

## ITALIAN YEARS AND INFLUENCES ON PAPAZIAN'S STAGE ARTISTRY



FIGURE 1: Vahram Papasian (right) with Armenian poet Siamanto at St. Mark's Square, 1900s

### As a Preface: Papazian and His Legacy

Shakespearean actor-director Vahram Papazian (1888-1968) – to whom the Armenian Shakespeare Association's 2019 conference in Venice was dedicated – studied and resided in this sumptuous edifice in the 1900s. While Papazian's influential and profuse theatrical legacy merits extensive investigation beyond this Conference boundaries, the present discussion focuses on Papazian's formative, life-defining years spent in Italy<sup>1</sup>. His rigorous classical instruction here – the renowned Mekhitarist Seminary for boys - forged his knowledge of classical civilisation, ancient and modern languages, broad erudition and his self-discipline. The decision of the Mekhitarist fathers to refer the gifted youngster to the Milan Academy of Arts to study fine arts and drama, secured his first theatrical

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1 ՅՈՎՀԱՆՆԻՍԵԱՆ ՀԵՆՐԻԿ, *Վահրամ Փափազեան, ՀՍ հանրագիտարան, Երևան 1986, հատոր 12, 326-327. HOVHANNISYAN, HENRIK. Vahram Papazian, in «Armenian Soviet Encyclopaedia», Yerevan 1986 vol.12, 326-327.*

steps with renowned Italian troupes in Italy and across Europe. Over five decades thereafter, performing in five languages Shakespearean roles (Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Bassanio, Petruchio and Romeo) within his wide-ranging classical to contemporary repertory, Papazian relished critical commendation and widespread popularity across countries. Papazian's contribution was significant in extending Shakespeare's reception through the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Near East, Persia, and later on, across the USSR. In Persia, for example, where not only Shakespeare, but theatre itself was unsolicited, due to the overwhelming success of his *Othello* performed with a local Armenian amateur troupe, Papazian was invited by the Shah Reza Pahlavi to partake in the creation of the first national theatre of Iran in 1932<sup>2</sup>. Unlike most leading actors beyond Europe's geographical margins, who remained unknown outside their national boundaries, Papazian had gained popularity across countries.



FIGURE 2: Papazian (Othello) and Arus Voskanian (Desdemona)

Following the announcement of his death at his family's summer house near Leningrad (St Petersburg) on 5 June 1968, letters and telegrams poured from the four corners of the world to the Armenian Centre of Shakespeare Studies in Yerevan<sup>3</sup>. One of the messages from Hollywood

- 2 ՓԱՓԱԶԵԱՆ ՎԱՀՐԱՄ, *Հետադարձ հայեացք*, Սովետական գրող, Երևան 1981, հատոր 2, 404-423. PAPAZIAN, VAHRAM. *Looking Back*, Yerevan Sovetakan Grogh Press 1981, vol. 2, 404-423.
- 3 Among national projects to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in Armenia, was the inauguration of the Shakespeare's international library (1964) and the Shakespeare Centre (1965) at the State Academy of Sciences initiated by academic and theatre historian ROUBEN ZARIAN (1910-1994).

was signed by film director Ruben Mamoulian: «Many actors attempt to play Shakespeare, yet very few succeed to authenticate his larger-than-life characters. Vahram Papazian was one of them. Because he had reached the heights of his profession. His death is a loss not only for the Armenian theatre, but for the world stage»<sup>4</sup>. Recognising Papazian as 'the last tragedian', famous Russian film director Gregory Kozintsev wrote: «The great tragedian of the Armenian nation was able to perform for all nationalities, identifying himself with everyone, regardless of the language in which he performed; because universal art is national in the first place. Papazian's name will stay forever in the global Shakespeare history»<sup>5</sup>.

Nonetheless, today Vahram Papazian is fairly unknown to the broader international scholarship. The reasons are manifold and complex. One of the more obvious explanations is that until the 1990s, the Western scholarship remained principally preoccupied by Shakespearean appropriations and adaptations in Britain, USA or Western Europe. Consequently, many noteworthy and influential actors beyond European peripheries were omitted by Western scholars, and Shakespeare's adaptations by Armenians were among them. Even in his recent volume *Great Shakespearean Actors*, Shakespearean expert Stanley Wells included solely four actors outside the British Isles: one Italian (Tommaso Salvini) and three Americans (Ira Aldridge, Charlotte Cushman and Edwin Booth)<sup>6</sup>. However, in the last quarter of the century, the Western research has gradually spread its geographical boundaries embracing Shakespearean appropriations across the globe.

