

## Guzin Yamaner

# Never Let Go

This is Turkey! In 1923, the leader of our Republic, at an elegant artistic gala, officially invited a Muslim actress - also married to a director - to the stage by holding her hand. Young women in our country receive their theatre education referring to the example of this actress. The model of modern Western theatre is well known on hundreds of technically and artistically equipped stages in Turkey. However, in this same country we find illiterate girls, whose throats are cut if they request a song on the radio for their beloved whom they are not allowed to meet; women who are shot in the streets accused of staining the family honour as a consequence of a rape. All this happens because of our society's customs, traditions and taboos.

This is Turkey! Here there is an example of a female movement that works although the women live many kilometres away from each other. Some of them are based in Ankara, where I live. It is a completely independent initiative: performances made by a group of women, all amateurs, who have persisted for years in making their Woman Theatre. As an academic and theatre critic with a feminist point of view, I wish to make their work known to other theatre practitioners and to people in general.

The idea of making a women's theatre dates from around 1993. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March of that year, a group of women published a manifesto in a special bulletin in Ankara suggesting the founding of Woman Theatre. At first, the group gathered in the back rooms of the leftist parties or of the non-governmental organisations. The meeting places were always temporary. The 'serious' politicians concerned with saving their homeland from capitalists and imperialists expelled our girls, since they made too much noise. When the women asked: "What have we done? Why are you talking about us behind our backs?" the leader of the 'serious' men denied everything by saying: "Why should I do anything of the kind, I am respectful of women's rights. I granted my spouse her freedom." Hearing this, our girls said: "God damn you!" and so lost any hope of obtaining meeting

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spaces. Then, they started meeting in the back rooms of offices they knew. They remember how when the women were about to arrive, men working in the office would dress up in expectation.

Twelve years have gone by, but the women have never had a regular place of their own. Nowadays the group gathers in cafes where students and officials meet in the evening. However, their most important meeting places are their homes. There they rehearse, write plays, keep records and debate their single-handed female experience, achieved with integrity, a rare exception for our country. They have presented their performances in the streets, within the framework of political organisations and demonstrations, succeeding in finding venues mostly in cooperation with non-governmental organisations that support them. They have presented their plays at university festivals, at the openings of leftist parties' events and during strikes. They have organised courses for illiterate women in community centres. The most regular appointment is the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, International Woman's Day, each year. On that day they present plays dealing with problems concerning Turkish women from varying backgrounds.

Woman Theatre's form of producing plays, the themes they choose and the network of relations between women are no novelty. They resemble the status of women who have remained confined to the private, quiet and indifferent corners of history. In line with the efforts of the women's movement, they are progressing in becoming more public. However, in Anatolia, one side of the coin reflects modernity while the other reflects tradition. The authenticity of these regions - which could be shared with sisters living in other countries throughout the world - is gradually beginning to find a place both in theatrical and feminist patterns of

creativity.

Woman Theatre is known through their own texts and performance photographs and through their diaries decorated with devil-eyes, earrings, cards, dried flowers, letters, poems, comics and names enclosed in hearts. These diaries also hold their records. If sometime somewhere a feminine language manifests itself, those diaries will show themselves as a similar record of praxis.

### LOOKING BACK

A member of Woman Theatre, after one of the first meetings was held, ran to the stationery shop to buy a cheap notebook. They used it to write the diary. They covered it and began to place devil-eyes and dried flowers in between its pages. The first chronicler invented a rival male historian to quarrel with while writing the first lines in a mischievous style. The male historian was chosen to provide the history of women with a value, meaning, resistance and achievement. The historian remained male for a very long time. Then, one day, a member turned the historian into a woman, a girl in love with theatre: Afife Hanim. She is exactly like the Turkish girl Afife, in real life in love with the stage and recorded as the first Muslim actress in Turkish history before the Republic. Then, another day, another member asked why the historian could not be from a third or fourth gender. The historian is like a touchstone for the group to discuss the gender roles of society when they fail to reach a consensus. If the notebook is not written in for a long time, complaints are made to the historian, accusing the member who does not keep the records of making "negative historiography". If the notebook is forgotten by someone, another member seizes control and announces herself to be "chief summariser" and starts to record the events. The summariser opens a parenthesis



A page from the Diary of Woman's Theatre.

to explain to the historian and make her complaints.

