**An Istanbulite Playwright in Paris**

***Born in Istanbul and based in Paris, Megerditch Basmadjian has been working for the*** [***AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) Paris***](https://ugabfrance.org/) ***for almost 34 years. Founder of the*** [***Ahazank theatre company***](https://ugabfrance.org/programs/theatre/) ***and author of some plays, he leads a group of about twenty people around various subjects that they are committed as their lifestyle. This interview was made in Paris in December 2019 by Ayşan Sönmez, a PhD Candidate at Paris 8 University, Geopolitics Institute.***

**Ayşan Sönmez: You've been doing theatre for a long time, for exactly 28 years without a break. You are a playwright and director. To begin with, can you tell us your story? How did you start making theatre?**

Megerditch Basmadjian: I would say it started by chance. An encounter totally changed my vision on theatre. I met one of the most popular artists of Soviet Armenia, Mr. Mehér Meguertitchyan. We met with him in Paris. He was here to direct a play of Hagop Baronian, the "Baghdasar Aghpar" in collaboration with the theatre company KISSANI. They staged this play four times in Paris, their performance fascinated the audience. It was a remarkable experience. It is not easy to explain, the time I spent with him in Paris, it was totally special.

I will never forget the last evening we spent with him. It will remain in my memories forever. He told us "go and see life, observe it well, that's the real theatre" and the next day he left Paris.

For some time, his words stuck in my mind, I was thinking on his comment before going to work. For weeks, I observed the immigrants and especially the Armenians. The cafe-bars in Alfortville had become a real source of inspiration for me to understand their concerns, and their problems, I mean, their lives in general.

**AS: You have a theatre company called Ahazank. How did you establish it? What were the motivations?**

MB: I started to write some pieces and presented them to a friend of mine. Over the time, some other friends joined us, and we created the project. The theatre company is the result of these meetings, our intense discussions and reflections on different aspects of our Armenian reality. This theatre company is a product of self-criticism, but it is also more than that. It encourages the audience to reflect on their roots, the double culture we are experiencing in diaspora, Armenian institutions and the future of them.

**AS: And then, it was 28 years ago and now you are still together. Can you tell us how you managed to stay together for such a long time? Most of the members are still here since the beginning?**

MB: To be honest, sometimes I also wonder how it happened. Why did they stay for so long? The theatre? Friendship? Cultural heritage? The language? You are right and indeed the founding members are still present in the troupe. I think there could be several reasons.

I have remained faithful to my principles; I defend values that I also share with those around me with a determination and confidence. We enjoy each other’s company in the group. It is a pleasure to meet every Friday for a drink to discuss current events, politics and sensitive issues in the diaspora. Our doors are always wide open to welcome new faces.

This group is based on certain values. We respect people, we understand their situations. We cannot compare people with each other. Everyone is valuable in his or her own quality. We are ready to welcome new people. This is also the case with the ability to speak the Armenian language. There are those who started with only 1-2 words and improved over the time. We make a rehearsal program based on people's working conditions. We work at a normal pace while having fun at the same time. What we are doing is important for each of us and for the community. It is important to be satisfied with what you do.

**AS: Your groups include Armenians from different parts of the world and different generations. It is a kind of meeting point in Paris for Armenians.**

MB: Yes, the Ahazank theatre company welcomes actors/actresses from all walks of life. Armenians from Armenia, France, Turkey to Lebanon… The competency level in Armenian language is diverse but our way of working allows everyone to express themselves in their mother tongue.

The theater company was born at the AGBU Paris Alex Manoogian Cultural Center. The Armenian General Benevolent Union is an association whose mission is to preserve and enhance the Armenian identity and heritage through educational, cultural and humanitarian programs. Therefore, it is an essential meeting place for Armenians in the Diaspora.

The Ahazank theatre company has staged the works of Hagop Baronian, Yervant Odian, Nechan Bechiktachleyan, Yervant Gobelian, Bergh Zaytountsiyan, Mouchegh Ichhkan, Garabet Dakesyan, Yves Miran - Hanri Gueroul, Israel Horovitz which we have translated (from French to Armenian).

For my part, as a writer, I am sensitive and attentive to the world around me, I try to observe people in the society in all its complexity. The subjects that I see and experience every day push me to react. For example: immigration, the duty of remember and our identity, the future of Armenian institutions...

I am happy and grateful to my family and friends to accept my thoughts and I’m honored to see my pieces stage with the group. To continue such an activity as theatre, especially within the diaspora, it requires a lot of dedication and courage.

**AS: Did the members of your company have theatrical experience before? How do you train new actors?**

MB: There are those who have performed in music or theatre shows. Others who made theatre at school or in amateur groups. The experiences are different and enrich our way of acting. I'm here not to train them, but to guide them, to help them. I can also draw on my experience and artistic training to help each actor’s progress on stage.

**AS: I see that you have a common language on stage as a group. This is probably a reflection of your approach; you work collectively.**

MB: Yes, we read the text, analyze it and try to understand the intention of the author. We wonder about the ideas, the words, the way the texts are written. Then everyone shares their ideas, their point of view in order to build something together. We have always worked this way by sharing our ideas. I think this collective work is richer and more interesting than an authoritarian vision where one person wants to impose his own point of view on the rest of the group.

