

Staging the Revolution:  
The Theatre of the Revolution in the Ottoman Empire 1908-1909

Bilge Sekin

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By  
Bilge Seçkin

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This thesis has been approved and accepted by:

Prof. Dr. Zafer Toprak  
(Thesis Advisor)

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Ass. Prof. Nadir Özbek

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Ass. Prof. Duygu Köksal

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This study scrutinizes the role of theater in the transformation of the public sphere and its political character by focusing on the “theater epidemic” that emerged immediately after the 1908 Revolution. This period is conceptualized as the “theater of revolution” which started with the first performance of *Besa* by Şemsettin Sami and ended first with the ban of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* and finally with the 31 March Affairs. In this period in which mass politics emerged was distinctive from the previous and following eras, theater was used as an effective vehicle in the transformation of the public sphere, mobilization of the masses and intervening in the actual daily politics. In this regard, the performances of the plays are taken into account as a social and political phenomenon, rather than a literary text. These performances forms the main subject of this thesis were social, political and mass events, which reflected the revolutionary aspects of the period. However, these performances are undermined by the conventional historiography with the claim that they do not have “artistic” value. The performances of *Besa*, *Vatan*, and *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, which are the representatives of the genre of revolutionary plays, became political and social events such as a mass pageant, a festival or a demonstration. In this respect this study includes one of the main components of theater, the audiences, in the analysis by criticizing the conventional theater historiography. That is why, this thesis consider theater as a research area of social history rather than field of literature. The main sources of this thesis are comprised of theater critiques, new and advertisements that appeared in periodicals, memoirs and the Başbakanlık Ottoman Archives.

Devrimi Sahnelemek:  
Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Devrimin Tiyatrosu 1908-1909

Bu tez 1908 Devrimi'nin hemen ardından ortaya çıkan “tiyatro salgını”na odaklanarak, tiyatronun kamuoyunun ortaya çıkışı ve biçimlenmesinde oynadığı rolü ve politik niteliğini incelemektedir. Şemsettin Sami'nin *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* oyununun sahneye konuluşuyla başlayan bu salgın *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* oyununun yasaklanmasını izleyen 31 Mart olayı ile son bulmakta ve bu tez içerisinde bu dönem “Devrimin Tiyatrosu” olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Kendinden önceki ve sonraki dönemden radikal bir biçimde ayrılan, kitlelerin politikleştiği ve politikanın kiteselleştiği bu dönem içerisinde tiyatro kitlelerin mobilizasyonunda, kamuoyunun biçimlendirilmesinde, gündelik politikaya müdahale etmenin etkin bir aracı olarak kullanılmıştır. Bu kavramsallaştırma içerisinde tiyatro metinlerinden ziyade sosyal ve politik birer olgu olarak oyunların performansları ele alınmıştır. Döneme ilişkin tarih yazımında sanatsal değere haiz olmadıkları sebebiyle göz ardı edilen bu performanslar aslında dönemin devrimsel niteliğini yansıtan siyasal, toplumsal ve kitlesel olaylar olarak bu tezin ana konusunu oluşturmaktadır. Devrim Tiyatrosu'nun örneği olarak *Besa*, *Vatan* ve *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* birer politik ve toplumsal vaka, birer kitle gösterisi, zaman zaman da bir festival haline gelen sahnelemeleriyle ele alınmış ve bu toplumsal olayları mümkün kılan tiyatronun ana bileşeni seyirci faktörü tarih yazımının ana eğilimin aksine analiz çerçevesine dahil edilmiştir. Bu noktadan hareketle bu tez tiyatroyu bir edebiyat incelemesi alanından ziyade toplumsal tarihin bir araştırma alanı olarak ele almıştır. Bu çalışmanın temel kaynakları dönemin basınında çıkan tiyatro eleştirileri, haber ve ilanları, anılar ve Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi belgeleridir.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

*“When the poet dies –his books remain.  
When the artist dies –his pictures live  
on. But what is left after the director and  
actor? Only Memories.”<sup>1</sup>*

The 1908 Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, like other revolutions such as the French Revolution and the Russian October Revolution, was followed by a theater epidemic. In the Second Constitutional Period, theater as a social organization, a means of representation and communication emerged as a fundamental institution of the public sphere. As such, it was used as an effective vehicle for the formation of public opinion. Theater both contributed to the expansion of the public sphere of the time and itself benefited from this expansion. Thus, different sections of society participated in theater activities in order to make themselves visible in the public sphere.

The transformation and expansion of the public sphere and the emergence of mass society and mass politics brought onto the agenda a new social and political phenomenon that was mobilization. Mobilization in the Second Constitutional Period was a process that converted passive collectivities into active participants in public life. Another aspect of the mobilization process was the framing of political and social issues that was directly related to culture, encompassing symbols, languages and rituals. Theater as a public space provides a ground for reflecting and recreating signs, symbols, messages, images, rituals, crucial vehicles for mobilizing the masses. Another

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<sup>1</sup> *Zrelishche* (28 November 1922). The epitaph is cited in William Kuhlke, “Vakhtangov and the American Theatre of the 1960’s,” *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May 1967), p. 179.

crucial feature of theater activities in this period is its effectiveness at disseminating ideas. Unlike novels, newspapers, journals and pamphlets, theater has the potential of reaching out to the illiterate masses. In the Second Constitutional Period, the elites were well aware of this fact and made use of theater for that cause.

The effectiveness of theater at disseminating political ideas also attracted the attention of the political actors of the time. They tried to use theater activities for both disseminating and legitimating their politics. However, this relation was not unidirectional one. The theater groups also legitimated their activities with the support of political actors and the participation of audience, especially theatergoers such as pashas, prominent CUP members and members of imperial dynasty. On the other hand, this relationship was inherently burdened by tension. The spontaneity of theater activities always disturbed the calculations of the political actors. Thus, they never considered theater groups as reliable allies. Most of the time political actors tried to control them closely through patronage.

The revolutionary theater activities immediately after the promulgation of the second constitution had features that distinguished them from previous and later periods of the Ottoman Empire. Although theater historians touch upon this distinct period, usually they choose to skip it and focus on other phases of the theater of the Second Constitutional Period. Conventionally, in the theater historiography of the period these activities of the “initial days” theater activities are dismissed as having no artistic value.

This historiography completely neglects how the revolutionary theater of the “initial days” could bring together thousands of people in theaters. Being able to attract a mass audience is especially significant for the revolutionary theater considering that theater was a literary genre that was a recent adoption from the West. Moreover, the low rate of literacy among the public required theater activities to rely more on



performative rather than textual aspects. This in turn opened up new opportunities for the participation of “lay men” in the theater. People without much educational or artistic background started writing plays and discussing performance. Thus, theater created its own public.

Most historians neglect the social aspects of theater activities. They base their analysis solely on a chronological time line without attempting to construct analytical concepts to distinguish between the different periods of theater history. Some other historians categorize theater history according to the subject and themes of plays without taking the different techniques and social political contexts into account. As a result, most popular plays of the Second Constitutional Period such as *Vatan* and *Besa* are excluded from the historiography of the time.

The failure of theater historians can be traced to their ideological background. Prevailing theater historiography has nationalistic overtones. They search for the roots of “national theater” and thus in the constitutional period they only include the events that are functional for creating a “national theater history.” Although most of the Muslim and Turkish male actors appeared on stage for the first time in this period, still theater groups and participants were ethnically mixed, which is not too functional for a nationalistic theater history. This attempt also implies that history progresses inevitably on a linear line towards the nation state. Furthermore, theater historians have an idealized model of Western theater, which is itself a fiction, and evaluate the theater activities of the time according to this imagined model. Therefore, when they look at the period, they are unable to find these ideal audience, theater groups, plays, buildings and even theater itself at all. According to them, everything regarding theater was incomplete and simplistic until the Republic.

Moreover, theater historians tend to devalue the role of audience. Although these historians recognize the popularity of the plays and theater groups and the existence of big theater events, they basically marginalize their significance for theater history, because these historians do not categorize these popular theater plays as theater due to the fact they do not fit the Western model. These plays are political and not fit as objects of a national theater history. Moreover, most of the time they emphasize the role of elites rather than that of the masses for making history. Thus, like the agency of the masses, the popular plays of the time as examples of “low art” become invisible in historiography.

On the other hand, alternative approaches such as social history in the historiography of the Second Constitutional Period also do not pay attention to theater plays as historical sources. Despite the possibility of using the written texts of plays as sources, no such effort can be found in Ottoman historiography. In addition to the written text, the performance of the plays and their perception by the audience provides fertile ground for analyzing the Second Constitutional Period marked by changing mentalities.

In this thesis I focus on the period of so-called “theater epidemic” that started with the performance of *Besa* at Tepebaşı Theater in August 1908. “The epidemic” subsided with the prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* in December and finally came to an end with the 31 March Incident. This period marked a distinct era. In these five-six months a great number of theater plays were written, even more were performed; numerous theater groups emerged, divided and disappeared. Three plays dominated the stage and the newspaper columns of theater critics. First, *Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa* by Şemsettin Sami, second, *Vatan Yahut Silistre*, by Namık Kemal, probably the most performed play of the period, third *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* by Hüseyin Kami, a very

controversial play despite its popularity. The first two plays were written before the promulgation of the second constitution. As Berna Moran states, in the context of *Tanzimat* novels, their authors chose to write plays not only because they were suitable for disseminating ideas, but also because theater was a Western genre.<sup>2</sup> Thus, theater itself, apart from its contents, became a political symbol of modernization. However, these plays were not performed for audience in the period in which they were written but only in the Second Constitutional Period.

I chose these three plays as the representatives of revolutionary theater in the “initial days” of the Second Constitutional Period. In line with my theoretical focus on the function of theater for the emergence of the public sphere, I study the discussions provoked by plays. In this regard, methodologically I relied on the reaction and perception of audience by referring mainly to theater critics and memoirs.

The approach of this thesis constituted a methodological challenge. Like media studies, this study also attempts to reconstruct the perception of the audience. While recent media studies can employ techniques such as ethnography and participant observation, historiography has to rely on scarce sources in this respect. For the purposes of this thesis I rely on theater criticism. Theater critics can be considered as sound historical sources for two reasons: first, art criticism was a discourse forming a certain taste for audience and thereby shapes public opinion. In this manner, theater critics writing newspaper columns tried to “teach” the public how to interpret plays. This can be a map for understanding the perception of audience and the mentality of the time and public opinion. Interestingly enough, most of the theater critics offer their readers not a focus on the artistic features of the plays, but their political connotations. Second, theater critics also depicted performances with all their components. Starting

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<sup>2</sup> Berna Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel Bir Bakış*, Vol. I, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004), p. 18.

from rehearsal, the composition of audience, distinguished guests in the audience, and details of the theater building, interludes between the acts, music and more importantly the reaction of the audience during the performance were described in the columns of the critics. In this respect, the overlapping reactions of audience during different performances provide clues for analyzing the public opinion of the time. Moreover, theater critics were themselves part of the audience and as such, they also depicted their own feelings in detail.

Other resources of this thesis are the memoirs of directors and actors, which are comprised of interviews. As such they are prone to the weaknesses of oral historiography since the accounts in these interviews reflect the select memories of the interviewees. Despite their limitations, they provide the most vivid depictions of the theaters of the time. In order to account for the one-sidedness of the memoirs, the information gathered from the interviews were checked against the columns of the theater critics, as well as the ads and news in periodicals. Moreover, Ottoman Başbakanlık Arşivi sources were used to double-check the accounts in the newspapers and the memoirs and also to reveal the state's relation to the revolutionary theater.

In the theoretical chapter "Mass Politics and Theater," relying on sociologists such as Jurgen Habermas and Charles Tilly I argue that theater is essential for mobilizing the masses to form a public sphere. Building on the theoretical framework, in the second chapter I review the literature on the history of theater in the Second Constitutional Period. I suggest that the ideological orientations of historians such as Metin And, Refik Ahmet Sevengil, Alemdar Yalçın, and Enver Töre prevent them from analyzing the links between politics and theater as well as to construct arbitrary periodizations and ignore the audience. The prevailing mode of this type of historiography is nationalist, elitist and Orientalist. In its search for the roots of

“national theater” most historians tend to ignore the aspects which are not functional for nation building. Elitism tends to overlook the role of the audience in theater. Therefore it misses the crucial link between theater and mass politics. Finally, Orientalism applies the standards of an imagined Western model to Ottoman Theater. Thus it neglects the hybrid forms and performances, which were essential in this period.

The third chapter depicts theater activities prior to the promulgation of the second constitution. The theater activities of this period set the tone of the revolutionary theater in 1908. This chapter introduces the main elements and trends of the Ottoman theater. Reconstructing the underground activities of theater groups is essential to understanding how the inherent link between the promulgation of the second constitution and the theater epidemic.

The fourth chapter focuses on the first performance of *Besa*. It was the first experience of revolutionary theater. It demonstrated the power of theater for mass mobilization as well as the need of the CUP to control and contain it within its own ideological framework. The performance was regarded by many as the true marker of a new era. *Besa* was performed by theater groups such Ahmet Fehim and Minakyan which had existed in the pre-constitutional period. The performances of these groups demonstrate how the political context pushed these pre-existing theater groups to change their repertoires. *Besa* is the first example of revolutionary performances preaching Ottomanism to the masses.

In the fifth chapter, I study performances of *Vatan*, which narrates the patriotic story of the defense of Silistra. It constitutes a perfect example of revolutionary theater since its performances were held not only in theaters but also in public squares, gardens, streets and schoolyards. Numerous theater groups gave performances of *Vatan*. The amateur Heveskeran Company performed the most famous

and representative versions of *Vatan*. As a group seceding from the pre-constitutional Ahmet Fehim Company it represents the emerging revolutionary theater groups.

The sixth chapter discusses *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, which is written by a post-constitutional playwright. Despite its controversial content it became one of the most popular and the final example of revolutionary theater in the Second Constitutional Period. The protests against the ban on its performances reveals the radical potential of revolutionary theater as well as the state's and the CUP's reservation against theater as a revolutionary performance.

With the study of these three plays I conceptualize the period between the first performance of *Besa* and the ban on *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, which was followed by the events of 31 March as the revolutionary theater of the Second Constitutional Period. I argue that conceptually this era forms a distinct period in Ottoman theater history.

## CHAPTER II

### MASS POLITICS AND THEATER

#### A Crucial Turning Point: 1908

The promulgation of the second constitution paved the way for radical political and social changes in society. Related to the extension of the political sphere was followed by the creation of public opinion. Furthermore, politics became a mass phenomenon. New forms of politics were introduced to society. Mass meetings were realized for the first time in public squares as political events. Political parties and thousands of associations were established and this was considered a constitutional right.<sup>3</sup> The masses marched; workers organized strikes for different purposes.<sup>4</sup> Boycotts were used as an effective vehicle for intervening both in international and national politics.<sup>5</sup> Not only were new forms of politics introduced to society, but also the political discourse changed radically. Tunaya writes that, “before the 10<sup>th</sup> of July a language was spoken as spy Fehim Pasha did, after 10<sup>th</sup> of July, as if everyone was a Namık Kemal.”<sup>6</sup> Zafer Toprak writes that “while on the one hand the Western pluralist, participatory parliamentary regime was coming to be accepted.” “On the other, anti-western resistance, boycotts, strikes and campaigns ‘to buy local’ came onto the agenda

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<sup>3</sup> Mehmet Ö. Alkan, “Osmanlı’da Cemiyetler Çağı,” *Tarih ve Toplum*, Cilt 15, No. 238, (Ekim 2003), pp. 4-12.

<sup>4</sup> Hakkı Onur, “1908 İşçi Hareketleri ve Jöntürkler,” *Yurt ve Dünya*, No. 2, (Mart 1977); Yavuz Selim Karakışla, “1908 Grevleri,” *Toplum ve Bilim*, No. 78, (Güz 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, *1908 Osmanlı Boykotu* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiyede Siyasi Partiler*, Vol. III (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları 2000), p. 45.

for the first time, ‘national economics’ were put in to practice for the first time during the same years.”<sup>7</sup>

This was a historical period for women who for the first time not only became visible in the public sphere, but also intervened in it. They organized their own associations, made speeches in meetings and in the streets in the first days of the revolution. They published newspapers and journals for women; they appeared in entertainment places, including theaters as audience members. Patriotic and philanthropic campaigns were organized for buying cruisers for the navy or for victims of a fire. Women were mobilized and actively participated in these organizations.<sup>8</sup>

Political ideas that appeared in that time occupied the Turkish political world for a long time. Westernism, Islamism, nationalism, populism, corporatism, socialism and solidarism were introduced and they not only remained as ideas but were used to find ground for organizing on a wider scale.

The press appeared as a powerful actor forming public opinion. Newspapers, journals, and pamphlets were the most influential and useful vehicles of the time for disseminating ideas. Political posters also appeared on the walls of the cities. Theater buildings were the places where political conferences and lectures and meetings were held.

In short, as Toprak explains “a constitutional regime, a parliamentary system, basic rights and freedoms, political parties, pressure and interest groups, public opinion, a free press: all these took shape during the Second Constitutional period”<sup>9</sup> and “henceforth politics would be an integral part of society.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Zafer Toprak, “Hürriyet-Müsavat-Uhuvvet ‘Her Tarafta Bir Politika Tufanı Var’,” in *Manastır'da İlan-ı Hürriyet 1908-1909 Fotoğrafçı Manakis Biraderler* ed. Roni Margulies (İstanbul: YKY, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Serpil Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Toprak, p. 18.



## Theater after 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1908: Theater Epidemic

The promulgation of the constitution was followed by an explosion in theater activities; particularly the first performance of the *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* at Tepebaşı Theater had great success. The old theater groups that continued their theater activities from the pre-constitutional period, such as the Ahmet Fehim Company and the Mınakyan Company, were suffocated under the pressure of new amateur groups. First, they were tuned in with the political fashion of the time. For instance, the Ahmet Fehim Company was the first that dared to put *Besa* on stage. They and the others also performed plays such as *Vatan*, *Jön Türk*, *Akif Bey*, *Zavallı Çocuk*, *Gave* and chose to go outside of İstanbul to find a place that was free from the invasion of amateurs, but they did not find one.<sup>11</sup> However, pressure of the amateurs on professionals increased due to the fact that the social and political atmosphere of the time gave birth to its own plays as well as its own theater groups like one of the most famous ones, the Heveskeran Company (Amateur Company).

The plays that were performed in these initial days can be divided into two. In the first group were plays written before 23 July 1908. Most significantly, those were plays whose writers were the initiators of the political organization and ideas that strongly articulated and dominated in public sphere in that time. *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* fit the basic political perceptions well; the performance of Namık Kemal's *Vatan Yahut Silistre* gained a kind of ritualistic meaning that praised the constitution and the principal notion of that time's politics, such as Ottomanism, patriotism and homeland.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ahmet Fehim Bey'in Hatıraları*, ed., Hafi Kadri Alpman (İstanbul: Kervan Matbaacılık, 1977), p. 194.

These names and plays became legendary and only attending to the performance of these plays was enough for one to exhibit oneself. It was a way to be visible and to take political sides in the public sphere.

The second group of plays was written immediately after the promulgation. As soon as they were written amateur and professional theater groups performed them. In the absence of enough political-dramatic was suitable for spirit of the time, writing plays became a patriotic duty, as did performing them. These plays had similar plots: they condemned the evils of the ancient regime; praised the Young Turks who suffered under this pressure or struggled against it; and portrayed exiles, spies, the dramatic deaths of heroes; and at the end of the story, a happy ending and the promulgation of the constitution. Although conventional theater historians dismiss these plays as having “low artistic quality,” their performance and plots provide a fertile ground for analyzing the atmosphere of the time since thousands of people attended their performances in that time.

The theater epidemic was not a phenomenon particular to Turkey’s second constitution. One of the most well known examples of this kind of “revolution and theater epidemic” was the experience of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. After the revolution public interest in the theater, immediately intensified and theatrical performances played unusually significant roles in the lives of the people.<sup>12</sup> Accessibility of the theater to everyone were one of the most important factors when history took its sharp and decisive turn. The literature on the concept of public sphere considers literacy as a formative element. However, theater plays a crucial role in the transformation of public sphere thanks to its ability to reach illiterate public. The light

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<sup>12</sup> Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater 1905-1932*, trans. Roxane Permar (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988).

that the theater radiated could reach everyone; the language of theater was comprehensive to the masses.

The theater helped millions of spectators trying to orient themselves in the complex political conflicts of the period.<sup>13</sup> Revolution brought different audience to theater halls. Attending theater had been a privilege of upper and middle strata of society but after the revolutions “simple people” who had never had a real opportunity to attend plays. Factory workers, soldiers, large numbers of former peasants wore soldiers’ uniforms filled auditoriums.

In the post revolutionary period, the theater movement came to be called the “theater epidemic” because “there was no village where some barns had not been converted into theater.”<sup>14</sup> The theater epidemic was a contagious illness that could not be stopped by lack of fuel oil or lack of Entente, or the lack of food. Nothing could stop it spread; drama circles were multiplying more rapidly than protozoa<sup>15</sup> and as Rudnitsky writes, “the stage often became a kind of platform for political agitation” and served as “a primary school and newspaper for the masses.”<sup>16</sup>

Another distinguishing feature of this theater epidemic was that amateur groups were able to give voice to the local and particular that professionals never did. On the other hand, it was not possible to control them totally, so they were also considered by the state as purveyors of low cultural values, dangerous political ideas and sexual titillation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theater* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), quoted from Serge Wolkonsky, *My Reminiscences*, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Rudnitsky, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 15.

The French Revolution was another historical turning point that experienced the “theater epidemic.” After the French Revolution (1789–1791), the increase in the number of theaters was astonishing, tripling in Paris. Furthermore, with the revolution, actors who had been social political outcasts in the ancient regime only few months earlier and officially their crafts had been regarded as profane were elected to powerful political and military positions. The relations between politics and theater did not end here, but went deeper. Deputies from the French National Assembly took acting lessons and claqueurs were planted in audience to applaud their employers on demand. Political representations of elite in general and representations on stage had conceptual affinity in this era.<sup>18</sup>

Revolutions, as the current reality in a society, are historical events that make people think harder about their role in shaping historical processes.<sup>19</sup> People tend to reevaluate and rewrite their personal history within the historical context. Theater is a very convenient place for that purpose. In theater it is possible to move between times places and different worlds for reevaluation. While a text includes abstractions, conception and fictive characters, the stage shows them in action. The theater provides a platform for converting abstract notions into the language of daily life, and creates role models that guide people in their daily action for the necessary attitudes for being the subject of these conceptions. Similar claims can be made about novels and other arts, but what makes theater convenient for that cause is that it is a collective action. It is something that is experienced collectively and simultaneously by a bulk of people.

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Selbin, “Revolution in the Real World: Bringing Agency Back In”, in ed. John Foran, *Theorizing Revolutions* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.125

Therefore, since theater does not exist at all without audience,<sup>20</sup> Mass collective action and mass politics must be taken into account in order to analyze the theater.

### Theater, the Public Sphere and Mass Politics

While politics was an activity that was done by elites, with modernity other strata of the population became first the subject and then the object of politics. Related to this, the concept of society declared its existence and, in the modern sense, concept of politics and society opened a way to a discussion of the concept of “mass society.”

Mass politics has two characteristics: first is the regulation and control of the population by rulers, which was the most integral part of mass politics.<sup>21</sup> Second is the organization of different sectors of society and representation of their sectoral features and interests. One of the concepts that is useful for analyzing these two characteristics is the concept of the *public sphere*. The emergence of public spaces, the creation of social organizations such as associations and trade unions, the establishment of different networks, the extension of national and international communication networks in every sense were related directly to the extension of the public sphere. In that sense the transformation of the public sphere was directly related to the transformation of the theater, which was a social phenomenon. The definition of the concept of “public sphere,” in that sense, is also crucial for both theater studies and theater historiography.

One of the leading scholars who use the concept of the public sphere is Jürgen Habermas, who considers theater one of the “institutions of the public sphere,” like

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<sup>20</sup> For a similar evaluation regarding the audiences, see Susan Bennett, *Theater Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> For a study that considers social control as a function of the modern state in the Ottoman context, see Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet : Siyaset, İktidar Ve Meşruiyet (1876-1914)* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2002).

coffee houses and halls.<sup>22</sup> According to Habermas, the public sphere is a realm that emerges in the course of modernization between the private realm of the family and the market, and state and public authority.<sup>23</sup>

According to Habermas, a rational discourse and participation emerges in this public sphere. The modern “bourgeois public sphere” is different from the previous publics such as “representative publicness” that more or less depends on visibility.<sup>24</sup> That is why the “bourgeois public sphere” for him is something different from a publicness, which depends on face-to-face relationships. As a result, organizations, societies, and networks communication technologies become significant in the transformation of the public sphere. Thus theater as a public space, a social organization and a means of representation and communication emerges as a fundamental institution of the public sphere.

However, Habermas has been severely criticized because of his definition of public sphere. It is argued that he has drawn an idealized picture of the bourgeois public sphere. For instance, he does not consider exclusionary practices and or recognize reciprocal relationship between the state and the public sphere. He thinks that the public sphere is immune from state intervention.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, he also does not take into account different and alternative public spheres. For instance, women’s movements and

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<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> For such critics, see Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); Geoff Eley, “Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century,” *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT, 1992).

working class movements have their own public spheres.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, they are different publicities and public spheres composed of different social actors and the state.<sup>27</sup>

According to Habermas, theater and the public sphere also have been related to each other from the beginning. Friedland writes that “Habermas traces the origins of public sphere laying out the argument that public opinion developed initially with respect to the arts, the theater and literature and only later came to assert itself in the political realm”<sup>28</sup> The bourgeois desire to see itself in works of art, in fiction and on stage brought domestic dramas and psychological novels in which family crisis and the innermost thoughts of the protagonist were depicted.

In the Ottoman Empire social and political life around theater had important impacts on the transformation of the public sphere because theater is not an isolated area, but is inherently linked with political, social and cultural realms.

Despite the emergence of state and politics in the modern sense during the nineteenth century, 1908 brought drastic changes to the forms of politics. Participation forms for the masses and society in theater activities changed and were enriched. The practices of mass politics were multiplying, and public opinion and public pressure emerges as powerful political parameters. In this respect, after 1908, the role that theater played in politics and social life became crucial. The expansion of the public sphere provided an opportunity for such an effect. In this period theater both contributed to the extension of the public sphere as a political vehicle and was influenced by its expansion. Theater activities in the extending public sphere did not

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<sup>26</sup> Mary P. Ryan, “Gender and Public Access: Women Politics in Nineteenth-Century America, Habermas and Public Sphere,” *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT, 1992) p. 284.

<sup>27</sup> Eley, pp. 300-320.

<sup>28</sup> Friedland, p. 53.

only represent social realities or reflect social conditions of the time, but also recreated social meanings and became one of the most vivid aspects of this era. Therefore, such topics as the ideals of new regime, the history of the Young Turks under the yoke of Abdülhamid II, the negative sides of the ancient regime were all represented on the stage of the revolution. Theaters were not only fundamental centers of the changing public sphere but also themselves became one of the symbols in it. As was stated by de Tocqueville, who converted “the heterogeneous group of men who gathered in Paris eighteenth century parterres into a symbol of some larger social or political idea: the crowd, the public, the nation,”<sup>29</sup> it is possible to define theater as a microcosm of the public sphere. Theaters not only conveyed messages to the people, not only represented ideals, did not only convene hundreds and thousands of people in the public squares and in theater halls, but it also mobilized masses and their sentiments. That is to say, theater both mobilized people in the real sense and their sentiments by galvanizing their feelings. The plays that came out just after 23 July 1908 brought people before their stage in theater halls by provoking the feelings of the Ottoman public for different philanthropic and patriotic aims.

### The Mobilization of the Public

The transformation and the expansion of the public sphere and the emergence of mass society and mass politics brought onto the agenda a new social and political phenomenon: mobilization. Two aspects of mobilization are significant for our purposes. First is the mobilization of the masses and their sentiments under the title of public opinion. This is also related to political legitimization. The second is the

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).



mobilization of society from below, as in the example of modern social movements, such as worker and women's movements.

According to Charles Tilly, "the word 'mobilization' conveniently identifies the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life."<sup>30</sup> The most important elements of the mobilization process are related to resources, social relationships, networks and the cultural framework. As Sidney Tarrow argues, the link between political circumstances and mobilization process is the framing process.<sup>31</sup> Framing is directly related to the cultural world, which is composed of such elements as symbols, languages, and rituals.

Theater as defined above, mobilized the Ottoman public and made people actively participate in public life. In this sense, theater played a major role in the framing process as a vehicle that triggered the mobilization process because theater is a public place where signs, symbols, messages, images, rituals and above all culture find its echoes.

### Theater As a Political Vehicle

The theater epidemic that accompanied radical social and political change is considered fertile ground for the dissemination of ideas and politics to the masses due to the effectiveness of theater for that cause. The pedagogic features of theater make it an art that was closely tied with politics of its time, especially if one takes into account the illiterate masses. However, the effectiveness of theater, its power over audience for convincing, manipulating and agitating them, naturally was not limited to the illiterate

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 118-134.

masses. Whether the audience knew the alphabet or not, theater was used not only for conveying ideas to people, but also convincing them.

The theater was also a vehicle for intervening in the public opinion, especially when the chaotic political atmosphere is considered. Being very aware of this fact, some of the critics of the Second Constitutional Period explain the popularity of plays with their close relation to politics. The titles of the plays give an idea of how these plays were intervening in the actual politics of the time: *Tensikatlar*<sup>32</sup> (Job cutbacks, firings of those who are considered supporter of ancient regime in the bureaucracy), and *Dönmez Yüz Yahut Hürriyet Ordusu* (the face never turns back or Freedom Army regarding the 31 March Affair). Political figures especially former spies and tyrant of the *İstibdat* became target of severe criticism of theater; *Fehim Paşa* (former spy); *Tut, Tut, Kaçıyor Millet Haini Arap İzzetin Komedisi* (the comedy of Arabian İzzet Pasha, Catch! Catch! He is running!) (a loyal pasha who escaped with the promulgation of the constitution). A play was written listing the names of former spies from the stage; *Hafiyelerin Listesi* (list of Spies), and more interestingly according to a newspaper advertisement that warned audience, it was plagiarized and performed in different areas of İstanbul. *Girit* (Crete) (gossips that starts around 1908 regarding the annexation of this island by Greece) was also a popular subject for the writers of this time.<sup>33</sup> Many writers who become dramatist after the 10<sup>th</sup> of July and had political affiliations with different political circles considered theater as a fertile ground for presenting their political ideas to the public. Apart from this, theater by intervening actuality shared the power of the press by creating public opinion thanks to its ability to play a mediating

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<sup>32</sup> “Tiyatro’da Bu Akşam Tensikatlar,” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 3 Kanunisani 1324, 16 Kanunisani 1909, 23 Zilhicce 1326, Cumartesi, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> For some of these plays see: Alemdar Yalçın, *II. Meşrutiyette Tiyatro Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Ankara: Akçağ Yayınları, 2002).

role. They were slower versions of the theater genre that was created for conveying actual politics to the masses “living newspapers.”<sup>34</sup> The living newspaper was an effective vehicle for filling the gap left by the lack of printed newspaper or access to newspaper or interpreting articles, news and comments into a more understandable language of actions and daily life. As living newspaper, these plays also were written immediately after an incident occurred and as soon as they were written they were performed for the public. This immediate process gave these plays the role of media, which was shared with the press of the time.

Another distinguishing feature of the “theater epidemic” was that it started spontaneously and continued like this for a while. On the one hand, while this spontaneity usually made the theater movement suspicious in the eyes of new rulers, so the new power holders considered them as the conveyer of dangerous political ideas and representatives of low culture.<sup>35</sup> They were unreliable allies. On the other hand, it provided them a wide political ground on which it was possible to shift one point to another and legitimate themselves in the eyes of wider population. The power of legitimization most of the theater also attracted the attention of new rulers due to fact that they most of the time lack it. Thus, the political powers, by supporting amateur theater activities, tried to legitimize their own power among the public and, on the other hand, by using this support they tried to control this spontaneous social actor whose next steps were unpredictable.

After the promulgation of the second constitution, the first performances of *Besa* and *Vatan* took place under the patronage of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Later, for instance, when *Vatan* was moved to public squares, the

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<sup>34</sup> This is also a form that was created, also like many others in the immediate post-revolutionary years of the Soviet Union.

<sup>35</sup> Mally, p. 15.

CUP, the bureaucracy and the Ottoman dynasty became great supporters of these performances. Going to theaters for these political actors was an act in which they confirmed their political stance before the Ottoman public, which also contributed to the legitimization of their power. The performances and going to theaters was no longer banned activities. On the contrary these activities were organized as part of celebrating the constitution and liberty or commemorating the heroes of freedom. The relationship of the CUP and theater was reciprocal on the issue of legitimization. On the other hand, the CUP usually, by depending on this reciprocal relationship was able to control these theater activities. When they spinned out of its control, the committee did not hesitate to use force against them and take them under control, as was in the case of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE THEATER WITHOUT AUDIENCE: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE LATE OTTOMAN THEATER

1908 is considered by most scholars to be a radical social, political and cultural turning point in the history of the Ottoman Empire. Historians of late Ottoman history usually agree on the significance of 1908 whether they accept the promulgation of the *hürriyet* (freedom) as a revolution or not. Thus, this radical change also had impact on the cultural life of the time.

