

AN IMPROVISED EXAMPLE IN TRADITIONAL TURKISH THEATRE: ORTAOYUNU¹

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Öz: Geleneksel Türk tiyatrosunun temel yapı taşlarında biri olan Ortaoyunu, metne bağlı olmadan doğaçlama olarak, seyircilerin çevrelediği palanga ya da meydan adı verilen dairesel ya da elips uzamlarda oynanan, içinde müzik, dans ve şarkıların da yer aldığı bir oyundur. Özellikle 1860'lı yıllarda İstanbul'da yazın açık, kışın ise kapalı uzamlarda büyük ilgi görür. Oyunlarda dekor olarak “yenidünya” adı verilen bir paravan ve “dükkân” adı verilen iki katlı bir kafes kullanılır. Başkişiler Kavuklu ve Pişekâr'dır. Her oyun, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki çok kültürlü dokuyu yansıtır. Farklı meslek, yöre, kültür ve uluslara mensup kişilerin özellikleri ön plana çıkar. Kostümler ise kişilerin ait olduğu toplumsal sınıflar ve kişilikleri hakkında çok şey söyler. Oyunlar kendine özgü yapılarıyla giriş, muhavere, fasıl ve sonuç bölümlerinden oluşur. Gülme ögesi ise dil kazası ve yanlışları üzerinde yoğunlaşır. Kesin biçimini ve adını XIX. yüzyılda alan Ortaoyunu, “açık biçimli”, “göstermecî” bir komedi türüdür. Biz bu derleme çalışmasında, ortaoyununu yapısal, anlamsal ve izleksel bağlamda, genel kurucu öğeleriyle tanıtmayı amaçlıyoruz.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Geleneksel Türk Tiyatrosu, Kavuklu, Ortaoyunu, Pişekâr.

Introduction

Ortaoyunu is a genre of Turkish traditional theatre. It is an example of improvised theatre, which focuses on a subject, and was performed in an oval field called *palanga* or *meydan* (area) surrounded by spectators (Boratav, 2000, p. 244). *Ortaoyunu* was particularly popular in and around Istanbul after 1860. In the summer, it took place outdoors, and in the winter, indoors. Summer performances were more popular because the outdoor format allowed for larger

¹ This study is a compilation prepared to introduce the Ortaoyunu.

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A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

audiences. Music, by wind and percussion instruments, song, dance, dialogue and characterization were the chief components of *Ortaoyunu* performances.

1. Origins and Meanings of *Ortaoyunu*

There are many conflicting hypotheses regarding the origin of *Ortaoyunu*; some claim that it reaches as far back as the fourteenth century, while others argue that it has developed more recently. The earliest claim is based on the known fact that under the reign of Bayezid I, an Ottoman Sultan (1389-1402), there were mime players along with companies of dancers and singers at court. Evliya Çelebi mentions twelve such companies of players that gained popularity. These companies performed a variety of plays, and Çelebi claims that the earliest roots of *Ortaoyunu* are to be found in these plays (Kudret I, 1994, p. 2).

Another hypothesis maintains that, under the administration of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566), *Ortaoyunu* was performed at mental institutions as part of the treatment of mental patients. This treatment was developed under the advice of a European doctor, who suggested entertainment in place of chaining or locking away diagnosed lunatics. As interest in these performances for the mentally disturbed rose, so did the attendance at the performances. The players felt obliged to perform at other events as well, and their fame was heard of even at court. They began playing at the houses of wealthy citizens and also at court. According to this hypothesis, this was the actual birth of *Ortaoyunu* (And 1985, p. 344).

Others contend that *Ortaoyunu* came into being during the reigns of Murat IV, an Ottoman Sultan (1623-1640), and of Sultan Ibrahim (1640-1648). There is also a claim that is based on the alleged similarity between *Ortaoyunu* and the plays performed at circumcision feasts of Sultans' sons in the seventeenth century. Another argument, that the origin of *Ortaoyunu* goes back to the period of Mustafa III (1757-1774), is not supported by any sources. Kudret alleges that *Ortaoyunu* arose from the popular shadow puppet shows of the Ottoman Empire, *Karagöz*³. In miniatures representing the old festivals, the relation between *Karagöz* and *Ortaoyunu* is mentioned and even stressed. The theory that *Ortaoyunu* thus came out of the *Karagöz* plays go back to the year 1790 (Kudret I, 1994, pp. 45-46).

Some historians declare that *Ortaoyunu* came from abroad: from Italy with Genoas or from Spain and Portugal with Jewish immigrants. According to

³ *Karagöz*, or Shadow Play, is one of the most important subtypes of the traditional Turkish theatre and has close connections with *Ortaoyunu*. The subjects, characters, style, comical elements and dramatic structure in *Ortaoyunu* are quite similar to the ones in *Karagöz*. Two main characters in *Ortaoyunu*, Kavuklu and Pişekâr, stand for *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* in *Karagöz*. They are almost exactly the living examples of *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* as represented on the stage coming from the shadow curtain. Almost all of the plays taking place in the repertoire of *Karagöz* are present in *Ortaoyunu* as well. The language, structure of the dialogues and the terms used are all similar to each other. In *Karagöz*, the play is based on the dual dialogue, a tradition preserved in *Ortaoyunu*, too. While *Karagöz* and *Kavuklu* use a pure folk language, *Pişekâr* and *Hacivat* use an incomprehensibly ornamented language (Türkmen, 1991, pp. 96-104).

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

Metin And (1985, p. 344), Spanish and Portuguese Jews developed the company plays (*kol oyunları*), which are currently considered to be an old form of *Ortaoyunu*. These people came to Anatolia from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They performed such plays at festivals in 1582, which were also performed in Spain under the name of *jugalres*.

Professor Fuat Köprülü links the development of *Ortaoyunu* to the nineteenth century. He bases his hypothesis on Hafız Hızır İlyas's work, *Letaif-i Enderun*. According to this work, *Ortaoyunu* took its final form between the years 1812 and 1830, namely under the reign of Mahmut II (1808-1839). The plays performed during this time were prepared and performed by Turks, but were based on the model of the performance of the Jewish players' companies under Prince Abdülmecit. According to Köprülü, these plays are what we call *Ortaoyunu* today. *Ortaoyunu* enjoyed its peak popularity during the Tanzimat period, especially under Abdülaziz (1861-1887). The rise of popularity for *Ortaoyunu* during the period is due to increased competition and rivalry with the European theatre. Because of this, as Kudret has remarked, paradoxically, *Ortaoyunu* enjoyed popularity and decline simultaneously.

