

Friday, August 26, 2005

# The real Turkey, as if in a dream

By DON SHIRLEY  
Times Staff Writer

When the San Francisco-born but Turkish-reared playwright Sinan Ünel attended the University of Kansas, he found that most Americans knew very little about Turkey.

The predominantly Islamic country's proximity to many Arab states makes people "think it's an Arab country," he says. "It's like confusing America with Mexico because they're both Christian countries in the same area."

Ünel's "Pera Palas" is likely to enlighten its audience about Turkey and the country's high-wire act of balancing European and Islamic influences.

In a well-received production at the Theatre @ Boston Court in Pasadena, "Pera Palas" interweaves three stories from disparate periods of Turkey's relationship with the West: 1918-24, 1952-53 and 1994. Part of each story is set in a room at Istanbul's Pera Palas hotel.

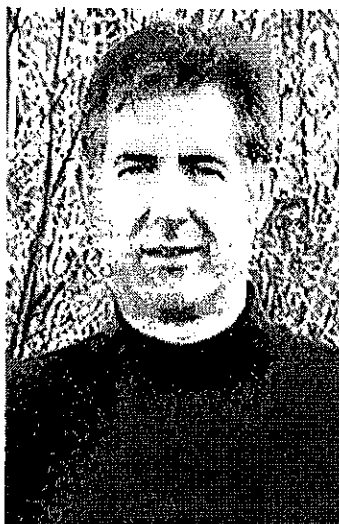
The ideas for the three stories arrived in Ünel's brain while he was hospitalized for an emergency appendectomy. "I don't know if it was the morphine," he says.

The play isn't hard to follow, as long as theatergoers understand that the three stories periodically interrupt each other. But there is an aspect that might look slightly drug-induced — some of the characters are played by actors of the other gender, and most of the actors play more than one role.

"The play is about identity and its changeability — it's extremely changeable in my view," Ünel explains. And though he acknowledges that the gender-swapping can be strange, "the challenge is to make it real, not campy."

Ünel's own identity has always felt divided. "In Turkey, I felt American. Here, I felt Turkish," he says. "There's always a feeling that I'm never home."

In the play, one character is, like Ünel, the son of an American mother and a Turkish father who lives in the U.S. but returns to Turkey with his male lover in the '90s. Yet there are differences between the character and the writer. Ünel's parents lived in



JOHN ANDERT

**PLAYWRIGHT:** Sinan Ünel says "Pera Palas" is about identity and its changeability."

## 'Pera Palas'

**Where:** Theatre @ Boston Court, 70 N. Mentor, Pasadena

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

**Ends:** Sept. 4

**Price:** \$30

**Contact:** (626) 683-6883;  
[www.bostoncourt.org](http://www.bostoncourt.org)

southern Turkey, not Istanbul. They met at the University of Michigan, not in Turkey. The fictional character is a photographer, not a playwright.

Still, Ünel spent time in Istanbul when he was attending boarding school. He returns to Turkey for visits every couple of years — including a trip this year for research on another play. His mother lives in Mersin in southern Turkey; his father died five years ago.

Contemporary Turkey, Ünel says, has "two roads veering away from each other," along similar lines to what he perceives in the U.S. "A gay presence has made itself quite visible in the last three or four years," while at the same time Islamic fundamentalism has spread. "We never saw women in veils as I grew up. Now they're

all over the place."

Ünel says he wasn't thinking in political terms when he wrote the play in 1995. But political events have increased interest in the play. "Every time something happens," he says, "the play resonates in a different way."

Jeanie Hackett, one of the artistic directors of the North Hollywood-based Antaeus Company, became excited by the play at what she calls a "very minimally staged" 1998 production in New York. She acknowledges that one of its attractions was a role — actually, two roles — that she wanted to play. But she had other reasons. "It's about how change and loss can rip us apart" — a theme that especially touched her because her fiancé had recently died of cancer.

Hackett organized a reading at the Antaeus theater in 2002, but "it didn't work. It was a mess." With actors playing more than one role apiece, "nobody knew who was who. It's the worst play on the planet for a sit-down reading."

A more fully staged workshop in 2003 was more successful. "Turkish couples came and left in tears," she says.

This year's staging is a co-production between Antaeus and the Theatre @ Boston Court, directed by Michael Michetti, a Boston Court artistic director. Hackett is playing the two roles that interested her, but all of the parts are double cast.

Ünel, who has lived in Provincetown, Mass., since 1984, attended four rehearsals in Pasadena. "We all wanted to pick his brain," Hackett says. "But you had to ask. He wasn't going to impose anything on anybody."

While he was in Pasadena, the playwright turned 47. He was amazed when, within 10 minutes of filling out a seemingly routine form that asked for his birthday, the company walked in with a cake that had his name on it and sang "Happy Birthday."

It was a better reception than he got when he stayed at the actual Pera Palas hotel for the first time, after the play had been produced. The hotel management had heard about the play and offered him a free stay of one night. But "they didn't give me an especially nice room," he says. "It's not a great hotel."