There is not enough attention on the cultural dimensions of this event in the mainstream historiography. The theater of the Second Constitutional Period is also not a popular subject among the historians who are interested in this period. In the historiography there are two tendencies. On the one hand, plays are evaluated as literature. On the other hand, is group of theater historians who try to take into account different aspects of theater with all its components. The founding fathers of theater history in Turkey, Refik Ahmet Sevengil and Metin And form this second tendency. Therefore this chapter would mainly focus on them.

The first group of historiography consists of scholars such as Enver Töre, Niyazi Akı, and Alemdar Yalçın, who totally neglect other aspects and only concentrate on the text of plays and their writers. Yet, unfortunately, they also fail to use these sources effectively. Although the textual analysis of these plays could offer a fertile ground for understanding the social and political atmosphere of the time, it is not possible to find such an analysis in the works of these three writers. These historians categorize plays according to parameters such as themes, writing dates, writers or

literary schools. Thus, they are not able to set a link between the theater world of the time or the social and political atmosphere and changes. Furthermore, it is taken for granted that the literature of theater in the Second Constitutional Period was only Turkish. For instance, Enver Töre named his work “Theater of the Second Constitution (Writers and Plays)”<sup>36</sup> Yet, he never allows that there were plays in languages other than Turkish in the Ottoman Empire. He excludes all facts and events that are not functional for building a national theater history.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly Niyazi Akı tries to construct a national history of the theater in the Ottoman Empire. His concentration on Turkishness forces him to trace Turkish theater history to the steps of Central Asia.<sup>38</sup> Like others, his narrative is based on a linear time framework. This Turkish history was immune from the effects of surrounding societies and cultures such as the Byzantine Empire.

Alemdar Yalçın categorizes theater plays according to their themes. He summarizes them without attempting any textual analysis. According to Yalçın, writers, actors and audiences are integral parts of theater. However, he argues that the concept of theater was alien to actors, audiences and society in general because neither actors nor audiences were ready for this art.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, not only the audiences and actors but also the writers were unable to understand techniques of stage. So plays that were written were inadequate. Theater for him is a Western product and its progress went hand in hand with the modernization of society.

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<sup>36</sup> “II. Meşrutiyet Tiyatrosu Yazarlar-Piyeler”

<sup>37</sup> Enver Töre, *II. Meşrutiyet Tiyatrosu (Yazarlar-Piyeler)* (İstanbul: DUYAP, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Niyazi Akı, *Türk Tiyatro Edebiyatı Tarihi* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> Alemdar Yalçın, *Meşrutiyette Tiyatro Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Ankara: Akçağ Basın Yayın, 2002).

Historians, by placing theater under the title of literature, under-emphasize its performative facets. Although they consider plays as works of literature, still it is not possible to find a written textual analysis, which connects the social and historical conditions with these texts.

Refik Ahmet Sevengil and Metin And place themselves in the history of theater rather than the history of literature. They attempt to analyze theater with its all components. They do not restrict themselves to the written texts. And and Sevengil, who are the founding fathers of the historiography of Ottoman theater, are interested in the Second Constitutional Period from the viewpoint of theater. They narrate the extraordinary social atmosphere of the period by emphasizing the joy of the people who enjoyed political freedom after a long period of political oppression. Like many other activities, staging or seeing a play that had been banned by *İstibdat* (The reign of Abdülhamit II), became a symbol of freedom after the promulgation of the constitution. The theater activities held in the heydays of the promulgation of the Second Constitutional Period were unavoidably political. Not only plays, actors and theater groups but also audiences actively participated in and even intervened in the political events of the time.

Both Sevengil and And emphasize the special features of theater activities that were held in the first days of the Second Constitutional Period. These first days differed from the other phases of the “theater of the constitution” that both And and Sevengil periodize as the 15 years between 1908-1923 by referring to political history. For instance, And begins his work by drawing a parallel story with theater activities during the French Revolution and with the activities held just after the promulgation of the constitution. It is interesting to see that the French Revolution, which may be the best model for conceptualizing revolution for many historians, is also the example

chosen by And in order to emphasize the reciprocal determination between social and political changes and theater. “Between the fall of the Bastille and rise of Napoleon” said And, “theater was affected by the social turmoil in a wide range and theater activities urgently keep in step with social chaos; thousands of plays were written, hundreds of theaters were opened.”<sup>40</sup> He continues by highlighting the mutual relationship between the revolution and the theater; he states that the chaotic political atmosphere not only changed the lives of actors and actresses but also formed a fundamentally oriented theater life of the time. Daily political changes had their impacts on the protagonists in the plays, their action and the life of actors and actresses. Actual political events found their echoes on stage immediately.

He also argues that the relationship between politics and theater was unilateral and reciprocal. Theater itself also had an influence on the revolution.<sup>41</sup> When he looks at history of “Western influenced Turkish Theater from 1839 Tanzimat Period onwards” by searching for an event that is similar to the French revolution, And singles out the “Theater of the Constitution.” According to him, the same reciprocal relationship between theater and politics can be observed in the Second Constitutional Period. He draws a parallel between the two periods in two folds. First, in both periods there appeared an abundance of plays, players, theater groups and audiences; and second, all these elements had strong relationships with politics and reflected the political atmosphere of the time.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Tiyatro faaliyetleri hızlı bir biçimde toplumun karmaşıklığına ayak uydurmuştu; binlerce oyun yazılıyor, yüzlerce tiyatro açılıyordu.” Metin And, *Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1908-1923)* (Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



And depicts the promulgation of the constitution as an event that “created great expectations”, and in which “freedom and constitution was supposed to be a key that opened every gates and it was hoped that everything which they craved would be immediately realized and all these would bring peace, welfare, hope, and security.”<sup>43</sup> In these extraordinary, optimistic and turmoiling days “theater became the spokesman of this joy and happiness, and was used as a mean to trigger feelings. On the other hand, again, theater was used as a strong voice that was raised and cried out against social grudges and anger against the ancient regime’s evilness”<sup>44</sup> says And. According to him, “in these first years a number of plays were written regarding the same issue (the evilness of the ancient regime and the gifts of the new one), the numbers of theater groups increased and theater activities were intensified.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, at this point Metin And draws a picture of a society in which “the number of associations, political parties, journals and newspapers increased and everybody tried to explain their ideas regarding this issue (politics).”

The emergence of mass politics finds its echoes in theater as well. In this regard, And argues that theater became one of the places in which the polical ideas of the time were expressed. Furthermore, regardless of their talent many playwrights emerged, many people tried to become actors and stepped on to the stage.<sup>46</sup> An increasing interest in theater as a weapon of politics also attracted the political actors of the time and again “in the initial days” says Metin And, “prominent figures of the

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<sup>43</sup> “Meşrutiyetin İlanı büyük umutlar yaratmış, Hürriyet ve Meşrutiyet kavramlarının bütün kapıları açan tılsımlı bir anahtar olduğu sanılmış, özlenilen herşeyin hemen gerçekleşeceği, bunların huzur, refah, umut, güvenlik getireceği umulmuştu.” Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> “İşte ilk yıllarda bu konuda sayıca pek bol oyun yazılmış, tiyatro toplulukları artmış, tiyatro çalışmaları yoğunlaşmıştır.” Ibid., p. 11

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

governing party, the Committee of Union and Progress was also caught by this current and they also widely supported theater and considered theater as a platform on which political and legal opinions were conveyed.”<sup>47</sup> In the heyday of the revolution, or in And’s word the “initial days,” plays that were put on stage were either the banned plays of the *İstibdat* or newly written plays that were produced to condemn the *İstibdat* days and celebrated freedom and constitution. These plays can be distinguished by their characteristics from other plays that were written later on. Yet they attracted audiences not only as plays but also with their philanthropic aims and other political, social and economic motivations. And also states that “spending the proceeds from plays for national aims, buying new war-ships for the navy, giving money to the needy and the poor, supporting the army economically, organizing theater activities for “*menfaat-i milliye*” (national interests), giving patriotic speeches, singing songs devoted to freedom fit well with the characteristics of the people in those days.”<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, it should be noted that despite the existence of a strong correlation between these plays’ political and social aims and the interests of the audience, it was not the only reason that people crowded the theaters. These plays, written and performed in the very beginning of the “first days,” had specific and different features than those of the plays that were written and performed during the “later days.” And classifies these plays into two groups, “political and documentary plays,”<sup>49</sup> as “plays that were written during the

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<sup>47</sup> “İlk başlarda iktidar partisi, İttihat Terakki’nin ileri gelenleri de bu akıntıya kapılmışlar, tiyatroyu geniş ölçüde desteklemişler, onu siyasal ve hukuki düşüncelerinin bir kürsüsü olarak kabul etmişlerdir.” Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> “Bu temsillerin gelirlerinin ulusun yararına harcanacağı (yeni bir savaş gemisinin alınması, yoksullara verilmesi, ordu harcaması) gibisinden “*menfaat-i milliye*” için düzenlenmesi temsillerle birlikte ateşli söylevler verilmesi, hürriyet konulu şarkılar okunması halkın o günlerdeki mizacına uygun düşüyordu.” Ibid., p.15.

<sup>49</sup> “Siyasal ve Belgesel Oyunlar” Ibid., p. 181.

promulgation of freedom”<sup>50</sup> and “the plays that were written after the promulgation of freedom.”<sup>51</sup> In this periodization, although the time framework is not so clear, And probably takes the “during the promulgation of freedom” period as between “10 July” and the “31 March Affairs.”

Regardless of how it is conceptualized, historians concur in treating the promulgation of the second constitution as a era of change. However, And distinguishes the plays during and after the promulgation only with regard to chronology. He fails to categorize them analytically, and states that he is “avoiding a selection and evaluation of the data,” and “bringing all the data to the reader’s attention”<sup>52</sup> The main body of this repertoire was plays that were written and immediately put on stage.

And argues that with the promulgation of the second constitution writers of various educational backgrounds joined the ranks of highly educated playwrights. However, regardless of the level and quality of personal education all of the playwrights of the period chose the same subjects and themes.<sup>53</sup> Although And points out the common feature of these plays, he fails to understand the essential characteristics of the theater of the time. First, he dismisses the plays which are politically motivated as “non-artistic.” Thus, he only marginally includes them in his analysis. Second, by basing his periodization solely on chronology he excludes the plays written prior to 1908 from the analysis of the theater of the second constitution. Therefore, his analysis neglects the importance of these earlier plays for setting the tone of the theater of the Second Constitutional Period. In this context, he only considers

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<sup>50</sup> “Hürriyetin İlanında yazılan oyunlar” Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>51</sup> “Hürriyetin ilanından sonraki oyunlar” Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>52</sup> “...eldeki veri ve ürünlerde bir seçim, ayıklama, ve değerlendirmeye girmeden kaçınarak okuyucunun önüne tümüyle sermektir.” Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

these plays as “Effects of the Nineteenth Century Turkish Theater.”<sup>54</sup> In what follows I would argue that these plays were constitutive and formative for the theater of the time. Moreover, the performances of these plays were only allowed after 1908.<sup>55</sup> Since theatrical performance and audience are essential parts of theater, I consider these plays with regard to their performative as well as their thematic feature as constitutive representatives of the theater of the Second Constitutional Period.

What characterized these plays and made them so attractive to the audiences? According to Refik Ahmet Sevengil, these plays were Şemsettin Sami’s *Besa-yahut-Ahde Vefa* (Pledge of Honor), Namık Kemal’s *Vatan-Yahut-Silistre* (Homeland or Silistra), *Gülnehal*, *Zavallı Çocuk* (Poor Child), and *Akif Bey*.<sup>56</sup> The staging of these plays helped to increase the popularity of theater.<sup>57</sup> Although both And and Sevengil depict the “initial days” as revolutionary, they avoid conceptualizing these initial days as a different period from other phases of the theater of the Second Constitutional Period. A cursory look at their foundational works reveals that they sense that the theater plays, theater groups, dramatists, and theater activities of these initial days mark a distinct revolutionary phase. Despite their sense of this distinction, the two leading figures of the historiography of Ottoman theater avoid conceptualizing the period as a distinct phase. This lack of conceptualization can be traced back to their methodological and ideological approaches and backgrounds.

General approaches in the Turkish-Ottoman historiography regarding the Second Constitutional Period underemphasizes the radical social transformations of the

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<sup>54</sup> “XIX. Yüzyıl Türk Tiyatrosunun Etkisi” *Ibid.*, p. 115

<sup>55</sup> Refik Ahmet Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, Vol. V (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1959), p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> Muhsin Ertuğrul, *Benden Sonrası Tufan Olmasın!* (İstanbul: Dr. Nejat Eczacıbaşı Vakfı Yayınları, 1989), p. 30.

<sup>57</sup> Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, p. 12.

society as mentioned before in the historiography section. This is a trap into which these two historians were not able to avoid falling. On the other hand, And categorizes plays of the time by using criteria borrowed from the dramatic literature discipline which fails to reveal the impacts of pre-1908 plays on the plays of the Second Constitutional Period. However, due to their historical significance And cannot totally neglect these plays, which he studies under the title “The Effects of the Nineteenth Century Turkish Theater.”<sup>58</sup> He gives a list of plays, categorizes them according to theater genres and chooses the approaches of dramatic literature. Furthermore, although And states several times in his work that there is a determining relationship between theater activities and social and political circumstances, it is not possible to find in his works why, where and how these connections work. On the one hand, it should be noted that And is the first scholar who tries to study the period systematically and categorize and periodize it. However, his categorization does not depend on his investigations or data that he gathered. He imports them from the study of Allardyce Nicolls, as he mentions in his introduction.

Sevengil is more successful in reconstructing the atmosphere of the time more vividly due to his use of the memoirs of the actors, actresses, directors of the time with whom he also had personal relationships and interviewed. Since his childhood overlapped with the period he can also add his personal impressions concerning the theater of the Second Constitutional Period. In this regard, Sevengil contextualizes the theater of the time much better than And.

The common characteristics of both And and Sevengil reveal a potential for a critical historiography. First, both authors are motivated by nationalism, which searches for the roots of national Turkish theater. Generally, national theater histories,

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<sup>58</sup> “XIX. Yüzyıl Türk Tiyatrosunun Etkisi” And, *Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu* p. 115

as do these two historians, tend to focus on professional groups rather than amateurs. This is strongly related to their progressive historical understanding. By searching for the roots of national theater they start from the end, and the theater groups that became important in the Republican era have more significance than the disappeared amateurs.<sup>59</sup> This attempt results in minimizing theater events that are important indicators of social and political history. To show the continuity in national themes and discourse Sevengil and And emphasize links between different generations of national artists.

Second, their analysis is characterized by the lack of audience. Their elitism dismisses the popular places that were abundant at that time. Finally, their analysis takes Western theater as a model they evaluate the plays according to the criteria, which they consider Western theater. Unsurprisingly, neither the text nor the performances nor the audiences can live up to their standards. Thus, they are unable to analyze the intertextuality between genre such as *Tuluat*, *Meddah*, *Ortaoyunu* and the theater of 1908. For example, they argue that *Tuluat* cannot be a source of Turkish national theater.

The nationalist, elitist and Orientalist character of the prevailing historiography of the theater in the late Ottoman Empire lacks the study of the audience. Consequently, it misses the crucial link between theater and politics in the era of mass mobilization. Conceptualizing theater as an essential component of the emergence of the public sphere in the Ottoman Empire also opens up the opportunity to appreciate its mobilizational power.

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<sup>59</sup> This tendency is not unique to the historiography of Turkish theater. Other national theater historiographies have similar pitfalls. For such different examples, see S. E. Wilmer, "On Writing National Theater Histories," *Writing and Rewriting National Theater Histories*, ed. S.E. Wilmer (Iowa: University Iowa Press, 2004), p. 24.

## CHAPTER IV

### SETTING THE STAGE

Emphasizing the intensity of theater activities during the Second Constitutional Period does not necessarily mean that there were no theater activities before. Theater activities that were held during the Tanzimat and İstibdat periods especially during the last days of the İstibdat, provide fertile ground for analyzing and understanding the tremendous growth of theater activities after the promulgation of second constitution. By following the periodization of political history, theater historians make a chronological periodization as of first, the theater of Tanzimat and İstibdat, second, the theater of Second Constitution, and last the theater of the Republic.<sup>60</sup>

Before the decisive turn of the promulgation of the second constitution, during the Tanzimat period there was a lively theater life in İstanbul and in other cities of the empire.<sup>61</sup> Apart from French, Italian, and Greek troupes that travelled among the cities, there were also local groups. Agop Vartovyan's (Güllü Agop) Ottoman Theater, performed in Gedikpaşa, where a theater had been built in 1860 for French circus master Louis Souillier whose company visited İstanbul regularly. In 1870 Güllü Agop

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<sup>60</sup> Metin And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu(1839-1908)* (Ankara: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1972); *Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1908-1923)* (Ankara: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1971); *50 YılınTürk Tiyatrosu* (İstanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1973); Refik Ahmet Sevengil, *Meşrutiyet Tiyatrosu*, (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1968); Sevda Şener, *Cumhuriyetin 75'inci Yılında Türk Tiyatrosu*; Alemdar Yalçın, *Meşrutiyette Tiyatro Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Ankara: Akçağ Basın Yayın, 2002); Gıyasettin Aytas, *Tanzimatta Tiyatro Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Ankara: Akçağ Basın Yayın, 2002).

<sup>61</sup> And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu(1839-1908)*.

obtained a ten-year concession, which gave him the sole right to produce dramas, tragedies, comedies, and farces in Turkish whether in the Ottoman Theater or elsewhere. However rivals who claimed that this monopoly was not valid for musicals or plays that had no scripts such as Tuluat, broke his monopoly.<sup>62</sup> The leading figures of theater life in this period did not come from the Muslim section of society. The actors and actresses were rather Christian, dominantly Armenians, such as Dikran Çuhaciyani, Bedros Magakyan, Tomas Fastilyeciyani, and Siranuş, some Muslims such as Tuluat or ortaoyunu players, such as Kavuklu Hamdi, Küçük İsmail, Abdürrezzak. Ahmet Fehim and Mardiros Mınakyan were also the part of the Ottoman Theater (its full name was Ottoman Dramatic Theater<sup>63</sup>). Later we would see these two prominent figures as professionals that were suffocated by the growth of amateur groups in the Second Constitutional Period.

Gedikpaşa Theater was the place where distinguished members of literary and theater circles of the time intermingled. Namık Kemal and Şemsettin Sami met in this place with the Armenian actors who made up the Ottoman Theater Company that was directed by Güllü Agop. It was considered as “the place where the first example of the western type Turkish theater was born.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, this theater was the place where literary works (*telif eser*) of the Commission of Literature<sup>65</sup> was put on stage and met with audiences. One of the most significant examples of this was *Vatan yahud Silistre*(Homeland or Silistra).

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<sup>62</sup> Metin And, *Osmanlı Tiyatrosu Kuruluşu-Gelişimi-Katkısı* (Ankara: Dost Kitabevi, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Osmanlı Dram Tiyatrosu

<sup>64</sup> Hilmi Kurtuluş, *Türk Tiyatrosu* (Ankara: Toker Yayınları, 1974), p. 62.

<sup>65</sup> The commission that was built for writing especially theater plays for this company and that was made up prominent literary figures of the time such as Namık Kemal and Şemsettin Sami



*Vatan yahud Silistre* was performed on 1 April 1873 at Gedikpaşa Theater by Güllü Agop's Ottoman Theater.<sup>66</sup> During the performance, the patriotic tirades were interrupted by applause. When the curtain fell, there were calls for the author to appear. The event ended with a march to the office of the newspaper *İbret* where Namık Kemal was the editor, shouting "Long Live Kemal!" "Long Live the Father Land!" "This is our wish! God grant our wish!"<sup>67</sup> As a result of this demonstration, *İbret* was suspended, and Namık Kemal was exiled to Cyprus.

Apart from Namık Kemal, other writers who were connected with the Ottoman Theater were exiled: Ebüzziya Tevfik and Ahmed Midhat to Rhodes, Nuri and Hakkı to Acre. Furthermore, the director of the Ottoman Theater Güllü Agop and the managing editor of *İbret*, Sarafıyan, were arrested and held for a short while. After the *Vatan* incident, all theater performances were suspended for a while. The Ottoman Theater under the direction of Mınakyan, went to Salonica but their performances were banned by the governor and they were sent back to İstanbul. Thus it is seen that apart from political exiles one of the most important consequences of the *Vatan* incident was the increase of the state's pressure on theater activities.<sup>68</sup>

After the performance of the *Vatan*, the second event that deeply influenced the theater life in İstanbul was the performance of Ahmet Midhad's play *The Circassians* (*Çerkes Özdenleri*) in 1884 at Gedikpaşa Theater. Two viziers spied the play as antithetic to *Şeriat* to the palace, four hundred municipal workers surrounded the theater and it was dismantled in one night.<sup>69</sup> The legends that surround the

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<sup>66</sup> And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu(1839-1908)*.

<sup>67</sup> "Muradımız budur! Allah muradımızı versin!"

<sup>68</sup> Mustafa Nihat Özön, "Bazı Küçük Notlar," in Namık Kemal, *Vatan Yahut Silistre* (İstanbul: Remzi, 1954), pp. 81-85.

<sup>69</sup> *Ahmet Fehim Bey'in Hatıraları*, ed. Hafı Kadri Alpman (İstanbul: Kervan Matbaacılık, 1977), p. 193.

Gedikpaşa Theater and the theater activities that were held in this place were highly political. For instance, one of the rumors was that “in those years” says İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci in his memoirs, “The Young Turks had emerged in Europe. Gedikpaşa Theater was dismantled in one night due to the excuse that Sultan Abdülhamid believed that these Young Turks had been inspired by Gedikpaşa Theater.”<sup>70</sup> After this second event, not only plays that contained some political indication but even plays that contained such words as “Anatolia,” “Yıldız,” “Cyprus,” “Crete,” “Macedonia,” “Bosnia-Herzegovina,” “Murat,” “Dethronement,” “Socialism,” “Strike,” “Anarchy,” “Freedom,” “Equality,” “Constitution,” “Explosion,” and “Nose”<sup>71</sup> “Efendi,” “Woman,” “Mecnun (insane)”<sup>72</sup> were censored or excised. Due to the attentive work of the censors on the plays, audiences had to attend plays that had no meaning at all. But on the other hand, “because the Palace and its supporters showed their admiration and encouraged Tuluat, the filth and slang words were met with laughter,” said Sekizinci<sup>73</sup> “national plays were not able to be performed.... Namık Kemal’s *Vatan* play was confiscated from book stores.”<sup>74</sup> But where did the seeds go that Gedikpaşa Theater and its commission of theater disseminated? Were the censors, totally able to determine the love of the theater that was inspired by Gedikpaşa Theater to a new generation? Probably no.

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<sup>70</sup> “O tarihlerde Avrupada Jön Türkler peyda olmuştu. Sultan Hamid’in itikadınca bu Jön Türkler Gedikpaşa tiyatrosundan ilham aldıkları bahane edilerek sadir olan iradei seniye ile bir gece içinde Gedikpaşa Tiyatrosu yıkıldı.” *Ibnirrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci 1874-1935* (Ankara: Ulus Basımevi;1936), p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu(1839-1908)*, p. 246.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibnirrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci 1874-1935*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> “...saray tarafı ve taraftarları tuluatçılara rağbet gösterip cesaretlerini arttırdıkları için orada söylenen çirkin kelimelerküfür kahkaha ile karşılanırdı.” *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> “Milli piyesler asla temsil edilmezdi. Namık Kemal’in vatan piyesi kitabı dükkanlarından toplanmıştı.” *Ibid.*, p. 8.

When I was at the *Mekteb-i Sultaniye*, in the summer break, I persuaded some friends from my neighborhood who also study in *Tıbbiye*(School of Medicine) and *Harbiye*(School of War) to collect some money among us, and built a stage in one of our gardens. Ramadan nights, we presented plays that were written in that time's method to the neighborhood's women. On top of our repertoire list there was Namık Kemal's drama, *Zavallı Çocuk* (Poor Child). I wrote a comedy named *Çoban Kızı* (Daughter of Shepherd). Of course, it was very primitive...while we were putting on these plays in our neighborhood with our friends, my uncle Kazasker Efendi asked the Üsküdar Mutasarrıfı Ali Paşa, who visited him one evening to ban our theater activities by saying that he was afraid we would turn into actors. Ali Pasha's answer echoes still in my ears even today. He said that, "let them have some fun, instead going to coffeehouses and playing cards and backgammon, they spend their time performing plays that revive their minds. If only every youngster of our time would do like this." It was the time when Sultan Abdülhamid started to oppress the public. Meetings were banned. Schools were under strict control, plays were scratched out by severe censor, and they remained without meaning.<sup>75</sup>

İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci was not the only young person who was passionate for theater. "The son of (Rıdvan Paşa), the mayor of İstanbul, Reşad Rıdvan, ...was admiring for theater"<sup>76</sup> Despite his father's prohibition and advice, he never left the backstage of the theater. He built relationships with French and Italian operas and comedy companies and artists. However, young Reşad Rıdvan's admiration of the theater resulted in a total ban of theater in İstanbul for one year with the order of the mayor. Ahmed Fehim states in his memoirs

The father of Reşad Rıdvan did his best to keep his son away from participating in theater activities. If it was not enough that he had brought troubles to poor Tolayan and Tospatyan, he also banned all theater activities within the border of İstanbul Municipality just before the freedom. He made the people who needed for a

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<sup>75</sup> " Ben mektebi sultaniyede iken yaz tatilinde mahalle arkadaşlarımdan Tıbbiye ve Harbiye talebesinden bir kaçını kandırdım, aramızda para topladık, birimizin bahçesinde bir sahne inşa ettik. Ramazan geceleri komşu hanımlarımıza o zamanın usulünde yazılmış eserleri temsil ederdik. En başta Namık Kemal'in (Zavallı Çocuk) namındaki eseri vardı. Ben (Çoban Kızı) namında bir komedi yazmıştım. Tabii iptidai şekilde bir eser...biz mahallemizde arkadaşlarımızla tiyatro oynamakta devam ederken benim sofu eniştem kazasker efendi bir akşam kendisini ziyarete gelen Üsküdar mutasarrıfı Ali Paşa merhumabizi oyuncu olacaklar diye şikayet ederek menetmesini söyledi. Ali paşa merhumun verdiği cevap hala kulaklarımda çınlar, demişti ki: (Varsınlar aralarında eylensinler, kahveler gidip iskanbil, tavla oynayacaklarına zihinlerine küşayış verecek oyunlarla vakit geçirsinler, keşke zamanımızın her kenci böyle yapsa)...O zaman Sultan Hamit ortalığı sıkıştırmaya başlamıştı. İçtimalar yasak edilmişti. Mektepler kontrol altında idi, tiyatro piyesleri şiddetli bir sansörün insafsız kalemleri ile çiziliyor, manasız kalıyordu." Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ahmet Fehim Bey'in Hatıraları*, p. 191.

morsel of bread and suffered for artistic anxiety and crises live for two years in a state of disarray and sorrow<sup>77</sup>

He said “How much I suffered in these two years only I and my god know. Luckily, the baker was a good guy; he regularly gave me bread without nipping. Other people of the theater spilled into Anatolia”<sup>78</sup> Muhsin Ertuğrul in his memoirs also mentions that he had become addicted to the Ottoman Drama Company. Thanks to his propagating activities of theater among his schoolmates, he at last achieved to form a small young theater group. They set up a kind of stage in one of their friends’ garden, and started to put on plays without any audiences.<sup>79</sup>

The passion for theater must was a common point that united the students of *Mekteb-i Sultani* (Imperial School). Another person who studied there was Burhaneddin Bey (Tepsi) who was suffered for his love of theater. He saw his first performances in Üsküdar, plays be Komik Hakkı and Kambur Mehmet. Later, he started to attend Abdi’s and Hasan’s theater in Kadıköy in Kuşdili. His first attendance of a “serious” drama was Minakyan’s *Balmumcu*, which made him fall in love with theater. After he saw the famous French actor of the time Mounet-Sully, he immediately decided to go Paris and study theater at a conservatory. However, the hurdles that prevented him from being an actor were not only the conditions of life but rather the social perceptions that considered theater as a low profile profession, maybe even not a profession. Tepsi wrote “at that time actors did not have any status in society. Not status, but even when their names were articulated, everybody looked with

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<sup>77</sup> “Babası Rıdvan Paşa oğlunu tiyatrodan alıkoymak için elinden geleni ardına koymamıştı. Zavallı Tolayan ile Toapatyan’ın başına ördüğü çorap yetişmemiş gibi, Hürriyete yakın zamanlarda bütün İstanbul belediye sınırları içindeki tiyatroları yasaklamıştı. Bir ekemek lokmasına muhtaç insanları, sanat bunalımları geçirenleri iki sene büyük bir perişanlık ve acı içinde yaşatmıştı.” Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>78</sup> “Bu iki sene içinde ne çektiğimi bir ben bilirim bir de Allah’ım...Bereket ekmeğe iyi adamdı da, bana iki sene devamlı olarak ve en küçük bir istiskalde bulunmadan ekmeğe vermişti. Diğer tiyatrocular Anadolu’ya dökülmüşlerdi.” Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>79</sup> Perdeci (Muhsin Ertuğrul), "Hatıralar," *Perde ve Sahne* (July 1942).

hatred.”<sup>80</sup> His family also never accepted his desire to become an actor. They had another plan for him. They sent Burhannedin to Marsilla. When he turned back to İstanbul, he finished school at the Mekteb-i Sultani and started to work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a young officer like other members of his family and climbed to higher ranks quickly. However, his “theater illness” was never cured but only doubled. He recognized that not only did he need theater but he understood and knew the necessity of theater for the country.<sup>81</sup>

Osman Hamdi, Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem and Ahmet Mithat Efendi were the persons with whom he shared ideas regarding theater and from whom he received support. Especially Ahmet Mithat Efendi, who defined being an actor as “carrière” (career) helped him make his decision clear. The literalists with whom Tepsi had relationships were not limited to; Ahmet Mithat and Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem. He also spent his time on summer evenings at Tepebaşı Garden where distinguished men of letters were met.<sup>82</sup> Regarding his passion for theater, he also received support from Halit Ziya, Ahmet Hikmet, Hüseyin Cahit, and Mehmet Rauf. Another person who shared the same desires with Tepsi was a friend from Mekteb-i Sultani, İzzet Melih (Devrim), who worked for the Tobacco Regie. They started to produce some pieces of *Le Marquis de Priola*<sup>83</sup> in French. They copied from the famous Lebargy, who came on a tour to İstanbul. The owner of *İkdam*, Ahmet Cevdet, invited them to his house to perform their play. “We feel secure and we have nothing on the spies of Abdülhamid

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<sup>80</sup> “O zamanlar bizde aktörün hiçbir mevkii yoktu. Mevkii değil ismi bile ağza alınsa adeta herkes nefretle bakarlardı.”Burhannedin Tepsi, "Niçin Neden Nasıl Aktör Oldum?," *Perde ve Sahne* (August 1941).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> A play that was written 1902 by Henri Léon Emile Levadan.

there, we repeated our pieces and were successful,”<sup>84</sup> states, Tepsi but this was not enough for him.

Tepsi sold his building site in Tarsus and fled to Alexandria, where he said he felt free from “the oppression of *İstibdat*, the formality of the ministry, the traditional objections of my family” and where “he was independent and free like air.”<sup>85</sup> He went to Cairo and met his schoolmate, Prince Haydar Fazıl. Prince Haydar Fazıl introduced him to a French comedy company and he performed with them in Cairo. The entrance of this Young Turk to the stage won raves. Tepsi later wrote that “all newspapers in Egypt mentioned” him.

Tepsi also met with Turkish dignitaries who had escaped from the cruelty of Abdülhamid’s reign. They supported and protected him before he left Cairo for Paris. They met him at a dinner. “On that night” wrote Tepsi, that “they describe the duty that was given to me: the creation of Turkish Theater, the selection of plays that are suitable for the benefit of people in the homeland, in short, start a revolution. But how? It was not possible while Abdülhamid was in power.”<sup>86</sup> They convinced him about these plans. “They were saying that ‘you just study, do not intervene, and wait!’”<sup>87</sup> Tepsi accepted this duty not only for the love of theater but also love of homeland. “It was not only the love of theater, but also there was a duty of serving the homeland. He believed that this duty was given to him by Halit Ziyas, Ahmet Hikmets and Rezaizades. Love of theater swept Tepsi from İstanbul to Cairo and then to Paris.

