

Building bridges

Under Viennese maestro Sascha Goetzel,
the Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic Orchestra
links East and West



Country Focus
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Istanbul Foundation
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As teenagers preparing for university at a Turkish *dershane* [a private 'crammer' school], Melis Tezkan and Okan Urun were usually too busy making jokes to pay attention in class. Years later, this shared sense of humour, combined with their irrepressible creative drive, led them to found *biriken*, an independent theatre company through which they write, direct and perform. Based in Istanbul, *biriken*'s work confronts societal taboos and political dogma through intimate storytelling. Its work is a mouthpiece for a new generation of Turkish citizens who are still locked in a struggle for democracy and freedom of expression. Claire Ramtuhul speaks to the team.

How easy was it to establish *biriken*? What have been the main challenges?

MT: Financing arts projects, especially theatre, is very difficult in Turkey. And as emerging artists with no permanent space of our own, it's particularly tough. The French Institute of Istanbul has supported us since we started out in 2006 with our first project *Now There is a Hole Where Once Stood Our House*. In 2010, when we were producing *Lick But Don't Swallow!* we met IDANS Festival's co-directors Aydın Siliyer and Gurur Ertem, which was a hugely influential moment in our careers. They showed real belief in us, and supported several of our projects such as *Re: Fwd: die in good company* [2012], which was co-produced through the

Jardin D'Europe network and premiered at IDANS. We usually work with very small budgets. Our new project, *Tatyana*, is a milestone for us, because we're trying to stage it without any institutional financial support, and we are looking for private sponsors instead. But it's very difficult to work in this way, particularly when the country is in the midst of a financial crisis.

OU: As we don't have our own space yet, residences are the perfect place for us to develop our projects. So far we've collaborated with *santrallistanbul*, Bilgi University, and Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts.

How have recent political developments in Turkey influenced your work?

OU: Our work is inspired by many things, and politics is an important part of it. It's impossible for us to separate our work from politics. The two Özen Yula plays we've staged are very political, but in quite different ways. *Treachery in the Near East* uses personal and intimate language to speak about the wounds left by political upheaval, particularly the *coups d'états* of 1980, though it's never explicitly referred to. It presents the voices of an injured and blighted generation. *Lick But Don't Swallow!*, also by Yula, speaks about the political, social and economic direction of the world, but this time through a porn set.

MT: If you look at our works before the [2013] protests in Gezi Park, *Re: Fwd: die in good company* and *Now There is a Hole Where Once Stood Our House*, they both envisage the end of the city, and the idea that it has become impossible for humans to live in this city [Istanbul] in particular. The starting point of the Gezi movement grew out of the same feelings and observations: buildings falling to pieces, destroyed parks and gardens, people exiled from their streets, homes and neighborhoods. The protests were the tipping point, and Pandora's box was opened. People were reacting against the wider picture: pressure on individual and collective liberties, despotism and so on.

OU: In *Re: Fwd: die in good company*, which premiered in October 2012, we were questioning the possibility of a revolution, through a character who felt so hopeless they were driven to suicide. But then they begin to believe that death, on a collective scale, can be a revolution in itself, and spread the idea of a mass suicide through social media. One of the characters performs Gil Scott-Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* at the beginning of the play. Seven months after the premiere, people were out in the streets, and the title of that song was written on walls everywhere. The Turkish media, particularly the mainstream channels, ignored the Gezi protests for a long time. But the protests, unlike our play, showed that we want to live to change things, rather than lose hope and give up on our lives.

You often use video in your live theatre pieces – how do you blend the two elements?

OU: In our performances, we want video to expand the physical space of the stage. So the video is not just part of the decor. We try to turn the projections

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biriken



into performers; they should somehow build interaction with other cast members as well as the audience. In *Re: Fwd: die in good company*, for example, we had a character named ULTIMO, who lived and performed on screen.

You've worked with the Italian company Ricci/Forte. How did you find the experience?

MT: They came to Istanbul and did a very inspiring workshop with local performers alongside our rehearsed reading of their text *Macadamia Nut Brittle*. It was a great experience – both the workshop and the text were inspiring and challenging for the audience. Their writing is both intimate and political; that's what we like to see from a theatre text.

Where have you performed outside Turkey? Are there any countries you'd like to tour but haven't yet had the chance?

OU: We've performed at Under the Radar Festival in New York, De Keuze International in Rotterdam and Heidelberger Stückemarkt. Performing at La MaMa with UTRF was a very important experience for us. We would like to perform in France, since we've both spent a lot of time there.

What has been your most challenging performance so far?

OU: Every new project is a challenge in Turkey, particularly in terms of production and finance. Though we're a company with quite a short history, we've already encountered some very problematic situations. Months before the premiere of *Lick But Don't Swallow*, a fundamentalist newspaper published many inflammatory articles about the play, after which we started to receive threats from people saying they would set fire to the theatre. We decided to delay the performance by six months for security reasons. It was difficult to ignore the general atmosphere around the piece, but in the end we didn't compromise on the initial staging, thanks to the support from IDANS.

What companies inspire you?

MT: We follow the choreographies of the Brussels-based company Peeping Tom, the Japanese company chelfitsch, and American director Jay Scheib's science-fiction theatre. All are very humorous yet subtle. We love to bring humour to our work.

What are your plans for the rest of the year?

OU: At the moment we're working on *Tatyana*, which will premiere at the 19th Istanbul Theatre Festival on 18 May. It's a contemporary adaptation of two versions of *Tatyana Repina*, one by Anton Chekhov and the other by Alexei Suvarin. We'll continue to perform *Re: Fwd: die in good company* and *Treachery in the Near East* in Istanbul and other cities in Turkey. We've also been invited to Romania to perform *Treachery in the Near East* at the Tony Bulandra Theatre's BABEL Festival.

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Re: Fwd: die in good company

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Re: Fwd: die in good company

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Re: Fwd: die in good company

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