

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

# Theatrical Guests of the Occupied Capital: Istanbul Tour of Azerbaijan Turkish Drama-Operetta Troupe\*

Gıyas Şüküroğlu\*\*

## Abstract

The research subject of this article is the Istanbul tour of Azerbaijan Turkish Drama-Operetta Troupe during the 1919 play season. As a result of the investigation of the cast, it was understood that the touring troupe consisted of artists from the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi. Istanbul's cultural and artistic circles who regarded the touring troupe as the theatre of the sister country, did not question the troupe's affiliation at all. The troupe's repertoire, which was performed on various Istanbul stages during the tour, mainly consisted of plays written by Azerbaijani dramatists. Turkish theatre critics, who evaluated the content of the repertoire as being oriental, appreciated the simplicity and national elements of Azerbaijani theatre. The organisation of the Azerbaijani troupe was a fresh breath for the Istanbul theatre audience, whose cultural and artistic life had been disrupted due to the occupation of Entente forces, while the actors of the touring troupe gained a great artistic experience.

## Keywords

The Caucasus, Azerbaijani Dramaturgy, Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi, Azerbaijan Turkish Drama-Operetta Troupe, Istanbul Tour.

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\*\* Dr. – Ankara/Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0003-0844-3490

giyassukuroglu@mail.com

# İşgal Altındaki Başkentin Tiyatrocu Misafirleri: Azerbaycan Türk Dram-Operet Kumpanyasının İstanbul Turnesi\*

Gıyas Şüküroğlu\*\*

## Öz

Azerbaycan Türk Dram-Operet Kumpanyasının 1919 yılı tiyatro sezonundaki İstanbul turnesi, bu makalenin araştırma konusunu oluşturmaktadır. Oyuncu kadrosunun araştırılması sonucunda turneyi düzenleyen topluluğun Tiflis Türk tiyatrosunun sanatçılarından ibaret olduğu anlaşılmıştır. Misafir topluluğu kardeş ülkenin tiyatrosu olarak telakki eden İstanbul'un kültür ve sanat çevreleri, kumpanyanın hüviyetini hiç sorgulamamıştır. Turne boyunca İstanbul'un çeşitli sahnelerinde oyunlar sahneleyen topluluğun repertuarı, çoğunlukla Azerbaycan dramaturglarının piyeslerinden ibaret olmuştur. Repertuarın içeriğini oryantal bulan Türk tiyatro eleştirmenleri, Azerbaycan tiyatrosunun sadeliğini ve millî unsurlar barındırmasını takdir etmişlerdir. Azerbaycan menşeli kumpanyanın organizasyonu, İtilaf kuvvetlerinin işgalinden dolayı kültür sanat yaşamı sekteye uğrayan İstanbul'un tiyatro seyircisine taze bir nefes olurken, misafir topluluğun oyuncularını da büyük bir sanat deneyimi kazanmışlardır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Kafkasya, Azerbaycan Dramaturjisi, Tiflis Türk Tiyatrosu, Azerbaycan Türk Dram-Operet Kumpanyası, İstanbul Turnesi.

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\*\* Dr. – Ankara/Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0003-0844-3490

giyassukuroglu@mail.com

## Introduction

Istanbul, which has been regarded as the meeting point of civilizations due to its geographical location, was one of the cultural centres hosting the development of dramaturgy in Western style at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly during the period following the II. Constitutional Era many theatre companies established, and many stages were opened to bring plays to the audience. Millet, Sharq and Ferah stages at Shehzadebashi, Kushdili and Apollon stages at Kadiköy, Odeon and Skating stages at Beyoglu, Meshrutiyet and Istanbul stages at Veznejiler, the Reshadiye stage at Taksim and others were among the favourite venues of theatre audiences at the capital (And 130-133). The wars and economic crises experienced in the last decade of the empire synchronously to the developments in question had affected negatively dramaturgy as well as on many other areas of life. Many theatre companies faced financial crises leaving stages idle. The difficulties that came along during the World War years were also added on top of the mentioned situation. Even the Darulbedayi, which established prior to the war with governmental support, encountered many problems as a result of the country's entrance in the war and operated erratically (And 128). The reason of the circumstances experienced by the institution in question was quite clear: its budget was out of money, and it lacked the sufficient number of stage players (Nutku 515). The state of the Darulbedayi had become quite complicated during the occupation of Istanbul after the armistice, and the company had difficulties throughout the winter season of 1919 in staging plays (Hüseyin Fahri 2). The Azerbaijani Turkish Drama-Operetta Company, which is said to have arrived from the Caucasus, swiftly entered theatre world of Istanbul in an artistic atmosphere, where other private companies remained incapable in addressing the Turkish audience, and brought a fresh breath to the theatre audience of the captive city with its repertoire, which was presented in Azerbaijani Turkish.

If we have to pivot on the association of ideas evoked by the name of the company, the name of the company in question does not come across in the institutional history of the Turkish playwriting developed in the Caucasus. In spite of this, there was a great number of news and reviews on the announcements published and plays staged by the company in the leading newspapers of the armistice period Istanbul. Some of the mentioned

journalistic material is present in the first volume of the *Theatrical Yearbook of Azerbaijan* compiled by Gulam Memmedli and published in 1975 (502-527). A broader version of the same set of materials has been incorporated to the work, which was published in order to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Şükürov and Qafarov 465-491). Additionally, Mustafa Merdanov, who was one of the actors of the touring company, recorded some noteworthy information on the difficulties faced during the tour, plays staged and the reaction of the audience (Merdanov 107-117). Remarkable information is present related to the reason for organizing the tour, plays staged, and the performances of the players in the published excerpts of the copy of work Ibrahim Isfahanli, one of the artists of the company, on the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi, which is preserved in the Manuscripts Section of the Georgian State Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinema Archives (Catalog 3, Item 15049) (Ş. Memmedli 54-55).