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<sup>84</sup> “Orada Abdülhamid’in hafiyelerinden azade bulunduğumuzdan emin olarak bu parçaları tekrar ederdik ve muvaffak olurduk.” Burhaneddin Tepsi, “Niçin Neden Nasıl Aktör Oldum?,” *Perde ve Sahne* (August 1941).

<sup>85</sup> “Devri isdibdatın zulmünden, sadaretin resmîyetinden, ailemin ananevi itirazlarından kurtulmuş ve hava gibi hür ve serbest idim.” Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> “İşte o gece orada bana teveccüh eden vazifeyi anlattılar. Bir Türk tiyarusu ihdası, memleket halkının istifadesini mucip piyeslerin intihabı velhasıl bir inkılap yapmak. Fakat nasıl? Abdülhamid tahtta oldukça bu mümkün değildi.” Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> “Sen tahsil et, üst tarafına karışma ve bekle’ diyorlardı.” Ibid.

He did not consider this only an individualistic experience in his inner world but also as a collective struggle that was shared by literary and maybe political circles. Moreover, this was a patriotic duty that had to be achieved. Not only was his personal world supported by the circles in which he participated but these circles also made his journey possible from İstanbul to Tarsus, and then Cairo and Paris. Especially in Cairo he met with Turkish distinguished persons who had escaped from the oppression of Abdülhamid.

While Burhannedin Tepsi was studying at the conservatory in Paris, theater activities did not end in İstanbul. He left behind the oppression of Abdülhamid II, spies' networks and censorship. To avoid being spied upon, enthusiasts of theater chose safer places. Muhavvit, Şadi, Müfit Ratip, Refik Halit, Refi Cevat, Suat Tevfik, Ali Muhittin, and Raif formed a home theater. During the performance, Müfit Ratip would note down the plays that were acted by Mınakyan. When he arrived home, he edited and reorganized them and then others performed these plays.<sup>88</sup> But the home theater was not a place that could satisfy this generation's passion for theater. Raşit Rıza and his friends Faik Sabri insisted on their desire to become actors publicly. In the "1908 Faik Sabri published two journals named *Musavver Terakki* (Illustrated Progress) and *Çocuklara Mahsus Gazete*, (Newspaper for Children) and I was making translations," said Raşid Rıza in his memories and continues: "I met with Ahmet Fehim Efendi by courtesy of Faik Sabri. Faik Sabri had translated some plays for him. Fehim Efendi was dissociating himself from Mınakyan and formed a comedy company. However passing these plays by the censor was a big issue. I pursued the procedures of some plays in censorship process and helped him on that issue and gained consideration from him." Faik Sabri and Raşit Rıza sometimes went to drink beer at Tepebaşı. One

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<sup>88</sup> Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, p. 3.

day while they were drinking beer and chatting, Faik Sabri disturbs asked: “why don’t we become actor?”<sup>89</sup> They said “already have a friend like Ahmet Fehim who has a company in which some Turkish actors appear such as Fahri and Hakkı Necip.”<sup>90</sup> then “next day,” said Raşit Rıza, “we knocked on the door of Ahmet Fehim’s home in Doğancılar without feeling any need for preamble,

–‘Take us into your company’ we said. He answered saying,  
-“Take you into my company? Are you crazy? Raşit, your uncle works for Mabeyn; Faik Sabri you are a journalist. . .will you make my life miserable at this age?”  
Our first attempt failed. Faik Sabri escaped to Europe. My friendship with Ahmet Fehim Efendi continued. I attended his plays and went to his home at Doğancılar.<sup>91</sup>

In other places in İstanbul, a group of young people was also trying to organize theater activities by following traditional practices. Painter Muazzez organized an *Ortaoyunu* for his son’s circumcision ceremony in 1908. The participants of this *Ortaoyunu* group were İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci (Pişekar), who would become an actor and dramatist; Painter Muazzez (*kavuklu*); Rıza Tefvîk Bölükbaşı (Albanian and immigrant) who would later become a famous poet; Baha (Persian) who would later become the minister of Tabacco Regie; officers of the Ministry Foreign Affairs Fuat from Beylerbeyi (Kocakarı); Refik from Kadıköy (Anatolian); Ferid (Kocakarı) who would later become Minister of Finance, Nimet (Zenne), who would later become director of Translation Office in the Administration of Customs, Behzat Haki Butak was *Kavuklu arkası* (follower of kavuklu); and Selahattin from the school of finance

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<sup>89</sup> “-Biz niçin aktör olmuyoruz?” Ibid., p. 6

<sup>90</sup> “Hazır, Fehim Efendi gibi bir dostumuz, onun bir kumpanyası, bu kumpanyada da Fahri gibi Hakkı Necip gibi Türk elemanlar da vardı.” Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> “Ertesi gün Faik Sabri ile Fehim Efendinin Doğancılardaki evinin kapısını çaldık; hiçbir mukaddemeye lüzum görmeden: -Bizi yanına al dedik. -Sizi yanıma mı alayım? Siz çıldırdınız mı? Raşit senin enişten Mabyende; Faik Sabri, sen de gazetecisin. . .Beni bu yaşta süründürecek misiniz?” diye cevap verdi. İlk teşebbüs böylece suya düştü. Faik Sabri Avrupa’ya kaçtı. Fehim Efendi ile dostluğum devam ediyordu, temsillerine ve Doğancılar’daki evine gidiyordum.” Ibid., pp. 6-7.



was a *pusatçı*. The date that they performed was one day before the promulgation of the second constitution.

In 1908, there was an intense pressure from the state on theater activities. However, especially from the memories of some theater activists, it can be argued that there existed a hidden theater activity at homes and gardens, parallel with the underground political network of the Unionists.<sup>92</sup>

One day after the circumcision ceremony of Ressay Muazzes's son, the second constitution was promulgated and theater activities were exploded and several amateur theater troupes multiplied faster than protozoa, divided immediately and they disappeared almost as quickly. Persons from different social backgrounds and classes became playwrights and actors. Every corner of İstanbul transformed into a "lunatic's city," said Ahmed Fehim in his memoirs: "people with their beards and hair were setting up stages by using fuel oil chests and hanging a bedcloth to the back and performing plays that were ending necessarily with chants of 'Long live Homeland', 'long live freedom!'"<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, İstanbul was not the only city that was gripped by the theater epidemic. İzmir, Salonica, Samsun, Adana, Bursa,<sup>94</sup> Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria<sup>95</sup> were also places where theater activities were held.

What did the revolution and freedom bring to the young persons who suffered for love of theater and struggled for it? It was obvious: the power of leaving all

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<sup>92</sup> "İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizincinin Hayatı Ve Eserleri," *Türk Tiyatrosu Dergisi* (15 February 1946).

<sup>93</sup> "...İstanbul ...bir divaneler şehrine dönmüştü. Saçlı sakallı insanlar, bir arsaya dört gaz sandığı koyuyor, bir çarşaf geriyor, 'Yaşasın Vatan!', 'Yaşasın Hürriyet' cümleleriyle biten saçma sapan bir oyunu çıkıp oynuyorlardı." *Ahmet Fehim Bey'in Hatıraları*, p. 121.

<sup>94</sup> Efdal Sevinçli, *İzmir'de Tiyatro* (İzmir: Ege Yayıncılık, 1994).

<sup>95</sup> İlham Khuri-Makdisi, "Levantine Trajectories the Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and between Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria, 1860-1914," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2003).

the things, statuses they had in society, well-established and comfortable lives of their families, prestigious jobs, behind them and entering the stage without any hesitance and fear. They were burning with desire to be on the stage and now they could do that.

## CHAPTER V

### HOW DID IT START? *BESA YAHUD AHDE VEFA*

The chaotic atmosphere of the revolution, as reflected in the newspapers makes difficult to find out the very first play staged of the revolution. How did the first attempt come? By looking at the newspapers of the time it can be claimed that Şemsettin Sami's *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* was the first play that was considered patriotic, political and most suitable for the spirit of the time by audiences, critics and the first news reports just after the revolution. On 29 July 1908, *Sabah* proudly announced "theaters also benefited from the eternal gift of freedom that was used by the press which stems from freedom from now on. Instead of banal plays Celals, Akif Beys, Dihter-i Hindus, and Gave-like plays will be put on stages."<sup>96</sup>

However only putting these worthy plays on stage was not enough. The expectation was that the new generations would create a better literature; "who can claim that expecting we will see plays that are better than these on the stage is an irrational hope?"<sup>97</sup> The *Sabah* writer also stated that as a generation they were not able to read these plays in peace. "We were missing them, we were not able to read and see them by love, and now the thing that was expected from the Minakyan company was to put on patriotic plays and plays that were written in the language of freedom on stage

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<sup>96</sup> "Sayeyi hürriyette matbuatın nail olduđu feyzi bi nihaiyeden bittabi tiyatrolarda istifade etti. Artık tiyatro sahnelerinde adi piyesler yerine Celaller, Akif Beyler, Dihteri Hindular, Gaveler gibi asar-ı mahalde oynanacak." *Sabah*, 29 Temmuz 1908.

<sup>97</sup> "Daha sonra bunlara da kat kat faik bedayi, tefekkürü o sahneler üzerinde mütemessil görebileceğimizi kim istiğrab eder." *Ibid*.

for the sake of freedom.”<sup>98</sup> The plays that had been written before the promulgation of the constitution, and plays whose writers were not only political figures of their times, but also writers and political figures were the ones to whom the Young Turks and Unionist mostly referred. By considering all these factors, news of the staging of Şemsettin Sami’s play *Besa* became a crucial event that was worth to visit and informed to a newspaper. *Sabah*’s writer complained about their own failure, thinking that *Besa* should be staged in that time, “yesterday, by visiting our publishing house Mınakyan informed us that he will put *Balmumcu* this week and Şemsettin Sami’s *Besa* next week on the stage. *We were not able to think that Besa is the play that is most suitable to the time.*”<sup>99</sup>

Mınakyan, as an owner of one of the most well established theater companies, was planning put on stage Şemsettin Sami’s patriotic play of *Besa* in 7 August 1908. The newspaper *Millet* shared the enthusiasm of *Sabah* regarding *Besa* one week later, but this time the company that would put *Besa* on stage was Ahmet Fehim’s. It was announced, “*In our theater world, a new era, an era of progress is starting.* Next Friday, at Tepebaşı summer Theater, departed Şemsettin Sami Bey’s *Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa* will be presented by the company that is directed by Ottoman actors Ahmet Fehim Bey and under the presidency of the Ottoman Society (*Cemiyet-i Osmaniye*).”<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, *Millet* reported that rehearsals were directed by Reşad

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<sup>98</sup> “ Biz onlara müştak idik. Seve seve okumadık göremedik, şimdi Minak Efendi’nin kumpanyasından beklenen eser-i hamiyet senelerce devam eden teşehhi-i hürriyet namına sırasıyla böyle vatanperverane; serbest lisanla yazılmış piyesleri oynamaktır” *Ibid*.

<sup>99</sup> “Dün kendisinin suret-i mahsusada matbutamıza gelerek haber verdiği göre bu hafta Balmumcu’yu gelecek haftada Besa’yı mevkiyi temaşaya koyacak imiş. Biz bunu düşünememiş idik. “Besa” zaman-ı hazıra en muvafık bir eserdir.” *Ibid*. Italics are mine.

<sup>100</sup> “Tiyatroculuğumuz da yeni bir devri terakki başlıyor. Önümüzdeki Cuma günü Tepebaşında Yazlık Tiyatroda Osmanlı aktörlerinden Ahmet Fehim Bey’in idaresindeki kumpanya tarafından Cemiyeti Osmaniye’nin riyaseti altında olarak Ş. Sami Bey merhumun eser-i telifi olan Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa nam oyunun oynanacağını...” *Millet*, 6 August 1908. Italics are mine.

Rıdvan whose father, before 1908, as the Mayor of İstanbul had banned all theater activities with in the borders of İstanbul in an attempt to prevent his son becoming a man of the theater which was exactly what he was going to be in the days of freedom. “The supervisor of the rehearsals is Reşad Rıdvan, who proved himself and won recognition in the field of theater with his power and research.”<sup>101</sup> *Millet* wished success to the attempts to put such national plays on stage and an increase in their numbers.<sup>102</sup> *Tanin* also informs its readers about the “extraordinary performance of Ottoman Theater.”<sup>103</sup> According to this advertisement “*Besa yahut Ahde Vefa*-6 scenes will be held at Tepebaşı Summer theater in the municipality garden, on 25 July this Friday has been approved by the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress.”<sup>104</sup>

Despite the fact that name “Ottoman Theater” usually was used by Mınakyan, Ahmet Fehim also used it. “Ottoman Theater, by approval of the honorable Committee of Union and Progress, works of virtuous Şemsettin Sami *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* will perform at Beyoğlu Tepebaşı Municipality Garden, 25 July, tomorrow, Friday, at the Summer Theater at seven o’clock. One piece from opera of Giyom Tel (William Tell) will be sung by one of graduates from the Paris Conservatory, Bervaned Kilyan (Gilyan?) Efendi.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> “...provalarına tiyatro hayatı hakkındaki tetebbuat ve iktidarları ile temayüz eden reşad beyin nezaret eylediği...” Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> “Osmanlı Tiyatrosu Lübiyat-ı Fevkaladesi” *Tanin*, 7 August 1324.

<sup>104</sup> “Tepebaşı belediye bahçesinde kaim yazlık tiyatrodada temmuzum yirminci beşinci bu Cuma günü gündüz saat yedide Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa, 6 perde, Osmanlı Terakki ve İttihat Cemiyeti tarafından tensip edilmiştir.” Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> “Osmanlı Kumpanyası tarafından fazılı şehir merhum Şemseddin Sami Bey’in asarından Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa nam oyun mevkii icraya konulacaktır. Paris konservatuarı mezunlarından Bervaned Kilyan (gilyan?) Efendi tarafından meşhur Giyom Tell operasından bir parça teganni edilecektir.” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 6 August 1908.

Most of the advertisements and news indicates that Ahmet Fehim's company would put on *Besa* stage on 7 August 1908, the same date that Mınakyan also planning to do same thing. Whether Ahmet Fehim and Mınakyan Companies were working together or staged this play separately or not, it is obvious that the two well-established and widely known theater companies were tuned into the political atmosphere of the time by changing their repertoires. They put *Besa* on stage as a play most suitable to the spirit of the time. Another notice that was published in *Sabah* verifies that these two companies put *Besa* on stage at almost same time. The son of Şemsettin Sami, Ali Sami, stated on behalf of him that

I see the demands of some patchy theater companies to stage my father's play, *Besa* in the pages of newspapers. I do not give the consent to the staging of this play by *tuluat* players that have only serviced for weakening the general morality of the society until now. Only Fehim and Mınak Efendi who have tried to stage serious plays to the public attention can stage this play. Son of Şemsettin Sami, Ali Sami.<sup>106</sup>

From this notice it can be understood that apart from the owners of the two big and established theater companies of the time, there were *tuluat* players who also wanted to stage *Besa*. Probably most of the *tuluat* players never asked for permission from the writers or heirs of their writers to stage their plays. Therefore, it can be inferred that *tuluat* players performed *Besa* in some corners of İstanbul. Furthermore, this notice also indicates that Ali Sami set a distinction between "serious theater" that was used to disseminate ideas to society and "tuluat" that "weakened the morality of society" and preferred the first one as suitable for his father's play. This notice also gives some clues about the popularity of this "patriotic play."

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<sup>106</sup> "Derme çatma birkaç tiyatro kumpanyasının pederim merhum Şemsettin Sami Bey'in (*Besa*) nam eserini mevkii temaşaya vaz etmek istediklerini sahaifi matbuatta görmekteyim. Şimdiye kadar ahlak-ı umumiyeiyi ifsad etmekten başka bir şeye hizmet etmeyen bazı *tuluatçı*ların bu oyunu mevkii temaşaya vaz eylemelerine katiyen razı değilim. Bu oyunu ancak ciddi piyesleri enzar-ı millete vaz etmeye çalışan Fehim ve Mınak Efendiler oynayabilirler. Merhum Şemsettin Sami Beyzade Ali Sami." *Sabah*, 31 July 1908.

Apart from when and by whom the first play of revolution was staged, it is crucial to understand the function of theater in that period. This function is highlighted by the emphasis in advertisements, which underlines the support and approval of the “Committee of Progress and Union” of *Besa*. This emphasis may also imply that putting *Besa* on stage in the first days of the new era, or organizing theater activities that obviously had political implications were still considered dangerous. Ahmet Fehim’s memoirs *described* a similar picture:

My aim was to perform a play that had been banned during *İstibdat* and a play that was banned due to the Gedikpaşa Event. As yet no one had dared to do that. Still there was a fear inside of everyone. I broke free from all my fears and anxiety with a spurt. I announced that I would put *Besa* on stage. The night that play was held was crowded like the apocalypse.<sup>107</sup>

By using the approval of the CUP in their advertisements, theater companies assured their audiences that their performance was legitimate. On the other hand, the CUP appeared on the political stage as an institution that could define an action as legitimate before the public. Thus, the CUP also provided fertile ground for its own legitimization in the eyes of public opinion as a giver of consent for legitimization. Furthermore, the opening of the new era, “the era of freedom,” in the theater world was celebrated by the performance of *Besa* with the help of the CUP and at the same time this performance also marked the beginning of the “era of freedom” as a touchstone. Another reason for emphasizing the approval of the CUP of the performance of *Besa* could be that the audiences that probably attended to these performances were close to this organization.

On 8 August 1908 Ahmed Fehim’s Company at Tepebaşı Garden performed *Besa*. *Sabah* sent a special reporter to the performance and published his

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<sup>107</sup> “Amacım bütün İstibdad’da, Gedikpaşa olayı üzerine yasak edilmiş telif eserleri oynamaktı. Henüz hiç kimse buna cesaret edememişti. Hala herkesin içinde bir korku vardı. Ben bir hamle ile bütün endişe ve korkulardan kurtuldum. “Besa” yı ilan ettim. Oyun gecesi tiyatro mahşere döndü.” *Ahmet Fehim Bey’in Hatıraları*, p. 192.

impressions and feelings about it.<sup>108</sup> The reporter Doctor Arif İsmet Bey, defined two urgent duties for that time; “first, in order to reach the level of civilization and progress which was desired, we should get the approval of the civilized world that we are a nation that deserves the freedom.”<sup>109</sup> Second duty also had some parallels to the former one; “on the other hand, also the government should present itself to the civilized world with beneficial, serious precautions, operations and actions, and it will.”<sup>110</sup> “The burdens of achieving these two duties” continued Doctor Arif İsmet “were shouldered first by the press then the council (circles) of science (*meclis-i ilmiye*) and literature.”<sup>111</sup> According to him during the ancient regime, tyranny had destroyed and ruined everything. There was a press and a council of science and literature, but they had reasons for not being able to do their duties. Arif İsmet also shared the point of view that the tranny of ancient regime was a rupture from the progress and the promulgation of the Second Constitution paved the way to starting this duty again and for progress on the linear historical time. The coming of the freedom made Doctor Arif İsmet Bey believe that every lack of the time would be be fulfilled.

Thank God! We have started to work again and over again from the beginning...the government is setting once again the necessity of the shortage of which grandiosity and greatness, power and force will be understood later, and will be completed one by one. In this regard, first on the present day, at Tepebaşı Summer Theater, virtuous Şemsettin Sami Bey’s play *Besa* was performed.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Sabah*, 8 August 1908.

<sup>109</sup> “Evvla şurasını beyan edeyim ki biz istediğimiz mertebeyi temeddün ve terakkiye vasıl olmak için...hürriyete layık ve müstehak bir kavim olduğumuzu cihan-ı medeniyete tasdik ettirmeliyiz.” Ibid

<sup>110</sup> “Öte taraftan hükümette nafî, ciddi tedabir ve icraatıyla kendini düvel-i mütemeddine ve muazzamaya tanıttırmalıdır, tanıttiracaktır.” Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> “Bu iki cihetin vasıta-i icratiyesini ise şüphesiz evvala matbuat, sonra meclis-i ilmiye ve edebiyeye deruhte eder” Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “Şimdi hamdolsun işe yeniden yeni baştan başladık...hükümet yeniden inşa ediliyor. Azimet ve celaleti, kuvvet ve kudreti sonra görülecek nevakis...birer birer ikmal ve itmam olunacak. İşte bu meyanda dün tepebaşındaki yazlık tiyatrodaki devri hazırda ilk defa olmak üzere fazıl-ı şehir Şemsettin Sami Bey merhumun *Besa* tiyatrosu sahne-i tamaşaaya vaz olundu.” Ibid.



At this point once again, it can be observed that in the eyes of most of the audiences, the quality of the performance or the question of how these plays were held artistically fell into second plan and presentation was neither essential for the audiences nor even the actors. The important thing was that the performance was taking place at all. *Besa*, by emerging on stages, distinguished the new regime from the ancient one politically. “*Besa* was performed. Oh my God! I wonder if it was a dream? *Besa* was performed, wasn’t it? But it is not possible...no, it was not possible... Whether hell is dispersed, earth is cleaved, hurricane invades, stars and craters are mixed, sun deviated from its orbit, air is decomposed, it was not possible to perform *Besa*.”<sup>113</sup>

However, the coming of freedom changed everything. Arif İsmet Bey shared his pleasure to spiting ancient regime and its supporters and said, “Oh! How does it performed!”<sup>114</sup> His narrative is filled with the joy and flame of enthusiasm even prevent him from explain what he feels. Sometimes it seems he was trying to convince himself about the reality of the performance. He was still in between dream and reality. What makes *Besa*’s performance extraordinary is the feelings of the audiences. The dreams and the impossibility had become possible. It was not important if the theater play was artistically good or not. It was at last performed. Moreover, apart from political connotations it was not even crucial what it contained as a text, because, “Yes ...yes it was performed perfectly, but the role was played by Freedom here.”<sup>115</sup>

The leadingrole of the time both on the political and theater stages was taken by “freedom.” Furthermore, this was a time when all dreams were expected to

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<sup>113</sup> “Aman yarab! Acaba rüya mı idi? Besa tiyatrosu mevki-i temaşaya vaz olundu öyle mi? Lakin bu mümkün değil...hayır mümkün ve kabil değil idi...cehennemler saçılır, yerler açılır, tufanlar istila eder icran ve kevakip birbirine girer güneş mahrekinden oynar, havayı nesimi inhilal, alemi melkut ihtilal eder. Yine: Besa oynanmaz idi!” Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> “Nasıl oynandı ya!”Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> “Evet...evet oynandı hem de pek mükemmel, pek muhayyeç oynandı. Fakat burada rolü hürriyet oynadı” Ibid.

come true. Everything that had been awful was left behind with the ancient regime. At the same time, the performance of *Besa* was a victory: “Yes...for the first time in 33 years, we have seen a national theater, thankfully! Victory. Victory...how I can explain and describe my feelings with my over-excitement... is it possible? What should I write and say?”<sup>116</sup>

Joy left its place to pity when he started to talk about the persons who were not able to see the days of freedom in which *Besa* and *Besa*-like plays could be performed, despite their fight for freedom. “Ah ah! Pity for the loss of 33 years every minute of which is as precious as a century. Pity for the martyrs of freedom who were deprived of the honor of watching a theater performance like this. Pity for the person who is obliged to watch plays that harm moral values, make feelings dirty, deviate from their own theme totally in filthy places.”<sup>117</sup>

Arif İsmet’s pity for the martyrs of freedom was meaningful if we consider that performing patriotic plays had become an inseparable part of freedom in the eyes of the writer. Performing and attending plays that had been written by writers who were “hero of freedom” and had died before the days of freedom gain a symbolic meaning that tied “now” to “past” and by giving voice the ideas that belonged to the martyrs of freedom carried them and the past to the present. Arif İsmet was not alone in tiding up the past, present and future by using the facility of the theater. It is possible to observe that the writer described their time as a “flow” between past and future in which the ideas of the heroes of the freedom who were not able to see the days of

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<sup>116</sup> “Tam 33 seneden beri ilk defa olarak bir milli tiyatro gördük, çok şükür! Zafer...zafer...fakat heyecan ve tesirinden ihtisatımı nasıl tasvir ve beyan edebilirim? Bu nasıl mümkün, ne yazayım ne söyleyeyim?” Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> “Şu bir dakikası bir asır kadar kıymetli olmak lazım gelen 33 senelik zaiyata ah...böyle bir tiyatro seyr edebilmek şerefinden mahrum kalan şüheadayı hürriyete yazık. O murdar yerlerde ahlak-ı ifsad, hissiyat-ı telvis, esası mevzuundan büsbütün istihale eden o piyes oyunları seyre mecbur ve mahkum kalanlara yazık...” Ibid.

freedom were transmitted to future. “Flow” is a conjunction point of the past and future in no the real world but a world of feeling in the present time and theater was the most suitable vehicles that could change the sense of time by drawing its audiences ten years back and forward but just leaving them in their chairs in the present time.

Arif İsmet provided some chance for sensing *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa*, “pledge or fidelity to oath,” meant for people of the time;

Ey! dignified and honorable nation! Recognize the freedom properly! Bless freedom. One thing is expected from you and us. Fidelity to the oath, Because we did oath to behave according to honor, equality and justice! Fidelity to the oath! The events of the future will show us glorious scenes. National moral political theater will be written and organized. Our children will be nourished by the theater as a place of men of letters. Our talent and feelings will appear even in these places. The civilized world will see our maturity and they will admire us. Without hesitating, let us keep going. Fidelity to the oath! Vow to again. Pledge.<sup>118</sup>

*Besa yahut Ahde Vefa*, pledge or fidelity to the oath, appeared as a term that not only implied the name of the patriotic plays of Şemseddin Sami, but also a parallel with the promulgation of the constitution and its expected results honor, equality and justice. With the promulgation of the constitution, it was thought that all Ottomans had taken an oath to behave according to principles of honor, equality and justice. Fidelity to all these principles also meant fidelity to the new regime. Furthermore, theater also took its place in the plan for the future of the nation. In the end it proved to the civilized world the nation’s talent for theater, one of the most crucial aims.

Although, the theater hall where *Besa* was performed was over-full, it can be said that there was an observable and appreciative order among the audiences. Arif

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<sup>118</sup> Ey kavm-i necip ve namuskar!...hürriyeti layıkıyla tanıyınız!... hürriyeti takdis ediniz!. Sizden bizden bir şey beklenir; Ahde vefa! Çünkü namus, musavvat, adalet, dairesinde harekete ahd ve peyman ettik! Ahde vefa! Atinin vekayiyi bize ne şanlı ne şerefli sahneler gösterecek. Milli, ahlaki, siyasi tiyatrolar tahrir ve tertip olunacak. Çoluk çocuğumuz bu darül ediplerden perverde edilecek. Kabiliyetimiz hissiyatımız buralarda dahi tezahür edecek. Cihan-ı medeniyet ....ve kemalatımızı seyredecek hayran olacak. Fütur etmeyelim, yol alalım. Ahde vefa. Edeceğimize tekrar; Besa!” Ibid.

İsmet wrote that the audiences were tolerant of the whole organization. “No one searches for a sudden improvement that actually comes out gradually.”<sup>119</sup> It is obvious that Arif İsmet used the theater model of the West as an example and dreamed of the theater of the future will be similar to this model. In his dreams, kings and princes appear in the lodges of the theaters and “our Sara Bernards, Koklens” take their places on stage. The performance of *Besa* at Tepebaşı Summer Theater was proof of this talent that paved the way for an advanced theater of the future. The play, Ahmed Fehim and his companions, and the son of Şemsettin Sami received standing orations, without feeling any need for explanation. Arif İsmet wrote, “every word that we wanted to say was voiced by the play.”<sup>120</sup>

The performance of *Besa*, the first step of our future of literature was opened in the freedom and this step was celebrated by applause and strong cries of joy and screams”<sup>121</sup> wrote İzzet Melih in *Millet*. Furthermore, he was completely aware of the fact that theater could be a pedagogical vehicle that could be very effective, especially on the illiterate population by attracting them with entertainment. His opinion sharpened during the *Besa* performance: “yesterday when I was listening to the deceased Sami Bey’s strong and beautiful works, I was thinking that how much people can benefit from this kind of literary theater plays.”<sup>122</sup> He paralleled theater entertaining features and medicine, which helped gently for digesting foods. Because they could make people laugh or make them cry. Furthermore, he declared that comedy or drama

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<sup>119</sup> “Kaideyi tedrice tabii olan tekamülü hemen burada birden bire kimse aramadı.” Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> “Piyenin heyet-i umumiyesi zaten söylemek istediğimiz sözleri natkı hem de natık muvaccizidir.” Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> *Millet*, 8 August 1908.

<sup>122</sup> “Dün merhum Sami Bey’in metin ve güzel eserini dinlerken, böyle edebi temaşalardan halkın ne kadar istifade edebileceğini düşünüyordum” Ibid.

that was written by a strong writer could have a big effect on nations and general morality.

“The people who are illiterate come to theater for entertainment and while they are entertained they also benefit.”<sup>123</sup> The author of these words was İzzet Melih, whose critiques regarding plays will be described later on, in the pages of newspapers. Before that, his name was familiar from theater activities that were held before 1908. He was a close friend of Burhanneddin Tepsi. İzzet Melih (Devrim) worked for the Tobacco Reggie. Before the revolution, Burhaneddin Tepsi and he had started to put on stage in French some pieces of the play *Le Marquis de Priola* that they copied from famous Lebargy.

The promulgation of the Constitution and just after it, the performance of *Besa* were very meaningful for İzzet Melih and he considered the day the *Besa* was performed as a “festival of literature and a national festival.” He reported that it was a festival for literature because theater is the most effective part of the literature. Despite the lack of strong works that manipulate religious and political beliefs and tendency of the feelings and morality to reasonable points. İzzet Melih strongly believed that “the future of the theater and literature is brilliant.”<sup>124</sup> What was needed for reaching these brilliant days was writers and artisans who overcome the technical difficulties. According to İzzet Melih, without any hesitation, said that it should be admitted that theater was primitive and imperfect. It is not surprising to see that as a man of time he probably had a perfect and advanced model of theater in his mind.

The performance of *Besa* also was a “national festival” because the time at which *Besa* was performed and the play’s theme perfectly fit with each other. “the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

performance of the precious play in these days, that *described* the heroism of Demir Bey, who does not hesitate to kill his own son due to his pledge and that delineates the sublimity of honor and justice, is deserved greetings.”<sup>125</sup> İzzet Melih also gives some clues about reactions of the audience toward *Besa* and tied *Besa* to the sacred words of the day; “greeting by standing oration to sacred words; honor, justice, freedom, fraternity, proved nobility of Ottoman nation and made all of us happy and be proud of.”<sup>126</sup> İzzet Melih also gave the names of the actors and actresses who took part in the performance. The leading role both in the play and in the organization went to Ahmed Fehim Efendi. Hakkı Necip, Nezih Ziya, Toloyan Efendiler, and Hekimyan Aznif and Rejina Hanım are also mentioned for their art and good faith. Another crucial part of this organization was the CUP.

İzzet Melih was not only grateful to the CUP for taking this first step with hopeful and satisfactory results but also for another reason. “We are grateful to them not only for this facet (the performance of the *Besa*), but we are indebted gratefulness to them forever.”<sup>127</sup> “The maestro of chorus Sinanyan,” and “the director of the Museum of Orient Mösyö Pardü who provided all costumes and necessities with a light heart”<sup>128</sup> are also mentioned. The performance of *Besa* seems to have taken place as a “national duty” provided fertile ground for mobilizing different sections of society for one aim. The event was not only an artistic work, but by mobilizing actors, actress, the CUP, musicians, people from different backgrounds and last but not least audiences became a social gathering and political sign. It is also a way to remember persons who had died

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> “Onlara karşı yalnız bu cihetten değil, ilelebet medyunu minnettarlarıyız” Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Orkestraya riyaset etmiş olan Sinanyan Efendi’yi, elbise ve levazımatı maal iftihar iare eden “Şark Müzesi” müdürü Mösyö Pardüyi de zikr etmek icab eder.” Ibid.

before the revolution, “the heroes of freedom”, in the day of freedom and as a gift to both sides. “With your permission,” said İzzet Melih, “I kiss Ali with whom I am bound by my heart with friendship starting from school desks, for fulfilling the duty that we owe to his father, the virtuous deceased Şemsettin Sami.”<sup>129</sup>

The first performance of *Besa* was one of the most significant social and political events of the time. Like *Millet* and *Sabah*, the newspaper *Servet-i Fünun* also reserved space for the performance *Besa*. The question of who were the audiences of the first performance of *Besa* whom crowded the gates of the theater should also be answered by using an impression that was published in *Servet-i Funun* by an unknown writer. They had been the “lovers of freedom” (*hürriyetperveran*). “Theater was overcrowded with thousands of freedom lovers (*hürriyetperveran*) who had emancipated themselves from the destruction of grief and cruelty that had come from the plague of tyranny for years.”<sup>130</sup> The theater seats were full and many people offered 2-3 Liras for one seat, but it still was impossible to find a ticket for one person. The crowd indicates the significance of the event. The audiences composed of lovers of freedom, got into the act that took place especially at the moment that touched upon political sensitivity. These scenes are also very striking for most of the writers, like this anonymous one. In the text of the play, a Bey forced a shepherd to give his daughter to a man who had been chosen by the Bey himself. The shepherd resists obeying this decision, but in a way that the audience could draw some parallel with their situation. He stated that

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<sup>129</sup> “Şimdi de müsaade ederseniz, mekteb sıraları üzerinde başlanmış samimi bir dostlukla kendisine kalben merbut olduğum Ali’nin, peder-i fazıl ve muhteremi Şemsettin Sami Bey’e karşı medyun olduğumuz vazifeyi teşekkürü kısmen ifa edebilmek için gözlerimden öperim” Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> “Senelerce bela-i istibdatın kahr ve zulmün tahribatından kendilerini istihlas eden binlerce hürriyet perveran ile tiyatro iğne atılsa yere düşmeyecek halde idi.” *Servet-i Fünun*, 8 August 1908.