At first, they considered female theatre to be a field of self-realisation. Their motto became, "hold on and never let go!" This had been said to them by a professional theatre actor. They wondered what the historian would make of this statement, but nevertheless, fortunately, the motto never let go of them.

While keeping the diary, the women

always turn back to previous pages to read what they have written before and refer to it. The women of Woman Theatre meet for theatre activities and in everyday life. Some are even sisters, but still they communicate with each other through the diary as well. They leave empty spaces in the pages, to be filled out by this or that woman. Sometimes the spaces are filled with writing and sometimes with a simple "oh, I could not write, as you see".

Making female theatre has an impact on all the women. Some move town. One of the departing women gave a single earring in the shape of five fingers stating that the history of women should have an earring. Telya Zaman, a character in one of the group's later plays, victim of a murder of 'honour', also had a passion for earrings. It was as if the diary had known her for a long time. The group is sensitive to questions concerning the women's movement and always participates in debating them. They wonder whether history will take them seriously, but they continue to write and make theatre. One day, one of the women said: "I want to be a table or an ashtray, I don't want to be a chronicler of history!", but nevertheless they fortunately continued to keep records and they take turns with this responsibility.

Since 1993 besides rehearsals, they also hold theoretical information meetings. When one of them cannot go on stage because of family or other traditional obstacles that can occur anytime for Anatoli women, they prepare and rehearse someone else in the group for the role in just one night. The group has always had differences and the women do not try to always agree or to have the same political and feminist views; they have managed to survive until today despite their differences.

In the diary the women note the telephone number of any woman in need of assistance and the telephone numbers of women's organisations. They remind each other of the need to be organised, systematic and to attend the meetings. Sometimes they gather on Wednesdays and Saturdays for two hours. They wrote in the diary: "if men managed to meet this often, they would establish three organisations!" They have obtained the support of professional theatre actors and even of a man among them. "What do you want me to do," said the good

man, "I am aware that you are feminist and I am willing to go with whatever will happen to me".

## THE PERFORMANCES

The themes of Woman Theatre are war, peace, poverty and violence, but what makes their work authentic is the relationship they establish with these themes.

The title of their first play was supposed to be *An Internationalist Solidarity between the Nations of the World from the Point of View of Women and the Role of the Mourner in This*. But it was shortened after the play was presented to the audience on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1994 to *The Story of World Tyranny Not to Be Considered as Melodrama*.

It is a kind of tradition for any female theatre to collect women from all around the world under a common denominator. There was a peddler in this play and she cried: "Come my lady! I have General Sheridan, a curiosity with Indian scalps". The peddler said: "My lady our bundle is our future. The Argentine Hebe Bonafini holds on to one side of the bundle, and Bese and Zarife to the other side." The women won the war against General Sheridan at the end of the play by coming together from all over the world.

The second play, *Daye Wan Ez Kuttim!*, relates the story of a village that was set on fire at midnight. A girl, who died aged fourteen, tells her mother, "Mummy, they murdered me!" from where she lies. Other corpses arise from their positions to reiterate what she says. A question flashes in the eyes of the dead girl. Other dead women want to rise from the ground and answer. Five of them are dressed in black, with faces covered by white masks. Their eyes and lips are painted black and their hands are painted red.

The third play, *His Name Is Ismet*, was actually a play about... What difference

does it make if your husband's name is Ismet?!? A husband is a husband and he is not a good person! The play is the story of a girl given in matrimony at thirteen. She was told: "This is your husband and this is your father-in-law" and she learned what it meant to be married. The girl who married at thirteen explains as if answering an oral examination:

Woman:

*I didn't know why we are woman, I learned. Husband is the pain that you get in the bed sheets! Husband is beating the groin. He is the thing. You say to yourself, I hope it ends and I am saved, when you go to bed in the evening. Love is to puff up his pillows before we go to sleep and to leave the most comfortable couch to him. Love is to approve all he says and never ask where he was. Love is good for baldness and dirty socks.*

But the woman yearns for the man she has married, grief struck. She lost her husband and it is very hard to be a widow and live alone with children in this country.

