“As a playwright, I have a responsibility to the world I live in”

A working class drama at the Theatre Factory in Istanbul: *Ekrem the Communist*

Our reporters
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Ekrem the Communist, *the first play staged by the Theatre Factory (Fabrika Tiyatro), premiered in Istanbul on September 29. Actor Emin ?entürk Sulji? gives a one-man performance in the play written and directed by young playwright and director Harun Yaylao?lu. Reporters from the World Socialist Web Site recently conducted interviews with Yaylao?lu and Sulji?.*

WSWS: Can you tell us about the play, *Ekrem the Communist*? What processes impelled you to write this play?

Harun Yaylao?lu: To be honest, there is no simple answer to that. As a playwright, I think I have a responsibility to society, to the world I live in. Last year, when Will Lehman was running for president of the United Auto Workers [UAW] in the US and his main perspective was to eliminate the union bureaucracy, I had an idea for a play.

Then I intertwined Lehman’s campaign with the wave of metal strikes in Turkey in May 2015, the so-called “Metal Storm.” I experienced it firsthand. I led Ekrem, who was living a lumpen life, to political enlightenment through the strikes. But as a writer, I can’t say that I fictionalized everything. Some things flowed naturally into this, and the writing process led to the inclusion of current issues in the play, such as the 2015 general elections in Turkey and the Ankara train station massacre on October 10 that year. Ekrem is a character who announces his candidacy for the union presidency–with his own limitations–under conditions where political parties and trade unions try to subordinate the masses to the parliamentary system.

WSWS: Ekrem appears as a narrator speaking directly to the audience.

HY: That’s very true and that’s what we’re trying to do. The biggest challenge I faced when writing Ekrem was how to approach this subject. I approached Ekrem as a storyteller, which I had never tried before.

WSWS: Are there any parallels between Ekrem’s stories and your life?

HY: Yes, there are. The neighborhood where Ekrem was born was the same where I grew up. Like Ekrem, my father had a car repair shop. I can say that this story is more similar to my brother’s. But while my brother continued to work as a car mechanic, Ekrem found himself at TOFA? [Fiat] auto plant in Bursa as a worker.

What I recounted after that is mostly what I saw or heard during the “Metal Storm” period. Of course, I cannot say that everything happened. But, for example, the scene of the convoy of Renault workers supporting the striking TOFA? workers happened in front of my eyes. So, yes, there are parallels.

WSWS: If we go back to Ekrem, he first appears as a character who is far from class consciousness. And when he first enters the factory, he catches the eye of the trade union officials, and they want to make a scab out of him. How did you come up with that idea?

HY: Ekrem is actually a proletarianized petty bourgeois. The TOFA? is an interesting factory in many ways. In a way, it is the place where the biggest trade union in Turkey, the right-wing-led Türk Metal, was largely founded. It is said there is a considerable rural population among its workers. Many of my friends also found work there. To come back to your question, this is exactly what my father, or my family in general, went through: from a petty bourgeois life, we became a working class family. This also has its place in the play.

As for the question of strikebreaking, unfortunately, that was one of the things we heard during the strike wave. Of course, although I fictionalized it to make it interesting while writing, these are issues that exist in the class struggle.

WSWS: In the play you have a serious attitude especially towards trade unions and you explain them in an ironic way, what do you think about the trade unions?

HY: As a long-time reader of the WSWS, and as a youth who read the writings of all publications during the “Metal Storm” period in 2015, I focused on the writings of Halil Çelik and the group he led, which was then called Toplumsal E?itlik [Social Equality]. Above all, as I pointed out in the play, unions like the D?SK confederation, which presented itself as “revolutionary,” have advanced almost nothing to workers. They caused the dismissal of dozens of workers and left them to their fate. All this increased my anger against the trade union apparatus.

Then, through unique works such as “Why are trade unions

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hostile to socialism?" by David North, I gained knowledge and perspective on the nature of trade unions and their place in the history of the class struggle. I think all this happened at some point through a sharpened, combined development of my creativity and my understanding of the world.