Western researchers claim that both Greek and Latin *mimus*, and Italian *Commedias dell'arte* had a considerable effect on the emergence of *Ortaoyunu*. This hypothesis is based on the similarities amongst the characters, dialogues and play designs of all three genres⁴.

Ortaoyunu has led to debates amongst scholars not only about its origins, but also about its meaning. The word, '*Ortaoyunu*', first appears in *Surname-i Saliha* (1834), a work that tells the wedding of Mahmut II's daughter, Saliha Sultan. Some historians claim that *Ortaoyunu* owes its name to *Commedia dell'arte* because of the similarity between both: *Commedia dell'arte* was originally translated into Turkish as '*arte oyunu*'. According to this hypothesis, the word '*arte*' has been transformed into '*orta*' over the course of time, becoming what, today, is called '*Ortaoyunu*'. Another theory makes a case that *Ortaoyunu*, as a word, comes out of the army and navy entertainments of the Janissary. Those who maintain that *Ortaoyunu* has a Spanish background contend that the one-act plays in Spain, which were called '*Auto*', have changed over time to become '*Ortaoyunu*' as it is presently known.

In my opinion, this genre of theatre is called '*Ortaoyunu*' because it is presented on a stage that is surrounded by the audience, and it is performed as an interlude between two other plays. Thus, *Ortaoyunu* has a variety of cultural origins, it is logical that it was born out of a combination of all of the elements mentioned

⁴ Adolphe Thalasso, *Revue encyclopedique Larousse*, 1889, no. 327 (Kudert I) It was Adolphe Thalasso who first drew attention to the similarity between *Commedia dell'arte* and *Ortaoyunu*. To him, the Turks' long-standing close contact with the people of Venice and Genoa is the best indication of the influence of *Commedia dell'arte* on *Ortaoyunu*. There are major similarities between the four main characters of *Commedia dell'arte* – Arlecchino, Pantalone, Scarramucchio, Colombina – and those of *Ortaoyunu* – Pişekâr, Kavuklu, Çelebi, Zenne. The term '*orta*' is also alleged to have derived from the word '*arte*'.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

above. Every hypothesis I have discussed seems to have contributed something to *Ortaoyunu*, and so this genre can also be interpreted as a mixture of various entertainments from Ottoman-Turkish society. While *Ortaoyunu*, as we currently know it, only developed in the nineteenth century, its antecedents can be found in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under the names of ‘*kol oyunu*’ (company play)⁵, ‘*meydan oyunu*’ (play in the round)⁶ and ‘*taklit oyunu*’ (mimicry play) (Türkmen, 1991, p. 19).

2. Subjects of *Ortaoyunu*

The subjects treated in *Ortaoyunu* play are rich and various: daily life, current events, traditions and popular history are all portrayed. The same subject matter has prevailed from the nineteenth century to the present. Usually, this material would be developed as a comedic situation, in which the parts and the subjects of the plays are outlined. The actors would then improvise their dialogue without recourse to a director, using the set of characters and improvising freely within the outlined scenario. According to Türkmen (1991), there are four types of scenarios: those which deal with traditional customs, social satires, popular histories and miscellaneous stories. Traditional customs are the subject of *Büyücü Hoca (The Sorcerer)*⁷ *Gülme Komşuna (Don't Laugh at the Follies of Your Neighbour)*⁸, is an example of social satire, and another social satire in anonymous and popular histories is to be found in the material of *Ferhat ile Şirin (Ferhad and Şirin)*⁹. *Kızlar Ağası (The Chief Eunuch)*¹⁰ also takes its

⁵ *Kol Oyunu* is a play performed by a troupe. Purified of such additional features as acrobatic games, magic and tamed animals' performances, these dramatic plays were surrounded with music and dance and were later called *Ortaoyunu*, as of the nineteenth century.

⁶ *Meydan oyunu* was firstly used as a play for the performance of various talents and later began to be called *Ortaoyunu*. Both *Kol oyunu* and *Meydan oyunu* were first brought under the name of *Ortaoyunu* in the nineteenth century.

⁷ *Büyücü (The Sorcerer)*: A sorcerer and his assistant arrive at the scene. Kavuklu angers the sorcerer, who in turn freezes him by magic. Unable to resist the begging of Pişekar and Zennes, the sorcerer breaks the magic. Kavuklu learns this magic from the sorcerer and freezes him and his assistant. Upon the begging of Pişekar and Zennes, Kavuklu breaks the magic. Kavuklu freezes the creditors (Kayserili, Jew, Roumelian) and makes them do whatever he wishes. Finally, the sorcerer wants to punish Kavuklu but forgives him upon the begging and demanding of everybody.

⁸ *Gülme Komşuna*: While Kavuklu and Pişekâr are away from home, Pişekâr's daughter and Kavuklu's wife invite over two young and handsome men (*çelebi*). Pişekâr and Kavuklu return home abruptly and unexpectedly. Shocked and afraid, the women conceal the men in parts of their home.

⁹ Pişekâr advises Kavuklu to open a blacksmith shop. A muralist is sought at Şirin's palace, and Pişekâr helps them to find this artisan. Many muralists come: Arnavut, Acem, Yahudi and lastly, Ferhat, who is an educated young person. Ferhat and Şirin fall in love with each other. Şirin's mother wants Ferhat to bring water to the city by making a tunnel through the mountain. Ferhat works hard in order to make a tunnel through the mountain. In the meantime, a rumour arises that Şirin has died. Yet this rumour is unfounded; Şirin is not dead and the preparations for the marriage begin. In the real popular history, however, the lovers do not meet.