The fourth play is *The Story of Oruch*. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1998, in the performance, the character of Hamit Serin orders his daughter Oruch Serin to be killed in the Fakili Village, Araban, Gaziantep Province. Oruch was a young girl who, at sixteen, fell in love with a man. They met under a willow tree. The man is a partisan of Caliph Ali and they were going to marry. But Oruch is pregnant. For nine months, she wraps clothing around her belly in order to cover her womb and she secretly gives birth to her child in a field. She smashes the umbilical cord of the infant with a stone and buries the baby under rocks and sand. She tells another woman working in the field that she is suffering from a terrible pain and that she

has a bad haemorrhage. The haemorrhage doesn't stop and she faints. The villagers take her to the hospital and the policeman understands the whole story. Oruch is arrested. As the judge is aware that in such a case Oruch's family must take the decision about her execution, he sets the value of the bail for her release at a very high price. The family gathers the money for the bail and the girl is released. The family do not give Oruch any food for three days. They propose "berdel" to the other family, but they do not respond. Then her father tells Oruch to hang herself: "We don't want to kill you," he says. The girl answers, "I can't; I didn't do anything wrong". On June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998, her father wakes Oruch, crying, and hands her over to her brother. Oruch was killed by her brother in the village square and the brother sentenced to eight years. He says, "I am penitent". The village people are relieved, "If Oruch had not been killed, she would be a bad example for our girls".

The fifth play is *Maria and Hope of Every Village*. The group played this performance with other street theatre and political theatre groups on various solidarity days in the squares of neighbourhoods with houses where people were squatting. "Every village has a Maria, Aisha and Fatima. There are so many of us, and we still exist. Women continue to dance with love and passion everywhere all over the world; this is why we still have hope."

The sixth play, *Red*, concerns custom and honour related murders and suicides, giving voice to the women who lost their lives in this context. *Red* is a play dramatised from a song written and sung for Gul Dünya, who had been raped and was then shot in the middle of the street by her brothers, because she had damaged the honour and integrity of the tribe.

The seventh play is a street performance about women resisting poverty and

was shown during a demonstration protest march.

The group also has other unfinished plays that have not yet been shown to an audience. One unfinished play is humorous and concerns the 'government'. It mentions an important cultural question: there are three types of henna; the sheep are hennaed to be sacrificed to God; the girls are hennaed to be sacrificed to their husbands; and the soldiers are hennaed to be sacrificed to their government!

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Community centres organise literacy courses for women, mainly those who have migrated from rural areas to cities. Woman Theatre takes part in this activity. The courses begin by asking the women to sing their regional hymns and folk songs. They choose their examples for teaching from the objects that can be found at home, in markets, connected with everyday life. Cooking recipes become educational material for the courses. They write down unfinished sentences such as "the marriage and my husband..." with blank parts to be filled in by the women. They come up against clichés and they try to get the women to talk. They assist women who are ashamed of showing their emotions and are afraid of speaking in public.

The group has noticed that women write as they speak and that is how they teach literacy. The women of Woman Theatre give the illiterate women exercises on the basis of recognition, understanding, speaking, listening, doing, looking, seeing, learning, teaching, searching, finding, losing, forgetting, remembering, expecting and waiting. They try to create self-confidence in them with regard to the family, neighbourhood, having a job and working, politics, sustaining daily living, friendship, things we disagree about and say no to. The aims are set on the basis of teaching women to understand what they are

not aware of. The group regularly records these experiences.

Woman Theatre members always travel together to perform and for the talks in connection with other activities. There is no hierarchy among the members. Sometimes discrepancies occur and if one woman does not feel the same way at the end of a process, she writes down her experiences and feelings and others reply to her. Until now, in twelve years, Woman Theatre has not undergone any fractures unlike many other women's initiatives, thank God! Some members leave, others join, but the Woman Theatre resists the severe conditions of our country and is one of the rare examples of a female movement in Turkey using theatre practice as a tool.

*Her name is Maria or Telya... There is always hope... Hold on and never let go! Your name is Rose/ Laugh World... But they murder you... But... Laugh World! Laugh so the whole world laughs...*

GUZIN YAMANER (Turkey) was born in 1968 in the eastern part of Turkey. She graduated from The Fine Arts Academy and has two master degrees in Theatre Studies, one on postmodern stage design and the other on the history of feminist theatre, and a PhD on the comparison between 20<sup>th</sup> century male and female playwrights' search for 'meaning'. Guzin has translated feminist plays into Turkish and has written a feminist play about female obsessions. She is a theatre critic.