## 1. Early Years at The Mekhitarist School in Constantinople

Though Papazian authored two volumes of the most enthralling autobiography (reprinted several times during the Soviet era both in Armenian and in Russian), many aspects of his eventful life remain obscure and ambivalent. One of the reasons for the flaws in his narrative, penned in his later life – based on his diaries, correspondence, and archives – was the

4 Շեքսպիրական, խմբ. Ռուբեն Զարեանի, ՀՍՍՀ գիտությունների ակադեմիայի հրատարակչություն, Երևան 1974, հատոր 4, 30; *Shakespearakan*, ed. by ROUBEN ZARIAN, Yerevan, Publishing House of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, vol. 4, 30.

5 Ivi, 35.

6 WELLS, STANLEY. *Great Shakespeare Actors*. Oxford University Press 2015.

loss of his records during his hasty escape from Constantinople during the ongoing Armenian Genocide, followed by constant relocations across cities for long decades. Furthermore, certain details of his turbulent life seem to be the outbursts of his boundless imagination and creative stimulus. Written in elegant, opulent style (a mixture of classical, Western and Eastern Armenian), his two-volume autobiography was acknowledged even by prominent authors as a true masterpiece of fiction<sup>7</sup>.

While it is largely accepted that Papazian was born in 1888, however, in an article published in a Moscow magazine he wrote: «I was born in Constantinople in 1892 in the family of Armenians. My mother was Italian»<sup>8</sup>. Yet no evidence has been found about his mother's Italian origins. Vahram was born in a middle-class Armenian family of four children (a brother and two younger sisters) in Constantinople on 5 June 1888. As his father's business prospered, the family moved into the Greek neighborhood, the affluent Pera district<sup>9</sup>. Pampered by a Greek neighbour, a young widow called Olympia, the little boy learnt the Greek language, which helped his theatrical career afterwards: invited by Greek authorities, Papazian, still in his twenties, performed with the Greek National theatre in the title role of *Orestes* by Euripides in the Hellenic language<sup>10</sup>.

Already at the age of three Vahram was fascinated by the enchanting world of theatre. When his paternal aunt and her husband visited the Casino Theatre in their neighbourhood to watch Martiros Mnakian, the little Vahram overheard their conversation about his astonishing performance<sup>11</sup>. The next morning, the inquisitive boy fled home furtively to discover the theatre for himself: «but never in my life I have entered through a door with such reverence, fright and anticipation, and it seems to me that I have never left that building since... for me everything that happened in my life thereafter, happened in that building»<sup>12</sup>.

7 *Shakespearakan*, cit. (n. 4), 42.

8 *О себе*, «Советский театр», 1928, 417. *About Himself*, «The Soviet Theatre», 1928, 417.

9 ՓԱՓԱԶԵԱՆ ՎԱՀՐԱՄ, *Հետադարձ հայեացք*, Սովետական գրող, Երևան 1979 իստոր 1, 7. PAPAZIAN, VAHRAM. *Looking Back*, Yerevan, Sovetakan Groch Press 1979, vol. 1, p.7.

10 Ivi, 233-236.

11 MARTIROSI MNAKIAN (1837-1920) one of the most influential Western Armenian actor-managers of the second half of the 19th century, who directed theatre troupes performing in Armenian (when not banned) and in Turkish, mainly in Constantinople.

12 PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit (n.9), 10.



One of the defining influences of Papazian's early childhood was Philomena, a family member and an actress, performing with local troupes, who regularly toured across the Mediterranean (his middle-class family viewed acting as an immoral occupation). Auntie Philo, as Papazian called her, adored the mischievous and disobedient boy indulging him with gifts and outfits from every country she visited. In particular, she offered him the first opportunity to appear in an afternoon performance authorized by Ottoman authorities only for Turkish women, as he later described: «the reactionary, barbarian and religious fanatics that were against any encounter between men and women in public places»<sup>13</sup>. Upon his return home, unable to hide the excitement of his first stage entrance, young Papazian repeated his comic stunt in front of his grandfather. Consequently, auntie Philo was banned from the household, as his grandfather considered her a negative influence for the boy's upbringing.

Vahram's parents, and particularly his grandfather, invested generously in children's education, therefore Papazian attended the best schools accessible in Constantinople. Thus, the young Vahram entered the renowned Mekhitarist preparatory school in Pera overlooking the Mediterranean<sup>14</sup>. He was particularly inspired by an instructor called Garegin, who managed to wean the disobedient and spirited youngster from his habitual shenanigans: «and when I left that prep school after two years, I was already a little man armed with all practical tools to face the life battles and cleared from all vices»<sup>15</sup>. Academic subjects such as philosophy, history, mathematics, sciences, and languages were taught by the best tutors of all nationalities. Latin, French and Italian were studied through historic and literary texts, while pupils were expected to recite long passages in original versions. Papazian's erudite teacher of classics inspired his love for Greco-Roman civilization: «Thanks to Kasgandilyan, I was introduced and gradually fell in love with Greek classics: I was captivated by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. I started to appreciate Heraclitus and Greek philosophy in general»<sup>16</sup>. Profoundly influenced by Homer, the future

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<sup>13</sup> Ivi, 19.