¹⁰ *Kızlar Ağası (The Chief Eunuch)*: Kavuklu is seeking a job. Zennes and a black servant appear on stage. They are about to go on a pilgrimage. Later the chief eunuch comes. He likes Kavuklu and wants to employ him near himself. He employs Çelebi as a secretary. The Jew, to whom the

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

subject matter from everyday life. Other scenarios do not concentrate on a precise subject (pp. 13-18). In the plays that treat of customs and traditions, the objective is both to show and to satirize them in picturesque scenes. The plays are based on the Turkish popular histories containing many alterations. For example, a story of tragic love may be transformed into a comedy, but the names of the characters would remain unchanged.

Having introduced the origins, the main characters and subjects of the plots of *Ortaoyunu*, I shall try to illustrate the essential qualities of this traditional form of dramatic art. In the following passages, I will discuss the setting and scenery, the dramatic structure and the character types to give a fuller understanding of the genre.

3. Setting and Scenery

The setting of *Ortaoyunu* can be divided into three major areas: the dressing space, the playing space and the audience space. The dressing space is a small room (*Sandık*, or *pusat odası*) where actors change their costumes. There is a door connecting this room to the playing area. The playing area can be divided into two sections: the musicians' space (*çalgıcıların yeri*) and the acting space. The instruments played by the musicians are called 'zurna', or 'çifte-nara'¹¹. The acting area is further subdivided. The shop (*dükkan*) is separated from the rest of the area by a folding screen. The area where most of the action takes place is an open area twenty to thirty metres long. The 'new world' (*yeni dünya*)¹² includes all the sites, which are revealed as the play progresses. It is created with a folding screen one and a half metres long, and of three, or sometimes four floors. The sites presented on the screen vary from one play to another. It may become a house or a Turkish bath (*hamam*). Throughout the course of the play, this screen is opened or closed when needed, and chairs for the actors are placed in front of it.

Finally, there are spaces devoted to the audience. The place (*mevki*), is the site for male audience members to watch the play, and the cage (*kafes*) is the sitting area for female audience members. A set of bars would separate the playing spaces of the actors and musicians from the audience area (Kudret, 1997, p. 105). It is likely that the male and female audience areas were kept separate due to the various factors of the social structure of the period, religious rules and traditions.

chief eunuch is in debt, comes to collect but the chief eunuch destroys the debt receipt. Finally, he is arrested for swindling.

¹¹ 'Zurna' and 'çifte-nara' are Turkish folk instruments.

¹² The 'new world' is often open on four sides, but can be covered with paper or cloth when necessary. In the second half of the eighteenth century, a quarter in the region of Yenikapı in Istanbul was given the name of 'yeni dünya'. This was because the houses in this quarter were newer and more panoramic than the ones in the other regions. Thus, the term 'new world' was transferred from there to *Ortaoyunu* to mean a 'perfect' and airy house. *Ortaoyunu* uses this element of the daily life as a matter of humor and comedy.

4. Structure of Plays

Ortaoyunu is divided into four parts: the prologue (*giriş*), a dialogue (*muhavere*), the play/main plot (*fasıl*) and the epilogue (*sonuç*) (pp. 106-107). The first two parts warm up the audience and show the comic expertise of the two main players. The third section is the heart of the dramatic presentation, and the final part advertises future performances.

A. Prologue (*giriş*): This begins with the music of *Pişekâr* by *zurna*. Before the presentation begins, *Pişekâr* enters the scene, speaks to the musicians and inaugurates the play (And, 1985, p. 387). The play is often introduced in the following way:

Pişekâr comes to the scene, salutes the audience and turns to the musician (*zurnacı*).

Pişekâr: Oh, my brave and gallant hero...

Zurnacı: Yes, my brave hero...

Pişekâr: 'Here's the play entitled "...'' play the *zurna* so that we can start our play. We shall entertain the audience so that they may enjoy themselves.'

B: Dialogue (*muhavere*): After the prologue the music that introduces Kavuklu the major clown of the genre begins. Kavuklu's honesty and straight-talking style cut through the pretence of the other characters. The dialogue itself can be further divided into two parts:

a) Exposition (*Arzbar*): This is the opening dialogue. *Pişekâr* and Kavuklu, two main players, meet by accident and come to realize that they are childhood friends (Kudret I, 1994, p. 55). By presenting recollections of each other, the characters give the spectators an insight into their identities.

b) Virtuosity monologue (*tekerleme*): This section is a tour de force by the comic actor Kavuklu and requires great skill on the actor's part, if the imagined events described therein are to seem real and life-like.

The actor's ability to perform this monologue is crucial to the play; the success of the play will depend on the success of the virtuosity monologue. A sample topic of this monologue might consist of Kavuklu's description of one of his dreams to *Pişekâr*. The dream is of extraordinary events, but his narration to *Pişekâr* is so believable that he will manage to convince him, momentarily, of its truth. However, it is revealed in the end that this story was actually just a dream (Kudret, 1997, p. 109). In one such dream, Kavuklu decides to breed silkworms in Bursa¹³. The silkworms grow and start to eat mulberry leaves. They grow very quickly and cover half of the room. One day Kavuklu finds himself in a cocoon. He cannot breathe and move and begins to sweat, and then awakes to find himself rolled up in a sheet and cover. The dream described in the virtuosity monologue has nothing to do with the subject of the play. Here, Kavuklu is simply illustrating his talent with words.

¹³ Bursa is a city known for the silk fabrics produced there.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu

C. Play/main plot (*fasıl*): The play follows the antics of Kavuklu. Its title is indicative of its subject; this part of the performance contains most of the characters.

Generally, Kavuklu rents a shop or a house. The objective is to create a justification for Kavuklu to always remain on the scene: in one play, he may be a smith and a haberdasher, or in another, a barkeeper (p. 129). The plot requires his presence on stage at all times.

The plays are always based on everyday situations and their potential for intrigue. The simplicity of the action foregrounds the importance of the spoken word. Scenery is reduced to a minimum: it consists of ‘the new world’, ‘the house’ and ‘the shop’ only. The dialogue is generally full of comedy and satire.

D. Epilogue (*sonuç*): Pişekâr announces to the audience that the performance is about to come to an end, and apologizes to them for any failings on the part of the players, while simultaneously informing them of the name and place of the next show. Finally, he takes his leave and exits the stage as the *zurna* plays the closing song (Boratav, 2000, p. 246). Advertising for future performances during the epilogue was necessitated by the fact that playbills did not exist at that time. At the end of such plays, Pişekâr comes to the front of the scene and addresses the audience, saying ‘Forgive our faults. We hope to see you again sitting there for our next play titled “...”’.