The Istanbul tour of the theatre company in question is covered to some extent in several works studying the history of the Azerbaijani theatre history besides the aforementioned main sources of the subject. For instance, it was identified in the works of Abbas Hajiyev that the company consisted of the players of the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi and the repertoire of the company and were briefly commented on the stage performances of the players (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 178-180; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 92-95). Likewise, the information on the origin of the company was confirmed and compact information on the staged plays for the Istanbul audience was given by the works of recent theatre historians Inkilab Kerimov and İlham Rahimli (Kerimov 256; Rehimli, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 32-33; Rehimli, *Azərbaycan Teatr Tarixi* 229-230). Adilkhan Bayramov drawing attention to the fact that the company in question staged its plays under the name of Azerbaijani Drama and Operetta Company, has approached to the mentioned tour of the company in the context of Ottoman – Azerbaijani intercultural relations (Bayramov 163, 166). Reshad Qasimov, who has studied the political history of the era in question, with reference to the same context, considered the activity of the company as an important tool of communicating Azerbaijani culture in Türkiye (Qasimov 199-200). Vasif Qafarov, one of the contemporary researchers of Azerbaijani history, has identified that the company was made up of the players of the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi in addition to making similar evaluations (Qafarov, *Birinci*

*Dünya Müharibesi* 199-200; Qafarov, “Azerbaycan Cümhuriyyəti” 50-51). Ali Asker and Mahire Asker, who consider the art of theatrics as an important element of intellectual history, have addressed the Istanbul tour of the company in question as an applied activity of independence stage of the Azerbaijani intellectual history (Asker and Asker 337-340).

As it is posed by the review of the related literature, despite the Istanbul tour of the company in question has been pointed out in the works of the field partially, the matter still has many aspects to be studied and mastered. First of all, the reason why a company, entirely made up of players of the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi, came before the audience of Istanbul with the label of Azerbaijan. Additionally, it would be helpful to master the degree of the interest shown by the audience of Istanbul, which was exhausted by the difficulties of the World War, to a company reported to had arrived from a sister country. In particular, the latter would be helpful in explaining the dimensions of the encounter of cultural accumulation, which had germinated and developed in two different habitats. The element of occupation, which took place after the armistice concerning the Ottoman fronts of the World War and psychological situation of the society exhausted by recent wars of the empire should be taken into consideration as a significant issue in all assessments to be made. Additionally, matters like the plays performed at the stages of Istanbul, the performances and the degrees of professionalism of the players are among the issues that has to be addressed in the perspective of arts.

### **The Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi**

Tbilisi, which was a governmental centre in the provincial organization of the Tsarist era, had been one of the centres, where Turkish drama in Western style had emerged. Names like Muhammad Jafar Jafarov, Abdullah Khalilov, Ibrahim Zeynalov and Shahhuseyin Minasazov were the first amateur artists of the Turkish theatre company of Tbilisi, who staged the works of Mirza Fethali Akhundzade, who were writing his plays in Azerbaijani Turkish (Ş. Memmedli 43-44). Many difficulties were being faced during the process of formation of the theatre company. A grave censorship existed on the plays considered to be staged, the financial sources and the technical equipment of the company was limited, appropriate stages for theatrics were lacking, the casting consisted of amateurs and Muslim actresses were almost non-existent

for female roles (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 131, 135). Roles were shared on voluntary basis by teachers and students for the rehearsal of prospective plays. Initially female roles were acted by males. For instance, the Ziba khanum role was acted by Abdullah Khalilov and the Peri khanum role by Eynali Sultanov in the comedy *Lenkeran Hanı'nın Veziri* (The Vizier of the Lenkeran Khan) of Mirza Fethali Akhundzade, which was staged frequently (Ş. Memmedli 44). Turkish-speaking Russian, Armenian, Georgian and Urum actresses acted female roles after the regional Turkish drama gained wide currency (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 132-133). Consequently, in 1880's most of the female roles in the plays staged at Tbilisi were acted by Alma Safrazyan, who could speak Azerbaijani Turkish fluently (Rehimli, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 4-5).

A visual enrichment took place during the professionalization stage of the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi. The plays of Nariman Narimanov, Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev and Najaf Vazirov were introduced to the audience in addition to those of Mirza Fethali Akhundzade (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 7; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 131). The expanding repertoire was followed by diversification of the cast; Eshref Yuzbashizade, Ismail Aliyev, Kerim Kerimov, Muhammad Ali Sidqi, Aziz Bedelov, Huseyin Childirov, Huseyinqulu Shabanov, Yunis Narimanov, Qasim Bayramov, Mustafa Merdanov, Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli and others became the new actors of Tbilisi stage (Ş. Memmedli 45). At the end of the century, under the leadership of Abdullah Khalilov, Ibrahim Zeynalov and Muhammad Jafar Jafarov, the Muslim Drama Theatre Company was formed in Tbilisi (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 13-14; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 133). As it was mentioned, the repertoire of the company, which was advancing in the course of institutionalization attracted the attention of various classes of the society, the Muslim women in Tbilisi in particular and women started to show up among the audience (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 18-19). Many of the female characters in the plays of this period were acted by non-Muslim actresses like Terlan khanum and Panfilya Tanailidi, who could speak Azerbaijani Turkish fluently. However, Turkish girls like Gulsabah khanum in 1908 and Guvercin khanum (Gevher Ganizade) in 1910, started to show up on theatre stages (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 141; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 49; Asker and Asker 330).