<sup>14</sup> The Mekhitarist order, founded in 1717 by MEKHITAR SEBASTATSI on the San Lazzaro island, throughout the 19th century opened schools for Armenian communities across the Ottoman Empire and other realms to preserve the Armenian language, historical and cultural heritage, while educating the Armenian youth according to the latest progressive European standards.

<sup>15</sup> PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, 71.

actor recited long passages from *The Iliad* at every school occasion, receiving gifts from cheering audiences.



FIGURE 3: nineteen-year-old Papazian in 1907

While Armenian theatres were banned by Sultan Hamid II, soon after his coronation in 1876, theatrical performances were given chiefly within Armenian schools<sup>17</sup>. «And the small stage at the Mekhitarist school was the only place, where the Armenian language was articulated by child-actors, and due to its educational nature, it remained unnoticed by the vigilant eye of the oppressive regime»<sup>18</sup>. At the Mekhitarist school, young Papazian's rhetoric and acting talents thrived in festive performances, attracting vast crowds of the cosmopolitan city. Tragedies by Greek playwrights and French classics such as Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine were translated into classical Armenian (Grapar) rather than modern Western Armenian for school performances. As teaching foreign languages was an essential component of the curriculum, French and Italian comedies in their original languages were equally performed by teenage actors.

During the graduation ceremony from the Mekhitarist school in 1905, the young Papazian performed the leading part of Jules Verne's novel *L'Île mystérieuse* and in the abridged version of Carlo Goldoni's

17 Armenian theatres remained banned throughout Hamid II's reign until 1908, therefore numerous male and female actors had either to form Turkish-language troupes (equally founded by Armenian actor-managers) or to take the road of exile. Most of them chose exile joining the Armenian professional theatre troupe in Tiflis, which had become the cultural centre of Eastern Armenian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

18 PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 72.

*Servant of Two Masters*, personifying Truffaldino. The overcrowded performance was attended by local audiences and foreign guests, including diplomats and reporters from Europe. The overwhelming success of his final recital was widely echoed in the press; an English reporter of *The Levant Review* declared: «As for the new graduate Vahram Papazian, who secured the evening's triumph, we recommend unequivocally to devote himself to theatre, because not only he demonstrated a rare talent, but we also believe he was born for stage»<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. *Collegio Armeno Moorat-Raphael in Venice*



FIGURE 4: The Hall of Mirrors of the Armenian Moorat-Raphael College (early XX c.)

Following his graduation with distinctions from the Mekhitarist school in Constantinople, Papazian was selected to resume his education at the Collegio Armeno Moorat-Raphael in Venice, similarly run by the Mekhitarist fathers since its foundation in 1836. In this sumptuous palace erected by the Zenobio family in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the best Armenian students selected from Tiflis, Paris, Calcutta, Moscow and other communities, found themselves surrounded by masterworks of Tiepolo, Canova, Cellini and others. The rigorous and wide-ranging curriculum was taught by the Mekhitarist scholars and European tutors. The military discipline escorted the broad academic curriculum including mathematics, sciences, philosophy, literature, history, modern (Italian, French, Armenian) and ancient languages (Greek, Latin and Grapar), sports and drama. Alongside academic subjects, Papazian excelled in sports representing the

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19 Ivi, 74.

Seminary during international tournaments in gymnastics. Fencing in particular, was his favourite exercise, which likewise turned useful in his stage career. His preferred Mekhitarist tutor, Father Kasgandilyan, whose seminars were conducted in the picturesque school gardens, prompted the Greek philosophers of antiquity<sup>20</sup>. Papazian's commitment to his maternal language was undeniably inspired by the Mekhitarists too, as he later acknowledged: «even the most talented actor, dramatist or theatre practitioner is inconsequential without mastering his native tongue. For if there is a place, where the native language can flourish and refine, is most certainly the theatre. The language *is* the nation»<sup>21</sup>.



FIGURE 5: a classroom of the Armenian College in Venice, early XX c.

Opportunities to perform at the Seminary were frequent during celebrations and religious holidays, meanwhile the future actor was increasingly convinced that theatre was his ultimate vocation. Although Papazian spent two edifying years at the Venice Seminary, his troublesome behaviour caused serious concerns to his diligent educators, and headache to his parents and grandfather back in Constantinople, who subsidised his European education.

The life-changing incident for young Papazian occurred during a routine school trip with his classmates to St Mark's Square, when he noticed a poster of a touring production of *Hamlet* by the troupe of the prominent actor Oreste Calabresi (1857 – 1915). «I would have rather died than missed the performance of *Hamlet* by such tragedian!», he confessed in

20 Ivi, 84. FATHER KASGANDILYAN is referred in the biography twice, as his tutor in Constantinople, as well as Venice, therefore further investigation seems necessary.

