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An Istanbul hotel brims with an infusion of humanity, tradition and changing times

By Leyla Gulen

Sinan Ünel's "Pera Palas" weaves a dense tapestry of life's conflicting threads - tradition and progress - and explores how their shift can rock society so furiously that people's identity can come unraveled in an instant.

The play is set at the 114-year-old Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul, Turkey - the lodging place for such icons as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Agatha Christie.

In this work, one of the hotel's guest rooms becomes the intersection of cultures, history and personal struggles while simultaneously meshing together three time periods ranging from 1918 to 1994. Adding more vigor to a whirlwind plot, 10 actors are playing 27 roles encompassing Turks, Brits and Americans.

"We meet these characters as young, idealistic people and see how time effects them," says Michael Michetti, the play's director. "How living life smacks right in the face of idealism, and we later see them as disillusioned and embittered by it."

"Pera Palas" also serves as a quasi-autobiography for the 47-year-old playwright, who first produced, what he regards as his most successful work, six years ago at New York's The Lark Theatre Company.

"The play is largely a contrast between a western outlook on life and a Turkish outlook," says Ünel. "I personally feel there was a lot lost when Turkey changed and I think the culture is still evolving.

"It's depressing to see the whole materialism, ambition, Botox and all that crap. The way of thinking has changed. Money is the important thing," he continued.

Born to an American mother and a Turkish father, Ünel moved to Istanbul when he was a year old before returning to the states to attend college as an undergraduate at the University of Kansas and Boston University, where he received his M.A. in playwriting.

Ünel, who has since settled in Massachusetts near his sister, says he visits Turkey every couple of years. "I think there's a lot still there and I think Turks have a sense of history and respect for history, respect for friendships and family and humanity where success doesn't always trump values."

Through the central character of Murat, Ünel says the play reflects two aspects of his own life and brings them together. "He's an expatriate and gay coming to terms with his family," said Ünel.

Actor Seamus Dever, who's playing the role of Murat, says learning the role of a man half steeped in American and Turkish traditions, posed a challenge. "I've had to temper a lot of my normal ideas of observing [Turkish] people because I'm playing someone who's been in the United States for nine years. A lot of my mannerisms are somewhere in between," says Dever.

In fact, all the actors during their five weeks of rehearsals did exhaustive dramaturgical research. "We brought a lot of Turkish friends in to help talk to us about Turkish culture, take notes when we're doing something inappropriately," says actress Jeanie Hackett, co-