The Turkish players of the Tbilisi stage were conscious of the fact that the job they were doing was an entertaining school, which was educating and developing adults and engaged in theatre because of their love to arts. These noble people had no professional education in the field of drama. Every one of them had their professions other than drama, which they earned their livelihoods from. Many of the players were teachers, tailors, bath attendants, typesetters, clothiers and traders (Şerif 153; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 147). These altruistic people, who dealt with various lifeworks in the daytime, came together in the evenings and rehearsed the plays they were planning to stage. Oddly enough, they lacked rehearsal stages equipped with sufficient scenery. Every month they were staging one or two plays in the circumstances of the day. They were usually staging at the Georgian Proprietors Club, Zubalov Community Centre and Kazyon stages as they did not have their own playhouse (Şerif 153). And sometimes they were staging at Actors Society, Artsruni, Mir and Aylabar Palace theatres (Rehimli, *Azerbaycan Teatr Tarixi* 220-221, 250-251).

Turkish thespians of Tbilisi were organized in two companies by 1911. The Saadet Company, under the leadership of Eynali Sultanov, consisted of some 40 gifted players like Shahhuseyin Minasazov, Jahangir Shahtakhtli, Mirnasreddin Seyidov, Habib Kerimov, Yahya Muhammadov and Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli. The plays prepared by the Saadet Company, usually were staged at the Georgian Proprietors Club (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 156; Ş. Memmedli 46). On the other hand, the Muslim Drama Society was established under the leadership of Mirzali Abbasov and consisted of players like Mirzakhan Quluyev, Eshref Yuzbashizade, Huseyin Ahmedov, Kerim Veliyev, Muhammad Taki Aliaskerov, Yunis Narimanov, Muhammad Ali Sidqi and Kerim Kerimov (Şerif 154; Ş. Memmedli 46; Merdanov 23; Kerimov 235). Lofty aims like developing and spreading the art of drama among Caucasian Turks were the *raison d'être* of the latter company. Plans were made for staging plays regularly at the Zubalov Community Centre and for organizing tours to the other regions of the Caucasus with the aim of staging package shows (G. Memmedli 223; Rehimli, *Tiflis Azerbaycan Teatrı* 17-18). The society became a member of the Zubalov Community Centre by considering its scenery and physical facilities after its official approval on 24 December 1910 (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azerbaycan Teatrı* 31; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 145).

After the mentioned membership the Turkish drama in Tbilisi gained a fully equipped stage for the rehearsals and performance of plays. However, the costs of staging a play at the community centre was very high and this was reflected on the price of tickets. On the other hand, the venue, where the plays were staged was a long way of the Muslim neighbourhood of the city. Attendance to the plays staged by the society was less than expected due to the mentioned reasons. Accordingly, it was taken into consideration to transfer the Turkish company of the city to Sheytanbazary, the Muslim neighbourhood. Primarily a venue in Sheytanbazary was found, suitable for staging plays, then the venue was renovated donations from the community. The renovated playhouse of the Muslim neighbourhood as named Auditorium and was opened on 1 April 1912 with the attendance of the mayor, the notables and thespians (Şerif 155; Kerimov 237; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 160-161; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 58-60). The Auditorium consisted of a small stage, a large hall and a few rooms (Şerif 155). Usually readymade scenes of a room, forest, desert, mountains, sea and a village together with curtains were as scenery for the plays (Şerif 166). After the roles were shared, rehearsals were held at the Auditorium for a while and the play was submitted to the discretion of the audience after the play was ready (Şerif 155). There was a coffeehouse next to the Auditorium. Newspapers and journals published in Baku and other cities with Azerbaijani Turkish were present at this coffeehouse (Şerif 159, 178-179). Artists and the audience were gathering at this coffeehouse and exchanging ideas on the plays as well as the issues of the period (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 62).

The economic crisis of the World War I strained the Turkish company of Tbilisi. Players facing economic difficulties, mostly took care of themselves by working at other jobs (Şerif 204-205). Few plays were staged during the years of war due to small number of audience and the activity of the Drama Society and Auditorium became inactive. After the February Revolution, the Auditorium was assigned to the *Vahshi Firqa* (Savage Division), which was the most regular defensive force of the Caucasian Turks (Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 177; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 86). A group of thespians led by Eshref Yuzbashizade and Mustafa Merdanov, who struggled to keep theatrics alive during the years of war and revolution, travelled to Iran twice and staged plays in Tabriz, Urmia, Marand, Qazvin and Rasht (G. Memmedli 483-484; Merdanov 87-97; Ş. Memmedli 53).



A significant change took place in the organization of the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi during the complicated phase after the October Revolution. A new company was established under the name of *Ittihad Dram Cemiyeti* (The Union Drama Society) with the involvement of Hashim Hashimov, Hasan Kapitalov, Mustafa Merdanov, Ali Qurbanov, Muhsin Sanani, Mirzali Abbasov, Muhammad Agalarov, Yusuf Rzayev, Muhammad Ali Aliyev, Mirza Mahmud Ahmedov, Ali Bayramov and Ibrahim Isfahanli (G. Memmedli 484; Ş. Memmedli 51). The Union company advertised in the newspapers after the formation of the society was completed and encouraged talented people to join the society (G. Memmedli 494). A second company was established with the involvement of Aliekber Seyfi, Ismail Hakki, Asker Nakhchivanli, Nadir Ibrahimov, Ismail Ismailov, Ahmet Salahli, Hasan Sabri, Muhammad Jafarli and Adil Hajizade under the name of *Ibret Dram Cemiyeti* after the revival of the social life in Tbilisi (Ş. Memmedli 52; Rehimli, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 71). The latter met with the audience 14 times within the first six months of its activation (G. Memmedli 484; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 91). As it is seen the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi, which had a deep-rooted history, had many talented players prior to the Istanbul tour and these players were organized as various companies within the process.