21 PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 47.



his memoirs<sup>22</sup>. Furtively escaping the attention of the College's watchful caretaker Antonio, he arrived at the Goldoni Theatre to see the famous Italian tragedian in *Hamlet*<sup>23</sup>. Disrupting the audience with sighs and groans during the show, the overexcited boy was soon thrown out of the auditorium by the theatre staff. Nonetheless, in the interval, he managed to penetrate the dressing room of the Maestro. Begging for his attention, he recited, acted and sang for Calabresi, who serenely reacted to his pledges: «If you persist, you will succeed»<sup>24</sup>. After the evening performance, the audacious young man crept into Calabresi's hotel room urging him to speak with the Mekhitarists about his theatrical future. The Italian actor compassionately escorted the young rebel to his College to persuade the Mekhitarist fathers that the boy had exceptional dramatic talent. After several hours of consultations between the Italian master and the Mekhitarist tutors, it was agreed to amend Papazian's academic curriculum to prepare him for admission exams to the Milan Academy of Fine Arts the following spring<sup>25</sup>.



FIGURE 6: students of the Armenian College  
in Venice, early XX c.

Subsequently, the last few months at the Moorat-Raphael College were particularly jubilant for the actor in waiting, whose daily schedule, alongside morning classes, comprised visits to museums, theatre, and opera to develop his understanding of theatre and fine arts. Papazian confessed in his memoirs afterwards: «I owed everything to Calabrese, who managed to defend my innate talent for arts and due to his professional experience, forecast my brilliant future, that resulted in uncommon concessions of the Seminary's rules for a single student»<sup>26</sup>.

22 PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 91.

23 Ivi, 92.

24 Ivi, 94.

25 Ivi, 99.

26 Ivi, 100.



FIGURE 7: students exercising in the gardens of the Venice College, early XXc.

### 3. Milan Academy of Arts and Touring with Italian Troupes

Contrary to their great expectations that their son would become a doctor or a merchant, Papazian's disappointed parents were slightly reassured by examiners' note from the Milan Academy: '*Speranza per l'arte drammatica moderna*' (the hope of the modern dramatic art)<sup>27</sup>. Papazian's four-year training at the Academy consisted of theory classes in European and world art, history, philosophy and theatre studies during the six months of each year. The remaining six months of the year, drama students were attached to various Italian troupes and theatre companies for their practical experience. In the initial year, Papazian was assigned to the travelling troupe of Girolamo Gozzi, one of the final masters of *Commedia dell'Arte*. «Gozzi's theatre was popular in the widest sense of the term», remembered Papazian. «As shows were truthful and overt representations of real life, his theatre did not require a written script, as performance topics were drawn daily from local events»<sup>28</sup>. Maintaining Italian traditions, Gozzi's troupe was improvising around familiar themes without any back-up text: «An hour before the performance, from the latest local news and gossips, Gozzi was coming up with the script»<sup>29</sup>. The troupe's performances were delivered in open-air Italian piazzas and gardens, depending

27 Ivi, 105.

28 Ivi, 108.

29 Ivi, 109.



exclusively on audience donations, which were evenly and consistently distributed among all actors, including Mr and Mrs Gozzi. The young apprentice learnt skills such as making wigs, beards and costumes, spontaneous improvisation techniques in order to grab spectators' attention from the first second to the last. «Overall, in the first six months of my training, I learnt everything that helped to enrich my future acting skills»<sup>30</sup>. Alongside the stage craft, more importantly, the young performer learnt the technique to overcome the stage fright, that he described afterwards: «not to be afraid of you, beloved spectator, because you are a thousand-headed dragon, my dearest, for you know how to praise and flatter, yet your claws can tear and your indifference can be lethal»<sup>31</sup>.

Papazian joined the troupe of the celebrated tragedian Ermete Novelli during his second year at the Academy, whose influence on his artistic development proved considerable. With Novelli's troupe, the actor-student toured across Italy, as well as Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, England, the Mediterranean coast of Africa, ending the tour in Gibraltar and Spain<sup>32</sup>. According to the dazzled student, «Novelli, with his colossal personality, standing at the verge of two centuries, was the greatest representative of the realistic theatre»<sup>33</sup>. Among Novelli's plentiful talents, Papazian outlined his absolute command of the auditorium, notable stage entries and exits, physical and facial expressiveness, and in particular, his ability to pause and to maintain the silence. Recollecting Novelli's performance of Hamlet's soliloquy "to be or not to be" (3.1) during their London tour, Papazian wrote: «There are silences that shake the world. Those silences tell more than any word can express, and in my experience, Novelli concluded that silent soliloquy with his entire body and soul, transforming into a terrifying question mark stuck between life and death»<sup>34</sup>. The young apprentice was equally marked by Novelli's acting with his back to the audience, disparaged by many in those days. Subsequently, Papazian mastered this stage technique initially defined by the French dramaturg and trendsetter André Antoine (1858-1943), the

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30 Ivi, 115.

