the trust that Cemil Pasha gives, the atmosphere slowly becomes inhospitable ... The need to go is making itself felt (...) Beyond doubt I have to go » (Antoine, 1965, p.52).

In the war, Ottoman Empire did not take France's side. The Municipality announced through newspapers that the opening of Darülbedayi would be delayed. Reşat Rıdvan Bey organized an opening ceremony. The first play put on the stage was the adaptation of Emile Fabre's *La Maison d'argile* by Hüseyin Fuat on the date January 20, 1916.

SORT OF A CONCLUSION:

Cemil Pasha, who made great efforts to see the theatre school in Istanbul professionally, succeeded in establishing Darülbedayi, which was the symbol of the Contemporary Turkish theatre despite all obstacles and preclusions. With this Conservatory, Antoine laid the foundations of modern Turkish dramatic art and organized a school in line with his pedagogical considerations, sharing many of his fieldwork such as structuring, communicating with artistic people, setting up committees and choosing students. In order for this institution to stay alive, he proposed a formula: *"An art institution should take all of its power from its own country, from its own, with great effort for it, native, national plays should be played but it must be played well. Then, there will be no need for material or moral support from anybody from outside and the institution will be strengthened"* (Sevengil, 2015, pp. 698-699). Antoine's

adventure of one month and six days was just the first step of the long journey. The person who was going to complete the remaining long and complicated course was the real pioneer Muhsin Ertuğrul who brought the Turkish theatre to the level of the western theatre.

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