### **The Istanbul Tour**

The players of the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi decided to travel to the neighbouring countries to solve the problems faced in the revolutionary environment. A special company was established by Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli, who was one of the pioneers of this initiative, with the involvement of Eshref Yuzbashizade, Mustafa Merdanov, Hasan Sabri, Muhsin Sanani, Terlan khanum, Vera Arsen, Nastya Kaftaradze, Huseyin Qasimov, Pasha Muhammadov, Abbas Ismailov, Ibrahim Isfahanli and others (Ş. Memmedli 55; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azərbaycan Teatrı* 92). After the completion of the organization process, the company first arrived in Batumi. The plays named *Nadir Shah*, *Edirne Fethi*, *Zoraki Tabib*, *Peri Jadu*, *al-Mansour*, *Meshedi Ibad ve Arshin Mal Alan* were performed during the short-term tour in Batumi, at the Railroad and Shmayevsky stages (Merdanov 104-106). However, the tour of the company was interrupted by the British occupation of Batumi (24 December 1918). The members of

the company decided to travel to Istanbul as their financial potential was restricted. They received their visas from the Turkish Consulate in Batumi and boarded the ferry named *Shile*, which was transferring soldiers from the Caucasian front to Istanbul, with the help of Turkish officers, who watched their plays at the city stages. The voyage was rather troublesome. The ferry was caught by a storm off the coast of Trebizond and the company members experienced scary moments like the other passengers. The ferry ran out of fuel on the fourth day of the voyage and the doors together with the wooden floors were removed and burnt. Starvation and disease arose as a result of these difficulties. All these challenges were somehow left behind and they arrived in Istanbul on the eighth day (second half of January 1919) of the voyage (Merdanov 107-108).

The thespians from Tbilisi, encountered a different scene than they had expected. Istanbul purported a city surrendered to the enemy. War ships and dreadnoughts were anchored to the harbour (Merdanov 108). Entente powers, which occupied Istanbul after the armistice ending the war in Turkish fronts, were interfering in almost all affairs of the city. Fortunately, they did not raise difficulties to the artistic organisation of the Caucasian thespians. The visiting artists turned the interruption of cultural and artistic activities of the occupied city into an opportunity and introduced themselves to the theatre audience of Istanbul as the Azerbaijani Turkish Drama-Operetta Company. Although this label suggested an independent Azerbaijani company, the members of the company completely consisted of Turkish thespians from Tbilisi. The use of such a label had reasonable causes. First of all, the language spoken by the artists from Tbilisi was Azerbaijani Turkish and the plays they were staging for the audience in Istanbul were written in Azerbaijani Turkish. In addition, the Republic of Azerbaijan, which was established by direct aid of the Ottoman Empire, had a positive image in the cultural and art circle of Istanbul. This image was extremely important with regards to the visiting company's approval by the art circles and the interest of the audience in their plays. Due to mentioned reasons, the art circle of Istanbul did not question the origin of the company and regarded the staged plays as the theatre of the sister country.

The Executive of the Azerbaijani Turkish Drama-Operetta Company, which set to work swiftly from the first day on, entered not agreements with Kishlik

stage at Tepebashi, the Millet stage at Shehzadebashi and the Kushdili stage at Kadiköy. It was agreed that the musical acts in the operettas were to be played by the Ertugrul Band of the Naval Ministry and by Huseyin Qasimov, one of the renown tar artists of the Caucasus (G. Memmedli 515). Considering specific conditions of Istanbul, plays were planned to be staged twice a day, at two or three p.m. for women and nine p.m. for general audience. Advertisement and promotion were accelerated in order to attract more audience to the staged plays. The following announcement was published in the mainstream media of Istanbul from 20 January 1919 on:

*Meshedi Ibad*, one of the most famous operettas of Caucasia will be staged next Friday at half past one only for ladies and due to transportation and current situation at five o'clock in the evening at the Tepebashi Kishlik Theatre and Saturday daytime and in the evening at the Millet Theatre at Shehzadebashi and Monday daytime and in the evening at the Kushdili Theatre at Kadiköy. (*Alemdar* 1347-37, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2627, 2)

As it is seen from the announcement, *O Olmasin Bu Olsun* operetta of Uzeyir Hajibeyli, which was more often known as *Meshedi Ibad*, had been the inaugural play of the tour. It was planned that the play would be staged on 24 January 1919 at the Kishlik Theatre, on 25 January 1919 at the Millet Theatre and on 27 January 1919 at the Kushdili Theatre, daytime sessions being for ladies only and the evening sessions for general audience (*Alemdar* 1347-37, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2627, 2).

An incident took place while *Meshedi Ibad* was being staged at the Millet Theatre, which the visiting thespians were unaccustomed to. The doors of the hall opened widely, and the bar maids entered the hall selling lemonade and ice cream with loud announcements as “thirst quenching soda, cooling ice cream for ladies, we have soda!”. The players on the stage watched this scene with bewilderment. The company executive Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli, approached the bar owner at the intermission and requested that they did not enter the hall and talk loudly during the play. The bar owner, who had listened to him calmly, replied “Please don't obstruct our trade!” After this reply, Kirmanshahli discussed the matter with Alexan Efendi, the executive of the theatre, and tried to solve the bar problem. Alexan Efendi showed the

relevant clause in the contract and advised not to interfere with the business of the bar owner. The company executive, understanding that they would not be able to change the customized commercial practice of the Istanbul theatres, pledge to pay 5 liras to the bar owner in return for not entering the hall during the play (Merdanov 110-111). The interest of the audience to the first performance of *Meshedi Ibad* was less than expected. The main reasons for the low turnout were not taking into consideration the transport problems of Istanbul and setting the time of plays at between five and eight o'clock according to European time (Midhat 3). Additionally, the society, which was exhausted because of wars and occupation, did not have the time and energy for art.

