

AFİFE: PRESS RESPONSES

Afife Theater & Zorlu PSM (2024)

Written by: Selin Cankı Ceylan **Directed by:** Serdar Biliş

MİLLİYET

Asu Maro

LINK: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/asu-mar/alev-almis-bir-aktrisin-portresi-7190594>

"A Portrait of an Actress on Fire"

The early 1920's, Istanbul: a theater company. They are staging *Twelfth Night*, with Eliza Binemeciyan in the lead role. It is a time when theater is forbidden to Turkish and Muslim women. However, for the first time, Muslim girls are admitted to the Darülbedayi theater courses, one of whom is Afife. On a day when Eliza is unable to perform, fate smiles upon Afife, who knows the entire play by heart, and she finds herself on stage. "A Muslim, a Turk, a woman. The audacity!"

Her family turns their back on her, and she is cast out of her home. The moment she is spotted by the police, an arrest warrant is issued. Afife, once celebrated on the brightly lit stage, now finds herself hiding in the shadows, forced to flee each night. Her life oscillates between the stage and the police station, but it all comes to an end with an order from the troupe, marking the tragic conclusion of her theatrical career.

Demet Evgar, upon hearing the story, immediately thought, "I must do something" and brought the play "Afife," which she had dreamed about for 20 years, to the stage at Zorlu PSM. She collaborated with director Serdar Biliş on the project design, and the flowing script was written by Selin Cankı Ceylan. Instead of presenting Afife's life as a biography,

they placed it within a fictional theater company, which I think was a very fitting choice. The characters are real, some events are fictional, but the walls that fall upon a woman simply trying to exist are all too real.

I would like to begin by saying how important I find the telling of this story, especially in a time when women's lives are still being burned away. What's even more remarkable is that this story is told without playing on the audience's tears, without resorting to tricks that would make an already heavy life even heavier, while still maintaining its entertainment and enthusiasm. Serdar Biliş is a master director at creating a world by using different tools together. Because he often works with the same team, this results in harmonious collaborations. The stage and costume design once again showcase Gamze Kuş's magical touch, and the magic is completed with Cem Yilmazer's lighting. The multimedia usage is extremely impressive (Illusionist). The music is composed by Tuluğ Tırpan, with lyrics by İlgin Kopuz. The final song, "Küstün mü Sen?", is by Sezen Aksu. Once again, the movement design by Candaş Başı is highly successful and seamless.

And the performances... Demet Evgar is someone born to be on stage, with all of her qualities and the light she radiates. It is such a great privilege to watch her alongside an incomparable actor like Tilbe Saran in this play. Necip Memili delivers an incredibly nuanced performance, taking on multiple characters. Bedir Bedir is just as impressive, with a natural and pure presence. Bora Akkaş and İdil Sivritepe are two other brilliant stars of the main cast. The young cast includes Orkuncan İzan, Ekremcan Arslandağ, Bilge Çınar, Öyküsu Okur, Basma Seiba, Alize Çalık, Hande Yilmazer, and Dila Yağcı. I must also mention how much I loved Görkemli Maxim's stage and Atılğan Gümüş's outstanding drag queen performance.

I want to fit a lot into a limited space because "Afife" has become a play whose impact grows with time. It's rare for one to leave such large productions with this feeling. The Afife Theatre and Zorlu PSM production of "Afife" is a brilliant, carefully crafted play with

something to say, and I hope it continues for a long time. The final, where the spirit of Afife Jale sets the stage on fire 100 years later, is something I will never forget.

CUMHURİYET

Öznur Oğraş Çolak

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"We spoke with the director and cast about the play, which continues to meet its audience in the new season."

The play, directed by Serdar Biliş, is written by Selin Cankı Ceylan. The cast features Ayta Sözeri, Tilbe Saran, Necip Memili, Bora Akkaş, İdil Sivritepe, Bedir Bedir, Orkuncan İzan, Bilge Çınar, Kerem Arslanoğlu, Öyküsu Okur, and Besma Seiba. The music for the play is composed by Tuluğ Tırpan, with lyrics by Sezen Aksu. Stage and costume design is by Gamze Kuş, and lighting design is by Cem Yilmazer.