The time in which people are obliged on the contrary of their consent, are made to obey to a decision using torture and force was gone. Now everybody has his/her own freedom. No one will violate the freedom of new generations, everyone is equal before the law, the shepherd and the Bey are equal, and the time of Tyranny are death. Cruelty and injustice is ended because the persons who are well known were ruined.<sup>131</sup>

These words, which were considered as the words of both Şemseddin Sami, “The hero of the freedom” and of the shepherd as a member of the lower classes who resisted against Bey by using the Law and Constitution, stimulated audience’s feeling regarding their political positions. The performance was interrupted by slogans “that come from inner most corner of the hearts”<sup>132</sup> “While he (Zebir,-the shepherd) was defending his political, constitutional rights and freedom” states an unknown writer “the owners of the freedom (*erbab-ı hürriyet*) who had just taken over these rights cried of ‘long live the constitution and sultan!’ “Damn Tyranny, perish cruels people! Despots, tyrants” that came from the bottom of their hearts.”<sup>133</sup> The similarity between the ideas of the shepherd and audiences at that point is obvious. The audiences received the political messages of the play and moreover participated in the play by interrupting it and emphasized their ideas with slogans. The writer also approved of the audiences’ feelings and behaviour. Furthermore, he joined them by saying

We had been ever so thirsty for justice, freedom, and a peaceful life for 33 years, atmosphere of freedom that we breathed yesterday. Because of the words of freedom that were sung and performance of the freedom on the stage was necessary for calming the desire and hunger of freedom, we were shouting “long live freedom” at the top of our voices and from our hearts.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> “Şemseddin Sami, *Besa Yahud Ahde Vefa* (İstanbul: Tasvir-i Efkâr Matbaası, 1292).

<sup>132</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 8 August 1908.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> “33 seneden beri adalete, hürriyete, müsterihane hayata o kadar susamışız ki dün teneffüs ettiğimiz havayı hürriyet terennüm eden lağmat-ı hürriyet, sahnede temaşayı hürriyet, teskin-i iştiyak hürriyete kafi geliyor diye bütün kalbimizle tekmlil kuvvetimizle “yaşasın hürriyet!” diye bağırıyorduk.” Ibid.



What did *Besa* mean for the audiences? This writer replies to this question from his own point of view, but highlighted the relationship between Ottomanism, and fidelity to oath and freedom. According to this writer of *Servet-i Fünun*, fidelity to the oath was one of the distinguished features of the Ottomans. He claims that in the history, there were many of glorious pages regarding the Ottomans' loyalty and their fidelity to the oaths. What tied these distinguishing features of the past to the present time their loyalty to the new regime. "We and our soldiers who undertook an oath to protect forever our laws and constitution, which we had taken back with our soldiers."<sup>135</sup> He is also sure that in the future the Ottomans would take their place in the pages of history due to their oath of loyalty that was taken for the Constitution. The Ottomans were also "loyal to their oath against their enemy."

The play that was written by Şemsettin Sami several years earlier *Besa* was an Albanian tradition had another meaning that was closely related to the social and political atmosphere of the second constitution. Oath "*Besa*" now was not only an Albanian tradition<sup>136</sup> but also a symbol that the indicated loyalty and fidelity of the Ottoman society to their constitution that they had taken back and was comprehensive to every member of the Ottoman nation. "The constitution was undertaken by the

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<sup>135</sup> "Askerlerimizle istirdat ettiğimiz hukukumuzu askerlerimiz ve biz en nihaye muhafaza edeceğimizi yemin ile taahhüd eyledik." Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> "Besa. Popular custom. The Besa is one's word of honour, a sworn oath, a pledge or a cease-fire. In Albanian Culture, the besa was regarded as something sacred and its violation was unthinkable. The besa was not only a moral virtue, but also a particularly institution in Albanian customary law. Among the feuding tribes of the north it offered the only form of real protection and security to be had. A besa could be given between individuals or feuding families for a specific period of the time in order for them to settle other urgent affairs. It could also be concluded between tribes as a cease-fire between periods of fighting. The besa, taken to the extremes, however, could have terrible repercussions." In this source besa was explained by giving example of the play "Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa"; the Rilindja author Sami bey Frasher (1850-1904) exemplified this in Turkish-language play *Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa*, published in Constantinople in 1875 and translated in to English as *Pledge of Honor an Albanian Tragedy* (New York 1945) In this rather melodramatic work, we are confronted with the tragic dilemma of an Albanian father who prefers to kill his own son rather than to break his besa." Robert Elsie, *The Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 35.

nation as a whole entity. This oath is comprehensive to the Ottoman nation.”<sup>137</sup>

Therefore, “being an Ottoman and constitution, constitution and being Ottoman is eternal, was eternal. God is eternal.”<sup>138</sup>

The newspaper *Tanin* also informed its readers about “the extraordinary performance of Ottoman Theater.”<sup>139</sup> According to an advertisement “*Besa* Yahut Ahde Vefa-6 scenes will be held at Tepebaşı Summer Theater in the Municipality Garden, on 25 July this Friday has been approved by the Committee of Ottoman Progress and Union.” The performance of the *Besa* in 7 August 1908 at Tepebaşı Theater that also was announced in *Tanin* and reported on by a woman writer, Nigar Münir. Nigar Münir also described her impressions without giving any clue about whether this performance was held only for women or if Muslim women attended the same performance as men at separated places. When she was leaving theater her heart was filled with pride. She thought that Ahmet Fehim and his friends acted out the plays of Şemsettin Sami giving the best performance they could be performed in these conditions of the day. People awarded them with applause and slogans. She, as an unknown writer of *Servet-i Fünun*, emphasized the response of audiences;

Especially when Ahmet Fehim Efendi, who plays the Zebir role, answers Demir Bey’s despotic threat by saying ‘those times had gone, we have a constitution now, everyone is equal.’ Voices of “long live freedom! Long live equality! Long live justice! Long live fraternity!” were chanted by the audience with vivacious maturity. The feeling of freedom in everybody’s hearts appeared with a sparkle in their eyes.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 8 August 1324.

<sup>138</sup> “Binaenaleyh Osmanlılık ile kanun-u esasi, kanun-u esasi ile Osmanlılık müebbetir, müebbeti. Ebed Allah.” Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> “Osmanlı Tiyatrosu Lübiyat-ı fevkaladesi” *Tanin*, 7 August 1908.

<sup>140</sup> “Hele Zebir rolünü icra eden Fehim Efendi, Demir Bey’in tehdidatı müstebidanesine, ... mukabele ederek: “o vakitler geçti, şimdi bizim bir kanuni esasımız var. Hepimiz müsaviyiz” diyince temaşageran “Yaşasın Hürriyet! Yaşasın Musavvat! Yaşasın Adalet! Yaşasın Uhuvvet!” nidalarını kemali şadi ile ref ettiler. Herkesin kalbindeki hissi hürriyet gözlerindeki lema ile ayan oluyordu.” *Tanin*, 8 August 1908.

The impressions of Nigar Münir also indicated that the audience drew a parallel with the position that had been created on the stage and their own position in society. On one side there was despotism and threatening, and on the other freedom, equality, justice and fraternity thanks to the promulgation of the constitution. The audience not only approved of the scenes that they saw on the stage but also they approved of the new regime and its principles that they thought were inseparable from it. Nigar Münir wrote that at the end of the play, people were applauding actors and actresses and they also called the son of Şemsettin Sami on stage. “The words of this young person that described how if his father had been able to live in these days of freedom, how he would have been happy were met with applause and slogans”<sup>141</sup>. They called his son on stage and heard from him that the day that they lived now was the dream of Şemsettin Sami as a hero of freedom. At that point, the stage became a symbolic place in which both the speech of Ali Sami and the performance itself were held, provided a vehicle for the conjunction of the past and present. With this conjunction, the person who lived in the past and served and envisaged the day of freedom incised in the minds of audiences and entered into a new canon. The prohibited and dangerous names of the ancient regime became a hero of the freedom of the new era and now knowing their name was no longer dangerous but identical with being Ottoman. “It is not necessary to tell the story of the play because it is hard to find an Ottoman who does not know the story of Fettah, who commits suicide after killing his son instead of ratting on.”<sup>142</sup>

The new regime also distinguishes itself from the ancient one by giving consent to these persons and for their work to take place on the stage freely. This stage

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> “piyesin mealini hikayeye luzum yoktur zan ederim. Sözünden dönememek için oğlunu katl ettikten sonra intihar eden Fettahın sergüzeştini bilmeyen Osmanlı güç bulunur.” Ibid.

was a place that most of the time was considered very pedagogic and where the audience shared feelings and showed their approval directly during the performance. The symbolic facets of the names of *Besa* and Şemsettin Sami and the theater became most visible before the public. Nigar Münir mentioned the success of the actors and highlighted the feature of being the first performance free from censor “there is not enough time and place in the newspaper pages to writing sufficiently that was exhibited during the performance by each actor at this first play that was performed free from devastating censor.”<sup>143</sup> She also congratulated all of the actors and “wishes sincerely that as soon as possible they will be able to organize a better performance.”<sup>144</sup>

The first performance of *Besa* on the night of 7 August 1908 Friday at Tepebaşı Theater by the Ahmed Fehim Company became a social event to which most of the prominent newspaper reporters attended and reflected their impressions in the pages of their newspapers. From the other side of the stage, leading actor Ahmet Fehim also described first night of the play with similar scenes from the event, as quoted above.<sup>145</sup> He also mentioned what he had prepared for the audience as a director. He prepared new “mise en scenes.” He ordered a new music composition for Sinanyan and from the Armenian Music School 80 students participated in the performance as a chorus. According to his memoirs, during the performance of *Besa*, with the direction of the Ahmet Fehim, a dance by the Albanian Lap region was exhibited, Virjin took the roles of Meruşa, Raşid Rıza took to the stage in the role of a little shepherd, a flock of sheep passed on the stage. The intermission was as colorful as the performance; an

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<sup>143</sup> “Sansür kayd-ı müdhişinden azade olarak sahneyi temaşaya vaz edilen bu ilk piyesten her aktör tarafından gösterilen mahareti, ve sanatı da ayrı ayrı zikre ne vakit ne de gazetenin hacmi müsait hepsini birden tebrik ederek...” Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> kariben daha güzel lübiyat tertip edebilmelerini, an samimül kalp temenni ederim.” Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> *Ahmet Fehim Bey'in Hatıraları*, p. 192.

Italian tenor sang a part from William Tell opera, a *zabit* gave a patriotic speech; İzzet Melih, whose impression of the performance was published in the pages of *Millet* and as mentioned before also made an address regarding the theater.<sup>146</sup> Due to the fact that audiences filled not only the theater hall but flowed out of the gates of the theater, performance was repeated on Saturday and Sunday. *İkdam* announced that

*Besa* a six-scene play of the deceased Şemsettin Sami was performed Friday and last night (Saturday) at Beyoğlu Tepebaşı Municipality Garden, splendiferously by Ahmed Fehim's Ottoman Theater with the patronage of the Committee of Progress and Union, will be held again due to the intensive demand and strong interest. And it will be held at the place that we mentioned before with the participation of the French Comedy Company<sup>147</sup>

“The third night,” wrote Ahmet Fehim, “without informing me, İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci came, dressed and appeared on stage as Fettah. I was not surprised because these nights were filled with applause and excitement, the stages teemed with many sorts of people and new actors”<sup>148</sup> Starting from 7 August 1908, “three days and nights, we performed *Besa*, and it was a box-office success.”<sup>149</sup>

The performance of *Besa* at Tepebaşı Theater undoubtedly was a great box-office success for Ahmet Fehim Company, which also reached large-scale audiences. However Tepebaşı was not the only place that *Besa* was performed. It was also performed by the Ahmet Fehim Company at the Bakırköy Municipality Garden for the first time on Friday 20 August 1908. One of the reporters of the newspaper *İttifak* was

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>147</sup> “Cuma günü ve dün gece Beyoğlunda Tepebaşında yazlık tiyatrodaki Osmanlı İttihat ve Terakki cemiyetinin taht-ı himayesinde olarak Ahmet Fehim Efendinin Osmanlı Tiyatro Kumpanyası marifetiyle gayet şaşalı surette mevkii temaşaya vaz edilmiş olan merhum Şemsettin Sami Bey'in *Besa* nam 6 perdelik oyunu bu defa vaki olan talep ve ibram üzerine bugün ve bu gece yine mahali mezkürde Fransız Komedi Kumpanyası'nın dahi iştirakiyle mevki-i temaşaya vaz olunacaktır” *İkdam*, 9 August 1908.

<sup>148</sup> “Üçüncü gece bir de baktım ki İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Bey, bana hiç haber vermeden, giyinmiş, kuşanmış “Fettah” rolüne çıkmış...Hiç hayret etmedim, çünkü geceler alkış ve heyecanla geçiyor, sahneler türlü türlü insanlar yeni yeni aktörlerle dolup taşıyordu.” *Ahmet Fehim Bey'in Hatıraları*, p. 192.

<sup>149</sup> “Artık üç gün, geceli gündüzlü “Besa” yı oynanmış, dünyanın hasılatını elde etmiştik.” Ibid., p. 193.

sent to the first performance and wrote his impressions the next day.<sup>150</sup> Four days later, in *Tanin*, Halide Salih described the women's matinée for *Besa* at the Bakırköy Municipality Garden, in detail.<sup>151</sup> It seems that Ahmet Fehim took his company to Bakırköy for audiences who are not able to attend at Tepebaşı Garden. The performance of *Besa* in a different place of İstanbul, extended its possible audience and its social influence. Even more people saw *Besa* as in the same weeks at Tepebaşı Theater, another theater company also performed *Besa*. As discussed above Minakyan visited *Sabah* and told them that he would put *Besa* on stage.<sup>152</sup> Thus, at least for *Besa*, the number of spectators who attended performances increased due to the fact the play was performed by different groups in separated places.

The anonymous writers of *İttifak* entered the theater and was surprised due because the hall was crowded with people who belonged to different *millet*s (communities); “when I entered to the theater I was surprised, Turks, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, there was a great crowd.”<sup>153</sup> The performance of *Besa* gathered audiences from different communities into one hall. These audiences were excited and waited for the performance with excitement and curiosity about how these national scenes would be portrayed with excited expressions that had not been seen for years. “On each face of the audience, a gleam of enthusiasm was seen.”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> *İttifak*, 8 August 1324.

<sup>151</sup> *Tanin*, 25 August 1908.

<sup>152</sup> *Sabah*, 29 Temmuz 1908.

<sup>153</sup> “Tiyatrodan içeri girdiğim vakit şaşırdım. Türk ermeni rum Musevi birçok galabalık vardı.” Herkes senelerden beri görülmeyen böyle milli sahnelerin nasıl bir edayi muaffakiyetkerane ile oynanabileceğini birbirine soruyor, -bizdeki manasına göre- tenkidden ziyade takdir ve teşvik lazım geldiğini teslim ediyorlardı. *İttifak*, 21 August 1908.

<sup>154</sup> “Bütün çehrelerde lümat-ı şevk ve server görülüyordu”.Ibid.

Most of them probably think that this first performance could not be successful, and they argued with each other that an evaluation regarding theater must not be over critical but rather encouraging and motivating. Luckily “performance was not bad in general”<sup>155</sup> It is obvious at that point the motivation that had brought the audience to this theater hall had not been only artistic interest in the theater. The writer of *İttifak*, thanks to the performance did not miss the chance to write about the oppression of the ancient regime that had destroyed the theater and wrote about the performance of *Besa* as a patriotic play that marked the beginning of a new era in which theaters and actors recovered and improved themselves.

Certainly new actors will progress, they also were surprised, the art of theater perished due to the lassitude of long years in which the gap opened between the spirit of art and labor and endeavor. The contemporary age, of course, recreates and makes better this crucial department of literature by recovering and originating.<sup>156</sup>

Like Nigar Münir, the writer also did not tell the story of the play, because he also believed that “every Ottoman who loves her land and is enlightened knows this crucial play of the virtuous and honorable Şemsettin Sami.”<sup>157</sup> Knowing Şemsettin Sami and this patriotic play was proof of loving the land. He did not discuss the artistic value of *Besa* and its performance, but rather referred to more important feature; “Is Şemsettin Sami successful at theater, is this theater in accordance with principle of art? To mention these issues is unnecessary, it is enough to look at patriotic passion that has been created by this play.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> “Mahaza oyun suret-i umumiyesi ile fena olmadı” Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> “Yeni yetişen aktörler şüphesiz terakki edeceklerdir; onlar da şaşırılmışlar, uzun senelerin ruhi sanat ile say ve gayret arasına koyduğu fasıla-i müdde-i rehavet bizde tiyatroculuğu kökünden mahv etmişti. Zaman-ı hazır elbette nekahat icat ve icazıyla bu şube-i muhimmeyi edebide ala ve ihya edecektir.” Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> “Oyunun esasını söylemek istemem; vatanını, vatanın, müesser irfanını bilen ve seven her Osmanlı şüphesiz fazıl-ı muhterem sami bey merhumun bu mühim tiyatrosunu bilir.” Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Sami bey bunda Muaffak olmuşmudur, tiyatro şimdiki kavaid-i sanata muvafık mıdır? Bunlardan bahsetmek biluzumdur, yalnız kalb-i ümitte husule getirdiği heyecan-ı vatanperveranayı tetkik etmek kafi” Ibid.

He also evaluated the performance of the actors and actresses. Mrs. Hekimyan was the most successful. She took the audience to those days. He also claims even the actor who took the Zebir role was not a real actor; however, role of Zebir gave him the manner of one. Ahmet Fehim Efendi, as he was successful in each of his roles, was also good in the role of Zebir. At the end of the performance, the scenes that showed the moral story from Albania were congratulated with a lot of applause. “During the March of Constitution (*Kanun-i Esasi Marşı*), the blessing attitudes and love of the people aroused feelings of crying,” said the writer and who added “we will be glad to see plays that serve progress and the rise of our homeland in the future.”<sup>159</sup>

Halide Salih described another performance of *Besa* by the plays Ahmet Fehim Company in Bakırköy in *Tanin*. What was the difference of these critiques of the performances of *Besa* was that Halide Salih depicted a performance that was held for only female spectators.<sup>160</sup> To attend the performance, Halide Salih had travelled to Markiköy from the other side (Anatolian side of the İstanbul) and had taken an old commuting train. At the beginning of her journey when she stepped on the boat she decided to ignore the “broken-down ferry boats, broken bridge, frowzy officers, filthy streets, and illiterate majority who interpreted freedom in such weird ways” and to dream about tomorrow. She also decided not to feel the tiredness that stemmed from waiting too long at the ferryboat station and other negative sides of the journey. Instead of that Halide Salih accomplished her trip in the future of the İstanbul. Everything that took its place in the dream of the future showed a contrast with her time. The gloomy, dark and black images of muddy streets small, miserable coffeehouses, ruined houses

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<sup>159</sup> “Kanunu Esasi Marşı çalınırken ahali ni gösterdiği tavr-ı takdis ve muhabbet kalplerde bir ağlama hissi uyandırdı. İleride elbette vatanımızın tealiyat ve terakkiyatına hizmet edecek tiyatrolar da göreceğiz ve sevineceğiz.”Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> *Tanin*, 25 August 1908.



and roofs faded away and whiteness took their places. From the ferryboat to clothes of the passengers Halide Salih depicted her dream with a lot of “white.” She also described the theater of future, a building with electric lights, but this performance was held for an all female audience like in her time. In contrast to her time again this building had marble columns; it was big and well designed for a theater. Another striking side of the dream was her emphasis on the order of the spectators as they entered entrance the theater hall. According to her, this order was strongly related to absence of children. The women had sent their children to Karagöz performances, cinema or to watch acrobat. Then she entered, in her dream, the theater hall with other women, most of them wearing full, white and chic dress. Everything that took place in this dream-world was contradictory to the actual world.

Contradictory to her experience, even the theater curtain and the music that was played before the performance were directly related to the play. In this dream world, electricity was used for lighting and on the dark red theater curtain there was a silver crescent and star. The slogans of the new regime, “freedom, equality, fraternity” were written on the curtain in lights but not the way in which Metin And had depicted, it was as if real.<sup>161</sup> In this dream the orchestra started and audiences stood up and sang the March of Freedom with awe.

At that moment her friend tugged on her arm and Halide Salih returned to the real world with great disappointment. The theater in which they attended the play was totally different from the dreamed one. The wooden floor of the theater lodges was so decayed that the heels of their shoes got stuck in the ground. They changed their lodge but this time the lodge above sounded as if it would collapse. Eventually, the performance started. The theater was over crowded. There were very few women

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<sup>161</sup> And, *Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu*, p. 18.

wearing “*çarşafs*” instead most of the women wore white. Halide Salih again emphasized the whiteness of the clothes of the women.

The silence that was expected by Halide Salih with the start of the performance never happened due to the fact that one fifth of the audiences were children. In contrast to her dream, there was no place to send their children and the women had brought them to this serious play. Again, in contrast to the order in her dream, there was chaos in this real theater. The children kept changing their places, some of the women standing; they called to the sellers whose voices competed with the actors’ voices. In this “hamam-like atmosphere” (public bath-like atmosphere)<sup>162</sup> with the the sound of hazelnuts being cracked, the actors had to shout.

Halide Salih quitted her effort to hear the dialogs of the actors, and at least, tried to see what happened on stage. She saw that despite this chaotic atmosphere and noise “on stage, by making people forget default of this basic play, all of the actors were trying to perform this play that made cry everybody with its national meaning with their all dedication.”<sup>163</sup> Between the sets that had no relation to the theme of the play and were extremely poor and patchy, not only could the costume changing of the actors were seen , but also some of the heads of curious people was tried to watch the play without paying.

The second scene was ended in this atmosphere but in the third scene there were such meaningful and beautiful words, a part of the audience who also had made noises at the beginning of the performance called to the other part of the spectators to

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<sup>162</sup> “Bir hamam cavıltısı aktörleri seslerini işittirmek için bağırmağa mecbur eden üçyüz ağzın birden fındık kırışı vardı”. *Tanin*, 25 August 1908

<sup>163</sup> “aktörler şu iptidai piyesin kusurlarını unutturarak yalnız manayı milliyesi ile herkesi ağlatan parçaları bütün varlıkları ile oynuyorlardı.”*Ibid.*

calm down and keep quite. However, the conversation between spectators and sellers never ended;

- “Shut up, shut up!”
- You have not brought me a *francala*<sup>164</sup>!
- I have been waiting for a piece of cheese for one hour!
- “Shut up, shut up!”
- Am I die because of I am thirsty!
- The girl with the long hair, sit down your seat!<sup>165</sup>

Among the calls of the audiences for *francala* seller who was more popular than Ahmet Fehim Efendi, and the hazelnut seller, water seller, and between the claps and cries of the children, the third curtain was closed. This real atmosphere was totally different from the dream of Halide Salih regarding the theater of the future. In her dream, as an intellectual of the time, her emphasis and expectation of order can be seen. The cultural activities of adults and children were segregated and adults attended a patriotic play in clean tidy clothes in a place mostly dominated by white as a symbol of tidiness, cleanliness and order. This expectation mostly stemmed from her view that in the West there were such audiences and theaters where everybody silently watched performance in a nice tidy and clean place.

This view also is a kind of fiction. In the West, for instance, in Paris, most of the time especially during revolutionary period most of the theaters were as chaotic as the one Halide Salih depicted. On the other hand, the dream of Halide Salih was plain and white, and this dream contrasted with the atmosphere of the real performance which was chaotic, vivid and colorful. She also dreamed of an intermission during which an orchestra played some patriotic songs directly related to the theme of the play, in fact, in the real world between the third and fourth scenes of *Besa*, orchestra plays “Kiki Koku” and “Maçıçı” that were completely alien to the theme of play.

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<sup>164</sup> Fine white bread sold as a longish thin loaf.

<sup>165</sup> “-sus, sus!, -Bana francala getirmedin! -Ayol , bir saattir peynir bekliyorum! -Sus, sus!.....-Aa susuzluktan öleyim mi?...-Uzun saçlı kız oturbakayım sandelyene...” Ibid.

In the fifth scene when the “Hürriyet Marşı” (March of Freedom) was played everybody stood up to show their respect but a few exception. However, Halide Salih was not able to understand even one word of the march due to the noises of peanuts, bargaining of the water sellers, and children crying out of fear of the flags and Albanian accouterment. Moreover the audience’s applauses did not depend on whether it was necessary or not. In the most crucial point of performance, while Fettah was muttering that he had to kill his own son, when his son woke up, a small hand gripped Halide Salih’s arm. He was a thin, small boy around seven or eight years old with pale skin, and a brilliant glance, “he focused all of his sprit and attention in his eyes and he was looking at the stage.”<sup>166</sup> Halide Salih gave her hand to this “petite and fragile Ottoman,” who “thrilled with patriotic feelings at the flags, clinks of guns and patriotic words” and patted his shoulder. In front of the lodges, children similar this one climbed the seats by keeping watch to the play, turned back to the women by pulsating with enthusiasm and complaining with scorn and mature revolt against them by saying “shut up yaa!”<sup>167</sup> Halide Salih depicted these little boys and their desire to watch these patriotic plays with all their attention as a hope that could compensate for the women’s ignorance. These “Little Ottomans” symbolized the next generation who were more patriotic and aware of their national identity in the eyes of Halide Salih. For embroidering the concepts of homelands, Ottomanism, nation, patriotism, altruism and progress, theater was the one of the most suitable places. By watching the plays, audiences understood visually what do these concepts mean as attitudes and behavior. These concepts introduced to the young generation as was done for the older and illiterate ones.

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<sup>166</sup> “...bir erkek çocuk bütün ruhu gözlerine toplanmış sahneye bakıyordu.” Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> “sussanız ya yaa!” Ibid

Later on while the March of Freedom was being sung, from one or two lodges women had not stood up. Halide Salih considered this disrespectful. She argued that everybody who attended a ceremony where the national anthem or march of a nation was sung, should stand. She also pointed out that one foreigner-looking woman did not stand up, but she did not accept the excuse of her being foreigner. “In a French meeting” wrote Halide Salih “if the Marseillaise were sung, a Russian, a German or a Turk stand by following the principles of politeness.”<sup>168</sup>

At the end of the performance, when Halide Salih was leaving the building, she started to think about theater of the future again. However, this time she was not able to dare to return to her previous fantasy because she had a heaviness in her heart and sorrow in her spirit. Instead she thought that “the equipment of the theater can not be completed for years, they can be completed but the dull ignorance of the calling (of the audience) for the sellers that interrupted this national play in the most patriotic part of it. I do not know if these can be corrected or not.”<sup>169</sup>

Another performance of *Besa* in Bakırköy was put on by the company of Mınakyan Efendi which was also one of the biggest theater groups of the time. As mentioned before, he visited *Sabah* and informed them that he would put on the play in a couple of days. This information was met with enthusiasm. However, most of the news regarding the performance of *Besa* informed their reader regarding the Ahmet Fehim performance. The writer of the *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, Hüseyin Kazım, attended the performance of *Besa* by Mınakyan Efendi Company at Bakırköy and shared his feelings and ideas with his readers. This play, “*Besa*, was the first light of freedom that

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<sup>168</sup> “Bir Fransız içtimainda “Marseyöz” çalınırda herkes ayağa kalkarsa, hazar arasında bir Türk bir Alman yahut Rus da kaideyi nezakete riayeten kıyam eder.” Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> “teatro kırık sahne levazımı eksik olabilir” bunlar zamanla düzeler; fakat aktörlerin o kadar hüsnü niyetle severek oynaladılar milli bir parçanın en vatanperver parçalarında hissiz bir lakayt ile yemişçileri çağırışlar... -bunlar düzeler mi?” Ibid.

reflected from theater stages ” wrote Hüseyin Kazım and added “This play had been forgotten for years.”<sup>170</sup> Hüseyin Kazım by using the chance to write about *Besa*, depicted Şemsettin Sami as a hero of freedom. He is one of the best examples of these heroes because “Şemsettin Sami was one of the first person who served the movement of freedom” and writing a play was also part of his service to the homeland. “Before the growth of the theater movement, he wrote *Besa* and he vowed to look up to his nation. He kept his promise. He worked for freedom until the last moment of his life.”<sup>171</sup>

Hüseyin Kazım also described another feature of the hero of the freedom: most of them and their sons and daughters had suffered both physically and mentally from the tyranny of *İstibdat*. The son of Şemsettin Sami, Ali Sami, also had lines on his face from when he had seen that books of his father, from both book stores and private libraries like those of many others authors were burned. However, now, in the days of freedom “the angel of freedom” had given a new life to the son of Şemsettin Sami. In the days of freedom everything was changed and persons who had suffered under the tyranny of *İstibdat* became heroes of freedom. “The appreciation of the nation tended to him (Ali Sami), and he was held in the glorifying hands of the nation with care”<sup>172</sup>

Hüseyin Kazım described the atmosphere of the performance and emphasized its political peculiarities.<sup>173</sup> He also shared the joy of the audience and joined them with great enthusiasm. According to him the audience had good reason for being enthusiastic about the play. Among other reasons they considered it as freedom because they had been deprived of everything. During the *İstibdat* under the tyranny of

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<sup>170</sup> “Bu biçare de senelerden beri ...nisyana mahkum idi” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 16 August 1908

<sup>171</sup> “İlk hareketi hürriyetperveranenin fedakar hadimarından bulunan Şemsettin Sami Bey merhum bizde tiyatroculuğun inkişafı evvelinde *Besa*’yı yazmış sanki milletine hürmet için *Besa* etmiş idi. Ahde vefa etti. Hayatının sonuna kadar çalıştı.” *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> “Enzar-ı takdir-i millet ona müteveccih, ağuş-u tebcilinde tutuyor.” *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

censor, the audience had been thirsty for even plays that were flawed and had lost their own charm, and they applauded every meaningful word that remained and every humanistic attitude that was able to escape the control of the censor. Now audiences that had been emancipated from the fear of *İstibdat* were very right to be joyful by assuming that freedom personified on stage. In the eyes of Hüseyin Kazım maybe the most apparent scene that presented freedom was the scene in which shepherd Zebir and Demir Bey come face to face. In that scene, response of audiences reached its peak point, when shepherd Zebir answered Bey's threat by saying that "times has gone, now there is law and justice."<sup>174</sup>

Hüseyin Kazım states that in that scene "all audiences cried and applauded to declare that they have been emancipated from *İstibdat* by which they had been dragged by a cruel chain for years."

The audiences not only clapped, but they also did not forget the soul of Sami. They called his son to the stage. Ali Sami gave a short and quick speech to these audiences with excitement and depicted his fathers' struggle and advised them not to "abuse their power."<sup>175</sup> His speech was met with slogans of freedom (*name-i hürriyet*). Hüseyin Kazım complained that he could not described this moment as strongly as they deserved, but he said that "a folk, an intellectual class, with their applause they sent their greetings with the wish of 'long live the homeland, long live the army' to the sky and they lived only the name of the homeland by forgetting the pain of all the years that they had suffered."<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> "kanun, adalet var o zamanlar geçti..." Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> "kuvvetimizi suistimal etmeyelim" Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> "Bir halk, güzide, mütefekkir bir sınıf, alkışları "yaşasın vatan, ordu" temenniyatı semaya el ediyor, bütün medid, elim senelerin acısını bir anda unutarak yalnız vatan namına yaşıyordu." Ibid.

Hüseyin Kazım also evaluated theater history and mentioned the dramatic writers; particularly those who had suffered under the tyranny of *İstibdat* and whose names were forgotten. The new regime created its own heroes by using both dramatic literature and theater. The names of heroes took their place in this new canon. In the first rank of this new canon was Namık Kemal. Hüseyin Kazım quoted from Namık Kemal, “although your grave did not, your name still remains,”<sup>177</sup> and he stated that Namık Kemal was the first person who had given his works in the area of dramatic literature. “Even his name was banned, but today the nation will raise a monument to his name. Already they prove that they deserved freedom by exclaiming his name first.”<sup>178</sup> Undoubtedly, Namık Kemal was seen as a person whose life had been an example for the struggle for freedom. The prominent figures of the time mostly referred to him as their role model and created an history that starts with the struggle of Namık Kemal against the tyranny of *İstibdat* and finished with a happy ending; the promulgation of freedom.

