

# THE JEWISH THEATRE IN TURKEY

An International Symposium

by

the Theatre Foundation of Turkey (TTV)

in cooperation with:

Pera Museum

The Quincentennial Foundation Museum of Turkish Jews

Staging-Abjection Project / European Research Council (ERC)

Istanbul University Faculty of Letters / Department of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy

Don Juan Archiv Wien

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Pera Museum

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## CALL FOR PAPERS

Turkey's theatrical heritage powerfully reflects the cultural wealth and diversity of the country. Preserving theatrical heritage is not only about remembering the forgotten and unearthing the unknown but also about nourishing the collective memory, thus is essential for preserving the culture of coexistence.

The rapid loss of theatrical memory in Turkey stemming from the disinterest of a large portion of the society towards the theatrical heritage may lead to a gradual erosion of cultural values. This is particularly true in Istanbul, a city with a long history of theatre.

The Theatre Foundation of Turkey was established by a group of theatre professionals and academics to support the art of theatre by preventing the loss of its memory and values. It aims to create an inclusive and complete archive of theatre - a deeply rooted cultural tradition. Hence the Foundation's main goal is to establish the Theatre Museum and Research Centre of Turkey. Another mission of the Foundation in the same direction is to collect and record the theatrical culture of Armenian, Greek, and Jewish populations in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey which made great contributions to theatre in Turkey, and to make their endeavors more visible.

A significant portion of the Jews deported from Spain and Portugal in 1492 settled in Ottoman lands. Naming themselves "Sephardim," they brought with them a rich tradition of jugglery (*juglares*). The art of jugglery often included clowning, singing, dancing, puppetry and shadow play and was highly developed and popular in Spain of this era.

As stated by travelers such as Evliya Çelebi (1614–1682) and Jean de Thévenot (1633–1667), as well as by foreigners who were stationed in Turkey such as François Baron de Tott (1733–1793) or by scholars like Metin And (1927–2008), Özdemir Nutku (1931–2019) among many others, Jews contributed to a great extent to Ottoman festivities organized on special occasions by their performance arts.

Jewish artists had the opportunity to show their skills not only at festivities but also on the street, in coffee houses, mansions of the wealthy and even at the court. For example, an American writer, John Mulholland (1898–1970), stated that the most interesting of the performances he watched in the Eastern countries was of a Jewish juggler in Istanbul (Metin And, *Traditional Turkish Theatre*, 1985). Musahipzade Celal (1868–1959), in his book on the life in old Istanbul (*Eski İstanbul Yaşayışı*, 1946), states that juggling is "an art that belongs to the Jews." We can multiply the examples.

The Jews in the Ottoman Empire also contributed significantly to the formation and development of Turkish traditional theatre (Karagöz and Ortaoyunu). We first find the traces of the Jews in Ortaoyunu in Evliya Çelebi's (1611–1682) 10-volume work *Seyahatnâme*, where he collected his chronicles of his travels around Europe, Western Asia and Egypt for more than fifty years. Evliya Çelebi states that most of the twelve major 'kol' (the name given to the performance troupes of the period) were Jews.

Similarly, in his *Sûrnâme* (1675), Abdi, a famous Ottoman chronicler of the era, mentions a Jewish 'kol' in Edirne in the 17th century.

The 'maître' of the juggler was called Pişekar as in Ortaoyunu (one of the two lead roles), that both of them had 'şakşak'- the two-slice wooden slapstick- and their conversations, the *def* /tambourine, the imitation etc. were similar to Karagöz and Ortaoyunu. (Metin And, *Traditional Turkish Theatre*, 1985).

After several researchers such as Nicholas N. Martinovich (1883–1954) suggested that Ortaoyunu, which they found to be similar to Commedia dell'arte, might have come to Turkey via the Byzantine Empire or Italy, Metin And mentions the possibility that it might have been brought by Jews from Spain (*Traditional Turkish Theatre*, 1985).

In Elena Romero Castello's (b.1942) three-volume study *El Teatro de Los Sefaridies Orientales* (1979) in which she examines the theatre works staged by all the sephardim communities living in the Ottoman lands, we learn that the earliest recorded play staged in Istanbul was in 1873 and the last one in 1929.

The Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) schools - opened during the Tanzimat (Reorganisation) period (1839-1876) which was dominated by the French culture and language - gave way the Jewish theatre of Turkey to turn its face to European works (Molière, 1622–1673; Shakespeare, 1564–1616; Racine, 1639–1699) and to local and contemporary Turkish writers such as Namık Kemal (1840–1888).

After the imperative by the Republican government in 1928 to use Turkish as the official national language in public, not only Judeo-Spanish and French, but also Turkish were also heard on the Sephardic stage. The acting and staging styles of the era were as a mixture of traditional Ottoman and European styles. Thus a multilingual and multicultural 'hybrid' theatre emerged, which constituted the distinctive features of Sephardic theatre.

Today, there are efforts in Istanbul to revive the Sephardic theatre through the endeavours of local cultural associations such as Göztepe Kültür Derneği, Yıldırım Spor Derneği and Dostluk Yurdu Derneği.

The objective of the two-day symposium which will be accompanied by a small-scale exhibition, is to raise awareness about Turkish-Jewish Theatre which has not yet been the subject of an adequate systematic and critical research, as well as to bring this field to the attention of scholars.

The symposium will be held in Turkish, English and Spanish.

Simultaneous translation will be provided.

We invite scholars and artists working in this field to investigate the history of Jewish theatre in Turkey by departing from the following topics:

- An overview of the history of Sephardic theatre in Turkey
- Jewish theatre in Turkey before the Sephardim.

- History of Ashkenazi community theatre in Turkey
- Jewish theatre in Turkey and multiculturalism, multilingualism
- The contribution of the Jews of Turkey to traditional theatre forms:
  - Jugglery
  - Puppetry
  - Karagöz
  - Ortaoyunu
- The Jewish character in the traditional Turkish theatre (Karagöz, Ortaoyunu)
- Judeo-Spanish plays during the period of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- 'Alliance Israélite Universelle' and Sephardic theatre during the Tanzimat (Reorganisation) Period (1839–1876)
- Issues of language (Judeo-Spanish, French, Turkish) under the influence of religion, politics, French culture and complementary events which surrounded the presentation of plays.
- Sephardic theatre as a sociocultural institution in the late Ottoman period (1789–1918)
- Language, identity, and Sephardic theatre
- Issues of tradition and change in the theatrical practice of the Sephardic world in the late Ottoman period (1789–1918).

We invite paper proposals of maximum 500 words that address the above-mentioned topics along with a short biography, by **31 January 2023** to the Email address: [sempozyum2023@turkiyetiyatrovakfi.org](mailto:sempozyum2023@turkiyetiyatrovakfi.org).

Conference Convenor:

Esen Çamurdan (Theatre Foundation of Turkey)

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