

# *Istanbul Retold*

*reviewed by burc idem dincel*

COLLECTED PLAYS 2: (ISTANBUL TRILOGY)

*Istanbul is White, Raki is Colourful* (Istanbul Beyaz, Raki Rengarenk)

*The Red Fatigues* (Kirmizi Yorgunlari)

*Alaturca Noir* (Gozu Kara Alaturka)

by Ozen Yula

YKY, 172 pp., 2007, 975-08-1174-6

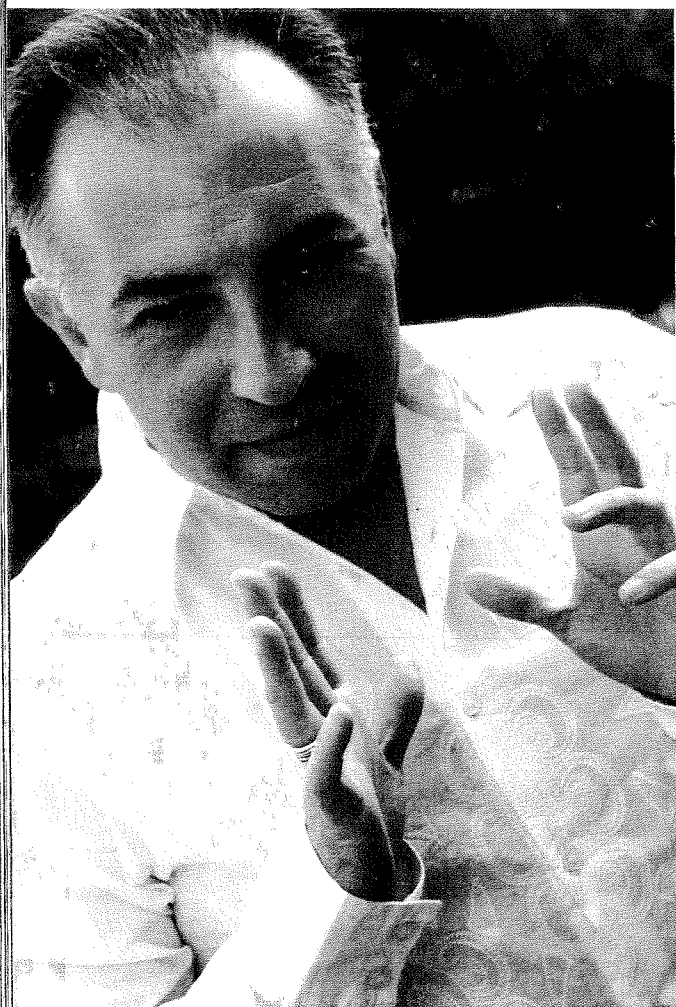
*'Gaze long enough into Dean Street and Dean Street will gaze into you.'*<sup>1</sup>

Istiklal Street, the heart of Istanbul, hosts many people belonging to different sub-cultures of Turkish society, so it has a specific place for the other districts of the city. You may gaze long enough into Istiklal Street and Istiklal Street will gaze into you through its stark reality including facets of lives neglected by the majority of society. At that instant, it is up to that person to consider these disregarded lives, or walk down the Istiklal Street of cosy cafes and gleaming stores.

It seems that Ozen Yula, probably the most influential playwright/director/storywriter representing modern Turkish theatre worldwide nowadays, has paid homage to Istanbul by dedicating a trilogy to the city. The international journey of the award-winning<sup>2</sup> author's plays began in the 2000s with the translation of his works into English, German, French, Bulgarian, Finnish, Polish, Russian and Japanese, along with the

performances of them at prestigious festivals such as the Biennale Bonn, the Vienna 'Kontext: Europa' Festival, the Toga Festival, and the 14th International Istanbul Theatre Festival.

