

ՀՈՐԵԼՅԱՆՆԵՐ JUBILEE



LEVON HAKHVERDYAN: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CITIZEN

"Levon is a man of this land"

Sos Sargsyan

It is far easier to write about a writer, a painter, or an actor than about someone who has written about virtually everything. It is perhaps this very circumstance that leads me to focus on Levon Hakhverdyan as an intellectual, approaching him as an individual and as a phenomenon, one that is precious and worthy of recognition above all for his uncompromising nature, his restless temperament, and his image as a deeply concerned and responsible citizen.

Perhaps it is precisely his character, his profound sense of love for and responsibility toward the homeland, and his restless nature that explain his deep devotion to Hovhannes Tumanyan, as well as his exceptionally sensitive analyses and interpretations of the life and works of the poet of all Armenians.

Levon Hakhverdyan was an unwavering admirer of Hovhannes Tumanyan, a devoted scholar and evaluator of his literary legacy. Repeatedly turning to Tumanyan's invaluable works, Hakhverdyan offers his own assessments and analyses, uncovering numerous hidden layers. Yet one striking feature remains constant throughout his interpretations: the homeland as the foundational axis, the pain of loss, and an interpretation of the Tumanyan-like "lament." And it is by no means surprising that, for example, in the article "Tumanyan and Us – Here and Now," when speaking about the poet, Hakhverdyan recalls his words: "What is the all-national pain of the Armenian? Persecution, torment, a state of exile, and life as a wanderer," and immediately poses a painful question: is it not the same today? At the same time, Hakhverdyan seeks to address not only external but also internal causes. He writes that we have failed to fulfill the testament of the Great

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Armenian, stating: "We do not cherish, we do not safeguard either our national wealth, which is not abundant, or our waters and Lake Sevan, which are our hope and refuge, or our forests, of which we have so few". "The sons of great and powerful homelands take care of what is theirs, but we don't".¹ He then adds: "We do not even cherish our language, we neither learn it nor respect it; otherwise, we would not suffocate Armenia and our capital with foreign-language signage... One might object that I am straying from the main subject of my article. No, I am not straying. And even if I am, I am right to do so".² He proceeds in this manner, further developing the theme by addressing provincialism, negligence, slovenliness, and attitudes marked by disrespect.

Numerous and noteworthy are Levon Hakhverdyan's theatre studies articles, including "One Must Not Joke with 'Anush'", "How a Money Pouch Raises a Man's Stature", "Yes, a New Theatre – Metro Station 'Garegin Nzhdeh'", "William Saroyan at the National Theatre", "Theatre in Vanadzor", "Did Sundukyan Come Closer to Us, or Did We Come Closer to Sundukyan?", "Gyumri's Sorrow, but Also Its Laughter", "It is Forbidden. Under No Circumstances is It Allowed", "Who is the Superfluous Man? On a New Production at the Sundukyan Theatre and the Fate of the Theatre", "His Hero is a Concerned Man, Like Himself," and others. Moreover, in all of these articles, one can discern an interesting pattern: the author boldly points out shortcomings, yet at the same time seeks to give priority to the positive aspects, with the intention of seeing the good, giving it due recognition, and offering encouragement – an approach not characteristic of all critics. This, in turn, constitutes a distinctive hallmark that undoubtedly stems from his character as a person.

Incidentally, in his articles on theatre, not only do his sharp perception, keen intellect, and incisive language become evident, as well as his ability to notice seemingly minor details, but also his attentiveness as a literary scholar. In this regard, his article on Tigran Levonyan's production of *Anush*, published in the newspaper *Azg* on 17 November 1994 under the rather telling title "One Must Not Joke with 'Anush'", is particularly noteworthy.