After the first performance of *Meshedi Ibad*, Uzeyir Hajibeyli's 4 act operetta *Arshin Mal Alan* was included to the repertoire. This operetta as well was staged as two sessions on 29 January 1919 at the Millet Theatre (*Sabah* 10488, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2634, 2). The same operetta was staged again as two sessions on 31 January 1919 at the Kushişdili Theatre on the Anatolian side (*Alemdar* 1358-48, 2; *İkdam* 7891, 2; *Sabah* 10492, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2636, 2). The role distribution of *Arshin Mal Alan* was as follow: the role of Asker was acted by Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli, the role of Gulchehre by Vera Arsen, the role of aunt by Nastya Kaftarzade, the role of Telli by Asya khanum, the role of Sultan Bey by Mustaf Merdanov, the role of Suleiman by Ibrahim Isfahanli, the role of Veli by Muhsin Sanani and the role of Asya by Nina khanum (Merdanov 112; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 93). The third play to be included to the repertoire was Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev's tragedy *Bakhtsiz Javan*, which was staged on 1 February 1919 at the Millet Theatre for the first time (*Atı* 384, 3; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2639, 2). The *Arshin Mal Alan* operetta was staged for the second time as two sessions at the Millet Theatre on 5 February 1919, due to heavy demand of the audience (*Muvakkıt* 18 [462], 2; *Muvakkıt* 19 [463], 2; *Sabah* 10497, 2). Similarly, the *Meshedi Ibad* operetta, which was very popular among the audience, was staged for the third time in two sessions on 6 February 1919 at the Apollon Theatre in Kadıköy (*Sabah* 10498, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2644, 2).

In the first two weeks of the tour two of the plays out of three, which was offered to the audience, achieved great success and this encouraged the company executive to expand the repertoire. The tragedy *Dagılan Tifaq*

*Yakhud Qumarin Netijesi* written by Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev, who was one of the realist dramaturges of Azerbaijan, was staged on 8 February 1919 at the Millet Theatre as two sessions during the daytime and in the evening (*İkdam* 7901, 2; *Sabah* 10500, 2). Haqverdiyev's comedy vaudeville *Ach Herifler* and Zulfiqar Hajibeyli's operetta *Elli Yashinda Javan* was staged on 10 February 1919 at the same theatre as two sessions in the daytime and in the evening (*İkdam* 7903, 2; *Muvakkit* 24 (468), 2; *Sabah* 10502, 2). Najaf Vazirov's comedy *Haji Qamber*, which was newly added to the repertoire, was staged at the same theatre on 12 February 1919 as two sessions. The *Elli Yashinda Javan* operetta and the *Ach Herifler* vaudeville was staged for the second time at the Kushdili Theatre on 13 February 1919 (*İkdam* 7905, 2; *Sabah* 10504, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2650, 2). *Arshin Mal Alan*, which was described as the most beautiful operetta by the Istanbul newspapers, was staged at the Kishlik Theatre as daytime and evening sessions on 14 February 1919 (*İkdam* 7907, 2; *Sabah* 10506, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2652, 2).

The company getting adapted to the art circles of Istanbul swiftly staged seven different plays on four different stages as daytime and evening sessions in the first month of the tour. The same fast work continued during the second month of the tour. Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev's play *Bakhtsiz Javan*, was staged for the second time as two sessions at the Millet Theatre on 19 February 1919. And on 20 February 1919, Sultan Majid Ganizade's vaudeville *Aksham Sabri Khayir Olur* and Ahmed Vefik Pasha's comedy *Zoraki Tabib* was staged at the Kushdili Theatre (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13644, 4). Thereafter the company concentrated on the works of the Turkish playwrights, and staged Shemseddin Sami's play *Gave-i Ahenger* as daytime and evening sessions on 22 February 1919 at the Millet Theatre (*Alemdar* 1374-64, 2; *İkdam* 7915, 2; *Sabah* 10514, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2660, 2; *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13646, 4). Again at the same theatre the play *Sheykh Shamil Hazretleri* was staged on 26 February 1919 as two sessions (*Alemdar* 1378-68, 2).

A number of new plays were added to the March repertoire of the company besides previously performed plays, which won the favour of the Istanbul audience. First, Uzeyir Hajibeyli's operetta *Asli ve Kerem* was staged on 10 March 1919 at the Kushdili theatre as daytime and evening sessions. The musical act of the operetta was performed by the Ertugrul Band and the

tar artist Huseyin Qasimov (*Alemdar* 1390-80, 2). The operetta *Arshin Mal Alan* was staged on 11 March 1919 at the Odeon Theatre in Beyoglu with the attendance of the same band and musician (*Alemdar* 1391-81, 2; *İkdam* 7932, 2; *İstiklal* 79, 2; *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13664, 4). *Asli ve Kerem*, which was highly acclaimed at its first performance, was staged at the Millet Theatre on 12 March 1919 as daytime and evening sessions accompanied by the same musical group (*İkdam* 7933, 2; *Yeni Gün* 188, 2). Shemseddin Sami's play *Gave-i Ahenger* was staged for the second time on 13 March 1919 at the Kushdili Theatre as two sessions (*İkdam* 7934, 2). Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev's tragedy *Aga Muhammad Shah Qajar* was offered to the audience for the first time on 19 March 1919 at the Millet Theatre as daytime and evening sessions. In addition, they started to rehearse Haqverdiyev's tragedy *Peri Jadu*, Mirza Muhammad Akhundzade's tragedy *Sa'd ibn Vaqqas*, and the *al-Mansour* tragedy of Heinrich Heine, one of the master writers of German lyric poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Alemdar* 1397-87, 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* 2684, 2; *Yeni Gün* 194, 2). On 24 March 1919 the *Meshedi Ibad* operetta accompanied Ertugrul Band and the tar artist Huseyin Qasimov, met with the general audience at the Odeon Theatre in Beyoglu at nine o'clock in the evening (*Alemdar* 1403-93, 2). Zulfiqar Hajibeyli's operetta *Evli iken Bekar* was staged for the first time at the Millet Theatre on 26 March 1919 as daytime and evening sessions with the participation of the same musical group (*Sabah* 10546, 2).