31 Ivi, 113.

32 ERMETE NOVELLI (1851-1919), considered the greatest Italian actor of the 1900s, who founded the Italian national theatre, the Casa di Goldoni, in the style of the Comédie-Française, also renowned for his Shakespearean performances.

33 PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 4), 118.

34 Ivi, 119.

founder of *Théâtre Libre* and the father of the concept of *mise en scene* before WWII. Meanwhile, the young actor-student realized early the urgency to develop his personal interpretative method: «I was admiring my master, analysing and observing his art, but as the days went by, I was more convinced that using or imitating is pointless and unattainable, that I should create my own style, without conditions and clauses, which would truthfully express my own identity»<sup>35</sup>.

Renowned for his portrayal of Shylock, Novelli's Othello did not correspond to Papazian's own evaluation, however. «From all tragedies that I have read, *Othello* has been the dearest to me, and until today amongst all *Othellos* that I have watched, including Novelli's, none of them have satisfied me», he asserted in his autobiography<sup>36</sup>. With his virtuous technique, Novelli articulated Othello's jealousy convincingly, nonetheless, the Italian master had discounted Othello's other critical traits – his boundless loving soul, his faith in human virtuousness – portraying him as «a medieval jealous husband, rather than a valiant knight destined to fight against evil»<sup>37</sup>. One of the contemporary critics also noted Novelli's shortfalls in the role: «Signor Novelli's Othello is not up to the standard that he has set as Lear and Shylock. But with all its shortcomings, it is still a noteworthy incarnation. There is something too keen, too obvious, too presumptuous in the Italian actor's conception of the Moor»<sup>38</sup>.

In his penultimate year at the Academy, with six fellow students, Papazian was attached to the troupe of legendary Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), presenting a rare opportunity to accompany the great dame of the Italian stage across Italy, Austria and Germany. In those days, heated debate was raised by critics about the differences between the styles of Eleonore Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, that Papazian followed avidly, learning from both stage icons of the era. «She possessed unmatched inner talents and the natural genius to interpret any character. Duse possessed that puzzling X factor, mathematically unsolved by humans until now»<sup>39</sup>.

35 PAPAIZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 121.

36 Ivi, 126.

37 Ivi, 127.

38 Novelli as *the Moor of Venice*, in «The Theatre Magazine», New York April 1907, vol.74, 96.

39 PAPAIZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 138.

While Gozzi had taught him the secrets of the everlasting charm of *Commedia del Arte* and Novelli the urgency to observe the human nature, Duse inspired the gullible youth to plunge – selflessly and unconditionally – into the depths of the author's thoughts to recreate the emotional turmoil and agony of the character. Witnessing Duse's painstaking preparation and unsurpassed interpretations of tragic roles – Alexander Dumas *filis'* Marguerite Gauthier, Gabriele D'Annunzio's Francesca di Rimini and Gioconda or Shakespeare's Cleopatra – were not only unforgettable for the avid student, but cathartic: «If I had not observed Duse's exceptional art, perhaps I would have never understood the essence of stage art, likewise, I would have not understood the light, if I had not seen the darkness»<sup>40</sup>.

Winning the Academy's special prize for the best essay on a topic suggested by Sarah Bernhardt (about Othello's internal state and his psychological turmoil when he realizes Desdemona's innocence), his article was subsequently published both in Paris and Milan press. By his tutors' recommendation, Papazian was hired for the first time as a professional actor in small roles accompanying Giovannina Grasso, Raffaello Mariani and Fausta Kalanti during their Milan tours.

Papazian joined the troupe of actor-director Ermete Zacconi (1857-1948) in his fourth and final year at the Milan Academy. The front-runner of the emerging trend, *verismo* (naturalism), who graduated from the Bologna University, Zacconi was first and foremost a doctor, yet after few amateur appearances, had gained unprecedented popularity in Italy and even abroad. Extremely polite, well-educated, and blessed with rare dramatic skills, nevertheless, he plunged into one of the most extreme theatre movements, which, in Papazian's words, «created one of the darkest, hopeless, pessimistic and the most pathological trends in art»<sup>41</sup>. His acting, particularly his death on stage, was so graphic that it looked like a «scientific illustration of toxicology rather than theatrical act». Papazian rejected explicitly graphic representation of pain on stage, both external and internal: «Stage cannot be the photographic reproduction of nature, and theatrical art is not photography»<sup>42</sup>. With Zacconi's troupe, the Armenian student

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40 Ivi, 139.

41 Ivi, 142.

42 Ivi, 143.

toured Rome, Napoli, Florence, Vienna, Budapest and several other European cities. Opting for the realistic method, Papazian joined the growing number of liberal theatre practitioners, such as Stanislavski, criticising naturalism leading to *verismo* at the dawn of the twentieth century<sup>43</sup>.