A particular focus on this article aims to reveal Levon Hakhverdyan's approach and principles as a theatre critic. In the article, while highlighting the shortcomings of the production, the author repeatedly references the original

¹ Levon Hakhverdyan, *We and Our Difficult Days*, Yerevan, 2000, p. 36.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

work, drawing on Tumanyan's own interpretations, the underlying ideas, and a distinct philosophical perspective. Hakhverdyan asks: "Is it permissible to change any aspect of a dramatic work, in this case, the time and space of *Anush's* action – the location? It is permissible if a greater semantic and artistic purpose than that of the original is being pursued; otherwise, it is not allowed".³

According to Hakhverdyan, Tumanyan's works in general should be considered within the timeframe they depict. As he rightly notes, the events of *Anush* begin in spring and conclude in spring, forming a complete cycle, whereas in Tigran Levonyan's staging, the events follow one another in a state of "temporal uncertainty." It is well known that in Tumanyan's *Anush*, nature functions as a kind of active character, with its elements and the Debed River highlighting the remarkable interconnection between humans and nature. This aspect is neglected in the production. Hakhverdyan also objects to the set design by Yevgeny Safronov, in which a ruined church was presented on stage. "*Anush* reflects primordial, patriarchal human relations and unrestrained passions, rather than Christian propriety",⁴ he writes. Hakhverdyan also discusses the costumes, questioning whether Saroyan and Mosun can be seen wearing the traditional attire of a Sasun native, and answering that it would be equivalent to "dressing Davit of Sasun in the chukha of a Lori man." The author also objects to the staging of the scene depicting Anush's "madness," which he considers an immense solo tragedy – "a monotragedie unlike anything I recall in operatic dramaturgy". In the production, however, this is accompanied by children's footstomping, which "gives a mundane, everyday tone to the great tragedy".⁵

Hakhverdyan once again rightly observes that in the poem everything unfolds according to the "moral imperative dictated by adat (tradition)," and there is no need to provide additional commentary on the events, as has been done in previous productions. "Of course, lavish, crowded scenes and dances leave an impression on the audience, but they distort the truth of life".⁶ Essentially, this reflects Levon Hakhverdyan's principle as an intellectual: for him, the disrupted truth of life is unacceptable.

Nevertheless, while meticulously pointing out every shortcoming, he does not fail to recognize the positive aspects as well. Characteristically, the final

³ **Levon Hakhverdyan**, *We and Our Difficult Days*, Yerevan, 2000, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ **Levon Hakhverdyan**, *We and Our Difficult Days*, Yerevan, 2000, p. 18.

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sentence of the article captures the author's stance: "One must not joke with *Anush*".⁷

L. Hakhverdyan writes about the Sundukyan Theatre, expressing concern for the condition and fate of the national theatre, but he immediately turns his attention to the younger generation: "What a sense of national artistic thinking, what a talent, and yet youth is slipping away right before our eyes..."⁸

In his articles, Hakhverdyan, true to his character, often arrives at painful conclusions: "Unified, unanimous, collectively organized – what rare qualities for Armenian reality".⁹

It is likewise no coincidence that Hakhverdyan frequently addressed the Armenian language, its purity, and its distortions in numerous articles, such as "How Far Have We Come", "A Series of Inquiries to Mr. Valeri Mirzoyan, Head of the State Language Inspectorate", "Close the Doors of the 'That' Part of Speech; It is a Sin Against the Armenian Language", and "You are Intellectuals, At Least Behave Decently Yourselves," among others. In all these cases, his concern remains the same: "Is it trivial that we call this language our mother tongue? Then, for the sake of your own dear mother..."¹⁰ Hakhverdyan consistently and on every occasion valued the Armenian language, as well as the role of theatre in particular in its preservation, and he offered a remarkable formulation, considering it a "historical responsibility."

L. Hakhverdyan responded to numerous writings and publications that violated the truth, authored many books on figures such as the great Tumanyan, Paruyr Sevak, Avetik Isahakyan, Suren Kocharyan, and Vardan Ajemyan, and translated several works, including Cune's Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece. He hosted programs on the Armenian language and, at the urging of Anahit Sahinyan, conducted interviews in Pioneer magazine. In all these endeavors, he never concealed his concern and anguish regarding his own country.