We spoke with Biliş about the process of bringing the play to the stage, and with the actors about what it's like to perform in a play that highlights the life of Afife Jale, a pivotal figure in Turkish theater history.

"A SOUL THAT CHOSE TO EXIST"

Portraying a character as significant as Afife Jale on stage is a beautiful choice, but it is also risky and delicate. What did you focus on during the staging process, and where did you face challenges?

Serdar Biliş: From the very beginning of this long journey, we were clear that this would be a story about "being Afife." Beyond the reality that a detailed biographical work

couldn't be made based on the existing information, there was also the risk of focusing more on Afife's tragic end rather than the extraordinary things she accomplished as a young woman. However, we wanted to celebrate her Dionysian energy and unyielding existence, spreading the inspiration we gained from her to the audience in the theater. She was a soul that chose to exist, not disappear, and the theater stage, to which she was deeply connected with love, had to be at the heart of the play. Of course, it was also essential to pay tribute to the theater masters of that period. Unfortunately, we do not know, remember, or preserve the names of those Armenian masters. Let us send our regards to them from here as well.

It was a dizzying era—World War I, Istanbul under occupation, the ideals of independence, the bustling streets of the capital. All of these historical and sociological elements are factors that enrich and deepen the story.

THE VITALITY OF THEATER

Why Demet Evgar for the role of Afife Jale?

Demet is an incredibly hardworking, disciplined, and unique actor who pours her entire being into her role. From the very beginning of the process, we established a kind of "bird language" between us. (Laughs) In other words, we were in sync, heart to heart.

Could you share the process of staging and preparing the play?

Theater is a collaborative effort. It's not something you can do by retreating to your corner like a painter or a novelist—although, sometimes, I do wish I could! (Laughs) Joking aside, the director's job is to merge all the creative energy gathered at the beginning of the story into one cohesive vision. But the magic of theater lies in the team. A fleeting moment on stage might require hours of rehearsal, calculations, and solutions to make it flow like water. The spiritual source of this labor is our passion, while the practical source is largely built on persuasion—persuasion, and more persuasion.

Theater, from its very origins, has been a multidisciplinary form. Music, dance, and spoken word have always been intertwined. In ancient Greek theater, actors portraying gods were lowered from above using the technology of their time. With the advent of electricity, control over light and darkness began. Whereas large masks were once worn to be visible, today we can reveal intricate details to the audience with close-up lenses.

While all of these changes have occurred, the one constant in theater remains its vitality—the performer and the audience sharing the same air.

TİYATRO DERGİSİ

Robert Schild

LINK: <https://tiyatrodergisi.com.tr/yeni-tiyatro-sezonu-icin-umut-verici-bir-yapim-afife/>

A Promising Production for the New Theatre Season: AFİFE

Beyond simply reading the life stories of those we admire, there is something profoundly engaging when a skilled writer enriches these narratives with imaginative yet respectful fictional elements. For theater enthusiasts, an exemplary work in this regard is *The Summer Guest* by British author Alison Anderson, a novel centered around Anton Chekhov. With the late 19th-century Russian socio-political backdrop vividly portrayed, the book transports readers into the personal and artistic evolution of this iconic writer as if we are living through it alongside him.

This same finesse is evident in *AFİFE*, a play brought to life by seasoned director Serdar Biliş and young writer Selin Cankı Ceylan, whose collaboration feels like a masterstroke. Set in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, the production invites us into the tumultuous artistic journey of Afife Jale, one of the revolutionary pioneers of Turkish theater. Framed within a fictional theater troupe featuring both imagined and real-life

stage companions, the play unfolds against the backdrop of the era's oppressive social and political climate.

What makes *AFİFE* exceptional is that no single thematic “layer” dominates the production. Instead, we are treated to a multi-faceted narrative that avoids being pigeonholed. Clocking in at just under two hours without an intermission, this (semi-) grand production—“semi” because it consciously eschews ostentatious stage designs—cannot be neatly categorized as a musical, a documentary drama, or even a Brechtian *Lehrstück* (teaching play). And yet, it encompasses elements of all these forms: the exquisite, ear-pleasing score by Vienna-trained composer Tuluğ Tirpan (known for works like the *Alice* musical in 2019 and *Shakespeare in Love* in 2023); the precise choreography led by Candaş Baş, who worked with Biliş on his stunning *Twelfth Night* for İBBŞT in 2015; and the inspired contributions of long-time collaborators Gamze Kuş (set and costume design) and Cem Yilmazer (lighting). Together, these elements create a visually striking and emotionally stirring experience.