Some of the audience kicked up a row chanting "we want dance, we want comedy" towards the end of the operetta staged at the Millet Theatre (*Temaşa* 15, 12). The company executive thought the audience's request was a joke, but after understanding the seriousness of the issue went on the stage and declared that the demand could not be met. Upon repeated insistence from the audience the replied as "go to chanteuse show if you desire dance, this is a theatre!" (Merdanov 112). Someone in the audience replied to this answer as "people like you ruined the nation, perish" and gave a fiery speech (*Temaşa* 15, 12). A trader, who requested dance, left the hall together with his friends. There was a significant fall in the number of audiences in the following days of this incident. It was found out after a small investigation that the same person, who was one of the rich traders of Istanbul, prevented ticket sales by placing his own men in front of the cash register (Merdanov 112). Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli made a statement in

the name of the company executive as a result of the mentioned incidents and stated that the aim of the company, which came from such a long way, is not to play for laughs or to dance, but is to display Azerbaijan's soul and drama to the audience of Istanbul (Merdanov 113; *Temaşa* 15, 12). Editorial board of the journal *Temaşa*, stating that it would not be appropriate to demand anything else than the program of the company, expressed that the extent of the disrespect shown to the visiting company was at surprising level and advised that similar incidents should not be repeated (Merdanov 113; *Temaşa* 15, 13). The company executive, trying to improve relations with the audience, expelled Muhsin Sanani, who used unnecessary words in the course of the incident beyond the knowledge and permission of the executive, and Pasha Muhammadov with other reasons (*Temaşa* 15, 16). The business of the company returned to normal after the press release and the discharge process and the audience started to watch the plays again (Merdanov 113).

After the problem was solved Uzeyir Hajibeyli's operetta *Er ve Arvad* was staged on 16 April 1919 at the Millet Theatre at nine o'clock in the evening. On 17 April 1919 the *Arşin Mal Alan* operetta was staged at the Skating Theatre as daytime and evening sessions with the participation of the Ertugrul Band and tar player Huseyin Qasimov (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13700, 4). Uzeyir Hajibeyli's operetta *Meshedi İbad* and Sultan Majid Ganizade's comedy *Hor-hor* was staged on 18 April 1919 at the Skating Theatre at three o'clock daytime only for men accompanied by the same musical group (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13701, 4). Again, at the same venue and with the contributions of the same musical group Zulfıqar Hajibeyli's operetta *Evli iken Bekar* was staged on 19 April 1919 as two sessions (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13702, 4). On the evening of 21 April 1919, the operetta *Turkman Qizi* was premiered at the Ferah Theatre in Shehzadebashi, in cooperation with the famous comedian Hasan Efendi's troupe. Thereafter the comedy *Dursun Ali Balli Badi* and the play *Ölünün Hortlamasi* was staged.

The company, which seems to have considered the demands of the Istanbul audience in its last activities, included cantos before the plays, played music with bands and saz during the intermissions and offered the audience oriental style dances with the participation of Vera Arsen and her companions (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13705, 4). The first performance of

Uzeyir Hajibeyli's operetta *Leyla ve Majnun* was staged at the Millet Theatre on 23 April 1919 with the contributions of the Ertugrul Band and tar player Huseyin Qasimov (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat* 13706, 4). Another play, which met the expectations of the Istanbul audience, was Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev's play *Peri Jadu*, which was being rehearsed for a long time. The role of Selime was acted by Terlan khanum, the role of *Peri Jadu* by Vera Arsen, the role of Qurban by Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli, the role of Iblis by Hasan Abdullahzade, the role of Shamame Jadu by Ibrahim Isfahanli and the role of Emrullah by Muhsin Sanani at the play, which was staged on 17 May 1919 at the Millet Theatre as a show of the *Temaşa* journal (*Temaşa* 17, 1). A miny concert was held by the Ertugrul Band and the tar artist Huseyin Qasimov and Caucasian folk dances were performed by Vera Arsen together with Nastya Kaftaradze, Muhsin Sanani and Ibrahim Isfahanli within the scope of the organization. Pieces of previously staged and admired operettas were staged at the intermissions (*Temaşa* 16, back cover inner page). The show was completed perfectly and received thumbs up from the editorial board of the journal *Temaşa* (*Temaşa* 17, 1).

As it is seen from the cast of the show on 17 May, Muhsin Sanani, who was expelled after the incident of 26 March, was given a role at the new play of the company. Likewise, Pasha Muhammadov, who was expelled at the same date, took his place among the actors of the new directory of the company. The structure of the company completely changed as well in accordance with the new directory. Hasan Abdullahzade was elected as the director of the company and Eshref Yuzbashizade as the stage manager. The actors and actresses were divided into four classes. Eshref Yuzbashizade, Ibrahim Isfahanli, Mustafa Merdanov, Vera Arsen and Huseyin Qasimov became first class artists, Muhsin Sanani and Jalil Quliyev second class artists, Nastya Kaftaradze and Pasha Muhammadov third class artists, and Meshedi Abbas Ismailov fourth class artist (*Temaşa* 17, 1). According to the new directory, none of the players could attend a show of any other theatre beyond the information and permission of the responsible director. The company, which was planning to stage plays in the scope of the Ramadan activities of 1919, rented the Sharq Theatre at Shehzadebashi. It was planned to introduce Azerbaijani plays that have not yet been staged to the Istanbul audiences, on Sunday, Tuesday and Friday evenings at the Sharq



Theatre and the other evenings at the other theatres at Kadiköy, Uskudar and Buyukada (*Temaşa* 17, 1).

