

THE MAKING OF

'Deported a dream play'



Bobbie Steinbach as Victoria and Jeanine Kane as Varter, in "Deported / a dream play"

By Joyce Van Dyke

Joyce Van Dyke's "Deported / a dream play" tells the story of two women deported together from Mezireh in 1915: the playwright's grandmother, and her best friend, Varter, the mother of Dr. H. Martin Deranian. "Deported" just received its first professional production, playing to sold-out houses at the Modern Theatre in Boston from March 8 to April 1, 2012. The play was directed by Judy Braha and produced by Boston Playwrights' Theatre in association with Suffolk University.

How can you make a play about the genocide and its aftermath? How do you tell a story that is unspeakable, unimaginable even? And if you do, will anybody come see it? Those were questions I started struggling with five years ago.

At the same time, director Judy Braha and a company of actors began collaborating with me to explore and shape the material that would eventually become “Deported/a dream play.” The story of two women friends, Victoria and Varter, “Deported” fuses the everyday and the surreal. It opens in Providence in 1938, then jumps forward 40 years to LA in 1978, and finally moves into a dream world of the future.

Early on I decided to tell the story of these two women genocide survivors as a “dream play.” The play would be composed out of dreams. When the lights first come up, we see the main character, Victoria, lying asleep on a table, dreaming about her friend, Varter. Dreams are woven throughout the action, and the entire final Act of the play, set in the future beyond 2015, interweaves Victoria’s dreams with those of other characters.

Dreams allowed me to crystallize a complicated history in visual images onstage. Dreams could accordion a great expanse of time into a moment. People and objects could magically appear and disappear. Real doors on stage could open into the past or the future. In the twinkling of an eye, we could slide from one world to another.

Making the play out of dreams was exciting and artistically challenging for me. It was also an attempt to wrest something beautiful out of this dreadful subject matter. That was an imperative I felt from the very beginning, for myself and for the audience: that if I was to write this play it *had* to embody a kind of beauty and vitality, that it had to represent humor and hope, that it couldn’t just reflect the genocide but had to reflect life beyond it too. The resurgence of life and dreams of the future—these needed to be a part of the play.

But at a deep level, it felt like a necessity rather than an artistic choice to make this a dream play. The form of the play was dictated by the need to tell the truth. What these characters had actually experienced in their lifetimes was surreal, nightmarish—the swift destruction and transformation



Varter and her first husband, Mr. Nazarian, Mezireh. Both are characters in the play.

of a whole world. How could I be true to the strangeness of their experience, to the way the genocide shattered not only family and culture, but space and time? How could I show their dislocation and disorientation? These were people for whom, as the main character Victoria says, “too much has happened,” like an earthquake whose repercussions went on and on, down through the years. I could never recreate that story in a realistic play. But I could evoke it in dreams.

So, a dream play, but also a documentary play. Half of the play’s characters are invented, but the others are historical. Much that the historical characters say and do in the play was taken from life. I used their real names, with just one exception. That, too, was a decision made early on. I wanted to save things. I wanted to use the literal facts where I could. These remnants felt precious, and whenever I could use real details in the play it

gave me a special satisfaction: for example, Varter’s artistry in making Armenian needle lace; her husband taken away in the middle of the night in his pajamas; the house Harry built at 74 Sargent Avenue in Providence; Victoria rehearsing a play in the attic of that house for the Armenian Euphrates Evangelical Church theatre group; the Turkish sergeant who followed Varter from Ourfa to Aleppo after she escaped. All of these and many more real-life details became motifs and events in the play. In larger matters, too,

the play’s stories are true, including the story of how these two women lost their children on the deportation.

As I began to work on the play, my original dread of confronting the subject matter gave way to a sense of happiness and release that took me by surprise. Although the writing process was often painful, it greatly deepened my knowledge and love for my grandparents, and for my grandmother’s best friend, Varter, Martin Deranian’s mother, whom I never met but came to love. The more I worked on the play, the more I felt the living miracle of their strength and heroism.

I was sustained throughout the creation of the play by the many people and Armenian organizations that gave me support: our Deported Advisory Board, Armenian International Women’s Association (AIWA), Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA), Knights and Daughters of Vartan, National Association



Bobbie Steinbach as Victoria and Ken Baltin as Harry.

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The playwright's grandparents and mother—Elmas Boyajian (called Victoria in the play) with her husband Harry and daughter Rose, Providence. All three are characters in the play.

for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR), Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Sayat Nova Dance Company, and the many individuals who generously contributed to our special fundraising campaign to help support the production. We were thrilled when Boston Playwrights' Theatre agreed to produce the play in association with Suffolk University at the newly renovated Modern Theatre.

I would like to mention two particularly wonderful features of this production. One was the beautiful photo exhibit in the lobby of the Modern Theatre, curated by Ruth Thomasian of Project SAVE. The exhibit was specially keyed to the "Deported" story and included photos of characters in the play, providing a moving complement to the production and drawing the attention of audiences before and after the show, many of whom were given a guided tour of the exhibit by Thomasian herself. I also cherished the Armenian dancing in the play choreographed by Apo Ashjian of Sayat Nova, who taught our whole company how to dance. Ashjian's beautiful weaving of those dances into the play made them a highlight of the production, communicating the joy and vitality that I so hoped the show would convey.

There are certain people without whom this play would never have come to be. I call Martin Deranian the godfather of this play. He inspired me to write it and was the source of everything I know about Varter, as well as, remarkably, much that I learned from him about my own grandmother.¹

My artistic collaborator, director Judy Braha, was my partner in the creation of this play from the very start. Braha not only directed the beautifully realized Boston Playwrights' Theatre production at the Modern, but had worked with me over a five-year period to develop the play. Starting before we had any script or even a story, she held improvisational workshops with our company of actors, which became the laboratory for developing the play. Most of these actors

appeared in the production at the Modern. Their creative work, as well as public readings and an earlier workshop production at Boston University that Braha directed, all contributed to the evolution of the script.

"Deported" is a challenging play to stage. In Braha's words: "The play leaps from the intimate to the epic, and it leaps quickly. Dreams tumble out of Victoria's imagination in multiple layers and leave as fast as they arrived... One of our greatest challenges was arriving at a scenic design that could easily, almost magically, shift from an attic in 1938 to a garden in LA in 1978 to a dream space in the future."²

An especially evocative and affecting element of the production was not my invention at all, but Braha's idea: that the Suffolk University students, who were cast as Armenian dancers in the show, should double as "Dreamers"—beings who swirled in and out and made the magic happen in the play, making lace and chairs appear and disappear, and repeatedly transforming the world before our eyes.

To my enormous gratification, large audiences came to see the show, and we even sold out most performances. People wept, and they laughed. I was thrilled to see that the audience members were of all ages and backgrounds. One night a busload of 40 college students from North Carolina came; they'd just seen "Les Miserables" at the Opera House next door, and were now taking in "Deported." Parents brought their children. Adults brought their elderly parents. A group of half a dozen women in headscarves came one night. A teacher brought his entire high school class. A lot of Armenians came to see the show, yet they made up less than half of the total audience, in my estimation.

A friend said to me, "Every Armenian's story is different, and they're all the same." Many came up to me after the play and said, "That was *my* story," "You told my mother's story," "my grandparents' story" "my uncle's," although not all of those people were Armenian. As we heard from many audience members—and as we had hoped in creating the play—it resonated with those whose families were changed by the Holocaust, by more recent genocides, by fighting in World War II, and by American slavery.

As for what comes next: My goal is for "Deported/a dream play" to go on to productions in other cities, between now and 2015, and beyond. I believe the theatre is uniquely able to convey the visceral and emotional reality of this story. But I would also like to say that the play ends with hope. In the last scene, set some years beyond 2015, Turks and Armenians from the past and from the future gather together onstage, searching for the words that will allow them to speak. I hope this play can contribute to that conversation. □

1. See www.bu.edu/bpt/pdfs/press/deportedpreview.pdf for the story told in a March 3 Boston Globe article.
2. See <http://artsfuse.org/53505/fuse-theater-interview-deported-a-dream-play-a-tale-of-new-england-with-global-implications/for> the interview with Van Dyke and Braha.