The irresponsible attitude toward the independence we had long dreamed of caused pain to many of our intellectuals, including Levon Hakhverdyan. He writes: "I never would have imagined that our small Armenia, upon gaining

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

¹⁰ **Levon Hakhverdyan**, *We and Our Difficult Days*, Yerevan, 2000, p. 88.

independence, could produce so many immoral, greedy, and short-sighted offspring...".¹¹ He then continues this thought with a profoundly sorrowful conclusion: "...I do not wish for the freedom to abandon my homeland".¹²

Levon Hakhverdyan's concerns remain strikingly relevant and telling even today, as reflected in statements such as: "...to cleanse history of all kinds of political considerations", "...the great misfortune is that scholarly, including literary, literature has lost its audience", and "You walk along the magnificent Mashtots Avenue, filled with foreign-language shop windows. The most striking of these is Black Cat... a black cat has crossed between Mashtots' language and Yerevan – it is more than evident." He also criticizes television: "Television 'devours' the reader... feeding them empty and meaningless series, talk shows, and low-quality programs..." Finally, he raises the fundamental question of the intellectual as a human being: "Where, then, is our planet heading on the threshold of the twenty-first century?"

In other words, there is a remarkable feature: in all his writings, Levon Hakhverdyan is also a publicist. He authored numerous articles and wrote about virtually everything – literature and literary studies, theatre, numerous productions, actors, repeatedly addressing language issues, and various cultural events. Throughout, however, his approach and style as a concerned public intellectual remain consistently evident. And this is by no means merely a personal trait; it is a conviction, a principle. Yet there is another characteristic: he criticized, became indignant, and expressed anger, but he always concluded with a sentence of encouragement, a word of faith. Characteristically, one of his articles ends with a poem by Hovhannes Grigoryan: "It is dark and cold. But do not despair: //With frozen fingers and trembling// Decorate the Christmas tree with whatever you can: //Decorate the Christmas tree."

"I believe in the vitality of Armenian national culture," Hakhverdyan writes. "On the day I lose that faith, I would wish to die on the spot, just as I would wish to die if I were to receive the news that Karabakh is not ours".¹³

Levon Hakhverdyan was not merely a Tumanyan scholar or solely a theatre critic; through every publication, article, and public address, he was also a concerned citizen of his country, a combative and uncompromising intellectual.

¹¹ **Levon Hakhverdyan**, *We and Our Difficult Days*, Yerevan, 2000, p. 209.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹³ **Levon Hakhverdyan**, *We and Our Difficult Days*, Yerevan, 2000, pp. 159–160.

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This, in my view, constitutes the greatest virtue of the intellectual and a distinctive obligation of the individual to the homeland. In nearly all of his writings, he addresses, in one form or another, the undesirable and flawed phenomena and practices of contemporary life, articulates his views openly, and does not hesitate to formulate his principle and demand: "Discover the Armenian national spirit, if you can..."¹⁴

Levon Hakhverdyan was first a citizen, an Armenian, and only then a scholar, literary critic, theatre expert, academician, and director of an institute. "What is a person worth if they have no concern, no care, no focus on a goal?"¹⁵ - he rightly writes.


And it is by no means surprising that Levon Hakhverdyan, the distinguished scholar and patriot, wrote on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday: "We must cherish, preserve, and nurture what we have and do not have, our air and water, our language, our time, and ourselves, if we wish to be a complete nation and society, worthy of our small and wonderful homeland. Otherwise, nothing will come of it. ... Let this, then be my testament".¹⁶

"Being a man was the way Levon Hakhverdyan lived: rising against injustice, standing up for the good of the nation, remaining loyal to friends, defending those in distress, engaging in public affairs, and, alongside all this, constantly writing, bringing one talented book after another into the world," writes Silva Kaputikyan.¹⁷

LILIT ARZUMANYAN*

Doctor of sciences (philology)

lilit.arzumanyan001@gmail.com

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁷ Theatrical Yerevan, 2003, no. 1, p. 7.

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