

Cultural Policy and **Management (kpy)** **Yearbook 2010**

Dossiers

Cultural Diversity

**Cities and Cultural
Policy Revisited**

Keynote Article

Hans Mommaas

Special Interviews

Raymond Weber

Danielle Cliche

From Anatolian Cities
Reviews

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Boekmanstudies

Cultural Policy and Management Yearbook 2010

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Congo as a European Member: The Cultural Role of the State in the European Membership Process

Theatre-Play review by **Burcu Yasemin Şeyben**

Today Congo officially applied for membership to the European Union... [sounds of marching and cheering] the historical application was made in Brussels today at twenty-two minutes past eleven Congo time... and yes, our President of Congo personally handed in the application at twenty-two minutes past eleven on 29 February ... it was remarkable that the application was written according to European standards and on the appropriate paper ... now you see... our President handing over the application to the European Union... and you're watching the European Union committee and our president raising their glasses in a toast... the glasses are filled with the famous manioc wine of our beloved Congo... served by Congolese girls in traditional Congolese dresses... Colourful Congolese rugs have been given to the European Union committee as presents... again by our Congolese girls in traditional dresses... now you see... a European committee member admiring a colourful Congolese rug...¹

These are the opening lines of the play *Code Name: Congo*, written by Mürsel Yaylalı and directed by Erkan Taşdoğan, performed by the Istanbul State Theatre during the 2009-2010 theatrical season. Following the announcement from Brussels, we share the excitement of two officers, Ubangi and Bayanga, celebrating the European Union (EU) Membership Application Day which has been declared a national holiday. The setting is an unremarkable police station in the imaginary country of Congo. The country may be made up, but the setting and the dialogues are anything but make-believe to the ears and eyes of a Turkish audience. Already by the end of the first scene, everyone in the theatre gets the 'Congo' metaphor with a knowing smile on their faces. For the rest of the play they simply mentally replace 'Congo' with 'Turkey' and thus the metaphor is complete.

The 'police station' chosen as a setting for the play is in everybody's mind a place of horror, a disreputable building or space charged with dark symbolic meaning. In Turkey, human rights issues only began to be discussed openly once the country started the process of EU membership in the mid 1990s. After this, all forms of Turkish art, including theatre, have used human rights issues as a basis for creative reflection. *Code Name: Congo* is no exception to this rule. Turkish people's perception of police stations as 'traumatic spaces' is only matched by the experience of the Latin Americans of the 1970s. Indeed, in all post-1990s cartoons, comedies, jokes and other forms of satire, the Turkish 'police station' was used as an image of torture, assaults in custody and death (still disguised as suicides even in the first years of the EU-membership process). Thus, the 'police station' in *Code Name: Congo* is a fundamental means of expression.

When an African immigrant named Festus Okey unfortunately and mysteriously died in custody in the recent past, this image of the 'police station' was again reinforced in people's minds. So the character Fallus in the play, who is the only 'suspect' in custody, seems to be a reference to the unfortunate African Festus whose sad story is remembered by all.²

When you watch the first scenes of the play where the plot and the main characters are presented, and bearing in mind that it has been produced completely by a state institution and under the influence of conventional judgements of the past, *Code Name: Congo* appears to be a play with an anti-EU discourse. This inten-

BURCU YASEMİN ŞEYBEN, please see page 113 for her biography.

¹ Mürsel Yaylalı, *Code Name: Congo*, unpublished play, Istanbul State Theatre Archive.

² The Nigerian refugee Festus Okey died in the Beyoğlu Public Security Branch Office where he was taken into custody on 20 August 2007. The authorities declared that he had lost his life because a police officer's gun had fired by mistake.

tional illusion gives way to groundbreaking messages with dialogues and action there to shock as the story unfolds. This shock element manifests itself both by the dramatic structure of the play, and by the bold dialogues it contains, and by virtue of the fact that it takes place on the stage of a state theatre. The play's radical stance is emphasized by a variety of symbols. First of all, the fictional date in the play is the day after 28 February 1997, the date commonly remembered as that of 'a postmodern coup'³, when tanks roamed through Turkey's capital. Then there is the district attorney from the capital who symbolizes politicized judiciary power, and there are other references to the unitary state structure via symbols like the 'map' or the 'Grand Larousse'. In keeping with the fierce imagery of the play, it would not be an exaggeration to remark that the play follows an anarchistic line by questioning the dominant male culture regardless of cultural and regional differences, homophobia, sexual discrimination and ultimately the notion of the 'State'.