Yula's *Istanbul Plays*<sup>3</sup> date back to the late 1990s and contain the signs of his artistry recognized by the world today. *Istanbul is White, Raki is Colourful* (1997), the first play of his Istanbul Trilogy, gives an account of the journey of a girl in search of the father of her unborn baby in the lost streets of Beyoglu. This narrative proceeds in the company of the 'other' residents of Istiklal Street – the transsexuals, beggars, gamblers, prostitutes, dustmen, solvent-addicted homeless children. What strikes the reader in *Istanbul is White, Raki is Colourful* is its language written in verse form. Ozen Yula's choice of verse form imbues the play with echoes of classical tragedy, a form of theatre whose authority has diminished to some extent in contemporary drama. The words of George Steiner about the condition of classical tragedy in contemporary theatre can be applied to Yula's use of verse form: 'From an-



Above, Ozen Yula, photograph by Gulay Ayyildiz.

tiquity until the age of Shakespeare and Racine, such accomplishment [that of classical tragedy] seemed within the reach of talent; since then the tragic voice in drama is blurred or still.<sup>74</sup> From this perspective, it can be understood that Ozen Yula returns to the use of verse form with the purpose of building a unique style that can enrich the contemporary world theatre in the long run.

The second play of the trilogy, *The Red Fatigues* is also concerned with the 'other' people of Istanbul. Apart from the 70-year-old neighbour, all of the protagonists of the play are 35-year-olds: a gigolo, a girl obsessed with him and following him for six months, the future flatmate of the gigolo and the gigolo's former lover, who is suffering heavily from dissociative identity disorder. In addition to the peripheral features of the play characters, their names are marginalized, and derived from cartoon-figures, such as Lucky Luke, Betty Boop and Olive Oyl. In this way, Ozen Yula exposes the identity problem that suffocates the inhabitants of almost every big-city of any country. Love, nostalgia and death are in the air, and the reader/audience senses all these throughout the play. Furthermore, in *The Red Fatigues*, Yula puts momentous emphasis on the everlasting debate between modernism and post-modernism. By incarnating the protagonists peculiar to the works of post-modernist literature in a modernist set, Yula calls for a (re)thinking of modernism and post-modernism.

The last play of the trilogy, *Alaturca Noir* also takes the lives of the marginalized people of Istanbul as a focal point. In contrast to the other two plays of Istanbul trilogy, *Alaturca Noir* depicts characters sensitive to the problems of the society in which they live. However, the way they express their reactions against these issues is either by concealing themselves under the guise of madness, or by favouring the values that contradict their worldviews. Yet, this characteristic of the protagonists bestows upon this play, a stronger sense of hope than the ones of *Istanbul is White*, *Raki is Colourful* and *The Red Fatigues*. This becomes quite clear when the decision made by one of the heroines of the play to enlighten herself as she becomes aware of the tricks played on her by her husband.

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With this brief glance at the Istanbul trilogy, one can see how Ozen Yula has gradually scattered the seeds of his current work recognized in the world today by depicting the Istanbul of the other, the ignored and the overshadowed. Ozen Yula's *Istanbul Plays* not only offer an encounter with the life led in the core of the city, but also a chance to (re)evaluate the 'other' of any hometown in conjunction with the 'other' of Istanbul. In this respect, Jonathan Lethem's keen remark about Dean Street can be paraphrased as 'Gaze long enough into the world of Ozen Yula and Ozen Yula will give you a good deal to gaze upon.' □

NOTES:

1. Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude*, London, Faber and Faber, 2005, p. 48.
2. The Afife Jale Theatre Award in 2001 and 2004, the Haldun Taner Short Story Award in 2001, and the Cevdet Kudret Literature Award in 2002.
3. Ozen Yula, *Collected Plays 2: (Istanbul Trilogy), Istanbul is White, Raki is Colourful, The Red Fatigues, Alaturca Noir*, Istanbul, Mitos Boyut, 1998; Istanbul, YKY, 2007.
4. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, USA, Yale University Press, 1996, p.10.