Ortaoyunu is presentational, or non-illusionistic. The aim throughout such plays is to make the audience aware that the presentation is just a play, that the players are simply players, and the stage is just a stage, thus implying that nothing should be regarded as occurring in real life. The stage is covered with a curtain, to avoid the impression of any particular place. The players do not attempt to resemble the characters they present or symbolize on the stage; their goal is not to make the audience members empathize with the emotions of their characters, but rather simply to present their feelings and actions on the stage. Moreover, at some moments, the players stop to address the audience during the play. Thus the audience is not encouraged to participate in an illusion, but to observe the play with an impartial eye and perspective. Obviously, alienation is important here (Kudret I, 1994, p. 85).

To prevent the effect of illusion in *Ortaoyunu*, the flow of action is often interrupted. Even though the play is designed with a certain structure, the order of the parts within this structure may be exchanged, and their length may be extended or shortened. In this way, *Ortaoyunu* is suggestive of Bertolt Brecht’s theories. Each of the part of the play is independent from the others. The play also changes its direction and tone to suit the sophistication of the audience. Therefore, it is very important that the players know their audiences, namely the strata of society to which they belong. For example, if there are public officials or politicians amongst the audience members, then the players choose even the words that they use with this factor in mind.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

Ortaoyunu deals with contemporary topical subjects and realities. In most of the plays, the rules and realities of life are supported by proverbs, which are used as a means of criticizing the wrong and inadequate aspects of daily life. Every play draws a social portrait of the mundane events of human affairs.

5. Language

In *Ortaoyunu*, the emergent comic elements are often the result of the events and details of the plays. These comic elements can be divided into two groups: the first emerges from circumstances and actions, and the second emerges from the language itself. The former are usually based on conflicts, unexpected situations, stage repetitions, disguises, illogical events, mistakes or errors, imaginary and surrealistic events, exaggerated caricatures and such. Examples of this first type of humour would stem from the Jew's cowardice, Kavuklu's continual mistakes and the narration of fantastic events based on a dream, as in the virtuosity monologue part.

"Language is an element of laughter". This element in *Ortaoyunu* fits the theory of comedy explained by Henri Bergson. To him, it is necessary to distinguish between the comic that is uttered by language alone, and the comic effect that is created by language. In *Ortaoyunu*, as well, 'it is the language itself that arouses laughter. The laughter is rendered abstract and becomes an element of comedy outside the events. The distinction and contradiction between the characters' language and the one spoken in the society' arouse laughter amongst the audience members. For example, Lâz, Acem, Arabians and men of Kayseri speak in very different accents of Turkish. However, differences in speech may also be the result of an inborn defect, such as stammering, or slow or quick speech.

In addition, the words used within the context of the language of the play perform a major role in the comic elements of the play. Words with multiple meanings or homophonic words are common in *Ortaoyunu*. For example, the word '*taksim*' is the name given to a large square in İstanbul, and also a verb, meaning 'to share'. Another example is '*fırçalamak*', which means both 'brushing' and 'scolding'. *Ortaoyunu* is also a satirical comedy. The typical stereotypes of the races living in the Empire are treated in *Ortaoyunu*, but court, mosques, police and state authorities are never mocked (p. 86).

Although the events in *Ortaoyunu* are very simple, words are very important in these plays. Indeed, *Ortaoyunu* is built on dialogue, not on action. Jokes, virtuosity monologues and meaningless and playful words emerge from miscommunications between the characters. Thus the vehicle which is normally expected to secure communication between the characters in a play—language—is rendered absurd.

The similarity between *Ortaoyunu* and the Eastern theatre results from its presentational aspect. Its aim is just to show, or present. To fulfill this target, it resorts to symbols, grotesque figures, exaggerations and caricaturing. Whatever the subject may be, *Ortaoyunu* is a comedy. Even the most tragic subjects are

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

presented in a light-hearted or humorous way. Given that its origin is traced in the *bairams*, festivals, weddings, meetings and travels, it seems quite normal that it should be filled with comical elements.

This is what makes us label the *Ortaoyunu* as a theatre of abstraction. The people on the stage do not reflect certain characters; they are cliché types. A lot of elements and points are left to the imagination of the audience. For example, the ‘new world’ used as a house is not really a house, but a folding screen. Furthermore, irrationality prevails in the dialogues.

Yet it should not be forgotten that from several sides, it is a realistic theatre. This is because the costumes reflect the dressing styles of different societies. In the dialogues, on the other hand, word plays bring about the abstract dimension and the accents refer to different regions. In this way, dream and reality are put side by side. In the area where everything is dreamed of, there is no place for the concept of time. The player represents everything in a fictitious world in which gods, animals and humans are mixed. In a fictitious manner, he gets on a car, opens the door and produces the sounds of crash, friction and breakdown. Thus, it seems that players not only play but also create the effects¹⁴.

In the play *The Fountain (Çeşme)*, for example, we find all the above mentioned points together:

Kavuklu: Let’s take a cart?

Pişekar: (Pretending to call a cart) Hey, cart! Cart! How much does it cost to take us to Şehzadebaşı (the name of a district in İstanbul)? (Changing the tone of his voice) Fifteen *kuruş* (money used by Turks), sir. (In his own voice) Ten *kuruş*, let’s say, ok?

Kavuklu: Where’s the cart?

Pişekar: It is here, just in front of you. Don’t talk so much. Look, I’m getting on. (Pretends to get on the cart and Kavuklu imitates him.)

Kavuklu: Which side is its front and which is its back?

Pişekar: You behave as if you have never got on a cart.

Pişekar: (He hits the head of Kavuklu with a whip vivaciously and drives the cart. He takes two tours around the square.) Here, we arrived.

Kavuklu: What a merciless driver! He whipped the horses uninterruptedly and I felt pain as if he was whipping me.

Pişekar: Here, we came. (He stops by the new world.) I opened the door. Get in, get in... Take the steps. Pat ... Pat... Pat.