In this history that unavoidably flowed through the happy ending Namık Kemal was not the only person whose name was referred. Names that were mentioned were Şakir Paşa, Bedri, Hikmet, Vahit, Manastırlı Rıfat who were related with to the theater and had suffered under the *İstibdat*. Among them “member of the army Manastırlı Mehmet Rıfat died in a place away from his homeland as a commander of an oblivion. The journals were not able to write even his name, but “*Ya Gazi, Ya Şehit*”(Ghazi or Martyr) belonged to him, didn't it?”<sup>179</sup> The continuity that was set by Hüseyin Kazım between his generation and the previous “heroes of freedom” is

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<sup>177</sup> “Kemalin, senin kabri kalmamışsa da namı kalmıştır” Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> “Bilirim ismini bile telaffuzdan men ettiler. Fakat bugün millet namına abideler rükn edecek. Zaten evvela onun nam-ı mübarekini atarak hürriyete layık olduğunu isbat etti.” Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 16 August 1908.



obvious. Further the republishing of this kind of play that show-cased the works of “hero of freedom” after the promulgation of the second constitution also imply that they considered these works as the roots of the freedom. In fact, the date of the second publication of Mehmet Rifat’s play “*Ya Gazi, Ya Şehit*” the theme of which was mainly based on the love of military service, was of this play is 1908 and in this second publication it can be seen that it was published in 1873.<sup>180</sup> A generation who thought that their ideological roots were these writers and their works tried to make them accessible and to create a new canon mainly based on these writers the most of them considered “heroes of freedom.”

In Hüseyin Kazım’s theater history, the first Muslim actor Necip Efendi, and the Gedikpaşa Theater are given spaces. He argued that future of the theater was brilliant, thanks to actors like Necip Efendi who fell in love with theater. However, the theater building that housed these lovers of theater, had been dismantled. As is well known, Gedikpaşa Theater was dismantled by municipality workers in one night due to the spying of a vizier who claimed that the play that was performed at Gedikpaşa theater, *Çerkes Özdenleri* was antithetic to the Şeriat. Until the days of freedom the ruins made the lovers of theater cry. One of the amateurs who worked at these *İstibdat* days at Gedikpaşa Theater had been Mınakyan Efendi. Hüseyin Kazım stated that Mınakyan Efendi had not let people forget theater while he was undergoing with deprivation, censor, spying and police surveillance. And he asked “will these men of theater, who perform the role of marquis, count, banker with old and shabby redingotes, appear on the stage with the costume that gives pleasure to us?”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Aytaş, p. 292.

<sup>181</sup> “Havı dökülmüş redingotlar ile kont marki banker rollerini oynayan bu hadimi sanat böyle nazarımızı okşayacak kıyafetle sahneye çıkacaklarmıydı acaba” Ibid.

He also gave the answer, “yes they did; moreover, they performed *Besa*, they were very happy with all these costumes and the play.”<sup>182</sup> Hüseyin Kazım explains approval of the costumes of actors especially those of Mınakyan and Hulusi Efendi. However he criticized the actors for wearing boot with shoelace despite at the time of the play there were no such shoes. After this criticism, he immediately quitted his critical attitude and explained that Mınakyan’s Ottoman Theater, of course, had excuses due to the fact that they had begged the censor to put on the very few plays that lost their spirit in the hands of the censor. In this company, also the leading role went to the director of the company Mınakyan Efendi. Demir Bey was Şahinyan Efendi, Fettah Ağa was Binemeciyan, and Vahide Hanım, who was Knar Hanım who had to take this role because of Aznif Hanım had suddenly taken ill and Knar Hanım had had three hours in which to prepare for this role.

Hüseyin Kazım concluded his impressions by saying “we say to the Ottoman Company there is no company who has performed *Besa* better and more naturally than you and we think their deficiency is because of their being the first.”<sup>183</sup> He also informed the reader regarding a new play that would put on stage the following week, Namık Kemal’s *Akif Bey*. He gave the company advice regarding the costumes. They should be chosen according to the 1269 clothes and Esat Bey should not wear boot with shoelaces.

By looking at the critiques and audiences response *Besa* was a great success as the first attempt to introduce free and patriotic theaters to the public. It paved the way for others. One of the most referred figures of the time, Namık Kemal, and his play “*Vatan*” which is better known for the resistance of the Young Ottomans against the ancient regime was waiting for its turn to be put on stage. It was the first ring that

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<sup>182</sup> “Çıktılar. Hem Besa oynadılar. Ne saadet yarabbi!...kendileri de seviniyorlar idi.” Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 16 August 1908.

tied those who lived in the freedom now to those who had struggled for it under the oppression of the ancient regime. *Besa* marked the beginning of the new era as a corner stone on which the works of the heroes of freedom was put on stage without fear and censor.

## CHAPTER VI

### A GLORIOUS SPECTACLE: VATAN

#### The Dream Comes True: The First Performance of Vatan at Tepebaşı Theater

The performance of *Besa* was a great box office success. This patriotic play drew an intense public attention. This public attention and thousands of people crowded the gates of the theaters and showed that was not a risk politically or financially for those who have the desire to put such patriotic plays on stage. The men of the theater, whether they were critics, playwrights, directors, or actors considered themselves the followers of the Young Turks. These theater circles experienced *Besa*'s success and the intensive public attention that it invoked. After the performance of *Besa*, released from the fear of the *İstibdat*, most of the critics, spectators and players affiliated with the CUP expected another dream to come true. The generation, who had spent their childhoods and their youth under the yoke of *İstibdat* had grown with the story of Gedikpaşa Theater which had become a legend by the time. This legend was closely related to the political figures of the time and to the theater.

Namık Kemal and his play *Vatan Yahut Silistre* and its performance at Gedikpaşa Theater was an event considered to be one of the first acts of resistance against the *İstibdat*. The exile of Namık Kemal, his dramatic death, the dismantling of the theater building were events Young Turks considered as past of their political roots. They saw themselves as the descendants of these events. In this linear time they considered themselves as the conjunction point of past and present. With the promulgation of the constitution, this generation found the chance to realize legend as a

national canon. This was a dream. As will be seen in the critiques of the *Vatan*, most of the critics and audiences described the performance of the *Vatan* as a dream-like event. It seems that most of the time they tried to make themselves believe that they had freely put *Vatan* on the stage and watched it. In this regard, the performance of *Vatan* became probably one of the most visible and challenging actions that were taken in the public sphere. It was a political and artistic event and marked the beginning of a new political era. Its performance became a measurement for people to understand whether they lived in the oppression (*İstibdat*) or freedom (*Hürriyet*).

Since *Vatan* was not simply a play, its performance was not considered a simple performance. Neither audiences nor the theater companies paid too much attention to the artistic aspects of the performance. Artistic value of this play was taken into account only when the necessity of national art was considered. What mobilized audiences from different backgrounds, amateur and professional performers from different communities, dramatists, chorists, and musicians was play's connotation with politics and resistance against *İstibdat*. That is why, it was not only the established theater companies but also numerous amateur groups that performed it.

*Vatan* was performed in every corner of İstanbul by theater groups for several different purposes due to its ideological and symbolic background. If one can talk about a theater epidemic in this period *Vatan* can be defined as a sub- epidemic. On the other hand, it was not only the political connotations of the first performance of the *Vatan* at Tepebaşı Theater but also its theme that was very convenient for the new era. What was the theme of the play that made people of the time so enthusiastic about it? What did the text of the play mean for its audiences? Selanikli Tevfik states that Namık Kemal was inspired by the event that had happened during the Crimean War: “the

Defense of Silistre.”<sup>184</sup> The defense of Silistre was a battle that was well known by the public and many stories regarding this “defense” had been told among the population. According to Selanikli Tevfik, *Vatan Yahut Silistre* was written nearly 30-35 years after this defense. Tevfik himself had also heard story of this defense, from a veteran of this war, who was still alive. According to this story, enemies surrounded the castle in winter. All the women and children were hidden underground. Without any interruption the battle of the guns continued from morning to night for days without an end.

“One of the works that was written and published about this event in that time and,” said Selanikli Tevfik “narrates that even children collected non-blasted canon shots and carried them to the citadel to fire on the enemies again.” Tevfik repeated the story of this “defense” probably as it was told among the public. He asked how Ottoman forces defended this castle successfully although they were outnumbered by the Russian forces. The reason was the spiritual power that had come out during the defense. These stories that was told among the people for a long time found their echoes in the play that was written by Namık Kemal. According to Selanikli Tevfik, the writer like Namık Kemal who reflected well the heroes’ love of homeland had a deep impact on his readers. 30 -35 years after this event he was able to create a stereotyped hero in İslam Bey, who was a full-fledged character, and based on a real hero of Silistra and a character that could reflect the sacrifices of the real heroes. Among Namık Kemal’s works that take their main theme from the conquest of İstanbul and the Siege of Kanije, *Vatan Yahut Silistra* is the third one based on a victory. The story of the Silistra defence was considered among those victories of Ottomans in which they had proved their power against their “enemies.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>185</sup> *Sabah* 22 August 1908.

It is interesting to see how events in history are remembered selectively and these selectively remembered events formed the collective memories of society. After the promulgation of the second constitution, the “current reality” of the time made people think about their pasts and reevaluate their position in these memories individually and collectively. Both political actors and people tried to legitimize their ideas and explored their past for this purpose. What they have selected from their history was events that facilitated their claim that their movements, ideas and beliefs have their roots in the past.

The staging of *Vatan* was the most visible example of this selection. The collective consent that was shared by the Ottoman public indicates that *Vatan* was a work that was most suitable for this task. The event had two aspects; first, Namık Kemal as a hero of freedom is a writer who resisted the evil of *İstibdat*. The performance of the *Vatan* at Gedikpaşa Theater played a decisive role in his life. He was sent to exile with other political figures of the time. This provided fertile ground for propagating about the evilness of the ancient regime and the struggle of the Young Ottomans against it. “Heroes of freedom” such as Enver and Niyazi, and others who contributed to the promulgation of the constitution, and who supported them by marching in the streets with slogans, and even those who watched the play that was put on stage under the patronage of the CUP, tied themselves collectively to these memories and created a canon for the legitimization of the new era.

Second, Namık Kemal selected the story of the defense of Silistra for his own purpose. He chose the subject in order to create a play that would awaken the love of homeland among the public. By highlighting this event that had happened 30-35 years before, he provided a fertile ground for propagating the love of homeland, which became an inseparable part of being Ottoman. At this point, Namık Kemal and *Vatan*

*Yahut Silistre* can be seen a stepping-stone on which the Young Turks walked to the glorious days of the empire.

The defense of Silistra as mentioned above was a theme strongly related to victory. It had been won against extreme conditions of deprivation and the Russian forces, which had vastly outnumbered the Ottomans. Namık Kemal tried to make people believe that love of homeland could be the key for a struggle against the fall of empire. It was the time “very disparate elements in Ottoman society, ranging from the bureaucratic elite and the Young Ottomans intelligentsia to the humble popular ulema, felt that a new social base was needed if the Empire was to survive.”<sup>186</sup> And in the days of the second constitution theaters propagandated the solution of Namık Kemal against the fall of empire that became dominant in this era to the masses for creating “a new social base.” It was very suitable for the atmosphere of the second constitution; despite the intense pressure of international economic and political problems and extreme pressure of *İstibdat*, the second constitution was promulgated and there was hope for the future.

But how did the *Vatan* epidemic start? The first performance of *Vatan* was held at Tepebaşı Summer Theater and, according to Raşid Rıza, “it was just like an apocalypse.”<sup>187</sup> After the first performances of *Besa*, Ahmet Fehim, advertised that he would put on *Vatan Yahut Silistre*. Knowing that a lot of young people who were dying with the love of theater and very enthusiastic for being on stage, he organized an audition for the leading role of “İslam Bey.” Ahmet Fehim was not able to hide his marvel. “In the midday, theater was crowded like a meeting place with applicants for

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<sup>186</sup> Selim Deringil, “The Invention of Tradition as Public Image In the Late Ottoman Empire 1808 to 1908,” *Comperative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (January 1993), p. 4.

<sup>187</sup> “Kıyamet de koptu.” Mentioned in Sevengil, *Meşrutiyet Tiyatrosu*, p. 14.



the role of İslam Bey.”<sup>188</sup> What is more interesting at this point is that the applicants were not only young people who were dying for the love of theater, but men from different social backgrounds. “Soldiers, officers, the elderly, engineers, doctors, pupils, grocers, young people, writers, poets, the people from various classes came and entered the audition for İslam Bey role.”<sup>189</sup> Such interest was surprising also for Ahmet Fehim: “In these bewildering days how my father did not jump up from his tomb to stage, it still astonishes me.”<sup>190</sup>

*İstibdat* ended with the promulgation of the second constitution and this was also good news for those who came from different ranks of society and from different social backgrounds and classes who tried to enter the theater world. Theater was considered a low status profession. Raşit Rıza also heard that there was an audition for the role of İslam Bey in the Ahmet Fehim Company. Raşit Rıza was the person who had knocked the door of Ahmet Fehim before the promulgation of the second constitution to ask him to take them to his company. His answer had been certain in the days of *İstibdat*; “Will I take you into my company? Are you crazy? Raşit your uncle works for Mabeyn. Faik Sabri, you are a journalist...will you make my life miserable at this age?” Raşit Rıza and Faik Sabri’s first attempt had failed. Faik Sabri had fled to Europe. Raşit Rıza’s friendship with Ahmet Fehim Efendi had continued, he attended his plays and went to his home in Doğancılar.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> “Tiyatro gündüzleri başvuranlarla bir miting yerine dönüyordu.” *Ahmet Fehim Bey’in Hatıraları*, p. 193.

<sup>189</sup> “Asker, subay, ihtiyar, mühendis, doktor, okullu, bakkal, genç, yazar, şair, hulasa her sınıftan insan gelmiş, İslam bey rolü için imtihan vermişti.” *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> “ben bu şaşkınlık günlerinde, babamın mezardan çıkıp da sahneye fırlamadığına hala hayret ederim” *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, p.15.

Ahmet Fehim also told the same story, but in a different way. He had first turned to Faik Sabri and said, “you are slender and weak, and you can not bear our living conditions. You will ruin your life!”<sup>192</sup> He also said to Raşid Rıza “You are so young, handsome and inexperienced. I cannot permit you to step into our world, behind the curtain that is seen as pompous, noble. I am responsible for that. A brilliant future is waiting for you! Stay in your profession...this is the advice of a father!”<sup>193</sup> After the escape of Faik Sabri to Europe, Raşid Rıza’s theater illness did not cover up. “He persist on begging me for being on stage” said Ahmet Fehim. At the end of two-year when Raşid Rıza established an affiliation with Tuluat and Ortaoyunu players Ahmet Fehim was convinced that his theater illness will never cover up and he decided to take him into his company, but without giving permission for him to be on stage. Although he knew that there was an audition for the role of İslam Bey, he was not planning to try for a part. But an old actor, Hakkı Necip, encouraged him and he decided to enter the audition. Raşid Rıza and Nurettin Şefkati took the same role.

In these days a new theater group had formed: *Heveskeran Kumpanyası*, (Company of Amateurs). Ahmet Fehim was very critical of this new theater, especially of its founder, Reşad Rıdvan, due to the fact that actors from Ahmet Fehim Company had left and took the side of Reşad Rıdvan. According to Ahmet Fehim, Reşad Rıdvan had deceived young Turkish actors who had newly entered theater world. One of these young actors, İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri, depicted the story of the foundation of Heveskeran Company in a different way. Ahmet Fehim and Reşad Rıdvan one week after the promulgation of the Second Constitution attempted to put *Vatan* on stage

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<sup>192</sup> “Sen çok zayıf ince bir çocuksun...sen bizim sürdüğümüz hayata tahammül edemezsin. Yazık olur sana!”

<sup>193</sup> “Sen çocuğum çok gençsin, güzelsin, tecrübesizsin.Bizim aleme, önden debdebeli görünen perdenin arkasına ayak atmana müsaade edemem.Vicdanen mesul olurum. İkinizi de parlak bir istikbal bekliyor. Mesleklerinizde sebat edin...size baba nasihati!...” Ibid.

thanks to the patronage of *Tanin*. Raşid Rıza, Nurettin Şefkati, Muhavvit, and Rıza Fazıl joined them. With the help of the government of the revolution of the time they performed *Vatan* in İstanbul, in the squares of the Ministry of War and at Tophane, Kuleli and Darüşşafaka schools, even they went to Salonica by private train and they performed there with the participation of students of the military school and the orchestra of Tophane (arsenal, artillery school)<sup>194</sup> According to İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci, “Heveskeran Company was composed of young actors, and became the origin of Turkish theater.”<sup>195</sup> Refik Ahmet Sevengil considered this judgment an exaggeration.

As a result of all these events, there emerged a theater company that was composed of actors who were newly entered to the world of theater after the promulgation of the second constitution, and who had suffered for their love of theater during *İstibdat*. This new company had its own plan regarding the future and they published a pamphlet and hung a banner over the wall of theater building that said, “actors and actresses of the Heveskeran Company provided by Ahmet Fehim.”

Ahmet Fehim, due to this event according to his memoirs, renounced his relation with this group. However, Raşit Rıza claims in his memoirs that Ahmet Fehim demanded to take the role of Abdullah Çavuş that was performed by Abdi Efendi, who is a tuluat player. Yet, it soon came to be understood that Ahmet Fehim no authority over theater company or the new actors and directors. “Ahmet Fehim desired to perform this role,” said Raşid Rıza, but “they (Heveskeran Company) did not give it to him. The play belonged to Heveskeran Company and of course things will happen at

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<sup>194</sup> *İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci*, p. 10.

<sup>195</sup> “İşte Türk Tiyatrosunun menşei bu heveskeran cemiyeti olmuştur.” *Ibid*.

the pleasure of the owner.”<sup>196</sup> When the conflict became obvious, the actors had to choose between the two groups. Raşid Rıza, after first *Vatan* performance with Heveskeran Company, had a row regarding a *misé en scene* with Reşad Rıdvan. As a result of this, he chose the Ahmet Fehim Company.

The conflicts between these two directors were more meaningful than simply the routine problems of “artists.” As can be observed later on, the two well-established theater companies, Ahmet Fehim and Minakyan were suffocated by the amateurs in İstanbul. They left the city and went on a tour to other cities in the empire. However, more crucially, Heveskeran Company and its director Reşad Rıdvan dominated the world of theater for nearly 5-6 months and they gained widespread recognition from the public as amateurs who dedicated themselves to patriotic and philanthropic activities. Heveskeran Company as was mentioned before, had its own route and they gave performances in the squares of İstanbul. Ahmet Fehim Company, after giving some performance at Tepebaşı Theater, took the road to the “cradle of freedom,” Salonica. Actors and actresses from these two companies before their split at Tepebaşı Theater put *Vatan* on stage together.

After 10 August 1908 an advertisement for *Vatan* appeared on the pages of the daily newspapers. According to these advertisements the company that would perform *Vatan* was Ahmet Fehim Company. *Tanin* congratulated the company for its choice of *Vatan* by Namık Kemal.<sup>197</sup> Another point regarding the performance of *Vatan* that received the approval and applause of *Tanin* was the aim of the performance. According to these advertisements, the proceeds of the performance would be used for

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<sup>196</sup> “Bu rolü Fehim Efendi oynamak istiyordu ama vermediler. Temsil Heveskeran Kumpanyası’nı elbette onların dedikleri olacaktı. Fehim Efendi isteği olmayınca kızdı.” Sevengil, *Meşrutiyet Tiyatrosu*, p. 14.

<sup>197</sup> *Tanin*, 10 August 1908.

the campaign that was organized to buy two cruisers for the navy whose names would be *Enver* and *Niyazi*. This national aim made the performance more significant in the eyes of the Ottoman public. When the day of performance approached the place that was given to the play in the Ottoman press increased. The information given in these advertisements became more detailed. They listed the names of the artists who participated in the organization. In the cast, leading role, Kadri Bey and Raşit Bey would going to be performed İslam bey. Other roles would going to be performed as listed: Sıdkı Bey: Ahmet Bey, Rüstem Bey: Eskrici(?) Bey, Abdullah Çavuş (Sergeant): Nurettin Bey, Kaymakam: Muazzez Bey, Major: Talat Bey, Zekiye Hanım: Knar Hanım, Hanife Hanım: Aznif Hanım, volunteers, peasants, soldiers and first, second and third officers.<sup>198</sup>

However, these are not only artists contributed to the event. There was also a chorus, composed of seventy people and were going to sing the song of *Vatan* in the second scene and an anthem of attack was going to take place. In the fourth and the last scenes, there would be 150 people on stage and also a parade of soldiers. The song of *Vatan* would also be sung. The costumes, decors and stage equipment were provided exclusively. The brass band that played in the municipality garden would also perform, and the famous composer Sinanyan Efendi would join the event as conductor. Three days before the performance of *Vatan* at Tepebaşı Theater, *Tanin* informed its readers that tickets of *Vatan* were about to run out. This performance was such an important event for *Tanin* that even improvements in rehearsals were considered newsworthy.

One day before the performance, Halide Salih penned an article that addressed the artists who would perform at the play.<sup>199</sup> She narrated Western Theater

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> *Tanin*, 20 August 1908.

History from the Ancient Greeks to Shakespeare, and declared that theater was able to reflect the moral needs and specific taste of a society. She also put emphasis on pedagogic aspects of the theater. On the other hand, she also defended that progress in theater and society went with hand in hand. Thus, the art of theater and playwrights, soul and mind of theater, could be found only in the nations that were most advanced. She put emphasis on lack of playwrights. This absence stemmed not from the absence of science and education but from obstacles that came from social life of Ottoman society<sup>200</sup> She was hopeful about the future; when society became more civilized, these obstacles would disappear. Halide Salih said that if the Ottomans did not have national plays, they could show works that had been produced by great nations which cultivates and heightens soul and minds of the nation. It was time to accustom the eyes of the people to beautiful scenes and their hearts to nice feelings. Furthermore, it is also time for the taming the souls of people that affected their private and social lives. The starting point of all these improvements was meaningful to Halide Salih. Progress in theater had just started with the performance of *Vatan*, written by Namık Kemal who was the first to feel the love of homeland. There could be no better point to start the theater for the people. She demanded that theater companies put on the works of old and new writers.

Halide Salih also wanted the theater companies not to forget women,<sup>201</sup> because “those, whose minds and hearts need beauty are not only men. Mothers, wives and girls of a nation should also see these great things and their souls should be greater by seeing this great things.”<sup>202</sup> She spoke on behalf of all women; “we do not want to

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid..

<sup>202</sup> “Dimağları kalpleri güzelliğe muhtac olanlar yalnız erkekler değildir. Milletın anaları zevceleri genç kızları da bu büyükşeyleri görmeli, bu büyük şeyler ile ruhları büyümeli!” Ibid.

see these works in the broken barracks of Kadıköy, we want to see them with good decor and in a theater building that has good conditions. Such bad buildings like the one in Kadıköy decrease the affects and beauty of the place and reduced its literary quality”<sup>203</sup>. She recommended that *Vatan* be shown at Tepebaşı Theater once and only for women. This also contributed to the performance’s patriotic aims by increasing the proceeds. Halide Salih ensured the amateurs about the fact that women also understood their art, as much as men did and they also should be sure that their efforts would not be wasted.<sup>204</sup>

Another point that indicates the significance of the event is the fact that journalists and men of literature were invited to the last rehearsal of the play. Most of them honored that invitation and attended to the rehearsal. A writer from *Tanin* noted four aspects of the event. First, although this was a play that had been left in a corner and forgotten for thirty years, but in fact, every sentence of it embroidered to freedom’s memories of nation. Second, all of the proceeds from the performance of the play were to be given to the campaign that was organized for the *Enver* and *Niyazi*.<sup>205</sup> These cruisers were going to bear the names of the two heroes who had personified İslam Bey in the real world and who had been chosen personally by Namık Kemal. The prognostications of Namık Kemal can be observed in every phase of happy revolution.

Third, he also stressed that young people performed this play with an amateur and public spirit (*hamiyet*). Furthermore, as an exception from the theater of the older generation, its last rehearsal was performed seriously before the journalists in

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<sup>203</sup> “Fakat biz bu parçaları Kadıköyünde kırık barakalarda görmek istemeyiz. Tesir ve güzelliğini gaip etmemek, kıymeti edebiyesi tenzil etmemek için onu yine iyi dekorlar ile iyi bir tiyatrodaki görmek isteriz.” Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

order to elicit their critiques. Writer states that it was obvious that to put *Vatan* which was written by patriotic excitement on stage was no easy task, especially if one considered the state of the contemporary theater. However, he believed that director Reşad Bey, who had a mastery of the duties of theater would over come this difficulty by his labor and efforts.<sup>206</sup>

The day came and “the performance was given at Tepebaşı Theater for the benefit of the Committee of Union and Progress at midday one Friday and it was just like the apocalypse” wrote Raşit Rıza and added “I said one word and immediately an officer from audiences pulled out his sword and started to give a speech. We were performing together with the spectators.”<sup>207</sup> Before the play started, it was obvious that it was going to become a great event for the public. All of the distinguished persons of İstanbul ran in to attend the play. Unfortunately, the capacity of the theater was not able to meet the demand. Many people were turned back from the gate with the answer “there is no place.”<sup>208</sup> Before the first curtain opened, audience was photographed from the stage as a memoir. After that the commander of the Tophane Military Band, Major Rıza Bey, left his place temporarily to famous composer Sinanyan Efendi and the band played a march that had been composed by himself and dedicated to the CUP.<sup>209</sup> Audience listened this march standing and applauded the band and the composer Sinanyan Efendi endlessly with appreciation.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> “Ben sahnede bir söz söylüyordum, seyircilerden bir zabıt sözlerimi kesiyor, kılıcını çekiyor, bir nutuk söylemeye başlıyordu. Böylece seyircilerle beraber temsil ediyorduk.” Sevengil, *Meşrutiyet Tiyatrosu*, p. 14.

<sup>208</sup> “Yer yok!” *Tanin*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>209</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>210</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 22 August 1908; *Tanin*, 22 August 1908.



A writer from *Sabah* who attended the last rehearsal of *Vatan* (*repetisyon jeneral*) stated that despite the fact that company had had too little time between the rehearsal and the performance, they were able to correct the faults that had been criticized by director Reşad Rıdvan at the end of the rehearsal.<sup>211</sup>

Most newspaper did not refer to the story of the play; they only presented a synopsis of it. Most of the time, they stated that there was no need for, a detailed narrative as the play was etched in the memory of the nation. Dividing it into act they summarized the plot. The first act of the play was a tableau of love, public spirit and national honor. The second act was a tableau of heroism; the third, a scene of public spirit, honor and altruism, the fourth a scene of attack, the fifth conveyed the images of fervor and victory, and the play ended with parades that was performed by genuine soldiers.<sup>212</sup>

What was the response of the spectators to these scenes? Is that really true that the story was etched the memory of the nation? “In the first acts of *Vatan*” reported a writer of *Tanin*, “is the struggle between love and duty.”<sup>213</sup> İslam Bey, whose family lived on the border of the homeland and raised martyries, was not able to stay with his lover. He sacrificed his comfort and love and ran to the battlefield. This first act of love for freedom that was verbalized by Namık Kemal “attracted whole fire of freedom and sacrifice the hearts of the spectators.” “Nobody cared if the performance of the play maintained its order, plainness and wholeness; every word of İslam Bey was interrupted by storm-like applause.”<sup>214</sup> It was a moment of trance in which the only focus point of

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<sup>211</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>212</sup> *Tanin*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>214</sup> “Oyun büsbütün ve sade olsun, kimsenin bunu düşündüğü yoktu. İslam beyin herlakırdısı bir alkış raat ve tarakası ile kesiliyordu.” *Ibid*.

the audiences was a common idea; “Everyone forgot the play, the actors, and themselves and applauded the holy, sacred and eternal homeland. They applauded love, sanctity and sublime of homeland.”<sup>215</sup>

*Tanin*’s writer put emphasis on the fact that this was the most crucial service of Kemal to the homeland: the desire of freedom and altruism, which burnt in Kemal like a fire was eternal. “As the acts changed, the first feeling grew stronger. In the third act, the hearts of the whole nation were fluttering when the dear soldiers who went through fire and water and confronted the attacks of enemies,”<sup>216</sup> stated the writer of *Tanin*. He depicted the audience in a state of trance; everybody in theater was in a mood of ecstasy; there was only one voice: appreciation; there was only one wish: the ascent of the homeland. Trance-like behavior was not only limited to audience the critics were not able to escape from these feelings either. İzzet Melih in *Millet* confessed that he was miserable. His lines were not a critique, but simply an interpretation of a feeling of a “Turkish heart” that had over flowed with pride and joy.<sup>217</sup>

Like the writer of *Sabah*, *Tanin*’s writer also noted that there was no need to tell the story of *Vatan*, but what he found significant was the impact of the performance on the audience. He proposed that the play always be performed in schools, battalions, and armies and to the general public for free. So that Namık Kemal’s fire-like words could awake even the most ignorant hearts. These writers, like many others who attended plays like *Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa* and *Vatan* and wrote

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<sup>215</sup> “Herkes oyunu oyuncularını kendini unutmuş mübarek mukaddes ebedi vatani alkışlıyordu. Vatan muhabbetini vatanın kudsiyetini ulviyetini alkışlıyordu.” Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> “Oyun ilerledikçe perdeler değiştiği ilk his bütün bütün kuvvet buluyordu. Hele üçüncü perde de düşmanın hücumna göğüs germeye koşan sevgili askerlerin arkası sıra koca bir milletin kalbi çırpınıyordu.” Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> *Millet*, 22 August 1908.

critiques about them, were usually aware of the fact that theater was a vehicle that was very effective in educating especially the illiterate masses. This writer also claimed that effects that could be created by books and articles in years were realized in a minute by theater. “The spectators were electrified because of this effect.”<sup>218</sup> The effects that were created by theater were rapid, but most of the time; remained life long. Writing plays becomes a duty because of this.<sup>219</sup> By sharing these points of view, İsmail Suphi stated that after listened to the words of İslam Bey, he found impossible not to bless homeland and hesitate to die for its improvement and advancement. Considering this strong influence over the audience and over himself, he was surprised at those who considered the theater only a form of fun.<sup>220</sup>

At the end of the performance which took on a form of “national festival” there was only one point that made the audiences despondent; they were not able to congratulate or show their reverence to the writer of play.<sup>221</sup> Before the fifth act, in order to show reverence to the author of *Vatan*, Fahrettin Bey called Ferit Bey, who was the son-in-law of Namık Kemal, to the stage.<sup>222</sup> Fahrettin Bey underlined the fact although he had created the freedom, Kemal had unfortunately been unable to see it. Everybody had to be satisfied with praising one of his relatives,<sup>223</sup> who was welcomed with warm applause by the audiences, which was excited by the play and madly clapped.<sup>224</sup> Ferit Bey addressed to the audience saying he was only a relative of Kemal

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<sup>218</sup> “Bundan hazirun elektriklenir“ *Tanin*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>221</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>224</sup> *Tanin*, 22 August 1908; *Millet*, 22 August 1908.

but that every individual of the nation was a son of Kemal. If they congratulated each other, they would certainly feel the freedom.<sup>225</sup>

The audiences and writers also hailed actors and actresses because of their extraordinary performance. They also had contributed to the event with their public spirit and sacrifice. Knar Hanım had acted the role of Zekiye without any fault and by feeling it; tuluat actor Abdürrezzak had played Abdullah Çavuş seriously, which had not been expected from him; and the Ahmet and İslam Bey roles were also good.<sup>226</sup>

“This was a big event among the public from two angles; its artistic value and it being a social phenomena,” wrote Ali Süha Delilbaşı in his memoirs. He added “as the play was performed without any fault, the theater group that performed it was composed of those who had social status in society such as Raşit Rıza, Ziya Nezihi, Nurettin Şefkati, and İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri.”<sup>227</sup>

Among them there was also tuluat actor Abdürrezzak who had not been on stage for years. Abdürrezzak received positive critiques even 36 years after the event. Although he had been used to clown-like acting on the tuluat stages, he performed the role of Abdullah Çavuş with equanimity and seriousness as if he was a comedian of high level and he proved the words of an Ottoman ambassador, who said to French Ambassador that “We have a Coquelin,<sup>228</sup> too, his name was Abdi.”<sup>229</sup> The joy of finding an actor who could be compared to a French counterpart was shadowed by feeling that if he could have found more suitable conditions for his talent, they would have had an actor whose fame could spread throughout the Western world. Ali Süha

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<sup>225</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>226</sup> *Tanin*, 22 August 1908; *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>227</sup> Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, p. 17.

<sup>228</sup> A French comedian actor Benoit-Constant Coquelin lived between 1841-1909.

