

# Independant stages in Istanbul

vendredi 13 mai 2011, par [Hatice Utkan](#)

**Now is the time to fight, shout, curse, play, run and jump on stage : independent venues are taking the theater scene in Istanbul. Like in every city in the world, independent theatres play an important role in social and cultural life. They do not hesitate to criticize society, to curse on stage, or to question government decisions. And, these venues are not only home to actors and playwrights, but also places for contemplating existential issues and dealing with contemporary urban topics like identity, migration, politics and religion.**

In Istanbul, most art venues are run by actors. This is the case with places such as *Kumbaracı50*, *Mekan Artı* and *İkinci Kat*, the owners of which gathered on March 27 to discuss how to increase the interest in contemporary theater in Istanbul. The meeting became the start of a movement to push this issue, called *Alternatif Tiyatro Mekanları Ortak Girişimi* (Alternative Theater Venues Joint Endeavour). Together, independent theaters will now work to continue performing and keeping their venues alive.

“For long, people had been complaining about the lack of alternative theater venues in Istanbul,” says Nilgün Kurt, spokesperson for Altıdansonra Tiyatro, which in 2009 opened *Kumbaracı50*, one of the most active alternative theater venues in the city. Their opening represented an important step for those interested in new and independent stage production. “It’s fair to say that *Kumbaracı50* not only creates new shows, but also new content. We prefer to choose novel and original scripts for our performances,” says Kurt. *Kumbaracı50* brings to the stage the problems of people in large cities and how they become part of the consumption society. An example is *Tilt*, one of their most popular plays, which tells five different stories of chaotic and fast city life, where people give up many things for their dreams.

Another independent actor is *Sıfırnoktaiki*, opened in 2007 and run by a small group of actors under the art directorship of Sami Berat Marçalı and Eyüp Emre Uçaray. The venue recently opened an additional section called *İkinci Kat* (Second Floor). Berat Marçalı, who besides his position as art director also is an actor, is happy about how the place is evolving : “Since our beginning in 2009, the main aim has been to perform plays which are dynamic and contemporary.” On their repertoire, *Sıfırnoktaiki* has had plays by names like Philip Ridley and Joe Penhall. Ridley’s play, which was staged under the title *The Fastest Clock In The Universe*, focuses on the the process of getting old, new beginnings and how human body is resisting time. Penhall’s work, as staged by *Sıfırnoktaiki*, is a social drama. Ray, a young schizophrenic, is being sent out into the world with only a jar of pills which he loath to take. He manages to leave the asylum and is taken in by his brother Pete, a diligent and well-meaning restaurant owner.

## A lack of scripts written in Turkish

At the beginning, finding Turkish scripts which reflected their concerns was a challenge for *Sıfırnoktaiki*. Berat Marçalı blames this on an overall lack of scripts written in Turkish, but also on the fact that young playwrights lack enough courage to share their works with the public. “Because of that, we choose to stage translated scripts. We prefer dynamic scripts from writers like Mark Ravenhill and Philip Ridley over texts that don’t meet our expectations.” But, the group has not given up on Turkish playwrights. Last fall, they worked with Istanbul-based actor and playwright Nihan Celkan to stage the play *17.31*, which focuses on the current global crisis and how it has affected people from all walks of life. The play suggests that the crisis has melted people’s lives through the perception of corporate business life. Violence has been normalized, the concept of happiness has been changed, and the entire ethical approach in our world has been changed.

Indeed, every opening of new independent spaces is a big contribution to the larger Turkish theater scene. Playwright Yeşim Özsoy Gülan from *Biz V° Diğer Şeyler Topluluğu* (The Society of Us and Other Things) and Galataperform : “In Turkey, the government happily supports those platforms that are under its control, so all money and support goes to state theaters. On these stages, there are many potential obstacles to freedom of thought. That’s why independent theaters are so valuable.” But, recent years have seen promising developments. Gülan : “Galataperform started in 2003 and since then, we’ve seen an upsurge in these kinds of platforms and groups.” Also, independent theaters are an important outlet for actors and playwrights. “With us, they both have the opportunity to express themselves freely and to earn money,” says Gülan. “That triggers the art of making theater.”

Being an independent art venue is not easy. Despite attempts to keep both themselves and the larger scene alive, staying open is a hard task. Nilgün Kurt : “Everything depends on financing. We often have a small budget to work with, and creating good drama can be hard in such conditions. PR is another challenge, since we have to advertise all our plays in the media. The very crucial thing is reaching an audience.” Struggling hard, the independent venues nevertheless maintain great creative value. “I think that being an independent venue is a positive thing,” concludes Berat Marçalı. “It gives us the chance to produce performances that we believe in and care about, which is important for us. For us, that’s a chance to prove our words in art.”

[Article publié sur Mashallahnews.com](http://Mashallahnews.com)

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## Sources

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