The play recounts the events taking place in a local police station during the EU-membership process. The interrogation is of a young man who has raped three men, all with moustaches, and who recorded the assault with a camera. The first victim is a pimp called Mabadanaka, second is the famous and good-looking industrialist Liranga, and the third is an intelligence agent whom we never see on stage. Since Fallus has confessed to all accusations, the police try to understand the motive. Unable to find a satisfactory one, they decide that he has committed these acts because he is a sexual pervert. As the story unfolds, they try to reveal that the motivation behind the crime was actually a plan cooked up by internal and external enemies of the power and of the 'masculinity' of the State. They try to prove that Fallus' beastly acts against the three men were actually a crime against the 'State'. Even the officer Bayanga, the only female character in the play, who usually finds the motives in question to be groundless, eventually adopts the same male-dominant ideas. The person who reveals the so-called planned and devious aspects of Fallus' acts is a district attorney commissioned by the 'Capital', a man with a bushy moustache. Questioned once again by the special team of Kapanga, using 'old fashioned techniques', Fallus fully accepts the statement imposed upon him. In the final scene, the district attorney Kapanga vigorously explains why masculinity, the State and moustaches are so important, and divulges all the red lines the government will not let anyone cross, even in the EU-membership process. Then the suspect Fallus dies suspiciously. His story is that of a person arrested as a summary offender, forced to accept countless political crimes against masculinity and therefore against the power of the State. All evidence pointing to his death during the interrogation is destroyed. Some shocking information, however, reaches the police station. When he dies at the end of the play his corpse reveals a secret posing a serious threat to the State and the established social order: Fallus is actually a woman who has had a sex change.

Based on a real story and with solid dramatic structure, *Code Name: Congo* skilfully blends classical and modern dramaturgical techniques. This is a 'unique' theatrical production and the mission it undertakes remains until now 'unmatched'. The fact that the play is included in the repertoire of the General Directorate of State Theatres is in itself a lesson in 'protest' theatre, with its undiluted opinions and poignant messages on the most taboo issues in the name of artistic freedom, in a way so far unmatched even by private theatres. It is altogether unprecedented for the State to present such a potent production. We are dealing with a unique kind of state self-criticism in a Turkish state institution. The recent television series⁴ 'Valley of the Wolves: Ambush', is fast becoming the symbol of anti-EU feelings and a breeding ground for anti-Semitic ideas. It makes nationalist attacks that bring Israeli and Turkish relations to breaking point. The programme is broadcast by a private television channel which is not connected to the State in any way. *Code Name: Congo* presents an alternative and less head-on way for the audience to deal with the impact of these harsh realities. This makes the

³ At the National Security Council held on 28 February 1997, the Turkish President at the time, Necmettin Erbakan, was forced to sign a declaration containing austere statements that the 'reactionary' threat had reached the highest levels, and unarmed action was taken in the following process that resulted in the overthrow of the government. As this was unarmed military intervention, this episode is referred to as 'a postmodern coup'.

⁴ The Israeli Government summoned the Turkish Ambassador in Tel Aviv to its Foreign Ministry, and expressed harsh political censure about a scene depicting Mossad agents kidnapping Palestinian children for organ theft in an episode of the TV series entitled Valley of the Wolves: Ambush broadcast on national television.

play even more phenomenal. The text written by Mürsel Yaylalı not only articulates a critical perspective but offers solutions to the problem as well: respect for human rights and self-criticism. In this context it is appropriate to articulate the 'mission statement' of the play with a phrase nowadays quite often repeated in Turkey: 'Glorify the people so the State will be glorified as well,' and another which is never expressed: 'Criticize yourself first so that you can respond to the criticism of others.' Beyond all its political references, *Code Name: Congo* successfully embraces a vision of life focusing on humanity and social self-criticism. This is a vision which the audience, irrespective of social standing, is sure to embrace.

Unlike other countries that celebrate the EU-membership process with festivities, Turkey has from the beginning experienced it more like a freak show. The process started off in a climate of weird, and for the most part unconvincing, arguments based on anti-EU attitudes. This climate was so heavy that even pro-EU elements of society could not shake off the gloomy feeling. In the same way, the huge success of Orhan Pamuk as winner of the internationally acclaimed Nobel Prize for Literature was overshadowed by criticism, rather than compliments, for his daring to refer to Turkey's 'issues'.

Groups publicly known as 'Neo-nationalists' or the 'Red Apple'⁵ coalition adopted an anti-EU attitude in their manifesto. Anti-EU activities were repeatedly mentioned in the criminal charges of the ongoing lawsuit publicly known as 'Ergenekon', where a large number of suspects ranging from high-ranking military officials to public officers, university chancellors and media members allegedly prevented the Turkish National Assembly from performing its duties by inciting armed revolt against the government.