<sup>229</sup> “Bizim de bir Coquelin’imiz vardı, adı Abdi!” Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, p. 17

Delilbaşı still felt the same sorrow 36 years later, although he had seen many actors for years.

İsmail Suphi had another sorrow regarding Abdürrezzak Efendi. He had neglected to mention in his critics him even though he had played one of the most important roles of *Vatan*, Abdullah Çavuş. Abdürrezzak was a victim of member of *Mabeyn*. They made him deprived of stage and stage of him. Despite years of deprivation, Abdürrezzak had proved that he was the actor best able to give meaning to Abdullah Çavuş in the way that Namık Kemal desired.<sup>230</sup> However, the severity of these sorrows felt by the two writers faded when the success of the play was considered; at the end of the performance the audience cried from the effects of it, and the actors also felt the same way on stage.<sup>231</sup>

At the end of theater critiques, the writers gave a very small place to those who had higher status in bureaucracy and who had attended and supported the play. İzzet Melih stated in *Millet*, that Şakir Pasha, son of Mecid Efendi, Gazi Ahmet Muhtar Pasha, Minister of *Evkaf* (foundations); “past master” Mahmud Ekrem Bey, under secretary Pertev Pasha, Keçecizade İzzet Fuad Pasha. *Tanin* also informed its readers that Müşir Şakir Paşa, a man of the sultan, attended to play.<sup>232</sup> Grand Vizier Kamil Paşa and former Grand Vizier Sait Paşa not only attended the play but they also granted money to organization of the play. Kamil Paşa and Sait Paşa considered giving money for the performance of *Vatan* as a national aid, and donated 300 and 200 lira subsequently.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 23 August 1908.

<sup>231</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>232</sup> *Tanin*, 22 August 1908.

<sup>233</sup> *Sabah*, 22 August 1908.

In order to understand the nature of the relationship between one of the most influential political actors of the time, the Committee of Union and Progress and theater, it was very critical to grasp that CUP not only support theater by preventing public authorities from banning these activities by making use of its name, but it also supported actively all these events by providing organizational network and money for them. Raşit Rıza, in his memoirs stated that he was called after the performance and the editor of *Tanin*, Hüseyin Cahit Bey, gave him five golden Lira on behalf of the Committee.<sup>234</sup> As was mentioned before, the staging of *Vatan* in the squares of İstanbul such as Harbiye Mektebi Square, Tophane Mektebi Square, and at schools such as Kuleli and Darüşşafaka was organized maybe not by the CUP but as we saw in the memoirs and newspapers, at least with the help of it. For instance, the performance of *Vatan* realized in Salonica by Heveskeran Company was possible by the furnishing of a private train that was provided by the “revolutionary government.”<sup>235</sup>

#### Vatan as a National Festival at Tophane Square

For disseminating their ideas to the masses and legitimizing themselves before the Ottoman public, and mobilizing masses for patriotic causes, theater was one of the best vehicles for the Committee of Union and Progress. Whether they had a direct relationship with the committee or not, whether they considered themselves Unionist or sympathizer, critics, actors, directors, and those who were a part of the theater activities were well aware of this fact and deliberately made use of this power. Because of that, it was not an outcome of the fact there was no well-established theater

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<sup>234</sup> Sevensgil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*, p. 15.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

building in good condition that was able to meet the intensive demands of the spectators, but also the desire for reaching the crowds and masses. Furthermore, staging theater in squares had a symbolic meaning and provided ground for introducing new political forms and symbols to the public. After the performance of *Vatan* at Tepebaşı Summer Theater, Heveskeran Company performed the same play in Tophane and Harbiye Squares. These performances had philanthropic aims; the proceeds of both events were donated to a campaign organized for the victims of the Çırçır Fire.

The first staging of *Vatan* in a public square, on 28 August 1908, was an event that could be defined as “a national festival.”<sup>236</sup> The square was overcrowded with people. Lamps, lanterns, and flags were everywhere. All of crowds were waiting for *Vatan*, “homeland.” Well-mannered officers with gloves and neat uniform, who also fastened the band on which the words of “freedom, equality, justice” were written, distributed water to people and carried chairs. Gas lamps lit the surrounding area. A big flag streamed over the square on which “glorious words” of “duty, military service, and freedom” was written.

This great square was not only a place that was overcrowded, but other places like building of the Ministry, Coffee Houses that are just opposite the square, and even the private houses that could see the square were full. While the crowd was waiting for *Vatan*, for one moment, the focus of everyone concentrated on one point, on the balcony of a mansion that overlooked the square, where prince Abdürrahim Efendi was sitting. In that moment, the Minister of Tophane (arsenal); Ali Rıza Paşa, Necip Paşa, and Ali Refik Paşa declared to the crowd that Prince Abdürrahim Efendi had accepted the honorary presidency of the Association of Progress of Art (Terakki-i

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<sup>236</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 29 August 1908.

Sanat Cemiyeti). The crowd responded to this information with great joy and shouted praise of the prince. He stood up and greeted the crowd.

Despite his illness that made him unable to move, the writer of *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, Hüseyin Kazım, was not able to resist call of *Vatan*, and this call made him recover, he joined the crowds. According to him, these scenes symbolized the reciprocal relationship between the Ottoman dynasty and its citizens. Free Ottomans considered showing their respect to Sultan as a duty and, as could be seen in these scenes, they also expected love from them. When they saw this respect and love, they became enthusiastic and the attitudes of Abdürrahim Efendi with his nobility and politeness met their expectations. These greetings made lifted fear of the gloomy years of the İsdibdat.

For a while after, the crowd waved with applause, the audience waved flags and a part of the brass band went to the seashore for a guest who had been invited and had honored this invitation by coming from Edirne. General staff kaymakam (caimacam)<sup>237</sup> Galip Bey responded to the endless applause by bowing. “He is one of the most patriotic and public spirited members of the Second Army,” stated Hüseyin Kazım “and one of the most intelligent and active members of the venerable committee (CUP).”<sup>238</sup> However, it was not only the crowds that welcomed this worthy guest, but also Minister of Tophane (arsenal) Ali Rıza Paşa, Necip Paşa, and other men of state welcomed Galip Bey, too. They took him to the balcony and introduced him to Prince Abdürrahim Efendi. Hüseyin Kazım considered these scenes exhilarating. Then Prince Abdürrahim Efendi came down from the balcony of the mansion to a chair that had been prepared for him among other spectators, who showed their veneration. The

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<sup>237</sup> The governor of a sanjak or district in Ottoman Empire.

<sup>238</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 29 August 1908.



orchestra played the March of Hamid and the audience joined in by clapping their hands. Apart from the real performance that would be given on the stage, all these events happened in the full view of the masses. They were performances in the public sphere and had direct political implications. These performances by those who were in power or in the struggle for power were most of the time symbolic.

Hüseyin Kazım, not surprisingly, and like many other journalists, did not feel the necessity to tell the plot of *Vatan*. According to him, this play had emerged from the remains of the fire that had burnt the heart of Kemal of his love of the Homeland. “Some critics,” said Hüseyin Kazım “claim that some points of this play do not fit the art of theater.” He replied by saying, “who cares?” Because, they do not watch it as a theater, but they rush to the theater because they see that the love of the homeland is embodied in this play. For him, whether it was qualified as theater or not, did not matter because it was not a text of theater already. It was presented, in Hüseyin Kazım’s point of view, to give the population the consciousness of homeland, the attention of the community that was awakening by mirroring it with a tableau.<sup>239</sup> It was possible that one day a better play could be written but until that day this play would not be forgotten. He wrote if it was possible to criticize whether this play had a moral power from the theater point of view or not. Furthermore, it was not possible to call this a performance as play at all because, the actors worked voluntarily and stepped on stage with their good intentions. These actors who were performing the play day and night, were able to fulfill their duty due to their experience that was gained by the repetition. What Hüseyin Kazım and others who thought like him tried to do was to watch this tableau, grasp the lesson from it and thank the persons who work for patriotic causes.

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

In keeping with what Hüseyin Kazım said about the play, starting with the first moment of the play, the audience entered into a trance. They watched the play in total silence except for some moment when they were unable to prevent themselves and chanted slogans and cries of love of freedom that came from their hearts and souls. The fifth and last act depicted the attacks of the Ottomans and it was well prepared. This scene gave “enthusiasm to the hearts of Ottomans who stand in their place with the power of their swords.”<sup>240</sup> At the end of the last act, the curtain opened for five bis<sup>241</sup>. The parade of soldiers from different ranks of the army made all of the Ottomans who were proud of their soldiers and soldiery rapturous. At the end of the play, it was reported that there was no eye that did not fill with the tears; there were no hands that did not shake. What remained in the ears of Hüseyin Kazım from this event were the endless echoes of the words that the audience chanted.<sup>242</sup>

#### The Ottoman Mass Pageant: Vatan at Harbiye Nezareti Square

The plays that were written before the promulgation of the constitution were performed most of the time for the benefit of patriotic causes. This cause sometimes could be a campaign that was organized to buy war cruisers for the Ottoman navy and sometimes for the benefit of political exiles who had returned to İstanbul after the promulgation of constitution and found themselves in destitution and misery. However, the event that happened at the end of the August shifted the focus of the

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<sup>240</sup> “İyi tertib olunan bu manzara makamlarında kılıçlarına dayanarak kıyamla müftehir olan Osmanlılar için müheyyeç kulubdur.” Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> “Used especially in music, to shout approval and to call for a repetition,” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, New Revised Edition., s.v. “Bis.”

<sup>242</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 29 August 1908.

public from these campaigns to itself. The Çırçır Fire had left hundreds of family homeless and in misery. After the disasters of Çırçır Fire, the first performance of the *Vatan* was organized for the benefit of the victims and it was maybe the largest and most unique theater organization that gathered such a big audience and participants together at once and for philanthropic aims in İstanbul for the first time. As was advertised in the newspaper, *Vatan* was going to be performed on 11 September 1908 in Harbiye Square and with the patronage of the Ministry of War. Its program, advertisements, and related news were published in newspapers<sup>243</sup> and readers were kept informed of the preparations and the places where tickets were sold.<sup>244</sup>

The event was under the patronage of the Ministry of War and the personal patronage of the Minister of War Ali Rıza Paşa. The government supported this event by providing the soldier uniforms that were used by Heveskeran Company.<sup>245</sup> Half officially, for the excellence of the concert (probably traditional one) governmental accounting vice-manager Muhittin Bey was responsible for preparation.

This event was not only performance of the *Vatan*, but also included concerts that would be performed by two different choral groups and orchestras. The first one was traditional with the traditional instruments, and the second was a Western style brass band and military orchestras; Mabeyn-i Hümayun Muzikası (Brass Band of Mabeyn-i Hümayun) and Tophane Sanayi Muzikası (Tophane Brass Band of Art).

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<sup>243</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 9 September 1908; *Servet-i Fünun*, 6 September 1908; *Sabah*, 11 September 1908; *İttifak*, 31 August 1908; *Sabah*, 8 September 1908; " *Sabah*, 6 September 1908; *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 11 September 1908; *İkdam*, 13 September 1908.

<sup>244</sup> According to advertisements tickets were available in "Köprübaşında; İpekçi Kani Efendi, Binbirçeşit, Selanik Bonmarşesi, Eczaneyi Hamdi, Beyoğlunda; Pigmalyon, Bonmarşe, Kitapçı Arto Kail, Tepebaşı Bahçesi." Ticket prices were ten Liras, five Liras, one lira, half lira, one *Mecidiye*, half *Mecidiye*.

<sup>245</sup> There appeared numerous writing between different ministries regarding the soldiers uniforms that was provided to the Heveskeran Company as costumes. The state wanted to take them back and for this cause they search for Reşad Rıdvan for two years. Yet at last the government learned that he had turned the costumes back. BOA. DH. EUM THR Dosya No. 50, Vesika No. 82, 19 N. 1328; BOA DH EUM THR Dosya No. 23, Vesika No. 55, 20 M.1328.

According to the advertisements that appeared in the newspapers they were going to perform both national melodies and some parts from operas. The traditional chorus and orchestra were composed of civil servants and officers of the Ministry of War with fifty people. In this orchestra some famous performers took part such as Hacı Kerami Bey, Osman, Ziya, Asım Beys, Kanunist (kanun<sup>246</sup> player) Cemil, Udist (lud player) Fahri, and Kemeñçe (kemenche), (Constantinople Lyra) player Arif Bey as famous figures of the traditional music circles of the time. Apart from concert there would be another play. This play was first to be Namık Kemal's *Zavallı Çocuk*, a drama but later it was changed to *Mürebbiye* by Hüseyin Rahmi, a comedy, due to the desire of sending the audience home happy.<sup>247</sup> Teachers of the Academy of War were going to perform some gymnastics. Two poems by Ekrem Bey (the son of Namık Kemal) were to be published and sold during the events for the benefit of the fire victims. He would also perform his poem (*Kaside*) (eulogy) that was written for the Ottoman Army and again his poem "Kırmızı Fesler" (Red Fezs) that address to spies was to be performed by an amateur on stage. Gas lamps were going to be light Harbiye Square and the fire tower was going to be decorated. Furthermore, many deputies, ambassadors and worthies of the army and bureaucracy were going to attend the event. The mother of Hedayi Hanımefendi also contributed to this organization by donating fifty liras. According to the program, at the end of *Vatan* there was going to be a parade by soldiers from different parts of the army such as the infantry, cavalry, and artillery. These advertisements also informed the readers about the public transportation that would be provided for the audience.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Kanun is a string instrument found in Near Eastern traditional music. It is basically a zither with a narrow trapezoidal sound board.

<sup>247</sup> *Sabah*, 11 September 1908.

<sup>248</sup> *İttifak*, 5 September 1908.

One day before the event everything seemed ready for the audience and when the time came, the stage was ready in front of the entrance gate facing the Ministry of War. The width of the stage was 12 meters; the length was 24 meters. Ten steps away from the stage two special tribunes were built on left and right sides of the stage for important guests. The square was lit by gas lamps and everywhere was decorated with Ottoman flags.<sup>249</sup> On two sides of the curtain two big Ottoman flags took their places. The edges of these two, there were two emblems of the army decorated with arms. Consequently, twenty, ten, five, one, a half lira chairs stretched towards the plain area. The area that was reserved for this activity was separated from the big square of the Ministry of War.

Before the event started, the audience came with their tickets, in a hurry to reach their chairs. This wide and open area was filled rapidly, as if it was enlarged by breathing.<sup>250</sup> According to the advertisements 16.000 tickets were printed<sup>251</sup> and some journalist stated that the place between the gate of the ministry and the building was chock full of people.<sup>252</sup> The audience was mixed; in the right tribunes there were high officials and great men of the Ottoman dynasty, and in the left tribunes, there was the ambassadors of Iran,<sup>253</sup> France and Spain.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, officers from embassies, soldiers from the high ranks of the army, ministers, officers of government, young and

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<sup>249</sup> *İkdam*, 12 September 1908.

<sup>250</sup> *Servet-i Fünun Akşam Nüshası*, 12 September 1908.

<sup>251</sup> *İkdam*, 11 September 1908.

<sup>252</sup> *İkdam*, 13 September 1908.

<sup>253</sup> *Servet-i Fünun Akşam Nüshası*, 12 September 1908.

<sup>254</sup> *Tanin*, 13 September 1908.

old people whose numbers exceeded 10.000 were waiting in silence and veneration in the circles that were well-lit.<sup>255</sup>

“Now,” said a writer of *Tanin*, Müştak, “I am watching these people who are preparing for a reading of a glorious page of the past from stage that was surrounded by two Ottoman flags.” One moment came and the silence became more concrete. “Chests were under pressure and hearts were beating as they were surprised.” Everyone was in a state of religious veneration. Müştak states that “this was the historical event which was organized for the idea of a memory from the past to the future and for a present of greetings and veneration from today to the past was performed in a place where the hero of future would arise.”<sup>256</sup>

The event started at one o'clock as it had been stated in the advertisements, and the curtain opened slowly; a mad applause broke out, with a torrent-like attempt. Thousands of people screamed “Long live!” (Yaşa!) All these scenes took the writer of *Tanin* to a different dream world; a hand that came by cleaving darkness and grasping a thin, transparent, and clean child's hand that came from the other horizon. These two hands brought together the past and the future of a nation that had been in the sorrow for 32 years. Müştak awoke from this dream with the urging of a military officer and looked where this man shows him. Müştak saw the moon, and this moon in the sky, according to him, celebrated this hearty scene and shed its lights on good fortunate and happy future of the nation.

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> “İki Osmanlı bayrağının kucakladığı sahnede şimdi mazinin bir sahife-i şerefine okumaya hazırlanan bu binlerce ve binlerce insanları seyrediyordum. . . Sanki göğüsler bir taziyik altında kalpler darbanı şaşırmişti. Herkesde bir hürmet-i dindarane vardı. Vatanın istikbaldeki kahramanlarını yetiştirecek olan yine bu yerde mazinin nişayid-i hamasetini dinlemek maziden atıye bir hatıra, atiden maziye tuhfe-i selam ve ihtiram göndermek fikriyle tertib olunan bu müsamere bir müsamere-i tarihiyeydi.” Ibid.

While Müştak was dreaming, program continued as had been advertised in newspapers; the first traditional chorus and orchestra rendered *fasıls*, and the Tophane and Mabeyn Brass Bands played national melodies and some parts from operas. After the music, although there was *Vatan* on the programs, *Mürebbiye* was performed first. However, *Mürebbiye* was interrupted, the middle of the performance skipped due to a dense fog that suddenly appeared. Before the performance of *Vatan*, the brother of Niyazi Bey was called to the stage and introduced to the spectators. He made a speech with his Albanian accent.<sup>257</sup> When he finished and the curtain was closed, Major Şükrü Bey, who had arrived in İstanbul about two days ago from Aleppo, stood up among the spectators and make a declamation as an answer to the brother of hero of freedom, Niyazi Bey.<sup>258</sup> After these speeches that were applauded with joy and enthusiasm, the performance of *Vatan* started. At the end of the first act, the son of Namık Kemal, Ekrem Bey, was introduced to the audience and he also gave a speech and recited a poem; *Kaside-i Askeriyye* (Euology for Soldiers) he had written. During the reading every line of it was praised by the audience with endless applause. Then, another of his poems about spies, *Kırmızı Fesler*, was recited by an amateur with serious attitudes and this poem also was met with intense greetings and slogans such as “Long Live Freedom! Long Live Justice! Long Live Army!” In this entracte, soldiers from Mabeyn and Tophane made a show by exhibiting rapier trainings.<sup>259</sup>

The actors and actresses won the approval of the spectators due to their extraordinary performance. Especially a young actor Nureddin (Şefkati) who played the role of İslam Bey, and Knar Hanım who played the Zekiye Hanım role, said their

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<sup>257</sup> *Servet-i Fünun Akşam Nüshası*, 12 September 1908; *Tanin*, 13 September 1908; *İkdam* 31 August 13 September 1908.

<sup>258</sup> *İkdam*, 13 September 1908.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

dialogs quickly and clearly, without needing any cues from the prompter. Abdürrezzak also made the effect of the play more powerful with his contributions.

At the end of the play, the soldiers who were on stage during some parts of the play, soldiers from Nizamiye (infantry), from artillery, students of the Military Academy, who wore clothes of Züâf Askeri,<sup>260</sup>(Soldier of Züâf) with turbans (*Sarıık*) and fezs, put on a parade. They were also hailed with applause.

At the end of the event, the princes of the Ottoman dynasty left the square with applause. Princes Selim, Selahaddin, Ahmed, Abdülkadir, Burhaneddin, Abdülrahim, Kemaleddin, and the son of departed prince Şevket Efendi; Damat Cemaleddin, Sabahaddin, Nureddin and Arif Hikmet Pashas were persons who attended the event on behalf of the Ottoman dynasty and prince Yusuf İzzettin also sent someone to represent himself. From the cabinet, the Minister of Justice; Hasan Fehmi Pasha, Minister of Interior; Hakkı Beyefendi, Minister of War; Ali Rıza Pasha, Müşir Ahmet Muhtar Pasha, Fuad Pasha, and Mahmud Muhtar Pasha, were among those important figures of the time who watched the play from special tribune-lodges that had been built at the right side of the big stage.

The journals that sent special journalist to this event also reserved enough place in their publications for the poems that were performed on the stage. Thus, readers were also informed and had access to the performance indirectly. However, the number of performances of *Vatan* was not restricted to those three. The performance of *Vatan* at Tepebaşı Theater for the first time, and in Tophane Square and the Ministry of War Square to the masses were only the big events that attracted public interest them and events to which the newspapers sent their reporters. Furthermore, due to the

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<sup>260</sup> Soldier of Züâf: A group of soldier that was composed of natives of Algeria, Züâf: A type of fezs its width is same both on the top and bottom and that was wore by Soldier of Züâf; Şemsettin Sami, *Kamus-i Türki*, pp. 675.



patriotic and philanthropic aims to reach a great number of audience their advertisements were published in different journals for days.

Apart from the performances that attracted the attention of the masses, there were also many *Vatan* performances in different parts of İstanbul and in the provinces according to advertisements that appeared in the newspapers. Some of the critiques regarding these performances found their place in the pages of these newspapers and by depending on these critiques it was possible to state that these performances did occur. On the other hand, there were several performances that were never critiqued in newspapers and journals and so it was not possible to learn whether they were performed or not. Only it could be inferred that most of them were well-organized events due to the fact that they were able to advertise their performances in newspapers. Furthermore, these were only the ones that appeared in Ottoman periodicals. By looking at memoirs and press it was possible to claim that there were thousands of performances, in every corner of İstanbul and probably in other big cities of the empire that were never mentioned in the newspapers.

#### Vatan for Women in Kadıköy

Just after the first performance of the *Vatan* at Tepebaşı Theater on 21 August 1908 and a second and a third one on that weekend were performed in the same place by a theater company that was about to split in to two. One part of this theater company performed *Vatan* for women in Kadıköy, in Kuşdili field.<sup>261</sup> More crucially, this event was organized by the *Osmanlı Kadınları Cemiyet-i İttihadiyesi* (Society of Union of Ottoman Women) that was newly established and realized its first service

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<sup>261</sup> *İttifak*, 27 August 1908.

with a public spirit with a performance of *Vatan*. A few days before the performance members of the association worked hard and went by ferry to visit the women of the Ottoman dynasty and officers, and they sold nearly all of the tickets to them and collected about 800 liras. The tickets that remained were sold out in two hours one day before the performance. Starting from 5 o'clock, Kuşdili field, filled with hundreds of Ottoman women wearing colorful *çarşafs* and *yeldirmes*. The box office was not able to meet the intensive demands for tickets.

Before the start of the performance, from the members of the association, the mother of Celal Sahir, Fehime Nüzhet introduced the wife of the famous doctor Pepö Akşivte, Madam Akşivte to the audience. Madam Akşivte made a speech about the freedom and the aims of the association. She also thanked the audience for their contribution to the campaign. Speeches were not limited to this first one. At the end of the first act, another address was delivered regarding the significance of raising children, by daughter of Doctor İsmail Pasha, Leyla (Saz?) Hanım. Fehime Nüzhet also introduced at end of the second act Miss Elizfre Skoyine, who was a nominee for membership of the association. She made a speech condemning the false European point of view of Turkish women. Furthermore, by listing the names of some women, she also declared that she knew many enlightened women who approved of the aims of struggle and joined it. She emphasized the contributions of the women for revolution. Furthermore, she received warm greetings from the audience while she emphasized the opinion that İslam was not a hurdle that prevented the progress of women, which was also approved by the consent of Şeyhülislam who was also a great supporter of progress.

Last, at the end of the third act, Fehime Nüzhet took the floor and she mentioned that *iane-i milliye* (national donation) was a sacred duty and she strongly

believed that Ottoman women who carried that sacred name would work for this aim.<sup>262</sup> She was applauded when she declared that Ottoman women should raise and educate their children to be honored and hard working men who engaged with professions who did not take their salary from the Treasury but from another sources. She also strongly defended that, the title of “honest and hard working man” was more valuable than the title of Pasha and Bey. She received intensive praise from the spectators.

Apart from the speeches that took place between the each act, women who watched it for the first time admired the performance. The actors were successful in their roles, in İslam Bey; Raşid Bey, in Zekiye Hanım; Hekimyan Hanım, and in Abdullah Çavuş; Ahmet Fehim. As usual, in the last act, a parade was held and some Military Academy students from the audiences and some from the Tophane Muzıkası (Tophane Brass Band) took the stage and joined the parade. The Tophane Muzıkası rendered national melodies and it was honored by torrent like clapping especially when they performed the *Song of Vatan*, words of which had been written by a member of the association, Fehime Nüzhet, and composed by another member, Leyla (Saz) Hanım.

After finishing of *Vatan* performance, “Hasan Efendi by voluntarily performing one act comedy” said the writer of *İttifak*, “refreshed the hearts that had been burnt by the fire of *Vatan*.”<sup>263</sup> Exit from the event was as colorful as entrance; “colors, dresses, appreciation lines on faces, smiles, the pleasure of Ottoman femininity whose hearts extended with sacred freedom.”<sup>264</sup> The writer also thanked the widow of the deceased Sadi Pasha, president of association, Belkıs Hanım and all members of association on behalf of all the Ottoman press and emphasized that she repeated the

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> “Renkler tuvaletler çehrelerdeki hutut-ı memnuniyet handeler... bu mukaddes hürriyetten kalpleri genişleyen Osmanlı kadınlığının mesar-ı umumiyesi”

cries of “Long live Ottoman women!” At the end of her impressions, the writer also put aside some place for stating that those who had participated in the event included members of Ottoman dynasty. Inside the theater, books that included the speeches and a poem of Celal Sahir, *Kardeş Sesi* (Voice of Brother) were sold and the proceeds given to the war cruiser campaign. Furthermore, while the women were leaving the theater 2400 lira and ten kuruş donations were collected and delivered the commission that was organized for the Çırçır Fire.

### Vatan is in Every Corner

The *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye* (School of Medicine) also organized an occasion that was comprised of concerts, and theater plays in its garden on 2 September 1908. This performance of *Vatan* and another play (*Zavallı Çocuk*) of Namık Kemal at this school was very meaningful because “it is possible to understand that freedom was not taken easily if the victims who were given for that cause from the Military Academy, School of Law, School of Political Sciences, School of Medicine were considered.”<sup>265</sup> Now, watching the performance of *Vatan* in the garden of the School of Medicine was proof and confirmation of freedom. Thanks to *Vatan* performances freedom was vivid. These were the reasons that the made audience, Ottomans who loved freedom, cry with happiness during the performance.<sup>266</sup>

At 5 o'clock a brass band and *İnce Saz* (traditional orchestra) renders, and March of Freedom, (*Hürriyet Marşı*) composed by Zati Bey, was sung by a chorus with the joining in many students from the audiences. The writer of *İttifak* was especially

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<sup>265</sup> *İttifak*, 2 September 1908.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

proud of this march because the words was written by the editorial writer of *İttifak*; Samih Bey. The audience was mixed. “The school was full of patriots who were men and women, Muslim and Christian.”<sup>267</sup> The first performance of *Zavallı Çocuk* was for women and Mehmed Bey in the İta Bey role and Kınar Hanım in the Şefika role acted perfectly and made all of the women cry. At night, this play was repeated for the men and it was applauded with joy by the audience who filled the garden of the school and whose number exceeded 5000. After these preludes, the play was on stage; *Vatan* was performed perfectly by amateurs with Captain Salih Bey in the role of İslam, Doctor Midhat Bey in the role of Sıdkı and unchanging actress of Zekiye role, Knar Hanım. Between the scenes Dr. Rıza and Tefvik Vacid Bey gave speeches and the groom of Namık Kemal, Rıfat Bey was introduced by the Teacher Suad Pasha and he addressed the audience briefly. In the daytime also some speeches had been made. The brother of the hero of freedom Niyazi Bey Osman Fehmi made a declamation; other speeches were made by one “Bulgarian friend”<sup>268</sup> and French teacher of the School of Medicine, Tefliyan Efendi, in French. Furthermore, the Minister of War Ali Rıza Pasha; and Damat Kemalledin Pasha; Fuad Pasha; the Ambassador of Iran; the undersecretary of the Ministry of War; Pertev Pasha, and many foreigners attended the event.<sup>269</sup>

The “*Sarıyer, Büyükdere and Yenimahalle Cemiyet-i Milliyesi*” (National Society of Sarıyer, Büyükdere, and Yenimahalle) also organized a performance of *Vatan* in Hidayetin Bağı (Vineyard of Hidayet) in Sarıyer.<sup>270</sup> According to adds the amateur theater group (Heveskeran Company) that had played *Vatan* at Tepebaşı

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> *İttifak*, 10 September 1908; *Tanin*, 5 September 1908; *Servet-i Fünun*, 3 September 1908; *Millet*, 2 September 1908.

Theater and Tophane Talimhane Square were going to perform there, too. The Tophane-i Amire Muzikası was also going to contribute to the event. Audience who showed their tickets on the ferry would be able to board without paying. In the evening of play the view was more or less similar to the previous ones. The garden was lit by gas lamps and everywhere was decorated with Ottoman flags. While the Tophane-i Amire Brass Band was playing, the audience whose number exceeded 2000 became joyful. Just a few minutes before the opening of the curtain, British ambassador came and he passed among the audience, who had already stood up with cries of “*Hurra! Vira! Yaşasun!*” (Long live! from different languages) and sat in his place with pleasure. As soon as he sat down, the curtain opened immediately and a speech was made first thanking ambassador as one of the members of free nations, for attending the play and then mentioned that it is not possible to explain the feeling in one moment that the British Empire had helped in the most difficult times, most dangerous days of Turkey. The British Empire had served altruistically by sharing the wound of disaster that had happened 1885. This speech was met with shouts of “Long live England! Long live the English People!” (Yaşasın İngiltere! Yaşasın İngilizler!). The writer of *İttifak* reported that after the performance ended the British Ambassador went out from the theater by opening his way among the crowd and applause.

*İttifak* writer put emphasis on the event how well had been organized. The association and the members of the association, beys and pashas had put intensive effort into the satisfaction of the audience. They also had provided food. The play had been also performed for women in the mid-day and it was as good as the later one. *İttifak* published the names of women; president of *Büyükdere Kadınlar Cemiyet-i Milliyesi* (National Society of Women of Büyükdere) Madam Aseyan, wife of Edhem Şemsettin Bey, and Miss Yahupeyan. They were honored due to their effort for

organizing this event. *İttifak* also reported that two women from Ottoman dynasty also attended the performance. Some other names were also mentioned in the same pages but without appreciation. According to *İttifak*, despite how great and admirable the interests of the people and even of foreigners to contribute to the campaign the aim of which was patriotic and benevolent, it was regretful and shameful the behavior of the director of Duetche Bank and the director of *Müze-i Hümayun* (Imperial Museum), Osman Hamdi Bey who immediately sent back the tickets without contributing to the campaign. As it could be understood from these reports, *İttifak* as a newspaper mentioned the persons who contributed the campaign that was organized for patriotic and charitable causes, and honored and publicized their name. It also displayed the names of those who had status in society, but hesitated to contribute to these campaigns before public with a threatening tone.

Another performance of *Vatan* was given at the Naval Academy on 3 September 1908.<sup>271</sup> According to the critiques of Halide Salih in *Tanin*, the play was prepared and performed by students of the school including the role of Zekiye. Before the performance, on the road, Halide Salih had had some concerns regarding the issue of who would act the role of Zekiye and she wished that if Knar had been brought for this role to avoid the vague situation of a female role acted by a man, and worse by a soldier. The thing that she was afraid of happened, but this situation did not disappointed her due to the fact that the male student who played the role of Zekiye made her feel that he did not lose his masculinity, even on stage. Although she admired the play and the performance, she did not hesitate to urge the student regarding theater and play. The play was one of the great works of Namık Kemal and it had contributed to the revolution that they were already living in. “As its value is great, in order to

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<sup>271</sup> *Tanin*, 6 September 1908; *Tanin*, 2 September 1908.

understand its value better,” she wrote “it was necessary to read it at the age of sixteen in a dark corner and hide it under a pillow.”<sup>272</sup>

Despite it was worth, it was not a military play at all in the eyes of Halide Salih; because order and discipline were the sprit of army, whereas in the play *Çavuş* and *İslam Bey* gave advice to the colonel although their duty was to follow order.<sup>273</sup> This could be well fit to stage, but not in the realty or in the army. She also shared the example of Japanese army. Which factors made the Japan army successful in the eyes of Halide Salih, was the unbroken chain of command.

Although theater was one of the most effective schools for morality, and despite the fact that this kind of social activity had beneficial effects on students of Naval Academy and provided chance for them contact with society, theater at the same time prevented them from studying their lessons. Halide Salih advised to the students spend their time in activities that were closely related to their profession, such as sailing, rowing, and whatever activities that could be done on the surface of the water. Last advice of Halide Salih was related to women. She advised to the students to show veneration to and trust in women because women who had been shown these two attitudes, would be straight, proper, and noble, if they were assaulted and scorned, they would be liars, deceitful and banal. The man who set a high value on women would be also elevated.