**AS : The style we call the divine director...**

MB: It's neither my style nor our group’s style. I have my own ideas; I express them and share them with others. If these ideas resonate with the other actors, they react it and express it in their own way. I cannot and do not wish to decide or control everything. Exchange is at the heart of the way we work. Each person, each personality will have a different idea or approach that will enrich the troupe.

**AS: You performed the plays of some Western Armenian playwrights. For example, famous Ottoman Armenian publishers and writers Hagop Baronian (1843-1891) and Yervant Odian (1869-1926). How do you interpret these playwrights?**

MB: First of all, let me start with Baronian, he is a writer recognized by the whole Armenian community. Everybody knows that he is a great playwright. But not everyone understood him properly. People think Baronian is a writer of funny content. In fact, he's not only just funny. Baronian was one of our writers who carried all the wounds and all the problems of the society he lived in, both in personal and social level. I would even define Baronian as a sociologist. His literature reflects the society of his time. You can see all the problems, all the relational and political dynamics in his literature. He also worked as an archaeologist. For example, he shows us how the society degenerated during the westernization of the Empire during the *Tanzimat* period (1839-1876). You have to understand and play his plays correctly. Baronian was not played properly in Armenia either. His work was considered only comedy, and the comedy in his plays was exaggerated. We wanted to put an end to it. We know that we are amateurs, we don't have the same means as professionals, but we try to approach his plays with a professional approach.

Odian must be considered Baronian's pupil. Odian represents another period, he is the next generation. He is also a sociologist of his time. We staged his "17th Spy" to show the political tension of the period. He wrote it like a novel, but his style is theatrical, so it's easy to stage. We will stage his "Tahgaganın Genige" this year. Baronian lived through the *Tanzimat* period and the autocratic period of the Ottoman Empire. Odian lived during the second constitutional period (1908-1920) and 1915. He then went into exile. We focus on what we want to say and show with the works of these writers. We want to show these works to our community, we try to find a different style to question and make the public react. If they start asking questions, then our mission will be successful.

**AS: Odian and Baronian are still contemporary writers. For example, poverty and corruption in society and how intellectuals have reacted to this situation in Baronian... Or the situation of some areas of dissension in Odian... These are still topical issues for Turkey.**

MB: That's right. We want to build a bridge between the past and the present. There's something timeless about these pieces and they allow us to make that connection. They remain relevant and allow us to question our audience and our world.

**AS : Did you tour in France to stage your plays ? There is a large Armenian community in France...**

MB: We have not been able to reach the community in other parts of France. We haven't had many opportunities. We had toured several times until 2006. We went once to Marseille, twice to Nice and once to Valencia. Apart from these performances, we are still in Paris. We haven't received any new invitations for the moment and hope to have the chance to present our plays to as many people as possible soon.

**AS: You use Western Armenian on stage. Eastern Armenian as a language is the official language of a nation state, Armenia, so it is protected. Western Armenian is the language used by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. The number of users is decreasing. You play in Western Armenian. This is an important in terms of the continuity of the language. So Western Armenian is still used, I don't know if we can say that it is an endangered language.**

MB: We must not avoid it; we must name it. Western Armenian is endangered. The language no longer has its space, the number of speakers has decreased. Western Armenian is the language of the diaspora. For the new generations, this language is like a foreign language. For example, a teenager born in France. If his/her parents speak Armenian at home, this child will hear Armenian. If he/she goes to Armenian school, he/she will learn Armenian at a certain level. But how will the language develop if there is no space to use it outside the family? It cannot develop.

What are we doing here about language? We consider our theatre work as a place to learn the language. Can we go beyond learning the language and start thinking in Western Armenian in Paris? If a language is not the language of thought, it cannot survive. That is what I believe. The number of people who speak the language is decreasing. Now, let us ask the question: why would a young person speak Armenian? Does a young man growing up in France have to speak Armenian somehow?

A child needs 10,000 words to express himself between the ages of 5 and 10. Now he/she can do it in French on various subjects, but he/she cannot do it in Armenian at the same time. Because he/she cannot read similar subjects in Armenian. How will a teacher at an Armenian school in France work? Will he/she approach it as a language teaching? In fact, he/she will have to implement such a system so that the child will see the same content in Armenian and in French. Let's say that he/she reads a page in French about ecology, and he/she will have to read similar content in Armenian. However, there is no such subject in Armenian language books. So how will he learn? He cannot teach 10,000 words in Armenian under the current system. For the majority of Armenians, the language remains a domestic language, only a few words at the table. We have to go beyond that.

Armenian has become a foreign language for young people. Now, with the theatre, we are trying to fight against this situation, while being aware of our limits. The actors learn the language, the audience comes, listens, learns the language. Those who don't know Armenian come to see our performances. We make a summary in French to facilitate this. They read the text before watching our play. We don't want language to be a barrier to coming together. We chose western Armenian because it's our mother tongue, the language of the diaspora is western Armenian. We want to give a second life to a language that has no space. We are doing this as much as possible.