6. Characters of the Plays

In *Ortaoyunu*, the characters are typified by their costumes, their personalities, and their languages (p. 62). The result of their interaction is a portrayal of the lively world of the Ottoman Empire in all its diversity. Miscommunication and difference are highlighted as people who have no natural understanding of one another are melded by politics into one unit. The spectators see and recognize

¹⁴ It is possible to see such effect in the plays, *The Turkish bath*, *The Garden* and *The Dairy*.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

themselves and their neighbours in the babble and diversity. Costume and props, music and movement define the characters, distinguishing one from the other.

Costume is the outward sign of the inward difference. Just as the French Pierrot would always be recognized by his white blouse and pointed hat, so each *Ortaoyunu* character wears his or her distinctive costume from one play to another. Every outfit has elements indicating the profession and habit of the persona. Hand props, too, define the character: for example, the drunkard carries a bottle in his hand; and Tiryaki, the addict, a bar of opium; Kabadayı/the bandit, a pistol; Kastamonulu/woodcutter, an axe; and Laz, the man from the black sea, *kemençe*¹⁵.

Music is a second element that defines the persona. Every person is introduced by a tune, a dance or a song which characterizes him. Thus the spectator can already predict who will come to the scene before seeing them on the scene. Most of the songs and dances are evocative of the places from which these persons come. For example, the spoon dance¹⁶ is evocative of Kayseri; the Sirto¹⁷ is from Roumelia; the Horon¹⁸ is peculiar to Laz.

Movement likewise distinguishes one figure from the next. Each person has his own way of walking and behaving. For example, Pişekâr, the main character, moves in a rhythmic way, while Matiz (The Drunkard) walks by stumbling. As with costume and music, each character has a distinctive movement repertoire.

Language is the ultimate divider. It is an inseparable part of each character's personality and the barrier that prevents clear communication with other persona. Figures are characterized by their linguistic peculiarities and dialects. For example, the Arabian is distinguished by his peculiar word 'ayva'¹⁹ and Acem by 'özüm'²⁰. The clichés are often repeated by the characters before they begin to speak, creating both a comic situation, and helping the audience to identify them before they are even seen. The characters are almost completely identified with these clichés.

Ortaoyunu has been called 'play of word' by several scholars, for the word has a privileged place in the genre. The language of the majority of the characters is in conflict with the Turkish spoken in Istanbul; only Pişekâr and Kavuklu speak the standard dialect of the city, which places them in proximity with the audience. Yet even they will have peculiarities of speech which make their

¹⁵ *Kemençe* is a musical instrument peculiar to native area of Laz.

¹⁶ This is a Turkish folk dance with spoons.

¹⁷ *Sirto*: This is a Greek folk dance.

¹⁸ *Horon*: This is a Turkish folk dance peculiar to the region of Black Sea.

¹⁹ The word 'ayva' – meaning 'yes' – is evocative of Arabians in our country. Arabians begin any sentence, whether negative or positive, with this specific word 'ayva', and this characteristic repetition creates a comic element and scene.

²⁰ Persians are stereotyped for their braggart qualities in our country. They begin any sentence by using 'özüm' – meaning 'I' or 'me' – a repetition that suggests the presence of Persians in the scene and arouses laughter in the audience.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu

diction distinct. For the rest, their speech marks them as ethnic ‘other’ and, therefore, comic. The Turkish of Istanbul creates a situation where there is a lack of communication, which characters and audience must overcome to understand the multicultural reality of the Ottoman world. This difficulty of communicating between and among various ethnic groups of the Ottoman Empire is what creates both tension and comic effect. Different dialects, linguistic differences that rise from class stratification, and personal peculiarities contribute to the miscommunication that is at the base of the comedy. For example:

Acem:- Look! You should have a cultivated eloquence.

Kavuklu: - What?

Acem:-You should speak in soft words.

Kavuklu:- (Pazarcılar) 324 Okay , I got it now!

Balama:- I didn’t understand what you have said.

Kavuklu:- What can I do? No Turkish on your part, no Greek on my part, okay?

....

Balama:- Vre, I knowing Turkish,...Vre, you knowing Greek?

Kavuklu:- Naught...What is your name?

Balama:- I said name vre. You no understand?

Kavuklu:- Naught! (*The Dairy*, p. 239)

These figures are stereotypical in that each of the persons carries all the characteristics of his social class and will act predictably in the situations presented. Their deficiencies are also caricatured. For example, the Jew is timid, egotistical and always bargaining; Tiryaki, the addict, begins to snore in the middle of a conversation; the Albanian is ignorant and boastful; the female Zenne is indecisive; while Laz from the Black Sea region is both pressed for time and talkative. The characterizations represent the impressions of each type that would have been held by the average Istanbul Turk. Another technique used in the presentation is to have one figure introduce and characterize another. Pişekâr, for example, speaks about Kavuklu to clarify Kavuklu’s persona. As a result of this technique, the skewed understandings are exacerbated and characters speak continually at cross-purposes, misinterpreting each other.

While the people living in Istanbul are presented in their own personalities, those of different races and nations from the further parts of the Empire have complicated languages which are preserved and spoken in their original form throughout the play. Therefore the effect and impression that they make on the people of Istanbul takes a fixed form. Yet no language spoken by the races living within the Empire is presented in an ironic and disdainful way; there is just a slight sense of exaggeration in them.

Those representing ethnic diversity fall into three groups: Muslim Turks of Istanbul, Turks from outside of Istanbul, and foreigners who are either Muslim or non-Muslim.

7. Muslim Turks of Istanbul

Piçekâr²¹: He is the leading actor of the *Ortaoyunu*. He speaks an emphatic and incomprehensible Turkish. Careful, a little bit conceited and well-read, Piçekâr is always deceiving people. However, due to his kindness and his smooth-talking, he wins the confidence and respect of the others. Sometimes he leaves the scene and sometimes he waits onstage at his home or in the cafe until it is again his turn to reappear – from time to time he controls the action of the plot. He intervenes in the discussions and quarrels of Kavuklu. Being a wise and moderate person, Piçekâr reconciles Kavuklu with the others. He opens, leads and closes the play. The dialogue in *Muhavere* is full of Piçekâr's questions called 'key phrases and feminine phrases', and these questions contribute to an atmosphere proper to the answers called 'masculine phrases' by Kavuklu and the others.