In the meantime, state officials of various ranks continue to declare that they consider the EU-membership process to be a state project and that the ongoing official membership activities are by their very nature above and beyond party politics. While occasionally displaying defence mechanisms in the face of negative reactions against Turkey's EU-membership policy, from within and from outside, the government still continues with intense efforts for EU membership and for the democratic reform packages on their agenda. However, there is a great need for all actors, including the government, to take responsibility and properly inform all members of society about the membership process. Discussion arenas need to be created, so that people can put forward their points of view, exchange ideas and come to their own conclusions. Whatever is holding up the creation of such forums needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

Culture is certainly the most important tool for the government's efforts to raise public awareness about the EU. The EU is an economic and political association, but since culture is also an essential component, it becomes even more meaningful to conduct the relevant awareness campaign using cultural tools.

The majority of Turkish society, including public officials personally involved in the issue, have already come to identify European Union membership with endless pages of uninspiring text, websites in foreign languages and with the seemingly forbidding word 'acquis'⁶.

Like many other nations who are not fond of reading, Turkish people satisfy all their information needs on the EU by means of relevant columns that appear occasionally in media and discussion programmes on television. Since the articles and programmes in question use classical Turkish, all issues related to the EU are presented as simple pros and cons. Furthermore, most of the ongoing discussion about the EU is on the basis of politics, economy and law, and there is no awareness of other dimensions such as European culture or cultural policies. The cultural discussions which do take place, within the small circle of associations and foundations that control the cultural climate of Turkey, seem for the most part to be fruitless, being confined to the subject of the utilization of EU cultural funds. As a result, a climate of distrust has set in which has brought

5 An ideal underpinning the romantic discourse of Turkish nationalism, which represents Turkish supremacy over all countries from where the sun rises to where it sets.

6 A survey entitled 'Public View on the EU: Advantages and Disadvantages' was conducted by Assist. Prof. Dr. Adnan Gümüş. The survey was conducted on students of the Philosophy Group Pedagogy Class at the Faculty of Education of Çukurova University (Department of Social Sciences). Between 1-10 December 2004, Dr Gümüş interviewed 504 individuals (257 of which were men) from various occupational groups and demonstrated that people have almost no information regarding the EU membership. (<http://www.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/50941-turkiye-halki-ab-uyeligi-icin-ne-dusunuyor>)

with its accusations of fraud and manipulation against all cultural activities supported by the EU and its subsidiary organs. Even those valuable projects that received EU funding as a result of a transparent, justifiable process, and successfully achieved their goals, have apparently been subjected to ugly accusations like 'sell-out' just because of this EU support.

Code Name: Congo is not connected directly with the EU or its partners. It was brought to fruition by cultural institutions affiliated with the State. Nevertheless, the play contributes to restoring society's perception of the EU in a positive way. Standing outside the bounds of accusations like 'EU-sourced and therefore EU-controlled', this artistic project plays an important role in raising public awareness and convincing reluctant parties with its heartfelt commentary on Turkey's EU-membership process. The existing legislation and organization of the charter of the State of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs is theoretically more than capable of carrying out public-awareness projects regarding the EU-membership process. Eurodesk contact points, established within all governorship and ministries by order of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey, are also expected to successfully take initiatives on related issues. Institutions⁷ like the General Directorate of State Opera and Ballet, the General Directorate of Fine Arts, the General Directorate of Libraries and Publications, the General Directorate of Copyright and Cinema, the General Directorate of Publicity, Foreign Affairs and the European Union Coordination Centre, and the General Directorate of State Theatres which staged *Code Name: Congo* have the potential and facilities to inform the public about the 'European Union' and about what full membership of the 'European Union' actually means, and they should make full use of their resources.

Cinema and theatre productions about the European Union process, which has marked Turkey's recent history, are extremely small in number. Apart from the satirical comedy *The European*, a film written and produced by Irfan Tözüm and released in cinemas in 2007, *Code Name: Congo* is the first play to treat these themes. The fact that it was performed to a full house in the 2009-2010 theatrical season it premiered, and was highly acclaimed by the theatre audience, and also received positive criticism from the media, proves that the topical subject matter corresponded to and fulfilled a certain expectation.

The success of the play demonstrated that we are at a crossroads in terms of Turkey's perception of Europe. For so many years state policies of culture and art were seen mostly as forced efforts at Europeanization, incompatible with the demands of Turkish society. However, as *Code Name: Congo* shows, there has been an increase in Turkey's support for EU membership.⁸ This mutuality between the State and society will have an ever expanding sphere of influence as long as it is supported by art and culture as much as by other fields. Turkey will increase positive perception of the membership process in direct ratio to its cultural interaction with the European Union. And finally, opening for debate such basic issues as 'human rights/women's rights' will demonstrate Turkey's inward and outward efforts to normalize its situation.

(Translated by Sona Ertekin)

⁷ All state institutions mentioned in this passage are general directorates affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey.

⁸ The results of the survey entitled 'Public Opinion and Turkish Foreign Policy' conducted by the Ankara University European Research Centre (ATAUM) show that public support for EU membership has recently increased relative to the last few years. (ataum.ankara.edu.tr/anket.pdf)