During his summer break from the Milan Academy in 1908, merely twenty-year-old Papazian debuted in the role of Othello back in Constantinople. Political changes sweeping through the Ottoman Empire allowed the oppressed Western Armenians to believe in the revival of their cultural identity: national theatre, uncensored literature and free press. Before the closure of Armenian-language theatres, the final performance of the Armenian theatre troupe had been *Othello* with Thomas Fasulajian in the title role<sup>44</sup>. Greeted in his hometown as a celebrity, Papazian was entrusted to resurrect the Armenian theatre with the same play (*Othello*) at the same venue (the Odeon theatre). With the help of his childhood friends, Papazian rapidly assembled an amateur troupe, while the old-school translation used by Fasulajian decades before was revised and edited. «Shakespeare visited us that year: moreover, he reopened the doors of the Armenian theatre that Hamid had locked for so many decades», wrote his childhood friend Hakop Siruni in his obituary for the great actor<sup>45</sup>. Papazian's first attempt to direct a rather inexperienced cast undoubtedly had shortfalls. Yet the reaction from Armenian and foreign critics was indeed overwhelming, as the English-language *The Levant Review* confirmed: «Meticulous study of characters, with complete mastery of his expressive methods, he is destined to become a tragedian with exceptional attributes»<sup>46</sup>.

However, the political situation and treatment of minorities rapidly deteriorated once again, as the promised reforms to save the decaying Ottoman Empire from collapse never materialised. «I felt that due to the political atmosphere in Constantinople, the idea of a permanent Armenian

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43 СТАНИСЛАВСКИЙ КОНСТАНТИН, *Моя жизнь в искусстве*, Москва 2014. STANISLAVSKY, KONSTANTIN, *My Life in Art*, Moscow 2014.

44 Thomas Fasulajian (1843-1901) was born in Constantinople, and member of the first professional Armenian theatre of Constantinople, the Eastern Theatre since 1863. With his wife, Paitzar Fasulajian, they were a demanded touring duo across the Balkans, Russia, Caucasus performing chiefly European romantic repertory, he was also commended for his interpretations of Othello and Shylock.

45 Shakespearakan, cit. (n.4), 345

46 PAPAIZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 205.

theatre was a complete delusion. My longing for a free theatre called me continuously to Europe», wrote Papazian about this disquieting period<sup>47</sup>.



FIGURE 8: Papazian  
as a young man

#### 4. Italian Influences on Papazian's Stage Artistry

Very few photographs have endured from Papazian's early years because of his precipitous exile from Constantinople amid the Armenian Genocide. At the start of the Genocide on 24 April 1915 - with the arrests and brutal executions of some 300 intellectuals, artists, writers and professionals of Armenian ethnicity - by utter luck, Papazian was in Russia filming with pioneering film director Aleksander Khanjonkov. In fact, from 1915 to 1918 he starred in over 15 silent movies directed by Khanjonkov under the pseudonym Ernesto Vagram: «My paternal name I wanted to leave for the sacred temple of theatre», he explained in his autobiography later on<sup>48</sup>. He had systematically refused to join the Turkish theatre whenever he was back in Constantinople visiting his family in the 1910s. For a principled and uncompromising individual, there was no question of partnership with the Turkish theatre amid continuous persecution of Armenian and other minorities. Therefore, Turkish authorities were waiting for a suitable moment to capture Papazian as well. During a performance with the Armenian troupe in 1920, Turkish soldiers quietly circled the theatre to arrest him. The theatre's loyal employee of Turkish origin, noticing the menacing situation, helped the Armenian actor to escape during the interval. Deceiving the soldiers that Papazian was about

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47 Ivi, 241.

48 Ivi, 394.

to enter the stage, he arranged Papazian's evade through the theatre roof. Without passport or luggage, Papazian boarded on a ship to Odessa, where a new chapter of his tempestuous life and extraordinary career commenced in the newly shaping USSR. Meanwhile, as anti-Christian repressions continued, his parents and siblings finally managed to flee from Constantinople to Marseille in 1922, and like most families fleeing the massacres, the contact with his family was disrupted for a decade.

Due to the lack of photographic evidence of his preliminary roles, we are reliant on eyewitness statements to imagine Papazian as a young actor. Theatre historians and eyewitnesses unanimously praised his natural attributes: «I was unable to take my eyes off his gorgeous figure, and his handsome face», wrote national writer Derenik Demirchian. «More I looked at him, more attractive I found him», confessed actor Manvel Manvelian). «Magnificent, captivating, and manly face, flexible, muscular and athletic body, expressive but graceful gestures...nature has been incredibly generous towards Papazian», described theatre director Levon Khalantar<sup>49</sup>. Meanwhile, his innate physical attributes often hindered the objective assessment of his stagecraft<sup>50</sup>. For instance, director Levon Kalantar assessing Papazian's artistic legacy during the historic wartime conference and theatre festival of Shakespeare (moved from Moscow to Yerevan) in 1944, defended the erroneous viewpoint – subsequently repeated by Shakespearean scholar Louisa Samvelian – that Papazian's early performances were dominated by an idiosyncratic and self-centred approach, tailored on external, recurrent effects without plunging into the depths of Shakespearean drama<sup>51</sup>.