For example, in the play called *Fountain*, Piçekâr asks questions. Kavuklu, on the other hand, tells whatever he has experienced by answering the questions. Each question of Piçekâr prepares the way for Kavuklu to continue telling of the event he has experienced:

Piçekâr:

- (...)Do you have a problem?
- Dear Sir, who are you?
- Where do you come from and where do you go?
- Are your mother and father alive?
- What is your name?
- How are you?
- So then?
- Oh, my God! What did you do then?

Piçekâr serves as a kind of on-stage director who sets action in motion and helps the second player, the clown, interpret the meaning of the action. Like Prospero in the *Tempest*, he instigates and shapes the action, while others must live through its consequences.

Piçekâr carries a hat of four colours, a large coat called *cübbe*, which is split in front and furnished with fur, trousers of the same colour as the coat that narrow in at the knee level, a shirt without collar and leather slippers called '*çedik*' (Türkmen, 1991, pp. 24-25). He always carries in his hand a stick called '*pastav*' or '*şakrak*' (the wooden sword), which is used as an instrument of effect as a slapstick (Kudret, 1997, p. 113).

Kavuklu²²: Kavuklu speaks a pure and understandable Turkish. In spite of his ignorance, his common sense is very strong; thus, it is very difficult to

²¹ *Piçekâr* means 'competent' and 'head of the players'.

²² Kavuklu takes his name from his very big hat called *Kavuk*. He is created by Aktar Şükrü Efendi and Kôr Mehmet Efendi.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

overcome him. Kavuklu is a symbol of the moral conception and common sense of the common people. He does not hesitate to say whatever he thinks. Illiterate, fearless, brave, generous, sincere, seemingly indifferent but cunning indeed, he suffers from poverty and has no occupation. To earn money, he has to do things that he hates. He has difficulty in understanding the intrigues that take place around him. He hates lies and hypocrisy, and remains realistic. To him, the dream and the illusion have no use. He does not know how to act in different situations.

Kavuklu is the owner of all the comical elements and aspects. To act in this role requires creativity in playing. The player has a limitless freedom in this role, in which he has to present all his abilities with words, mimics, gestures and movements. In a sense, the fate of the play depends on the success of Kavuklu. As the second actor, he is the main comic actor of *Ortaoyunu*. He does not leave the stage until the end of the representation. It is through him that the comical funny aspects of the other characters appear. He is in charge of making the pun which has nothing to do with the subject of the play. He plays the ignoramus, but his guile is his most effective weapon to reveal the deceitfulness of Pişekâr. Kavuklu, as an impolite type and blunderer, always converses with the other characters, and gets into quarrels with them. The accidents and deformations of the language are mainly caused by him; he does not hear, nor listen to the others, or he pretends not to listen to them. Also, he does not understand or is late to understand (Türkmen, 1991, pp. 30-32).

There are many accidents and deformations of language in all of the plays. For example:

Pretension not to understand: Here, there is pretension not to understand the uttered word and to return it in the same way as it is to the one who really says it.

Pişekar hints that Kavuklu is like a dog, saying: He becomes loyal like a dog upon seeing the money. Kavuklu, in his repartee, says to return the word 'dog' to Pişekar: My brother considers me to be what he is.

Pretension to understand: In an effort to appear as a significant and important person, Kavuklu pretends to have understood a statement that he indeed does not understand.

Pişekar: It is a duty of humankind to help someone, a friend, anyone you meet anywhere and everybody you know or do not know. Charity can be given as an example to this duty.

Kavuklu: Now, should I say 'amen'? (Pazarcılar)

He wears a lobbed hat, a red and large dress split on the front called *cübbe* and a pair of trousers that are rather wide and shrunk in knees and slippers.

Zenne (The Woman): There are nearly all sorts of women in *Ortaoyunu*: of any age, of any social class and of any temperament. In the jargon of *Ortaoyunu*, Zenne is called '*Gaco*', and those who are black are called '*Kayarto*' (Emeksiz, 2001, p. 96). They are always teased by Kavuklu because of their physical

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu

appearance. They are the feminine types of the representation. The roles of Zenne are held by the men who have specialized in the feminine roles (Kudret, 1997, pp. 117-118). Zenne is the centre of interest of the representation. She appears as a wife, mistress or prostitute. She becomes a wife or a sister for Pişekâr or Kavuklu, and runs into love or money affairs with the other characters (Türkmen, 1991, pp. 36-37).

From one representation to another, the persons of Zenne offer different aspects: in plays from the anonymous popular histories, they are wise, beautiful and romantic and enter the scene after the dialogue, accompanied by an Arabic woman and an old mother. It may also happen that they enter the scene before Kavuklu.

In the plays of intrigue, they are beautiful, young and pretty. They always have a procurer, who is Matiz (The Drunkard). They are intelligent and especially capable of saving themselves from difficult situations. In some plays, the feminine types appropriate for the place in which the action takes place are represented in an exact, meticulous and accurate way.

The costumes of Zenne are also varied. It consists of a *yaşmak* and a large coat with sleeves called a *levy ferace*²³. The *yaşmak*²⁴ is made up of a very thin tissue, but the *ferace* is made of the brilliant tissue-matt in all kinds of colours. The costume may change shape according to the fashion of the time and every actor can use supplementary accessories as he likes.

Çelebi: Heir of a fortune from his noble relatives, he is rich, noble and well-grown; he is also a gentle, elegant and dandified man. He is a type of ‘*mahdûm*’ (the man who is served) (Emeksiz, 2001, p. 64). He speaks the Turkish of Istanbul. His origin goes back to the seventeenth century. He is generally presented as ‘*zampara*’²⁵. In certain plays, he is presented under various types (p. 64). For example, he is a modest man, a customer and a secretary. He plays the roles of lovers (Türkmen, 1991, pp. 40-41). From one play to another, he appears under various names: ‘Rezzakîzâde Tarçın Çelebi’, ‘Üsküdarlı Gelenbevîzâde Fatin Bey’. From time to time, he works as an employee at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He enters the scene, reading a poem or singing a small part of a song. He is representative of a part of the youth of the nineteenth century: heirs, dilettantes and seducers.