By looking at the advertisement in the press, one may see the different performances of the *Vatan* took place in every corner of İstanbul. For instance, on 2 September 1908 at Kuleli Mekteb-i İdadiye-i Askeriye (Senior Military High School of

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<sup>272</sup> “Bu birkaç sahifenin kemalin bütün asarıyla beraber inkılab-ı hazıra ettiği hizmet o kadar büyük o kadar büyüktür ki, bunu takdir etmek için on beş on altı yaşındayken bu parçayı karanlık köşelerde okumuş, yastığın altına saklamış olmak lazım gelir.” *Tanin*, 6 September 1908.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.



Kuleli), in Çengelköy *Vatan* was performed by the theater group (Heveskeran Company) that performed at Tophane-i Amire (Square of Tophane-i Amire) along with students. Furthermore, the Ertuğrul and Tophane Brass Bands also contributed to the event<sup>274</sup>. On 5 September 1908 the school of Darüşşafaka was another place that *Vatan* was put on stage for the benefit of fire victims and orphans.<sup>275</sup> 11 September 1908 at Tepebaşı Theater, Müzakere-i Fünun-ı Maliye Cemiyeti organized a *Vatan* performance for the benefit of those who had returned to İstanbul from exile.<sup>276</sup> On 13 September 1908 in the Mirgün-Millet Garden (Mirgün-Boyacıköy) *Vatan* was performed for the benefits of victims of the Çırçır Fire. *Vatan* was organized by *İttihad Kulübü* (Union Club) under the patronage of Prince Sabahattin with the contribution of the Ertuğrul Brass Band. A theater group that was “only composed of amateurs” and that acted in Tophane, the School of Medicine, etc performed *Vatan*. Rehearsals were directed by Reşad Rıdvan Bey (Heveskeran Company). It seems to have been a big organization with seven chorists that sang the *Vatan March* in the second and last acts. Two hundred people also walked in the parade.<sup>277</sup> *Millet* informed its readers regarding a *Vatan* performance that took place at Mirgün (Emirgan)-Millet Garden. There was also an advertisement where news from Bursa was featured. According to this news, the Ministry of Interior was informed that the *Vatan* also had performed in Bursa and 100 liras had been collected for the benefits of the victims of Çırçır Fire.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 4 September 1908; *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 2 September 1908.

<sup>275</sup> *Tanin*, 2 September 1908; *Sabah*, 4 September 1908; *Tanin*, 4 September 1908.

<sup>276</sup> *Tanin*, 7 September 1908.

<sup>277</sup> *Millet*, 11 September 1908.

<sup>278</sup> *Millet*, 11 September 1908.

## CHAPTER VII

### EVENING OF THEATER AND “MORNING OF FREEDOM”

By looking at the memoirs and the press of the time it could be claimed that *Vatan* was the dominant play of its time performed in every corner of İstanbul and elsewhere. However, while the performance of *Vatan* became a kind of routine for the public a new play appeared and attracted public attention. The name of this play that shook the stage and finally fell victim to censorship was: *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* (Morning of Freedom) by Hüseyin Kami.<sup>279</sup>

While some critics do not consider it even a theater play, others bless it as a major contribution to the theater world, but all critics agree that this theater play is very political. Although some critics might question whether the play contributed to the education of the public or not, its popularity cannot be denied. Huge crowds filled the theaters to watch the play, so that finally the government felt a need to intervene. At that point, everything turned upside down.

#### Theater Critics *Versus* The Taste of Masses

Starting in November, news about *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* appeared on the pages of newspapers. Furthermore, “Nearly every day, it is impossible to see anything other

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<sup>279</sup> Hüseyin Kami was born in 1878 and died in 1912. He was a poet and worked as a journalist. He was known as his opposition against the Unionists. He was exiled to Karaman where he died. İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, *Son Asır Türk Şairleri* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1969), pp. 785-786.

then *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, whose ads are hung up in every corner and the critiques of which that appear on in every newspaper column.”<sup>280</sup>

Ironically, the writer of this passage, İbnürrefik, also contributed to this fashion by sending a critique of the play to *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* in which he evaluated it with a bitter tone. “What a beautiful word (*Sabah-ı Hürriyet*) (Morning of Freedom)” wrote İbnürrefik, “how sweet to hear, to see and to read this word! It is refreshing!” According to İbnürrefik play did not give its audience what it promised with its name. He predicted that in the future, in an encyclopedia, an entry about the play would say

*Sabah-ı Hürriyet* is the name of a play that, in the year of 1324 (1908), was played by Heveskeran Company several times. However, there is no relation between its title and content. Those who heard this brilliant and sweet name and ran to the theaters were not able to see anything but the life story of a pasha who had fled to Europe. They were not able to understand the subject matter of the play or the intention of writer. The play was banned by reasonable people due to the fact that this play was written with a one-sided view and it created a bad effect on the public opinion by distorting reality.<sup>281</sup>

Furthermore, he claimed that the entry would not even mention the name of Hüseyin Kami, because it would be totally forgotten.

Although it is not possible to find an encyclopedia that contains an entry about *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, some memoirs, news and articles make available the contents of play. In the absence of a text of the play, the accounts even make the reaction of audience visible and provide some clues as to what made this play so popular. Although there is no full-fledged evaluation of this play as a political event today, it could be claimed that some of the observers were more positive than İbnürrefik for understanding the intention of the writer. For instance, a contemporary British historian

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<sup>280</sup> “Bir aydan ziyade hemen hergün sokak başlarına yapıştırılmış, gazete sütunlarına yazılmış tiyatro ilanlarında Sabah-ı Hürriyet’ten başka bir şey görülüyor.” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 1 December 1908.

<sup>281</sup> “Sabah-ı Hürriyet 1324 senesinde tepebaşı heveskeran cemiyeti tarafından bir çok defalar oynanan bir oyunun ismidir. Lakin bu oyun ismiyle mevzu-ı hiç münasebet almamıştır. Bu parlak, bu tatlı ismi işitip tiyatroya koşan Avrupa’ya firar etmiş bir paşanın bir kısım tercüme-i halinden başka bir şey görmemişler ve oyunun mevzuunu ve müellifin maksadını anlayamamışlardır. Müellifin gayet tarafgirane yazdığı bu oyun tarik-i hakikatten inhiraf etmiş olması hasebiyle efkar-ı umumiye üzerinde hasıl ettiği su-i tesirden dolayı bilahere ehl-i insaf tarafından men edilmiştir.” Ibid.

E.F. Knight described all the scenes of the play vividly, revealing the real names of the political figures that were implied in the play. He described the propaganda activities of the CUP, such as sending missionaries throughout the country to preach the cause of the Constitution and discredit the discourse of reactionaries.<sup>282</sup> The lecturers of the Committee were fascinating crowds on the streets of cities. “Even the theaters were used for the dissemination of political doctrines, both in Constantinople and Salonica.” He wrote, adding that he had also attended a play that was written to show the horrors of despotism and blessing the liberty under the constitutional government. It had been played by a “company of amateurs, Young Turks, several whom were officers in the army, whilst the others had either recently been released from prison or had returned from exile.” It had been put on Pera (probably at Tepebaşı Theater). This play was “The Awakening of Turkey,” another title for *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*.

The play opens with the dream of a Pasha. When the curtain rises, it disclosed a room in which a white-bearded old man sleeps. According to Müfit Ratip, this was Mahmut Şevket Pasha,<sup>283</sup> who was considered by audience as one of the victims of İstibdat. The dream of the Pasha was brought to life on stage vividly. The play takes the audience to the “interior of a luxuriously furnished chamber in Yıldız Palace”, and the evil doings of the camarillas were displayed here with a “silent show” in which a spying pasha held the bloody head of freedom.<sup>284</sup> The sultan’s hated secretary, İzzet Pasha, his elderly astrologer, Abdul Houda (Abdül Hüda), and other Court favorites also appear. Spies come and bring a list of accused reformists. Orders for executions and exiles were signed. These despots decide to take a break from their

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<sup>282</sup> E. F. Knight, *The Awakening of Turkey; A History of the Turkish Revolution* (London: 1909), p. 281.

<sup>283</sup> *Musavver Muhit*, 19 October 1908.

<sup>284</sup> Knight, p. 283.

job for a while to seek some recreation. They order a black eunuch to bring a group of beautiful Armenian dancing girls. Simultaneously, a Young Turk in chains is tortured in order to get the names of his associates and to betray his friends. Then the Court executioner puts him to death. To make thing worse, his wife is present, on her knees, begging for mercy, frantic with grief while the favorites of the Court were paying no attention to either the wife or the dying of Young Turk. They continue to watch the dancing girls. A messenger arrives in with news that is evidently of importance and opens the box he has brought with him. The box contains the bloody head of Midhat Pasha, to the joy of the courtiers.

The visions fade away and the Pasha awakes from this nightmare, so deeply affected him makes a long speech in which he recounts his adventures. He decides to flee from Turkey to Paris to give his support to a prospective revolution. His son enters the scene, and delights to hear the Pasha's resolution and agree to accompany him. Then the play depicts the Turkish Embassy in Paris, where the plotting spies and how the corrupt ambassador Münir Bey in Paris both plots against reactionaries and deceives the Sultan.<sup>285</sup> However, this plot was circumvented by an attaché of the embassy who is a secret ally of the Young Turks. In this scene, some famous figures of the time were seen on stage such as Prens de Chimnay, Dreyfus, and James Sauna (Abu Nadara).

While Mahmut Şevket Pasha is on his deathbed, an envoy comes and advises the Pasha to reconcile with the palace. This way he would reclaim his status and prosperity. The Pasha did not act upon this advice. The son of the Pasha who is waiting with his father also did not accept the offer and sent the envoy.<sup>286</sup> Mahmut

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<sup>285</sup> *Musavver Muhit*, 19 November 1908.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

Şevket Pasha tells to his son that he left his property and his wife behind for the sake of his country and urges his son to follow the same principle in his life. He dies and a funeral oration is delivered over the remains of dead patriots. Angels carry him to paradise. There he takes his place among other icons of the era, Ali Suavi, Midhat Pasha, and Namık Kemal.<sup>287</sup>

The last scene depicts a party at which a good deal of champagne is being drunk at an embassy. Suddenly, a newsboy appears in a rush carrying a poster announcing the promulgation of the Constitution. The curtain drops on the spies who were now shocked and filled with fear.

According to Knight “it was a gloomy play, mainly made up of long and earnest monologues, lit up occasionally with flashes of grim humor.” Despite its disadvantages, “its effect upon the audience was extraordinary.”<sup>288</sup> Yet what made the effects of this play “extraordinary”? It probably depended on the reciprocal relationship between the theater company and the audience. The names of characters were fiction, however, they represented real people “creatures of the palace, reformers and others.” Audience was also aware of this fact. When an actor appeared on stage wearing a make-up to portray a real revolutionary or a spy, the audience at once knew who was intended and received him with warm applause or cries and groans of execration, as the case might be. Mahmut Şevket Pasha, one of the leading roles, was also “recognized by audience as a well known victim of Despotism.” Although there is no written evidence that the fictive Mahmut Şevket Pasha was Mahmut Celalleddin Pasha, the father of Prince Sabahattin, the life-story of the fictive pasha overlaps with that of the real pasha. Another real character appearing on stage was the Sultan’s hated secretary, İzzet Pasha,

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Knight, p. 284.

and “to judge from his reception by audience, he is safer in his English house than he would be in Constantinople.”

“The audiences were almost exclusively composed of Muslim Turkish soldiers, theological students, turbaned hodjas and others.” On the other hand, female audience had access to this play at special, separated performances. Officers from the army and the navy sat in the higher priced seats and two close relatives of the Sultan were present in the boxes.

“They (Actors) swaying audience as they woulded” stated Knight in his memoir, added “for these were not merely clever actors who felt their parts, but men who had done and were still doing, in real life, the things that they represented upon the stage.” The audience was very responsive to them; they applauded the patriotic sentiments, showed their abhorrence of the tyrants and pity for the victims. This play made most cry by recalling bitter memories.

It is not possible to know which performance of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* Knight attended, but it is possible to state that the atmosphere of the performance he wrote about was not an exception, especially when the characters and agitative features of the story was considered. For instance, on 26 October 1908 at Tepebaşı Theater *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was performed for the benefit of victims of despotism from Tabriz (Iranian exiles). Hours before the performance started, spectators, Ottoman and Iranian supporters of freedom, filled the theater building. “There were some moments,” reported *Millet* “in which despite our efforts to suppress our feelings, one was obeying the agitation of applauses rising from ones most sincere conscience. In these moments an everlasting, strong and mad applause shook the theater building”<sup>289</sup> In the last act, a patriotic feeling ruled both the stage and theater building; everyone was shaken with the

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<sup>289</sup> *Millet*, 26 October 1908.

same feeling. The writer also made a comparison between Iran and the Ottoman Empire and explained that half of the hall (Ottomans) were enjoying freedom. The other half, Iranian exiles, victims who were still suffering under despotism from which the Ottomans had already emancipated. While he was sharing his ideas with a friend, an Iranian turns to them and tried to thank them for their understanding, but he was choked with tears.

Until *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was banned, most of the critiques that was published in the newspapers were quite bitter and said they found many failures in the play.<sup>290</sup> Neither the form nor the content was approved by most of the writers; sometimes they claimed that it was not even a play. However *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, although it was not put on the program, was performed during the in the celebration meeting for the establishment of the National Theater Committee under the patronage of Museum Director Hamdi Bey and Minister of Education Ekrem Bey and which included in its cast the writer of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*; Hüseyin Kami. Although Hüseyin Kami acted on this prestigious day, the play was not able to escape severe criticism. *Servet-i Fünun* declared *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* to be improper and inconvenient with the context of the meeting.<sup>291</sup> Some of them considered the performance of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* devoid of style and amateurish.

*Sabah-ı Hürriyet* introduced a new form to the theater public. It did not use traditional plots and did not narrate a story with a beginning and an end. It rather used flashbacks depicted independent scenes that were very provocative. At that point, it could be claimed that *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* offered a new form in the theater as a part of the revolutionary theater movement and annoyed most of the theater critics in the

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<sup>290</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 1 December 1908; Müfid Ratip, *Musavver Muhit*, 19 November 1908.

<sup>291</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 21 October 1908.



Ottoman press, like the writer İbnürrefik who claimed that there was no other work of Hüseyin Kami, who was presented as the writer of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. According to him this proved that he did not have a good position among the Ottoman writers. There were some brilliant, meaningful poems in this book (play) and specifically the poem that ended with the words of “Haşa!” and “Kela!” However, according to İbnürrefik, this poem did not fit either the place or for time. He also condemned Heveskeran Company regarding the ball scene at the embassy due to the fact that they had embellished their stage in their first performances, in the *Vatan* play, by showing glorious Ottoman soldiers, and now they disgraced the stage by including coquettes. Furthermore, there was too much discrepancy in the story, and no need to stage haphazard things because of abolition of censor. A dramatist whether he wrote about a real story or a fiction, should consider the principles of the stage and public opinion. He also predicted that most of the play was very specific for this exciting time and it probably would be forgotten in the near future.

However, these critique and advertisement also reported that people crowded the gates of the theaters to watch *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. Kadıköy Winter Theater,<sup>292</sup> Tepebaşı Winter Theater,<sup>293</sup> presented several times *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* and Heveskeran Company before the prohibition. Sometimes Heveskeran Company made some changes in its program due to the intensive demands for the performance of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. For instance, at a daytime performance for women at Kadıköy Winter Theater, due to the demands of the audience, another play of the Company, *Efendi Eve*

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<sup>292</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 8 November 1908; *Servet-i Fünun*, 31 October 1908.

<sup>293</sup> *Hukuk-u Umumiye*, 8 October 1908; *Servet-i Fünun* 6 November 1908.

*Gidiyor*, was cancelled and instead of it, not surprisingly, *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was performed for the women and in the evening for men.<sup>294</sup>

In *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* the severe critiques of İbnürrefik were published, a discussion was held and *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* became one of the leading issues that was discussed openly on the newspaper's pages. An article was published after the one written by İbnürrefik. A reader, whose name was A. Kemaleddin, sent it.<sup>295</sup> It was a response to İbnürrefik and it was published with an introduction that had been penned by Hüseyin Kazım. In this introduction, Hüseyin Kazım said that people had specific idea regarding theater and because *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was so popular. Reşad Rıdvan benefited from the electricity that made the broken legs of a chair valuable, and featured in low-cut dresses of women, well-known and faces of hatreds and thus he had achieved to gather audience. One more time, after how many times, Reşad Rıdvan and his company were very proud of the fact that they performed a play which was written by one of his friends, Hüseyin Kami Bey. However, Hüseyin Kazım said that despite Reşad Rıdvan's pride of it and that it had been performed several times, those who had ideas regarding theater had not liked the play at all and in the pages of newspapers it was portrayed as inferior.<sup>296</sup>

A. Kemaleddin started his article with thanks to Hüseyin Kazım regarding his service to theater criticism in the pages of *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* by emphasizing that the İsdibtad had oppressed theaters and consequently had prevented the emergence of theater criticism. The promulgation of Constitution had given way, like many other things, to the development of art of theater criticism. However, the article that had been

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<sup>294</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 9 November 1908.

<sup>295</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 8 December 1908.

<sup>296</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 8 December 1908.

published with the signature of İbnürreffik was not a good example of this progress and advancement. For instance, İbnürreffik stated in his article that glorious Ottoman soldiers embellished the stage even though coquettes had disgraced the same place. He strongly defended that it was because the Ottoman soldiers were glorious, and freedom and homeland were beautiful that it did not mean necessarily that a play that contained them, would be glorious and beautiful.<sup>297</sup> What made plays like *Besa*, *Vatan*, Akif Bey and *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* popular is that they were strongly related to the actuality of the time and coherent with the principle of art in their details. In short, their popularity depended on their contents, not on the inclusion of soldiers and coquettes. A. Kemalledin found as logical and some scene that was criticized as full of spirit explained most of the critiques of İbnürreffik regarding the plot and technical details of the play. Moreover, he also stated that the opinion of İbnürreffik regarding the poem, which put emphasis on the poem's discord with the time and place, was totally wrong. On the contrary, the contents of the poems were perfectly specific to this time and now, this is the time for verbalizing all these things but later it could be forgotten.

On the pages of *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, in the same issue, Hüseyin Kazım replied to A. Kemaleddin with severe criticism of Reşad Rıdvan and Heveskeran Company by emphasizing in the first sentences that it was no the business of his, giving answer to Kemalledin who had replied to İbnürreffik who wrote from outside. He claimed that *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was not a play and Heveskeran Company was not a theater company if its director could say theater is noise. Hüseyin Kazım's words become more severe and bitter. He declared that there was no need to say anything about Reşad Rıdvan, who had proved himself by what he considered from to be theater

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<sup>297</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 8 December 1908.

by choosing the comedy *Efendi Eve Gidiyor* because of the low cut costumes (it had obscene scenes).<sup>298</sup>

At the end, on one side it is a master work, on the other it is not able to be a theater play at all but these attitudes left its behind the question of what makes writers too radical in their ideas regarding *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*? Is there any hidden personal or political confrontation that makes these discussions too severe? If so, which political actors take which sides? Despite there is no clear-cut answer for these questions until now, maybe it is better to search answers in the protests that was held after prohibition of the play.

#### Militant Audience on the Streets for Hürriyet

“It is very well-known by both the public and the governor of İstanbul that *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was performed several times and in several theaters in İstanbul,” wrote *Sabah*, adding that the play had been performed without any censor and prohibition despite it having some scenes with which any of the officers would not be able to tolerate. Zaptiye Nezareti (Ministry of Police), in 10 December 1908 wrote an order to the Beyoğlu and Üsküdar Mutasarrıflığı to forbid the *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*.<sup>299</sup> According to *Sabah*, the reason for the prohibition was that the play had some scenes in which libelous words were pronounced.<sup>300</sup> Another explanation was that prohibition stems from sentences that takes place in the last act.<sup>301</sup> Despite there being no clear-cut

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<sup>298</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 8 December 1908.

<sup>299</sup> BOA. ZB. Dosya No. 295, Gömlek Sıra No. 11, 27 Teşrinisani 1324; BOA ZB Dosya No. 391, Gömlek Sıra No. 162, 27 Teşrinisani 1324.

<sup>300</sup> *Sabah*, 17 December 1908.

<sup>301</sup> *Servet-i Fünun*, 16 December 1908.

explanation for why this play was banned, the order was very clear and decisive. Furthermore, an order sent to the Beyoğlu Mutasarrıflığı ordered that *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, which was to also be held at Tepebaşı Theater, and the Mutasarrıflık should take every precaution to prevent this performance.<sup>302</sup> According to *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* “Last night, in Beyoğlu, the last act of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was banned by the Zabıta.”<sup>303</sup> However, the event was not that simple. Reşad Rıdvan gave the order that the curtain would not be raised before his arrival. He arrived at the theater and announced to the audience that *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* would not be performed. Instead a different play *Nasıl Oldu* would be performed. Anyone who wanted his or her money back would be able to receive it. The audience was not satisfied with this explanation and strongly demanded the *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*.

On the other hand, despite *Tanin* depicting Reşad Rıdvan’s attitudes as calming, according to the records of the Zabıta he agitated audience against the government.<sup>304</sup> The Zabıta, by depending on the order that they had received from the Zaptıye Nezareti, intervened in the audience. This action made audience more agitated and they marched until Galatasaray and, according to *Tanin*, “they held a threatening meeting.”<sup>305</sup>

Mutasarrıf of Beyoğlu, realizing the seriousness of the situation and taking all responsibility, gave an order that permitted the performance of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* and the audience stayed at the theater until late hours.<sup>306</sup> However, few days later, on 14

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<sup>302</sup> BOA ZB Dosya No. 391, Gömlek Sıra No. 162, 27 Teşrinisani 1324.

<sup>303</sup> “Sabah-ı Hürriyet tiyatrosunun son perdesi evvelki gece Beyoğlunda zabıtaca men edilmiştir.” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 11 December 1908.

<sup>304</sup> BOA. ZB Dosya No. 329, Gömlek Sıra No. 2, 2 Kanunievvel 1324.

<sup>305</sup> “Tehditamız bir nümâyış icra etmişlerdir.” *Tanin*, 17 December 1908.

<sup>306</sup> *Tanin*, 17 December 1908.

December, the Zaptiye Nezareti wrote to the Beyoğlu Mutasarrıflığı and demanded they find director of the Heveskeran Company, Reşad Rıdvan, and bring him to the Zaptiye Nezareti that night or by the next night at 7 o'clock.<sup>307</sup> Then, next day, in the pages of *Servet-i Fünun*, it was publicly announced that *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* would be performed at Ferah Theater in Şehzadebaşı. However, this time the lesson was learned and the Zaptiye Nezareti wrote to the Ministry of Interior saying that it had not been possible to Reşad Rıdvan Bey until then to warn him not to perform *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. Furthermore, they had been informed that in Ferah Theater *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* would be performed that night and it seemed probable that by appearing there and agitating the audience against government he would cause trouble. Because of that, Harbiye Nezareti send a troop from the Avcı Askeri to Ferah Theater at 12 o'clock to prevent the performance of the play.<sup>308</sup>

Trying to perform *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* at Ferah Theater was a challenge against the prohibition. Both sides of the struggle were decisive; the Ministry of Zaptiye was worked to prohibit the play and the audience struggled for its performance. By sending an order to the Şehzadebaşı Police Station, Major Mustafa Bey and a police team were sent to the theater to prevent the performance. It was declared by the theater that they would perform another play, *Nasıl Oldu?* instead of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. According to another news from *Sabah*, the theater company first declared that it had changed the program, then that night announced that they would perform *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> BOA. ZB. Dosya No. 391, Gömlek Sıra No. 165, 1 Kanunievvel 1324.

<sup>308</sup> BOA. ZB, Dosya No. 329, Gömlek Sıra No. 2, 2 Kanunievvel 1324.

<sup>309</sup> *Sabah*, 17 December 1908.

As was reported from the theater, when Reşad Rıdvan started to shout “where is the constitution? What is the problem with *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* play” the crowds grew bigger.<sup>310</sup> Imprompt speeches were given among the crowds and outside of the theater. The zabıta blocked the gate of the theater building and the police chief and other policemen warned Reşad Rıdvan Bey and amateurs that the play was banned for certain and if they insisted on performing it, the police would have to intervene by force. However, the crowds were getting bigger and bigger and these warnings did not work. Two teams from Avcı Taburu came and made themselves visible by piling their arms. This scared the people and they fled. Reşad Rıdvan and the actors called after them by shouting “where you are escaping? Turn back! There is freedom no one could ban!” and trying to make the crowds calm, the polices arrested them.

Soldiers surrounded the theater building. The amateur actors were inside. Some people were demanding their money back, but others were insisting on watching the play. Then, a few minutes later people convened and the applause and speeches started again. Soldiers ordered them to disperse. A part of the crowds was separated from the mass and getting bigger, went to see the Minister of the Zaptiye and the Head of the Police Department. During the march cries of “are we living in freedom of *İstibdat*?” were heard and protesters demanded the abolition of the prohibition.<sup>311</sup> These crowds turned back with slogans of “Long live freedom! Long live Constitution!” and with the addition of new comers, the protesters exceeded 20000.<sup>312</sup> When they confronted the police force, one of two policemen who argued with each other were taken to the police station on the accusation of being a former spy. This event more

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<sup>310</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 17 December 1908.

<sup>311</sup> “İstibdatta mı yaşıyoruz hürriyette mi?” *Tanin*, 17 December 1908.

<sup>312</sup> *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, 17 December 1908.

agitated the crowd who tried to enter the police station with that policemen and the police force and crowds were scrimmaged. Then when the police attached their bayonets, the people scattered and until 4 o'clock there appeared small-scale protests. According to *Sabah* around the theater thousands of people gathered and the road that stretched between Osman Baba Tomb and Vezneciler was packed. Then İzmirli Mehmet from the School of Medicine and persons around him started to sing the *Vatan* Song and waving flags they made speeches against the government and they pioneered the crowd.

In the upper floor of the building where the theater company Sahne-i Heves was sheltered, and just opposite of Ferah Tiyatrosu, Hafız Tevfik Efendi, who was blind drunk, became the focus point of the crowds for a while and in that moment Muhsin Efendi from the clerks “say some inconvenient words” according to a report in *Sabah*. Because the crowd was getting bigger, Minister of the Zaptiye, Sami Pasha, who had come there in order to stop any undesirable action, sent a message to *Merkez Komutanlığı* and brought Avcı Taburu there. The Police gave some advice to the people but the situation did not change and some people among the crowd asked again why the play had been banned. The Minister of the Zaptiye answered this question by advising audience to watch another play but not this and he also explained that he was the third rank in the Ministry and he was responsible for following out the order that had been given by the Minister of Interior who was superior to him. The Minister of Interior knew the reason for the banning of the play and the audience could go to him and ask for the reason and ask for permission there. However, people shouted, saying, “explanations were given by the Ministry of Interior but not permission. Despite this, the play was performed at Beyoğlu, why it is not performed here? Will the soldier trample the people using the people’s own arms?” and they marched again towards



theater. This attack was met with preparation tramper of soldiers. The militant audience answered, saying, “People will stand against bayonets and it will be performed! We do not care anyone! Is it the way prescribed by the constitution!”<sup>313</sup>

The second trumpet called the soldiers to be ready to fire and the soldiers put on their bayonets and sword bayonets and attached them to their rifles. In another corner of the crowds, the clerks who probably had sworn before, Muhsin Efendi, shouted at Major Mustafa Bey who tried to give advice to the crowds and stirred up the crowds to revolt against Avcı Taburu who had already started to disperse the crowds. Further he also slapped one of the colonels of Avcı Taburu and shouted at the soldiers, saying “*müstebit askerler!*” (Tyran Soldiers). In the end he was arrested by the police and brought to Süvari Karakol (police station) in Vezneciler. Adil and Mehmet Tevfik Efendi’s also were sent to the Ministry of the Zaptiye.<sup>314</sup> Avcı Taburu approached the people slowly and dispersed them. Then there appeared a silence for a while.

Around four o’clock Captain Tahir made a speech to the crowd, saying “do not think that this is a shame for the soldiers. The only thing that I did is to apply the order I already have taken. Tomorrow you could apply to the authority and bring the case to trial.” A person on behalf of protesters argued with him and the crowd was agitated again. Captain Tahir was not able to make his voice heard despite shouting “no way! Never ever could it be performed! The order is this!” One more trumpet was heard for the use of force and then one more for putting out protective of rifles. The order to fire was about to being given. The people who realized what was happening and fled. In a while all the people was dispersed.

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<sup>313</sup> “Ahali göğüs gererek oynayacaktır. Biz kimseyi tanımıyoruz. Kanun-ı esasi böyle mi emrediyor.” Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> *Volkan*, 17 December 1908.

Starting from Çemberlitaş and ending in Şehzadebaşı again another protest march was held against the prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. It started around three o'clock with young people who carried two little flags and sang school songs, and cried such sentences as "The *istibdat* is returning back, those who love nation should follow us" and "those who do not follow us are supporters of *İstibdat*, damn *İstibdat*."<sup>315</sup> Passing Çarşıkapısı, they turned in front of the Hasanpaşa Karakol and marched towards Direklerarası. Vahdeti, writer of *Volkan*, also was among the protesters for getting information regarding the event and asking the protesters what was happening. Protesters explained the problem, saying,

There is a theater play, *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* that was going to be performed in Direklerarası. We went to the Ministry of Zaptiye, in the day time, he gave permission, then in the night he surrounded theater with soldiers because of the order he took from the Ministry of Interior. He shadowed morning of freedom (*Sabah-ı Hürriyet*) with the clouds of *İstibdat*." Their intention was clear and they turns each other and "it is better to die, instead of quieting."<sup>316</sup>

When the theater building appeared, the gray horses of soldiers also could be seen from this distance and sounds of horseshoes were heard. Derviş Vahdeti reported that most of the crowds were young people and their numbers were composed from public porters, watchmen, mollas, 2000 and while they are marching, those who realized that there is a chaotic action, run and joined the march. When the march ended in front of the theater building, with the sound of a trumpet, the cavalry moved towards protesters. Most of the protesters dispersed, but there remained considerable crowd. *Merkez Kumandanı* Ömer Yaver Pasha shouted to protesters, saying, "you have disturbed me, what do you think you are about to do? Now for it, it is time to disperse." Despite this

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<sup>315</sup> "İstibdat avdet ediyor. Milletini seven arkamızdan gelsin... Arkamızdan gelmiyenler müstebitlerdir." Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> "Direklerarasında Sabah-ı Hürriyet nam tiyatro oynanacak da Zabtiye Nezaretine gittik. Gündüzün müsaade etti. Bu akşam Dahiliye Nezaretinden aldığı emir üzerine tiyatronun etrafını askerlerle sardırdı. Sabah-ı Hürriyeti istibdat bulutlarıyla kaplattı... Arkadaşlar ölmek var dönmek yok ha...!" Ibid.

reproving tone the crowds did not care and further they answered these warnings by insisting on their attitudes: “we will not disperse! This is freedom, it is freedom.”<sup>317</sup>

The pasha was protested with applause and slogan of “long live freedom!” was raised. Then an attack blast was sounded and applause stopped. The protesters tried to go ahead, commander gave the order for make ready their bayonets and soldiers were ready to attack. The bayonets were presented to the chests of the crowd. One of the protesters opens his shirt and said, “if your intention is to shoot me down, here is my chest.” Another protester is fainted and fell down. A struggle broke out between the policemen and the protesters. A policeman was captured together with the person who had open his shirt and sent to the Ministry of the Zaptiye. Despite the efforts of the police force, it was not possible to disperse the meeting and police cavalry unit also join the force already there, composed of infantry gendarmerie and platoon of cavalry. When the other protesters saw that the two men had been arrested, they fled.<sup>318</sup>

At the end of the day, it seems that protesters who had demanded the performance of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* had lost the war. According to *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, they had misunderstood the decision that was taken by Ministry of Interior to ban *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. This prohibition did not mean that the censor had come back. But at the same time, the absence of a censor did not mean that theaters and newspapers, which were capable of disseminating every good and evil, would be free of a control mechanism. If so, freedom caused chaos. This newspaper also claimed that there were some points in *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* that were unconstitutional because they insulted the Sultan who took his place in the Constitution and who was the representative of the nation. In short *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* was one of the supporters of this prohibition.

