

[A Glimpse of a New Version of the Armenian Opera ‘Gariné’ in NYC](#)

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Christine Moore, left, and Aram Tchobanian sing at Alwan

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NEW YORK — Gerald Papasian, like many intellectuals, is a man with a mission. In his case, the mission is to keep Western Armenian culture alive, and as an actor himself, his focus is on theater and opera. At two lively events held in Manhattan on December 13 and 17, Papasian brought to the attention of Americans, and in particular Armenian-Americans, his effort to revive a 19th-century operetta called “Gariné” (known originally as Leblebiji Horhor Agha), written by Dikran Chukhajian [or Tchouhadjian; 1837-98].

At the first event, a fundraiser cocktail party, some 30 people gathered at a Greek restaurant, Kellari Parea Bistro, in order to learn about the project and watch a video excerpt of a recent performance of “Gariné” in Paris, France. The evening took place under the joint auspices of Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern), and Ambassador Garen Nazarian, Permanent

Representative of the Republic of Armenia to the United Nations, with the support of the Tekeyan Cultural Association and the chairman of its greater New York chapter, Hagop Vartivarian.

Barsamian spoke of the importance of bringing the “hidden” treasures of Armenian culture to a greater audience, while Nazarian declared that he would be happy to help Papasian bring productions of “Gariné” to the US and Armenia.

The second event was hosted by Alwan for the Arts, an organization that showcases the art and culture of the Middle East and North Africa. Here, not only did Papasian explain to a crowd of more than 40 the work involved in reviving “Gariné” and present the video excerpt, but in addition, soprano Christine Moore, and tenor Aram Tchobanian sang four arias and duets from the operetta, accompanied by pianist Sofya Melikyan, and joined in one excerpt by Papasian himself. Moore, born to an Egyptian mother of Lebanese and Armenian extraction and an American father, has performed many roles, including Mimi in “La Bohème” with the Leipzig Opera, Micaëla in “Carmen” with the Sacramento Opera, “Madama Butterfly” with the Central City Opera, Alice Ford in “Falstaff,” the title role in “Suor Angelica,” Donna Anna in “Don Giovanni” and the Countess in “Le Nozze di Figaro.”

Aram Tchobanian has premiered numerous operatic and chamber works by such composers as Thomas Cipullo, Yoav Gal, Martin Halpern, Jakov Jakoulov, Thomas Pasatieri, Marga Richter, Salvatore Sciarrino and Ben Yarmolinsky. Melikyan, born in Yerevan and a member of ima Piano Trio, has toured through many countries of Europe and much of the US. The three only had a very short time for rehearsal before this event, but nonetheless, managed to give the audience a tantalizing glimpse into the possibilities of this comic opera.

Both events were organized by the actress and director Nora Armani, who obviously maintains a comfortable and amiable relationship with Papasian, her ex-husband. Armani served as the master of ceremonies, introduced Papasian to the audience and asked the audience to financially and morally support the production of “Gariné.” At the second event, Ahmed Issawi, a member of the executive board of Alwan, welcomed the audience and spoke about Alwan’s work. Alwan has been supportive of Armenian cultural events in New York in the past and at the present time has an Armenian board member, Dr. Anny Bakalian.

Papasian, born in Cairo, studied directing and acting in Soviet Armenia in a five-year master’s program, and had studied piano since age 4. He moved next to London, where he was the artistic director of the Armenian Theater Club from 1979 to 1981. Moving to the US, Papasian directed the Anush opera in 1981 in his own English translation, and continued acting, translating and performing. He worked as the artistic director of the AGBU Artavazd Theater Company in Los Angeles from 1981-1984. He held the position of artist-in-residence and lecturer on theater at the University of La Verne from 1986 to 1991. Back in Europe, he settled in Paris, and worked as a guest lecturer at the University of Venice since 1990.

A founding member of the Paris-based Irina Brook Company (Irina Brook was a surprise guest in the audience at Alwan on December 17), Gerald Papasian performed in the play “Waiting for the Dream” at La MaMa theater in New York this November, and is the co-writer with Armani of the award-winning show “Sojourn at Ararat.”