As his autobiography unveils, Papazian's first theatrical steps were primarily influenced by the optimistic and vibrant popular theatre of Gozzi, as well as Novelli's realistic theatre. Additionally, Duse had taught him the importance of the innermost analysis of the text and *being* the character

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49 ՀԱԽՎԵՐԴԻԱՆ ԼԵՆՈՆ, *Հայ թատրոնի պատմություն. 1901-1920*, ՀՍՍՀ գիտությունների ակադեմիայի հրատարակչություն, Երևան 1980, 307. HACHVERDYAN, LEVON. *History of the Armenian Theatre: 1901-1920*, Yerevan 1980, 307.

50 *Ibid.*

51 ՍԱՄՎԵԼԵԱՆ ԼՈՒԻԶԱ, *Շեքսպիրը եւ հայ գրական եւ թատերական մշակույթը*, Հայաստան հրատարակչություն, Երևան 1974, 515. SAMVELIAN LOUISA, *Shakespeare and the Armenian Culture*, Hayastan Publishers, Yerevan 1974, 515.



rather than *playing* the character. Papazian's autobiography conveys his insightful observations on his famous Italian mentors who shaped his artistic approach and his optimism about his nation's future. He fervently defended that Shakespeare's outlook was optimistic and juxtaposed to Dante's divine philosophy: «While Dante rejected the reality evading into the circles of innermost imagination, Shakespeare, quite the opposite, engaged readers and audiences with the torrents and delights of life on earth. Humans attain redemption only within themselves, observing the depths of their own emotions and self-consciousness»<sup>52</sup>.

## 5. Post-Italian Period and Initial Shakespearean Roles

Following his graduation from the Milan Academy, carrying references from his tutors to Paris theatres, Papazian emerged into the theatrical arena of the French capital to further his artistic vision. One of the recommendation letters was addressed to the director of the Comédie Française, Jules Claretie, who even offered the ambitious graduate minor silent roles at the most prestigious stage of the French theatre. Papazian, immersed inside Molière's sumptuous language and dramaturgy, but was nevertheless disillusioned with the old-fashioned stylishness of Molière house. From the theatre's repertory, he estimated that Greek tragedies were the most suitable for the traditional sets and classical elocution adopted by the Comédie Française. Participating in the company's production of *Oedipus the King*, a French version by Jules Lacroix of Sophocles tragedy with Jean Mounet-Sully in the title role, he evoked in his memoirs afterwards: "Mounet-Sully, the great French tragedian was divine in the role of Oedipus. Blessed are my eyes that witnessed such unsurpassed perfection!"<sup>53</sup>. This French master remained one of the strongest influences on Papazian's dramatic art, like Novelli.

Back in Italy, Papazian joined the troupe of Tina Di Lorenzo, who, in his words was «not so much of an actress but chiefly a beautiful woman, who had made her female charms the core of her art»<sup>54</sup>. Nonetheless, her troupe was greeted triumphantly by hard-pleasing audiences from North

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52 PAPAIZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n. 9), 293.

53 Ivi, 154.

54 Ivi, 194-196.

Africa to Southern Europe (including Beirut, Damascus, Tripoli, Marrakech, Gibraltar, Malaga, Kudliks, Seville, Syracuse, Livorno, Genova and Napoli where the tour ended).



FIGURE 9: Papazian as Romeo

During his brief visits to Constantinople, Papazian happily joined Armenian troupes in Smyrna and in Constantinople, where he was greeted as an established stage authority. Among many roles (Side, Cyrano, Uriel Acosta, Don Juan, Arbenin and many others), he also interpreted Shakespearean heroes: Romeo, Macbeth and Othello. In Smyrna, notably, the young actor appeared in the role of Hamlet for the first time, replacing his experienced and renowned stage partner Siranoush<sup>55</sup>.

European press and critics were enchanted by Papazian's initial appearances; his Othello in particular was rapidly gaining widespread popularity. As mentioned before, by the invitation of the Greek government, Papazian, still in his early twenties, appeared with the Greek National Theatre in Athens performing the title roles in *Othello* (in French), and in *Oresteia* (in Greek). Following his triumphant shows, the Armenian actor received further offers from Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Italy, where he acted in French and Italian. Comparing translations in various languages, Papazian translated dramas by Shakespeare to Alexander Dumas father, Victor Hugo, Edmond Rostand, Oscar Wilde, into Armenian.

<sup>55</sup> SIRANOUSH (MEROPE SAHAKI KANTARJIAN) (1857-1932) Armenian actor born in Constantinople, renowned for her roles as Ophelia, Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, Margaret, and dozens of others. She was the first female actor to interpret the role of Hamlet in 1901 across Eastern Europe, Caucasus and the Near East. Her tours extended to Russia, the Balkans, Caucasus, Northern Africa; she died in Cairo.