Information on the activities of the company after the renewal is limited. According to a contemporary study, the Istanbul tour of the company took 11 months in total (Rehimli, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 69). Probably in the second half of the mentioned period, Uzeyir Hajibeyli's *Asli ve Kerem* operetta was translated into Turkish and published as a pamphlet upon the request of Seyit Tahir Bey, the concessionaire of the *Temaşa* journal (Merdanov 114; G. Memmedli 528; Asker and Asker 338). Again, the *Arshin Mal Alan* operetta was translated into Turkish and was staged at the Millet Theatre towards the end of the year (İkdam 8202, 4; *Sabah* 10802, 4). The *Arshin Mal Alan* operetta, which was highly appreciated by the Istanbul audience, was staged 43 times in total during the tour (Merdanov 112; Hacıyev, *Tiflis Edebi Mühiti* 179; Rehimli, *Tiflis Azerbaijan Teatrı* 69; Asker and Asker 337). The client of French cinema company Pathé, who had the opportunity to watch the same operetta, suggested that the play to be adapted to the big screen. The assistant manager of the French company personally conveyed the proposal to the Azerbaijani company executive and invited the players to Paris. It was written in the draft contract that *Arshin Mal Alan* would be performed 10 times on the Paris stages and then adapted to the cinema. The proposal of the French company was not accepted due to lack of allocated finance despite the high workload (Merdanov 114; G. Memmedli 527-528). Additionally, tour proposals were received from Bursa and Izmir (Merdanov 112). But these proposals were rejected as the company was about to return to Caucasia as they finished their work in Istanbul.

### **Performance Evaluation**

The organization of the company, which staged Azerbaijani plays in Istanbul, a city under the occupation of Entente forces, attracted attention from the first day on. The announcements of the company were published in the pages of most read newspapers of Istanbul, it was commented on the general characteristics of Azerbaijani dramaturgy and artistic interpretations were made about the performances of the artists of the visiting company. A. Mithat, one of those who made such interpretations, evaluated both the content of the operetta and the Azerbaijani theatrics in general terms

after watching the first performance of *Meshedi Ibad* (27 January 1919). Although he found *Meshedi Ibad* too oriental in his review, he pointed out that the Azerbaijanis have established serious theatrics. He emphasized that the operetta, whose theme was based on daily life, identified the social problems of the country it stood for. Mithat, stated that the music and dance forming the basis of the operetta was completely reflecting national elements and appreciated that all these features were at a level satisfying artistic taste (Midhat 3).

Huseyin Fahri, who shared his impressions on the plays he watched until the third week of the tour with his readers on 8 February 1919, particularly stated that the interest shown by the public to the visiting company was directly related to the political development of the last year. Huseyin Fahri, drawing attention to the importance of a nation's cultural abilities and talents, stated that it shouldn't be expected in such complex days that a company sent by a newly independent country would be perfect and suggested that the imperfections of the artists and equipment of the company should be excused. Despite the mentioned imperfections, he judged the organization of the visiting company positively with the words "... it is too good to be compared to our laughingstock companies, which have been performing in our country for years and should have taken lesson from foreign companies present in Istanbul..." Although Huseyin Fahri as well like A. Mithat found the plays staged by the company oriental, appreciated it was far from European imitation and carried all features of a national art (Hüseyn Fahri 2).

Muhsin Ertugrul, one of the pioneers of contemporary Turkish theatre, discussed the organization of the visiting company in his column in the *Temaşa* magazine and displayed his artistic excitement with the sentence "... Whether the Azerbaijanis are competent or not, they are bringing us artistic works from beyond the Caucasus, from our compatriots..." (1 March 1919). He appreciated and honoured the mission of the company, whose language, taste, music and dance were not given sufficient attention, with the sentence "... is to bring a piece of taste, a piece of art, a piece of beauty to the people of the sleeping realm..." And he addressed the people of Istanbul, who was indifferent to the art of the sister country, with the language of the German philosopher Nietzsche's Zoroaster: "The voice of beauty comes out very low pitched and this voice is only heard and understood by the ones, who are

most awake and by the most sensitive souls.” (Ertuğrul 2; G. Memmedli 517). Muhsin Ertuğrul pointed out that Azerbaijan responded to the military aid given in difficult times with art with a noteworthy reckoning as “We Turks went to Azerbaijan with weapons, and the Azerbaijanis came to us with art and music.” (Şahmalıyev 5).