Çelebi has a green frock coat, a pair of dark blue trousers, a white waistcoat with a wide crossed collar, a satin shawl, a shelled *paletot*, a *fes* on his head and a stick in his hand (pp. 40-41).

Those Istanbul speakers with physical, behavioural, or class differences form a subgroup:

²³ *Ferace* is a kind of dress worn by women. It covers the whole body. Women wear this dress outside.

²⁴ *Yaşmak* is a head-cover worn by women to cover their heads.

²⁵ This word is used to mean the one who runs after girls or women.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu

Cüce or **Kambur** (Dwarf or Hunchbacked): Dwarf enters the scene just after Kavuklu. He is either the son or the neighbour of Kavuklu and an extra character who does not remain on the stage for very long. He wears the same suit as Kavuklu. But he ridicules Kavuklu, wearing a big oblique hat and a belt up to his breast (Kudret, 1997, p. 121).

These two types do not have much importance for the play. Their presence near Kavuklu as crowd-artists has become a tradition. However, there is no derision of their mental disabilities and physical defects.

Külhanbeyi (Rowdy): He is a firefighter who wants to be a blusterer. Entering the scene, he reads short poems called *mânî*. He does this only as the fancy takes him. Kavuklu has difficulty in understanding the jargon of Külhanbeyi. It looks as if Külhanbeyi speaks a language which is never discerned. He always has the nickname for ‘Çatanoz Salih’, or ‘Yanbastı Ali’. He is either already drunk or in the process of drinking to become drunk. To break glasses or to bandage his wounded hand is a sign of glory for him in front of the others. As somebody compliments on him, he has the talent to speak as ‘Çelebi’.

He wears a jacket, a *fes* on which there is a silk scarf, a pair of French half-trousers, low-fronted shoes with ovoid heels, a band of Tripoli silk, a French shirt with an open collar which wrap the stomach and a small jacket in the neck (p. 120).

Denyo (Naive): He enters the scene with the figures of Hacivat and Karagöz in his hand and pulling a scrap of wood bound by a rope. From time to time he carries a lantern. Born and bred in a district of Istanbul, which is ill-reputed, bad, shameless, impertinent and impolite; he takes advantage of the feelings of pity and of the indulgence of the inhabitants. In all the plays, he irritates Kavuklu but it is Kavuklu himself who is shamed and disapproved by everybody every time he wants to beat Denyo. He is the caricature of sick people in the society.

He wears a pair of trousers rather wide and attached to the neck by a rope, a *fes* pale in front and partly torn and drags a wooden wheelchair behind him. There is a shoe on one of his feet and a wooden clog in the other (Türkmen, 1991, p. 49).

8. Turks From Outside of Istanbul

Kayserili (the Man of Kayseri²⁶): Cunning, impertinent and talented, Kayserili is always a merchant or a grocer. He speaks the dialect of his native country, Kayseri. His nicknames are ‘Mayisoğlu’, ‘Zübüroğlu Mahmut’ and ‘Hacı Yorgioğlu Bodosaki Narcisidis’. He enters the scene by dancing with two wooden spoons in his hand. He forces Kavuklu to accompany him in the dance. He wears a leotard and a striped shirt, a belt of bands of fabric around his waist, a *fes* surrounded with a decorated fabric on his head, embroidered socks of wool and leather shoes (pp. 45-46).

²⁶ Kayseri is a city that is located in the central part of Turkey.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

Hirbo (Anatolian): Being called Anatolian, Hirbo represents the Anatolian villager. This type of person is characterized by his naivety and his villager's state of mind. His profession changes very often: a salesman of yoghurt, dough, and crepes (pancake), a shoemaker or a circumciser. He is given the names of 'Mehmet', 'Memiş', 'Himmet', 'Veli Dayı', 'Dursun Ağa' and 'Abdi Ağa'. In the present documents, we do not find a suit or costume appropriate to Hirbo. However, we can guess that he is wearing an Anatolian suit (p. 48).

Lâz (the man of Black Sea): He is called by the same name in all plays: 'Hayrettin'. He enters the scene performing a dance called *horon* and playing the *kemençe*, both of which are peculiar to his native region, the Black Sea. He makes Kavuklu dance. Talkative, nice and dashing, Laz has an accent of the Black Sea region. He gets excited very quickly. He wears a pair of trousers which are tight from knees to ankles and which become narrow at the level of the stomach and the thighs, a shirt without collar, a court black dolman, a hat made up from black felt, and slippers (pp. 54-55).

9. Foreigners Who Are Non-Muslim

Balama (Greek): In the jargon of *Ortaoyunu*, Greek and French are called *Balama*. The *Balma* enters the scene, dancing the polka. Having danced alone, he is accompanied by Kavuklu. He is often a doctor and rarely a pharmacist. He appears under various names: 'Dr. Kiryako', 'Hristaki Efendi', 'Dr. Krippiyaz', 'Niko' and 'Nikoâki'. He very often uses Greek words. As he speaks in an incomprehensible way, it is difficult for him to get into a proper debate with Kavuklu. In almost all plays, he is beaten by Kavuklu in their arguments. He mixes Greek and French words. It is, however, Pişekâr who has to make the translation of the Greek retorts. His costume consists of a sort of tail coat made of some coloured materials, a white and starched shirt with a decorated collar, a red and long tie, a very high hat, sharp, low-fronted shoes, gaiters, square-patterned trousers and a stick for the hand (pp. 57-58).

Yahudi (Jew): The Jew enters the scene silently with the Torah in his hand, reading it, blowing and rocking on his legs. He is a seller of chest of drawers, a silversmith and a moneychanger. He is differently called: 'Azarya Efendi', 'Mişon Efendi', 'Samuel Efendi', 'Buhuraci Efendi' or 'Cud'. He is avaricious and always converses with Kavuklu and Pişekâr. He is wrongly beaten by Kavuklu, rolls down on the ground and squalls. His costume is composed of an *alvar* and a large dress in cloth split on the front called *cübbe* (pp. 41-42).