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<sup>317</sup> “Dağılmayacağız, bu hürriyettir, hürriyet.” Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

Undoubtly, the constitution was the source of legitimization for both sides. Those who were against the banning of the play defended and legitimized their ideas by referring to the constitution and they even considered attending a theater free from censor and bans as unconstitutional. On the other sides were those who argued that the banning of play had been necessary as it infringed upon the constitution by not showing enough veneration to the Sultan. Both sides were taking their legitimization from constitution. It is clear at that point that the constitution was the source of legitimization for both sides and it was accepted by both the newspaper and journalist that were influential politically and by the masses that were composed of people from different social backgrounds and who take their places as new political actors in the public sphere. Furthermore, by arguing that disrespect to Sultan was contrary to the principles of the constitution, *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* claimed that the Sultan was the representative of the nation. It is very interesting to see that in claiming that disrespect of the Sultan was unconstitutional, the Sultan's position was legitimated by stating that he was representative of the Nation in this position. Then nation at that point became the source of legitimization, as had been in the previous example regarding the constitution.

### The Decline of Revolutionary Joy on Stage

After the promulgation of the constitution, the forming of a new parliament was in order. The preparation for the elections started in July and the election was held between November and December 1908. These elections were not held simultaneously in all the regions of empire, and they had two phases ending with the opening of the parliament in 17 December 1908, the date that the newspapers wrote

about *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* incident. However, later the on opening of the parliament must have shifted public attention away from the prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. The opening of parliament drew all of the attention and the prohibition of the *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* caused serious disappointment regarding theater among the public. It also was seen that there were serious fractures among the front that was composed of different social segments of society and those who created revolutionary atmosphere of the time. Although this fact had a consensus over the past that was depicted by plays like *Vatan* and *Besa* and as every part of this front mostly accepted use for building a self portrait of society, *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was a breaking point for all. Probably the past that was depicted in *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* did not fit with the purposes of some powerful part of this front and was not supported by them and the government banned it. Contradictory to *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, *Vatan* and *Besa* offered audience concepts like Homeland, patriotism, Ottomanism, which were the main reference points, principles and pillars of this unity.

Although the performances of plays did not end, their intensity was decreased and the theater started to lose its importance as a place where big patriotic meetings were held and where crowds collectively remembered and in fact built their memory by creating a tool kit that would be used in mobilizing them for different ideological causes. It is not possible to find either new cases of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* performances that mobilized the masses as militant audience demanding its performance or gathering thousands in one place for patriotic or philanthropic aims. Probably another crucial factor that created this situation was the absence of theater buildings that could accomodate large crowds. The joy and enthusiasm of audience at the first performance of *Vatan* at Tepebaşı Theater was not seen again. Rather the theater world became dominated by the discussion of the establishment of an

institutional theater and national theater, which came onto agenda with the triumphant return of Burhaneddin Bey (Tepsi) as the first national actor.

Burhanedin Bey was returned to the homeland just after the promulgation of the constitution in August and the intellectual minority who considered him the first national actor welcomed him. However, this was the time when the Heveskeran Company was enjoying the heyday in public and totally dominated the theater world. So, the voices of the national- schooled theater project were not heard at all despite their intensive efforts in the pages of newspapers. More crucially, since the performance of the Heveskeran Company had gathered thousands of people together, the spectators of Burhannedin Bey relaxed in empty halls with the happiness of being away from the noises of the crowd and at the end being watched without interruptions of “long live homeland!”<sup>319</sup>

It was time to discuss more artistic terms and a theater that at least claimed to satisfy the high arts of elites. However, at the same time it should be noted that this change of the world of theater did not mean that the number of theater activities decreased totally, rather after the prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* there was several theater plays that were performed in several places in İstanbul. However, these plays never became events that gathered thousands of spectators together for one cause and they never determined public opinion. Previous plays such as *Besa*, *Vatan* and *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* had been great events whose performance had meaning for everyone and thus most of the time they had their place in the first ranks on the agenda of the public. The joyful days of the revolution calmed down and the audience that had crowded gates of theaters, which had attended plays as masses and expressed their emotions, even interrupting the actors also calmed down. Being visible in the public sphere lost its

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<sup>319</sup> Müfid Ratip, "Finten'in Burhanettin Bey'in Tiyatrosu'nda Temsili Münasebetiyle," *Musavver Muhit* 9 Nisan 1325 in *Fecr-i Ati'nin Kurucularından Müfit Ratip Makaleleri* (İstanbul: MVT, 2005), p. 97.

previous urgent importance and like everything in social and political life, theater started to return to its routine. Moreover, the understanding of theater as a place in which not only real actors but also social political actors of the time expressed their ideas freely, the place, like public spheres of the time that were not determined by only one dominant political actor and the place in which main principles of constitution united the masses was wounded by prohibition. As the performance of *Besa* marked the beginning of a new era free from censorship, which symbolized the oppression practised by the ancient regime, prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* marked another beginning and proved that theater was no longer a place for every actor, but for actors who had more political power. It is typical that revolutions start with the abolition of censorship, as a logical result of revolutionary political changes. Most of the time it was argued that there was no need for censorship thanks to the new regime, but typically again, this is an illusion of the first months of revolutions.<sup>320</sup> 1908 was not exception in this regard.

The success of the Committee of Union and Progress was that by formulating the demands and desires of different social groups and classes in society and inserting and manipulating them in its own discourses and actions to hold the representative power of them against the *İstibdat*. Thus the CUP gained widespread respect and consent of the public especially after the promulgation of the constitution as representative of the social and political actors. The short-term aim was achieved, the *İsdibdat* disappeared and the constitution was declared. Starting with this moment every political and social group had its own version of constitution and freedom; they were not paying taxes to the state for peasants, cutting trees without permission for the forest peasants, publishing newspapers that could reflect the political ideas of all political

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<sup>320</sup> Zygmunt Hubner, *Theater and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), p. 40.

groups without censor and oppression, the ability to go on strikes and defend their rights against bosses for workers and porters, being more visible and organizing associations and defending women rights for women, and being able to be on stage, act and put the banned plays of the İstibdat on stage for theater companies, actors, and freely expressing their idea regarding plays, their contents, forms or actors for spectators.

In these joyful days of the constitution, every political and social actor was able to find a place in the public sphere and express his ideas no matter how radical. This was at the same time the politicization of the masses and the becoming of politics, a mass phenomenon. Then as one of the most powerful political actors of the time the CUP, left behind being of the representative of every part of the front, struggle to seize power its own hand as an political organization began. This caused the marginalization of political and social groups and classes that did not fit the project of the CUP. The CUP also did not hesitate to collaborate with its former enemies of this front. Prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was a full-fledged example of this change in theater. While *Besa* and *Vatan* that perfectly fit with uniting principle against İstibdat and the interpretation of the past for the benefit of the day's politics, and these plays were performed in the public squares most of the time government and with the support of the CUP. However, when a play appeared such as *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, probably another interpretation of the past and more critical to the government and the Sultan than the CUP was able to be accepted, by not reacting against the government prohibition and supporting it the CUP made a choice for prospective allies. Thus, another political group, most likely supporters of Prince Sabahhattin, and those who considered attending the play as a constitutional right were suppressed and marginalized in the realm of theater for the first time. This shook the confidence in the stage as a place



where the different ideas of the time could be represented freely and expunged it from being effective for these political causes. In the end, the performance of different plays continued, but they did not hold the distinction of being plays of the joyful days of revolution. Attending the performances of these plays had had its own meaning and importance. While, most of the time these plays mobilized the masses for patriotic and philanthropic aims, it does not mean that theater was only a simplistic mechanism for gathering people.

It is obvious that the plays were good at that job but on the other hand attending a play free from censor and that had been banned by the ancient regime, being visible and expressing feelings individually and collectively, were emancipating acts that created the core of revolutionary theater. By creating a tool kit and inserting basic concepts of nation, homeland and Ottomanism into daily life deeply effected the political atmosphere of the time by forming both the minds and feelings of the spectators, whose numbers exceeded thousands. Revolutionary theater distinguished itself from both from the theater of previous and of the following era of theater history.

### *The 31 March of the Theater*

During the 31 March Affairs (13 April 1909), the insurrection of reactionaries in İstanbul outraged the political atmosphere. The theater world also was affected by these changes. Some of the men of theater left İstanbul and went to other places. It is very telling that the departure of Raşid Rıza and Ahmet Fehim from İstanbul illustrate how this event affected the world of theater. Raşid Rıza and other friends of him were in office of a journal and they were discussing a play they would perform a few days later. Then, Hamet Fehim appeared at the door in a weird state,

shaking. He said, “reactionaries have revolted, they are slaying the educated, journalists and actors. Do not stay here!” All of them run into the streets. They wanted to pass to Üsküdar by boat, then Ahmet Fehim and Raşit Rıza saw a ferry about to leave harbor towards the Black Sea. They jumped on to the ferry and went to Samsun.

The memoir of Behzat Butak recounts events parallel to Raşid Rıza’s story. The government decided to send four or five young Turkish men to study electrical engineering at a Toscana factory in İtaly. When the 31 March incident happened, Behzat Butak also quit the theater and join this group and went to Italy. It is possible to claim that the theater world, if it did not leave all activities aside, at least felt their profession greatly threatened. In the days of fighting that ensued neither reactionaries nor *Hareket Ordusu* had time to be interested in the theater in a positive way. Particularly the army did not want any trouble with the theater, which could cause more chaos in İstanbul.

On 3 May 1909, an order signed by the Commander in Chief of the Third Army and the Hareket Army to the Ministry of Zaptiye strengthens this opinion.<sup>321</sup> The following Friday they were to perform a theater play for women at in Kadıköy. However, it was not a suitable for performing plays for women. Because of this, the performance should be banned, and postponed and this should be published daily in a newspaper. Another order was sent to the Üsküdar Mutasarraflığı with same signature but without mentioning postponement, directly banned plays.<sup>322</sup> This prohibition could be regarded as specific to this play, but another order that banned theater and music for women in public was soon to come. 5 May 1909 an order was sent to the Üsküdar

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<sup>321</sup> BOA. ZB. Dosya No. 628, Gömlek Sıra No. 83, 20 Nisan 1325, Belge No 1.

<sup>322</sup> BOA. ZB. Dosya No. 628, Gömlek Sıra No. 83, 20 Nisan 1325, Belge No. 2.

Mutasarraflığı saying that it was not suitable to perform plays and concerts in public for women.<sup>323</sup>

At first glance it seems that authorities were trying to avoid new reactions, especially regarding the freedom of women and their existence in public, especially in theater and entertainment places, which was criticized by the reactionaries in their newspapers such as *Volkan*. However, this prohibition and doubtful postponement was not limited to women or that time. “The first national actor” and his play *Abdülhamid* took his part from this prohibition from the Commander in Chief of the Hareket Army.<sup>324</sup> Before it was performed, information reached to Commander and he sent a recommendation to the Ministry of the Zaptiye that *Abdülhamid* be prohibited. The Zaptiye Nezareti immediately wrote that it hold this advice.

As the insurrection of reactionaries consternated the theater world, the Hareket Army also influenced them deeply, but not in a positive way. By legitimizing punishment, the CUP eliminated most of its political rivals from the political stage. It became the dominant political figures in the public sphere. The joyful days of revolution were ended and different social classes and groups such as women, workers, other political and social groups in society lost the chance to represent themselves freely in the public sphere as they had in the chaotic atmosphere of first days. They were marginalized. Some men of theater and literary had their own parts in the elimination process. The author of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, Hüseyin Kami, was arrested and stayed for a while in prison.<sup>325</sup> More importantly, the 31 March Incident swept out the last remainants of the theater of revolution and reduced theater to a basic vehicle with

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<sup>323</sup> BOA ZB Dosya No. 628, Gömlek Sıra No. 91, 22 Nisan 1325.

<sup>324</sup> BOA ZB Dosya No. 603, Gömlek Sıra No. 2, 8 Mayıs 1325.

<sup>325</sup> İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, *Son Asır Türk Şairleri* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1969), p. 50

which disseminate ideology and ideas to the masses. It was no longer a stage for expressing different political ideas that came from different social and political groups of society. Hereafter, there was not much place for giving different meanings the basic popular concepts of the time such as freedom, equality, justice, patriotism, and homeland, and Ottomanism. Different political interpretations of these main principles of process were also eliminated in favor of the one version. Projections of past, present and future were dominated by only the most powerful political actors of the time. It is a process of reciprocal determination: the CUP seized power by eliminating all other versions. The first attempt was the prohibition of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* and after that what remained of the theater of revolution ran into the wall of 31 March.

It should be noted that the theater epidemic that appeared after the promulgation of the constitution was not limited to either the plays such as *Vatan*, *Besa* or *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, or geographically to İstanbul. These three plays marked highest point of this current. It is possible to trace other plays that were written to condemn the İsdibdat and hail the constitution, freedom, equality and justice. Writing these plays, putting them on stage, attending them freely were symbolic processes and had their own meaning. They were national duties that tied their participants to a resistant past and brilliant future and marked a historical moment of the present. More importantly, these participants made their subjects visible in the public sphere by becoming supporters of freedom, equality and justice, and carried out their patriotic assignment. While they were participating in these theater activities they also had the chance to articulate their own version of basic concepts and rivaling and uniting with others. Another distinguished feature of the performance of these plays is that they were full-fledged collective actions. All processes that happened around these plays both affected the personal feelings of individuals and the emotional process that was experienced by

the masses. These are basic processes that united the plays of revolution. Behind the most visible performance Namık Kemal's *Vatan Yahut Silistre*, Şemsettin Sami's *Besa Yahut Ahde Vefa*, and *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, were hundreds of others. It is possible to know for some when, where and sometimes by whom they were performed because they were subject to some critiques and memoirs of the period. They had names such as *Jön Türk* (The Young Turk), *Nasıl Oldu* (How It Happened), *Hafiyeler* (The Tragedies Caused By Spies), *Hafiyelerin Listesi* (The Lists of Spies), *10 Temmuz 1324* (10 July 1324), and there are some hundreds of others whose only proof of existence today is the advertisements published in the newspapers.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

The 1908 Revolution in the Ottoman Empire was followed by a theater epidemic. By accompanying and having been influenced by the radical social changes of the time, theater as a social organization, a means of representation and communication emerged as a fundamental institution of the public sphere. The expansion of the public sphere had results in the sphere of theater. Different sections of society filled halls, squares, gardens and streets and participated in theater activities in order to make themselves visible in the public sphere. On the other hand, theater was used as an effective vehicle for the formation of public opinion.

Mobilization was a new social and political phenomenon directly related to the transformation and expansion of the public sphere and the emergence of mass society and mass politics. In this respect, theater was used in order to trigger the feelings of the masses and make them active participants in public life. In the mobilization of the masses, the framing of social and political issues was significant. In this process, theater provide fertile ground for the mobilization of the masses due to its relationship to culture. Symbols, traditions, rituals and language as part of culture were used effectively on stage to this end.

By recognizing the power of theater for spreading political ideas, the political actors of the time tried to use theater activities for both disseminating and legitimating their politics. Theater groups also discovered the power of politics and they legitimated their activities with the support of then political actors and the participation of the audience.

One of the main features of these intensive theater activities was their spontaneity. These theater groups emerged spontaneously and they remained as independent organizations despite their political affiliations. Thus, the political actors never considered theater groups as reliable allies. Most of the time the political actors tried to control them closely through patronage.

Mass audience is especially significant for the revolutionary theater considering that theater had a literary genre was a recent adoption from the West. Moreover, the performance side of the theater opened up new opportunities for the participation of “lay men” in theater especially when low literacy rate was certain fact. Many people without paying attention to whether their educational backgrounds and talents was suitable or not, participated in these theater activities. Thus, theater created its own public.

This theater epidemic features distinguished from those of previous and later periods of theater in the Ottoman Empire. Although during the “initial days” of the second constitution thousands of people were brought together in the theater, the historiography of the second constitution dismisses these theater activities as having no artistic value. Moreover, theater historians tend to devalue the role of the audience which was the main conjunction point of politics and theater. Marginalizing the role of the audience in theater causes serious problem in analysis especially for this period in which politics conjuncts with theater and mass audience. Alternative historiography fails also in using theater as a historical source.

The theater epidemic that broke out after 1908 Revolution had its own repertoire. These plays symbolized the emerging new era. They were staged throughout the empire and helped spread the ideals of the new regime. I choose three plays from this new repertoire of revolutionary plays, *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* by Şemsettin Sami,

*Vatan yahud Silistra* by Namık Kemal, and *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* by Hüseyin Kami. These three were distinctive among the others. They were extremely popular when they are compared to the other plays of the new era. They were hotly debated in the Ottoman public and discussion of them filled the columns of the newspapers. They attracted the attention of a wide population and invoked the regulations of the Ottoman state. In a very short period of time these three plays became more than theater plays and had social and political impacts on Ottoman society.

This theater epidemic was started with the performance of *Besa*. This first performance provides an opportunity to analyze the relationship between theater and society. The performance of *Besa* paved the way for the other revolutionary plays due to its box office success and the support that it gained from the political elites and public opinion. The ideals of the new regime such Ottomanism, equality between different communities and loyalty to the state were propagated successfully. The critics and the debates that this play triggered conceptualized *Besa* and showed the Ottoman public how to interpret this performance. As a result of this success for the first time after the promulgation of the second constitution, the staging of new plays started to turn into public events. Rapidly the theater halls became insufficient to meet the enormous rise in the demand of the Ottoman public. Due to this enormous demand the second play, *Vatan*, was performed not only in halls but also and mainly in public squares and gardens.

*Vatan* was the peak point of the theater epidemic. There was thousands of performances throughout the empire. The author of the play, Namık Kemal, was a symbolic name for the new regime and for the Young Turks. Besides its defense of the ideals of Ottomanism, it also put emphasis on patriotism and the “significance of the army.” The performances of *Vatan* in the public squares turned it into a mass pageant in



which the symbols and elites of the time represented themselves. Thousands of people gathered and participated in these mass spectacles. The performance of *Vatan* was at the same time a reinterpreting of the past collectively and simultaneously by thousands in the public squares. The performance of *Vatan* was also a reevaluation and rewriting of the past according to the current realities.

In these two plays the state and the government supported their performances. However, the performance of the third play, *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*, provoked a controversy among the theater critics and elites. As a result, after a while, the government banned the performances of the play. Furthermore, this ban of the play was also supported by the main theater critics and to a certain extent by some sections of the Young Turks. That is why government succeeded in its suppression of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet*. This play was written just after the promulgation of the second constitution. In this regard it was different that the previous two which had been written before. *Besa* and *Vatan* were mainly based on the narration of a story. However, *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* was composed of scenes that were not based on a progressive linear narration, which annoyed theater critics. By flashbacks *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* depicted the suffering of the Young Turks and the members of the opposition under the yoke of İtibdat. The play closed with a happy ending, which celebrated the new era. This play is a good example of the newly written revolutionary plays that came out just after the revolution. The debates were not restricted to the theater columns but there appeared demonstrations in the streets of İstanbul just after the ban of the play. The arguments around this ban brought onto the agenda the question of whether it was a constitutional order or tyranny in which the people of the time were living. This debate also symbolized the borders of the freedoms under the forthcoming new era.

The theater epidemic that started with the first performances of *Besa* reached its peak point with the performances of *Vatan* in several public squares. However, as the joyful revolutionary days started to decline, a demise also followed in theater activities. The ban of *Sabah-ı Hürriyet* provoked the protests and demonstrations of audience, yet the 31 March Affairs put an end to these kinds of performances and movements. From that point on, the theater lost its spontaneous character. The plays after 31 March Affairs became much more the official representations and performances of the ideology of the new regime.

This study is mainly based on Ottoman sources in Turkish. However, there were several communities that were living in the Ottoman Empire and they also had a convivial theater life, which was effected deeply by the promulgation of the second constitution. Therefore, further studies should take into account sources in languages other than Turkish, such as Greek, Armenian, Ladino, and Arabic. Yet this does not necessarily mean that these communities and these theaters and actors were totally separated and compartmentalized from each other. In order to analyze the theater epidemic of 1908 Revolution, one had to embark on a comparative study in order to reveal the different aspects of theater life in the Ottoman Empire.

## APPENDIX A

### THE PLOTS OF THE PLAYS

#### The Plot of *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa*

A daughter of a shepherd falls in love with her cousin and they get engaged. However, one of the men of Tepedelen Beys Selfo also loves the daughter. The Bey forces the shepherd to give his daughter to Selfo. The shepherd resists. Selfo kidnaps the daughter on the order of the Bey and during the kidnapping he kills the shepherd. Before he dies, the shepherd makes his wife promise to get revenge. She searches for their enemies and she witnesses an event. One guy is sleeping under a tree and another guy taken his guns. The first guy wakes the sleeping guy and wants him to beg for mercy. Yet, he refuses to do so. When he is about to shoot him, Vahide, the wife of the shepherd, shoots the man and saves him. He is Fettah Ağa, who has been away for twenty years and now he is going to see his son and his wife. Vahide tells him her story and Fettah Ağa takes an oath to kill the murderer of her husband. But the murderer is his own son Selfo, but Fettah Ağa kills him due to his oath (besa).

#### The Plot of *Vatan Yahut Silistra*

Zekiye lives in a Rumelian city with her wet nurse. She meets İslam Bey, who has volunteered for the army, and falls in love with him. İslam Bey leaves Zekiye in order to fight on the battlefield, saying "those who love me should follow." Zekiye puts on men clothes and follows him under the name of Adem. In the second act, in Silstra castle İslam Bey is wounded and Zekiye takes care of him. The commander of the castle, Sıtkı Bey, is away from home because of he lost his reputation in the army before. He enters the army under another name and becomes a commander. Silstra castle is under a siege. İslam Bey, Abdullah Çavuş and Zekiye volunteer for a mission to blow up the enemy's arsenal and succeed. As a result the castle is saved. İslam Bey explains Zekiye's genuine identity and Sıtkı Bey by asking some questions learns that Zekiye is his own daughter. The story ends with a preparations for the wedding of İslam and Zekiye.

## APPENDIX B

### THE PHOTOGRAHPS RELATED WITH THE 1908 THEATER



“Şehrimizde bir milli tiyatro tesis etmek üzere teşkil eden heyet-i edebiye aza-i keramı  
1- Maarif Nazırı Ekrem Beyefendi 2- Müze Müdürü Hamdi Beyefendi 3- Ahmed  
Hikmet By 4- Halid Ziya Bey 5- Mehmed Rauf Bey 6- Meşhur artist Hüseyin Kami  
Bey 7- İzzet Melih Bey 8- Meşhur Artist Burhaneddin Bey 9- Fahreddin Bey”



« لىلا » پىسى مؤلى محرد نزيه عزت مليح بك  
Izzet Mélih Bey auteur de «Leila» drame  
en I acte joué par M.elle Blanche  
Toutain au théâtre des Variétés

“Leyla Piyesi Müellifi Muharrir-i Nezih İzzet Melih Bey”



Müfit Ratip

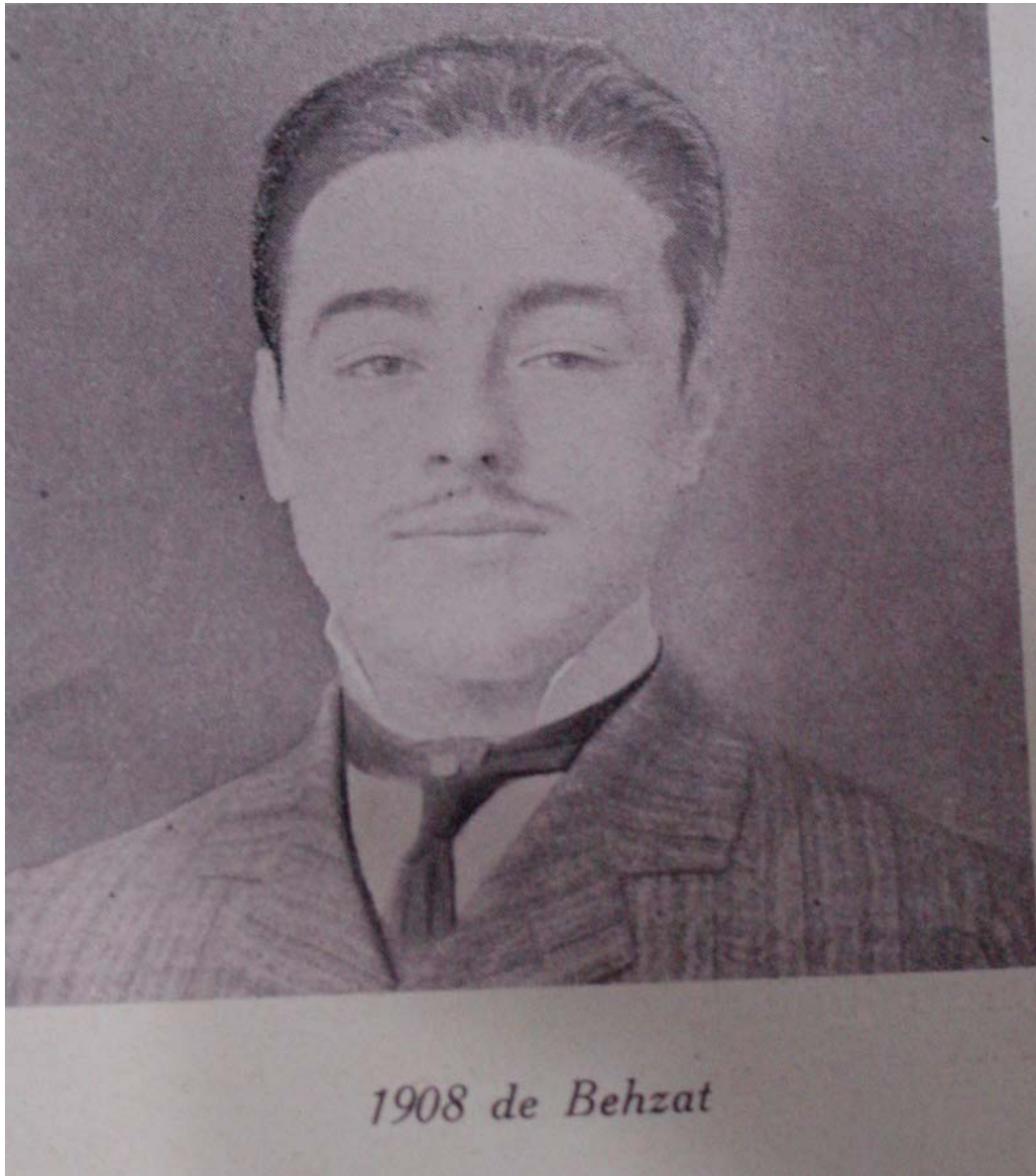


Behzat Butak ve Ahmet Fehim



“*Sabah-ı Hürriyet* Piyesi Müellifi Sanatkar-ı Şehir Hüseyin Kami Bey”

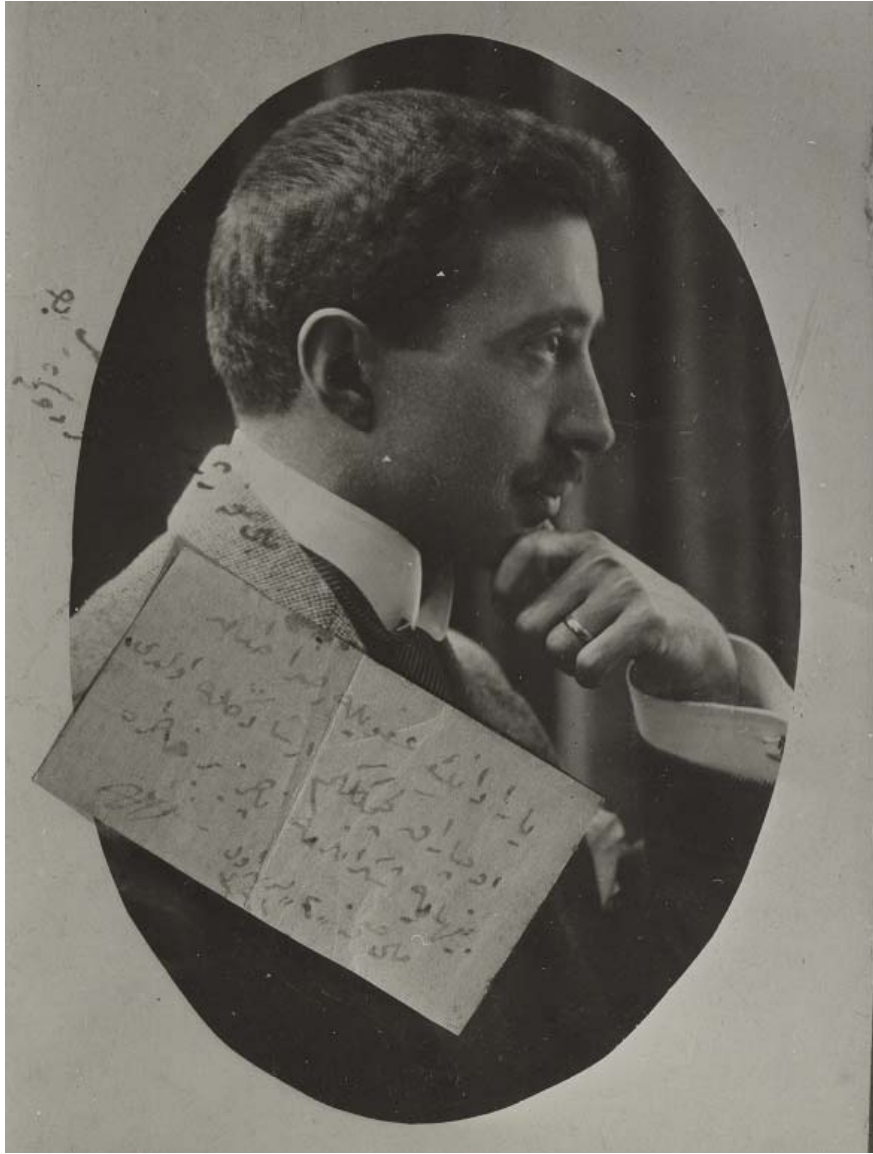




Behzat Butak in 1908



The photograph of Raşit Rıza in *Besa yahud Ahde Vefa* as “little shepherd,” taken by Ahmed Fehim in 1908. (From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Nurettin Şefkati

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Sahne-i Heves 1908

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Ahmed Fehim, Minakyan and Kinar Hanım

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Ahmed Fehim

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Kınar Hanım

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Minakyan Efendi

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)





Eliza Binemeciyen and Raşit Rıza in front of a portrait of Tevfik Fikret on stage

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Burhaneddin Bey as Napoleon  
(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Direklerarası

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



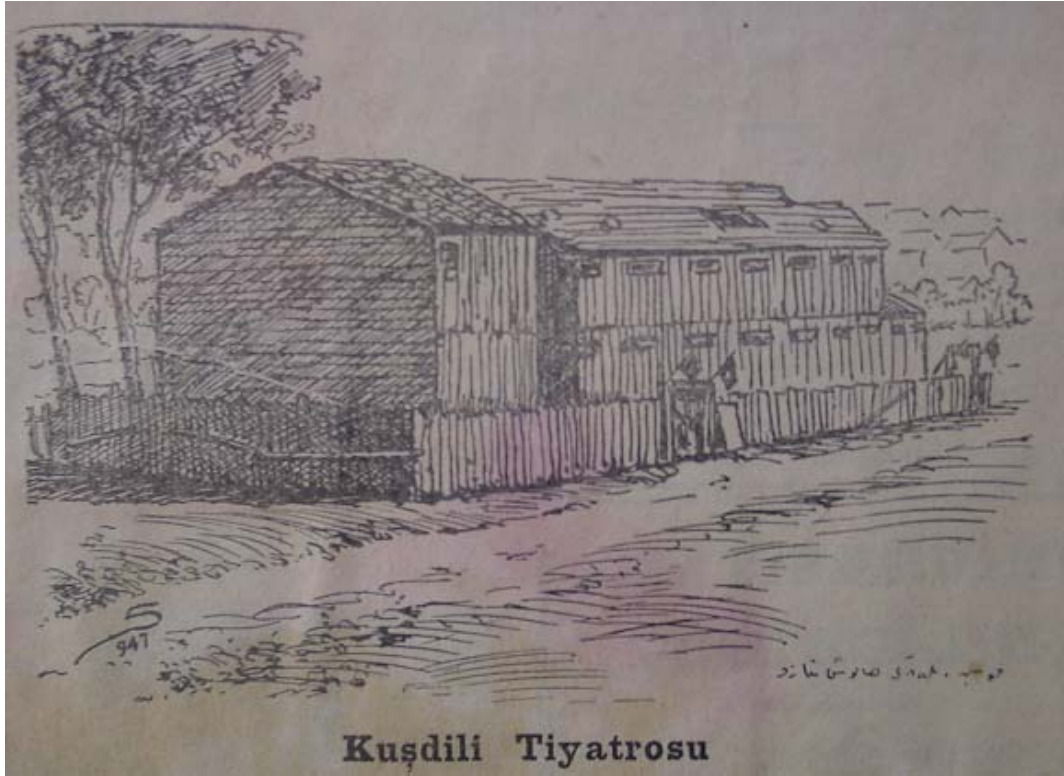
Tepebaşı Summer Theater

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



Ferah Theater (Republican Era)

(From the Cengiz Kahraman Archive)



**Kuşdili Tiyatrosu**

Kuşdili Theater in Kadıköy

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