WSWS: The play ends with Ekrem announcing his campaign for the union presidency and referring to the Ankara train station massacre. What was your reason for bringing up the Ankara massacre?

HY: As I mentioned before, while we were trying to tell the story of "Metal Storm," other relevant events inevitably found their way into the play. I think the main reason why the unions and the "left" sabotaged the "Metal Storm" was their fear of a class movement that would get out of their control. If you remember, this was a year in which the Erdo?an regime accelerated its authoritarianism. The general elections were held just one month after the strike wave.

When the June elections failed to produce a government, the famous wave of terror that lasted until the November elections was unleashed. Inevitably, I found myself writing a play about these issues. In my opinion, the Ankara massacre literally mirrored the imperialist war in the Middle East in Turkey. At the same time, it was also used to suppress a movement of the working class. There seems to be a connection between this and the authoritarianism of the Erdo?an government.

WSWS: Your play raises important social and political issues. This is very different from the prevailing understanding in the field of cinema and theatre. What is the main difference in your approach?

HY: I think it is all about the way we perceive the world. I have to stress that this is a very dynamic process. However, as someone who studied playwriting, I can say that we were told for four years at university that there was a clear distinction between art and politics. I think that dozens of talented people are wasted. In the end, these writers experience a crisis, think they lack talent and give up writing. I was one of them, but somehow my political attitude and my deep concentration on art brought me back to the odyssey of writing. It was at this point that I began to write plays about the main problems of the world, such as freedom of expression, the rise of fascism, the rights of refugees, the WikiLeaks revelations and Julian Assange and the drive to authoritarianism, etc.

WSWS: *Ekrem the Communist* is also your directorial debut. What are your next plans as a director?

HY: Actually, I think that writing and directing are things that support each other. There is a crisis in artistic production in Turkey and internationally. But in this time of crisis, there will also be the rise of new artists. I would say that I see myself there—or want to see myself there. I think we can find our originality and creativity in the objective world. I try to emphasize this intersection between our subjective consciousness and the objective world. A writer or a director cannot produce a real work of art without thinking about the problems of the world in which he or she lives. I can say that an artist must have the ability to perceive the problems of his or her time and the courage to convey them.

WSWS: After the premiere, you announced that you would be starting your second play.

HY: Yes. Our second play, *Lupin: A Spectre is Haunting the Middle East. Lupin*, as its name suggests, is in a way an adaptation of Arsène Lupin [the central figure in a series of short stories by French writer Maurice Leblanc, first introduced in 1905, about a thief and master of disguise. The character later appeared in various stage, film and television adaptations].

But our Lupin is not a bank robber. He lives in the Middle East and tells the story of the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR by the Stalinists. Starting with the US invasion of Iraq, all the societies invaded and ruined by the US are presented here as a kind of image of the Middle East. Our Lupin, in disguise, infiltrates the Pentagon and exposes war crimes ...

The Theatre Factory will not retreat from its aesthetic concerns in any of the issues it deals with and will continue to address the fundamental problems that affect this world.

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WSWS: What made you take on the main character in a working class story such as *Ekrem the Communist*?

Emin ?entürk Sulji?: The field of culture and art has been subjected to oppression many times in the past, and also today. There have been attempts to silence it, to close it down. We had colleagues (tutors, drama teachers) who went into exile, even to prison... In short, in the past there were revolutionary theatres, filmmakers and writers. When we came to the present day, in such a crisis it was necessary to say "we exist, and we will exist"... That was our starting point as the Theatre Factory.

I am on the side that stands against postmodernism and refuses to make a theatre that is determined by the bosses and the well-heeled. Neo-liberal policies have created a gap between art and profit concerns. I come from the tradition of "troupe theatre," which prioritizes collective artistic production. Many actors and many artists have come out of this tradition.

Under these circumstances, a revolutionary attitude and a revolutionary theatre were necessary. Being a part of a working class story, *Ekrem the Communist*, is enjoyable and exciting at the same time. It is a relevant story in today's conjuncture.

My professors had a very nice saying, let me end with it: "Theatre has a matter, and we are obliged to tell these matters." With solidarity.

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