Vahram Papazian's everchanging life was as turbulent and triumphant as his nation's. Montaigne's famous words quoted by Andrew Hiscock in his keynote lecture at the ESRA conference in Rome in 2019, could summarise Papazian's restless life on the road: «I know well what I am fleeing from but not what I am in search of». Indeed, the greatest Shakespearean actor of the Armenian stage of the twentieth century hardly ever lived in Armenia, only settling in Yerevan in the 1950s.



FIGURE 10: Papazian as Hamlet

Papazian's dramatic art was the fusion of his deeply ingrained Armenian identity and the European culture absorbed through decades of exploring, touring and regenerating, as theatre critic Lévon Khalatian argued: «in the history of the national theatre Papazian occupies an exclusive place, national with his passionate temperament and universal with his vast international repertory».<sup>56</sup> Yet the definitive evaluation of his dramatic art belongs to Papazian himself:

«the combination of my European education with the study of Greco-Roman civilisation from early childhood and my Armenian upbringing with the instruction of the classical language and history, as well as my teenage years shaped by the neo-Latin culture, made me a Western man rather than an Eastern man. Meanwhile, it was impossible to erase the Eastern mysticism and passion inside me passed on with enduring ancestral genes, and if Eastern audiences

56 ԶԱՐԵԱՆ ՌՈՒԲԵՆ, *Էջեր հայկական շեքսպիրապատումից*, ՀՍՍՀ գիտությունների ակադեմիայի հրատարակչություն, Երևան 1981, հատոր 2. ZARIAN, RUBEN. *Pages from Armenian Shakespearean History*, Yerevan Academy of Sciences Press, 1981, vol.2.

viewed me as a European, in Europe, on the other hand, nobody ever forgot that I was from the East»<sup>57</sup>.

Papazian's extraordinary life story, captured in two autobiographical volumes, and his extensive studies on *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* urge new editions (all editions date back to the Soviet era) for the forthcoming generation of performers, scholars and theatre enthusiasts. Additionally, those volumes – unveiling his eventful life and extraordinary career – unquestionably deserve to be translated into English and other languages for international Shakespeareans and theatre historians. With the global Shakespeare research expanding its geographical boundaries, now it seems the right time to revive the interrupted discussion on an influential Shakespearean actor-director, famed during his lifetime across countries, whose dramatic art reconciled the irreconcilable East with the West.

JASMINE H. SEYMOUR  
Armenian Shakespeare Association (ASA)

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57 PAPAZIAN, *Looking Back*, cit. (n.2), 253.

## Ամփոփում

ԻՏԱԼԱԿԱՆ ՏԱՐԻՆԵՐ ԵՒ ԱԶԴԵՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ  
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## ՅԱՍՄԻԿ ՍԷՅՄՈՒՐ

Շէյքսպիրեան դերասան եւ բեմադրիչ Վահրամ Փափազեան (1888-1968), որուն նուիրուած է Հայ Շէյքսպիրեան Ընկերակցութեան 2019ի Վենետիկի գիտաժողովը, սորվեցաւ եւ բնակեցաւ Մուրատ Ռափայէլեան Վարժարանի չքեղ պալատին մէջ 1900ականներուն: Փափազեանի ազդեցիկ եւ ճոխ թատերական ժառանգը ծաւալուն հետազոտութեան արժանի է այս գիտաժողովի ծիրէն դուրս:

Այս յօդուածը կեդրոնացած է Իտալիոյ մէջ դաստիարակութեան եւ կազմաւորման տարիներուն վրայ, որ դրոշմեցին մեծ արուեստագէտին կեանքն ու գործը: Փափազեանի ստացած խիստ դասական կրթութիւնը Միխիթարեան վարժարանին մէջ ձեւաւորեց դասական քաղաքակրթութեան իր ընկալումը: Մուրատ Ռափայէլեանի մէջ է նաեւ որ սորվեցաւ հին եւ նոր լեզուներ ու ձեռք բերաւ կարգապահութիւն եւ մեծ հմտութիւն:

Միխիթարեան հայրերուն առած որոշումը՝ խոստումնայից երիտասարդը Միլանի Արուեստի Ակադեմիան ուղարկելու, որպէսզի մասնագիտանար գեղարուեստի եւ թատերգութեան ճիւղէն ներս, Փափազեանի դերասանական ասպարէզին առաջին քայլը հանդիսացաւ, առիթ ընծայելով, որ Իտալիա եւ Եւրոպա շրջի իտալական յայտնի թատերախումբերու հետ: Յիսուն տարիէ աւելի, Շէյքսպիրի տիպարներու հինգ լեզուներով դերակատարութեամբ, ան տարբեր երկիրներու մէջ արժանացաւ քննադատներու բարձր գնահատանքին եւ ժողովրդական համբաւին: