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# Anahid Sofian's Passage through Light and Shadows: The Children of Ararat

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Over two weekends in October, 2010 at Theatre of St. Clements Episcopal Church in New York, Anahid Sofian presented what must be called a love letter to all things Armenian. The ambitious ninety-minute piece with a company of thirteen was a succession of images to evoke the aspirational side of Armenian culture in addition to better known defining tragic moments. While production values may have been modest, the overall impression was bolstered by attractive costumes and careful succession of moods and choreographic styles. Lighting was noteworthy as well as multimedia. But in the end it was Sofian's sense of beauty—all too rare—that made the evening memorable.

The opening is an example of how Sofian builds interest and emotion into an extended scene. A single woman (Sofian) is revealed kneeling center stage. In half-light she rises and makes a slow circle until she is joined by three other women in traditional dress. The pace gradually quickens and arm movements become more sweeping, all underlined by Armenian traditional music with its rich harmonies and oriental flavor. Combined with vintage film clips, the whole can be read as reverence for the continuity of Armenian culture.

The church venue was entirely appropriate given that religion has been the basis for Armenian identity since Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity as its religion. For this segment following a set of full-fledged traditional dances for men and women, Sofian reintroduces the company's male contingent in the guise of priests in long black robes. While not intended as a recreation of a religious ceremony, a sense of majesty pervades.

What would be expected to be the overriding theme doesn't appear until after midpoint in the piece. After a long buildup of isolation, there began in 1915 a full-scale massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians then living in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire principally around Mount Ararat of the piece's title. Sofian wisely focuses on the human tragedy at the individual level. Silhouetted figures in near-darkness symbolically reenact the forced marches that claimed most of the victims. Maybe only dance is capable of sweeping away the useless rhetoric that has surrounded discussions of what is known as "Great Crime" in Armenian language to concentrate on the cost to the people caught up in it.

Humorous moments are not missing. There is a kind of Armenian Romeo and Juliet story on view in a dance version. An odd tale of Fate is recounted verbally: a rich woman's gifts are rejected in favor of a poor woman's offerings to the capricious force.

Sofian manages to offer a comprehensive look at Armenian culture despite the economy of means but with dance including movement and imagery as a language. Armenian traditional dance can tend toward the stately, so it's perhaps understandable that purely energetic moments the surprisingly ample men's contingent could have brought are largely missing. Still the overall effect is uplifting, as she intended.

Director Anahid Sofian's choreography is augmented by Gagik Karapetian. Additional credits: Kia Rogers/Lighting, Meganne George/Costumes and Joseph Spirito/Set. ❧

Carlos Fittante and Sira Melikian © Jeremy Haik