

Ayla Algan

From the Crossroads of Istanbul

The humiliating German attitude, after the "sweetheart" treatment of Turkish audiences, probably gave me the incentive to reassert my identity, and to assist my hardworking compatriots to discover theirs. I researched folk stories, folk dancing and wrote plays for children during this time.

I was born in Istanbul, a crossroads of people, cultures, religions and philosophies. Crossroads facilitate travelling, meetings and bringing people together. The travelling started in my family with my father who came from Crete and loved to sing the Cretan *mandinades*; poetry people made up on the spot for all kinds of occasions. There were women on my mother's side whose parents had also travelled from elsewhere to make Istanbul their home. Travelling, for me, began at school in Paris, reading foreign literature, learning French. An open minded French teacher introduced me to the Koran which I read in French, the first surprising taste of my own religious and philosophical background.

My mother's insistence allayed my father's suspicion of licentious French society and at fifteen years old I was packed off to the Maison d'Education des Jeunes Filles, Lycée de Versailles. The French nuns did not attempt to convert me, but I learned French which stood me in good stead later when I acted and directed on and off between 1979 and 1983. Theatre workshops with Peter Brook, and meeting Jean Villard and Louis Barrault, were some of the treasures I collected and brought back home later. In the 90s I would return to bring my offerings: the poetry of the mystic Yunus Emre, and concerts with Turkish folk songs and records.

But first came love and marriage and travelling to New York with my husband, Beklan Algan; two wide-eyed young people off to see the world, eager to discover the world of theatre in particular. We soon found our way to the Actors Studio. Edward Senior, Joshua Logan and Elia Kazan were some of the people who initiated us in their "Method" based on Stanislavski. After two years we left the Actors Studio and with Wendel K. Philip to assist us, we created *A Moreno Stage*, an actors' repertory theatre and put on "works in progress" Off Broadway.

Istanbul 1960: when parents would not support us, uninterested in family business and money, we were employed by the Municipal Theatre to play and my husband to direct. I played many leading parts in plays, films and musicals and I

turned down the prize of the Best Actress of the Year because I thought theatre was a collective art. Between 1960 and 1975, Turkish politics were against the left, so many intellectuals, including my husband, were put in prison. At that time I was in Paris for my singing career. My father was telling me not to come back to Turkey because I might be put in prison. He was supporting me as well as some well known activists like Melina Mercouri.

Next stepping stone: Berlin, 1979 to 1983, the Turkish Workers Theatre established by Beklan Algan and Peter Stein in Schaubühne. The humiliating German attitude, after the "sweetheart" treatment of Turkish audiences, probably gave me the incentive to reassert my identity, and to assist my hardworking compatriots to discover theirs. I researched folk stories, folk dancing and wrote plays for children during this time.

My fellow traveller for over forty years - my husband, actor and director - encouraged and supported me and introduced me to research and experimentation, including the work of Eugenio Barba and ISTA. Through this work I have travelled far discovering other cultures, learning to appreciate and to use the riches of my own heritage in my acting, directing and teaching. Beklan Algan and I created a Theatre Research Laboratory at the Municipal Theatre of Istanbul following ISTA sessions, seminars and symposiums. In this work in progress, we want to join the Floating Islands. My longest journey into dramatic art has been within the Theatre Research Laboratory. We travelled in time and space to research, to reveal, to give form to dramatic expression. We have had students from all over the country, bringing their own customs and traditions, in order to learn how to employ them in the theatre. Some of these young people created their own theatres.

Ancient Greek theatre and Anatolian genetic cultures have been not only in my repertory, but in my imagination as well, since I have always had a fascination with a mythology that blended the Asiatic "foreign" and Mesopotamian cultures. Potentially irrational figures of fecundity (like Cybele) and the subconscious inadmissible darker side of the self (like Dionysus) bring into question the well-ordered rational philosophy of ancient Athenian democracy. I have worked with the Greek director, Theodoros Terzopoulos, on his production of *Herakles* (in Istanbul, Tokyo and Delphi) and on Olympic Stages I danced my own folkloric dances and laments.

My most recent literal and figurative trip has been to Samsun University, in the pontic city on the south shore of the Black Sea. The plan is to establish a theatre department that would run according to a new syllabus, and where non conventional teachers would want to teach. I have gone back and forth almost in secret, in case some evil bureaucratic "eye" casts a spell before the plan goes into effect.

"A rolling stone gathers no moss", they say, and maybe I am a rolling stone. I have experienced excitement about common elements in very different cultures or passion about social issues. I have realised how significant it is for everybody, but especially for theatre artists, to appeal to both a local and a foreign audience at the same time.

AYLA ALGAN (Turkey) is a well-known folk singer and actress, working in theatre, film and television. After studying with the Actors Studio in New York and with Peter Stein in Germany, she has now settled in Istanbul dividing her time between official commitments and research. Her roles as Shente-Shuita in *The Good Woman of Sezuana* and Polly in *The Threepenny Opera* are particularly famous.