Reshad Nuri, who shared his impressions with his readers after watching operettas performed on Istanbul stages, stated that the visiting company displayed a higher performance than the companies of Istanbul other than the Darulbedayi (9 Mart 1919). He presented the developments in theatrics in Azerbaijan with the evaluation “the first idea that both the plays and the performances aroused in us was that the Azerbaijanis take theatre seriously and with importance and that they have surpassed Türkiye in this regard (Reşad Nuri 13). Reshad Nuri, emphasising that theatrics is international with regards to its codes and concept, put forth that while it is possible to produce works based on imitation every nation strives to form its own unique theatre, and Azerbaijanis have formed a national theatre inspiring from their own land. Reshad Nuri pointed out that Azerbaijani comedies have a simple and textual temperament like Molière’s style and put forth the idea “... if we look at them with the same eyes, we watch European plays, we will see them as primitive and in need of development. However, purity and simplicity are virtues that make us neglect and forget these imperfections.” (Reşad Nuri 13-14). Hüseyin Fahri, who almost shared the same idea with Reshad Nuri, pointed out the Molière influence in some plays with the following sentences: “... they have a virtue, which is very striking and that is the simplicity and purity of their art. Unnatural movements, elaborate artificialities, and ridiculous excesses are not seen in them...” (Hüseyin Fahri 2). In Reshad Nuri’s opinion, national music, dances and jokes in operettas were the elements that reinforced the simplicity, which was mentioned (Reşad Nuri 13). Hüseyin Fahri, who was amazed by the stage performance, referring to the words of one of Istanbul’s distinguished artists, drew attention to the outstanding performances of the company artists with the following sentences: “They have a harmony and order in their plays that without exception none of our theatres has ever experienced before. Division of duties is very good. No work is disrupted due to anyone’s fault.” (Hüseyin Fahri 2).

As a matter of fact, the visiting players, who had no professional art education, were playing their roles on Istanbul stages with fully self-taught talent. Despite their lack of professionalism, they were always open to improvement. It was very difficult for these artists, who had not seen a statesman in a higher position than the tsarist officials in the lands they were living in, to enact on the stage the characters of a shah, a sultan and a tsar exactly (Şerif 170). Tours to foreign countries and other cities were offering them the opportunities to develop their artistic talents. For instance, his observations during the Tabriz tour had positive contributions to Mustafa Merdanov's stage performance. Again, the plays of La Comédie Française Company, which was the guest of the capital during the Istanbul tour, made great contributions to Mustafa Merdanov's understanding of art and according to his own words, he learned a lot from the stage performance of the French theatre actor Koklen (Merdanov 114-117). It was written in the *Temaşa* magazine's review of Mustafa Merdanov's performance, that he was a young artist who promised "a future that will work miracles in the hands of a good master." (*Temaşa* 14, back cover inner page; Merdanov 116).

*Temaşa's* evaluation of the other artists of the company was shortly as follow: The director of the company, Mirseyfeddin Kirmanshahli, who looked extremely likable, was a very polite and respectful artist (*Temaşa* 14, face cover inner page). Eshref Yuzbashizade, one of the senior actors, was a lively Meshedi Ibad in real life with his skill and talent in the art of theatre. Muhsin Sanani, who became famous for his role as the porter in the same operetta, was a young artistic traveller with a bright future (*Temaşa* 14, face cover inner page). It was predicted that the future of Huseyin Abdullahzade as well, who had the temperament of a drama actor in terms of his character, would be bright. Terlan khanum, who was able to use only fifty percent of her talent in operettas, was recommended to act in drama works. Vera Arsen, one of the tireless actresses of female roles in plays, was also a talented performer of Caucasian folk dances. (*Temaşa* 14, face cover inner page). Pasha Muhammadov, who stood out with his talent in folk dances, was an artist who played cautious and dignified roles on the theatre stage. Combining theatre with his agile dancing on the stage, İbrahim Isfahanli was thought to be a young artist with a bright future, especially in drama rather than operetta. Huseyin Qasimov, who caressed people's hearts with the touching voice of his tar, was an artist who imaginatively took his audience through the Caucasus Mountains (*Temaşa* 14, back cover inner page).

## Conclusion

As a result of the analysis, it turns out that the company, which had been staging plays on the stages of Istanbul as the organization of the Azerbaijani Turkish Drama-Operetta Company since the winter season of 1919, consisted of actors from the Turkish Theatre of Tbilisi. It could be easily said that the Azerbaijani label was used throughout the tour due to factors such as the cultural circle where the actors were brought up, the origin of the plays, and the ability to attract more audiences to the plays. The repertoire of the company consisted of operetta, vaudeville, comedy, drama and opera works by Azerbaijani dramaturgs such as Uzeyir Hajibeyli, Zulfiqar Hajibeyli, Najaf Vazirov and Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev. Although it is difficult to evaluate the performance of the artists as the operettas, which constituted the majority of the repertoire, are easy-to-perform works, the visiting company's plays were watched with interest by Istanbul's art circles. It was concluded that the members of the company, who had no professional art training but played their roles with their natural talent in performing arts, were superior to other companies in Istanbul, with the exception of the Darulbedayi. The origin of the company was never questioned, and it was accepted as the theatre of the sister country among the theatre audience. Although the plays staged were considered to be simple and oriental, they were appreciated for being far from imitation. They were evaluated positively as they were reinforced with national music, folk dances and jokes.

The culture and art world of Istanbul, which was experiencing difficult times due to the occupation of the Entente forces, had the opportunity to get to know the theatre works produced in the Azerbaijani cultural circle by the organization in question. The actors, who brought the Azerbaijani theatrics to stages of Istanbul, gained experiences of high artistic value by interacting with local and foreign communities in Istanbul's artistic environment. The actors, who returned to their country after the completion of the tour, did their best to keep the Turkish Theatre in Tbilisi alive. The artistic tradition represented by them received the state theatre status under the name of Tbilisi Turkish Drama Theatre after the Soviet rule was established in Southern Caucasus (1922). It was closed down after operating with this status for a quarter of a century (1947). In the period following the collapse of the Soviet order, the revival of the historical theatre came to the agenda

in the context of developing Azerbaijani – Georgian cultural relations (1998). This historical centre of art, which was re-created under the name of Azerbaijani Drama Theatre of Tbilisi in the new period, was given the status of state theatre (2004).

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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