It is also necessary to add that in *Ortaoyunu* there are some other supplementary types such as a Tatar, a Kürt, a Circassian, an Armenian, a Zeybek etc. All these types, the characteristic lines of whom I have tried to give in this essay, are chosen from ordinary people, not from the nobility.

10. Foreigners Who Are Muslim

Arap (Arabic): He is called the white Arabic or Gazel. He becomes, alternately from one play to another, 'Hacı Baba', 'Hacı Fıfış' and 'Hacı Fettah Efendi'. He enters the scene by singing a monotonous song, which is 'yâlelli'. He is

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: *Ortaoyunu*

always bested by Kavuklu. As he speaks an incomprehensible Turkish, he always has problems with Kavuklu, who does his best to understand him. From time to time, when the Arabian speaks in his own language, Kavuklu thinks he is praying and says 'Amen'. His costume is very simple: a rather wide dress called *entari*, an ample dress in cloth split on the front called *cübbe* and a scarf called *kefiyye* on his head. The width of the dress is diminished by a band of cloth (pp. 58-59).

Acem (The Persian): He is always presented as a trader, but what he sells varies very often. He enters the scene by reading Persian poems. In these plays, he is called 'Gaffar Ağa', 'Mirzâ Dâniş Ağa', 'Hüseyn Kehvâri Tebrizi', 'Ali Ekber Ağa'. This character perfectly illustrates the influence of Persian literature on Turkish literature and poetry. Acem is a master of exaggeration. It is very difficult to understand what he wants to say because of his dialect. He is both avaricious and generous. He wears a *şalvar*, a shirt which stretches down to his knees, a belt of the bands of cloth, a hat covered with fur, leather boots and a shawl on the shoulder. He carries a rosary in his hand (pp. 50-51).

Arnavut (The Albanian): He is one of the main types. He is a merchant of cattle or gardener and is called 'Bayram Ağa'. Most of the time he is calm and wise, but when he gets angry, he immediately draws his pistol. Although he speaks in an exaggerated way, he is nice and sympathetic. As long as he is not irritated, he tries hard to speak politely. He is ignorant but sincere. He always delivers a speech to Kavuklu on business ethics. He wears a pair of rather wide embroidered trousers shrunk in ankles, a shirt without a collar, a dolman without sleeves and a red belt of the bands of wide clothes around his body (pp. 38-39).

Rumelili (The man of Roumelia): He is called an immigrant of the Balkans and enters the scene by singing the airs of Roumelia. Generally, he is a wrestler and from time to time, a courier. He boasts of his victories in contests but in fact, he always loses them. He has a shirt without collar, a rather wide embroidered trousers shrunk in ankles, a dolman without sleeves, a belt of the strips of wide cloths on the dolman and slippers (pp. 43-44).

The problems that arise from the juncture of cultures between the Ottomans/Turks and minorities living in Istanbul appear in *Ortaoyunu*. Ottomans/Turks did not put a distance between the minorities and themselves; they never objected to them living to their own culture or sharing the same culture with them. The minority characters and the comic elements that emerged when they interacted were introduced in *Ortaoyunu* just for the sake of the play, not mockery. There was a broad sense of tolerance towards such differences.

The minorities within the territories of the Ottoman Empire were sound and safe and were left free to decide whether to use their own language or speak Turkish in this or that way. The Ottoman Empire did not exert any pressure whatsoever on the minorities to be Turk or converted into Islam, even during at the peak of its power. Therefore, these minorities maintained their presence in the Ottoman

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu

Empire in great freedom. As Turks were mainly interested in military and administrative affairs, art and trade were often in the hands of the minorities.

The Ottoman Empire entered a process of westernization in 1839, thereafter *Ortaoyunu* found itself in competition with European theatre. As a result of this rivalry, *Ortaoyunu* reached the highest point of its popularity in the middle of the nineteenth century, a period simultaneous with the fall of this genre. The factors that led to the fall of *Ortaoyunu* can be listed as follows: the old masters of *Ortaoyunu* had died one by one and it was difficult to recruit the next generation of actors; *Ortaoyunu* failed to keep up with the time as regards to content and theme; it was viewed as a primitive art form in comparison to the European theatre; and finally, it failed to compete with the technological and artistic developments in theatre and television in later years (Kudret, 1997, p. 126).

Ortaoyunu exposes our past. I am of the strong opinion that we each should do our best to secure the continuity of this cultural inheritance. Today we have the chance to see *Ortaoyunu* at some theatres in Istanbul, on TV, at festivals and at private celebrations during Ramadan, a religious month in Islam during which adults fast all day. Our mission should be to transfer it to the future generations and prevent it from disappearing or being forgotten in the generations to come.

The tradition of *Ortaoyunu* is hardly alive today. However, Haldun Taner, Aziz Nesin, Turgut Özakman, Ferhan Şensoy and Sadık Şendil should be credited with contributing much to the preservation and survival of *Ortaoyunu* through the plays they have written. We really owe a lot to them in this respect.

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AN IMPROVISED EXAMPLE IN TRADITIONAL TURKISH THEATRE: ORTAOYUNU

Abstract: Ortaoyunu is one of the main elements of the traditional Turkish theatre, which contains improvisation, music, dances, and songs performed in a circular or ellipse ground surrounded by the audience. Especially in 1860s in İstanbul, it received great attention, as it was performed in open air in summers and close in winters. A folding screen which is called “yenidünya”, and a two-layered cage called “dükkan” were used as décors. The leading characters are Kavuklu and Pişekâr. Each play reflects the multicultural pattern of the Ottoman Empire. The

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu

characteristics of the individuals coming from different occupations, environments, cultures, and nations are represented. Costumes reveal the social classes and characteristics of the individuals. Plays are divided into prologue, conversation, act, and resolution. Laughter concentrates on tongue slips and errors. Ortaoyunu, which is established completely in the 19th century, is an “open” and “exhibitive” type of comedy. Our aim in this paper is to introduce ortaoyunu with its structural, thematic, and semantic elements.

Keywords: Traditional Turkish Theatre, Kavuklu, Ortaoyunu, Pişekâr.

A. ER, An Improvised Example in Traditional Turkish Theatre: Ortaoyunu