In 1997, Papasian founded the Dikran Tchouhadjian Research Center in Paris and became its artistic director. Not surprisingly, the goals of this center are identical to those of Papasian — to disseminate and propagate the treasures of Western Armenian culture, especially in the realm of theater and opera. Among other projects, Papasian and his center restored the opera “Arshak II,” which premiered at the San Francisco Opera in 2001, and staged “Anush” again the same year in the Detroit Opera House.

Chukhajian’s operetta “Gariné” is the next project of this center. Its restoration required a lot of detective work, as it had been changed a lot over the years. Originally called “Leblebiji Horhor Agha,” it was written in 1875 in Turkish, and quickly became a hit. Chukhajian used the urban and folk melodies of his

time in the framework of a comic operetta. After an attempt at a silent movie version in Turkey during World War I, it was made into a Turkish-language talking film in 1934, and into a television version in 1975. The setting was in the harem of Prince Khurshid Bey, in the 18th century. The prince fell in love with young Fatime, whose father, Horhor Agha, was a poor chickpea seller. He wanted to save his daughter from what he thought was a kidnapping, but his daughter was actually in love with Khurshid.

The operetta was translated into Armenian for first time while Chukhajian was still alive, and in the 20th century was translated into Greek and German.

In the 1940s, it was performed in Soviet Armenia under the new title “Gariné.” It had been reorchestrated into a new Armenian-language version, with the script altered according to the demands of Soviet society. In 1967 the Armenian version was also made into a film. It was still set in Istanbul, but the harem story was changed. Instead the father does not want his daughter to marry a rich young man, and in this version all names are now Armenian.

While Chukhajian’s original score has been lost, Papasian recently discovered scores in Paris in French translation that were intended for a French production that never occurred. Papasian exclaimed: “There are a lot of pages in Chukhajian’s own hand, and it is the only orchestrated score (by Chukhajian himself) to this date!”

After this discovery, Papasian was able to use the various extant versions to make his own revisions for a new Western Armenian script. Papasian realized that “in order to make some things work, we have to make changes to the opera to make it more palatable to today’s audience.” For example, in the original Turkish, Horhor Agha had a funny provincial accent and sometimes funny words were used in the choruses which would be lost in translation. Furthermore, the story was very repetitive.

On the other hand, in the Soviet Armenian version, many of the Oriental or Eastern melodies of the original were removed to make it more “Armenian,” and Papasian wanted to find a way to continue to use them. He said that for this reason, “I created a new story with a pretext for the Oriental music — a theater within a theater.” The first production is a tale of the Arabian 1001 Nights, the great tragedy of Khurshid and Fatime.

Papasian changed the figure of the father from a poor chickpea vendor into a rich man, because he realized that today it is no longer funny to mock a poor man. The father’s opposition to Gariné’s involvement in the theater group is Papasian’s replacement for the kidnapping plot absent in the Soviet Armenian version.

Papasian also had to change the development of the love story to allow for a livelier plot. Gariné gradually falls in love with Armen, a young intellectual who returns from his studies in Venice and establishes the theater company in which Gariné performs. Papasian attempted to respect the original as much as possible, and kept the sequences of 21 musical numbers in the same order as in the first Turkish-language Chukhajian version.

After creating a new Western Armenian version, with a revised script, Papasian translated this into French and English. The French version was staged in Paris and Marseille earlier this year by a company of 40 actors (including Papasian as the father, Horhor Agha), singers, dancers and musicians to critical acclaim. For budgetary reasons as well as ease of travel, it was made as a simple and “light” production but Papasian felt very satisfied with the result. He declared, “Even if I have more money, I would not change anything (though maybe I would improve some costumes or lighting).”

Papasian explained on December 17 that the motivation for his work was not merely Armenian patriotism. It was rather that “it is just natural to want to share something that you like. It just happens that I know a lot of Armenian literature and opera, and I realized how much they need to be promoted in the wider world.” Financial and geopolitical reasons, most significantly the Armenian Genocide, and perhaps a consequent

inferiority complex among some Armenians, did not allow these Armenian works to be better known in the past, but that does not mean that they do not deserve to be heard.

The two above-mentioned December presentations were intended as an introduction to “Gariné” for the US. Papasian hopes to be able to obtain sufficient financial support here and abroad so that he can refine and present his version of “Gariné” in appropriate productions to the modern world in the Armenian, French and English languages.

For more information and updates on the progress of “Gariné,” see Nora Armani’s Pemart website: <http://www.pemart.org>.