At its heart, the play delves into the profound struggles of Afife Jale, Turkey's first Muslim female theater actor. Despite her limited opportunities—her talents were tragically showcased in only a few productions—*AFİFE* shines a light on her remarkable defiance of the restrictive societal norms of her time. Through compelling scenes, the play vividly captures not only the suffocating moralistic barriers she faced but also the colorful and turbulent nightlife of late Ottoman Istanbul.

But *AFİFE* is more than a historical drama—it is a powerful call to action. Its closing moments echo beyond the stage, resonating with urgency in today's world. With its implicit parallels to the oppression faced by women in countries like Iran and Afghanistan—and its cautionary undertones for societies at risk of regressing—it boldly demands, “Abandon these medieval mindsets. Grant your women the freedom to think and act!” This message rings loud and clear, particularly in Afife's poignant and defiant final lines, ensuring the play lingers in the hearts of its audience long after the curtain falls.

***"To be a woman in this world,
if you want to exist, you must burn.
And as you burn, you must light the way for those who follow,
sacrificing yourself in the process."***

What, then, can we say about the actors who inhabit this layered stage, bringing it to life? Having lived away from Turkey for quite some time, I was previously familiar with Necip Memili primarily from his work in cinema and TV dramas. This play, however, marked my first encounter with him in theater—and what an encounter it was! *AFİFE* is only his second theatrical endeavor in Istanbul, yet he delivers a performance so compelling that one cannot help but imagine him becoming an indispensable collaborator for Serdar Biliş in the future. Memili plays four smaller roles, but it is in his portrayal of the troupe's owner, Mardiros* Minakyan, and the ruthless Commissioner that he truly shines, delivering extraordinary and nuanced performances. One might say, "A star is born!"

Tilbe Saran, on the other hand, needs no such introduction. I first took note of her in 1997 when she co-founded Aksanat Production Theatre with Işıl Kasapoğlu and Cüneyt Türel—a collaboration that caught my eye (and admiration) almost immediately. Over the years, she has earned the well-deserved title of *La Grande Dame du Théâtre Turc* ("The Great Lady of Turkish Theater"). In *AFİFE*, Saran takes on four smaller roles, but it is her portrayal of Kınar Hanım that truly anchors the play's interplay of reality and fiction.

Kınar Sivacıyan, for those unfamiliar, was one of the early pioneers of Ottoman theater. Together with Zabel Binemeciyen and Sırapyon Hekimyan, she co-founded the Yeni Osmanlı Tiyatrosu while Asiye was still a child and later became one of the first performers of Darülbedayi. As Kınar Hanım, Tilbe Saran steps into the shoes of a figure 26 years Afife's senior, masterfully embodying both her character's wisdom and her protective mentorship of her younger colleague—onstage and, perhaps, in real life as well. Speaking with a striking Armenian accent (a detail for which we owe gratitude to writer Bercuhi Berberyan), Saran's performance is a testament to her unparalleled talent and dedication.

And then... Demet Evgar!

Like her elder colleague Tilbe Saran, she also hails from the (Yıldız) Kenter school of acting. Since her theatrical debut in *Gece Mevsimi* in 2006, I've had the privilege of watching all her subsequent plays, and I can confidently say that her trajectory has been nothing but upward.

In *AFİFE*, we first see her in the role of Eliza—daughter of the legendary Armenian actor Zabel Binemecyan. It is during Eliza's absence abroad that Afife steps onto the stage for the first time in front of a mixed-gender audience and earns resounding applause. But after that, the stage belongs entirely to Demet Evgar. She portrays Afife with a sincerity that brings every phase of the character's tumultuous life to life: her self-education, her rise to the stage, the banning of her performances, and her ultimate descent into despair.

Evgar's performance is made even more vivid by the use of a live camerawoman who frequently captures her expressions up close, projecting them onto the large stage screen. This innovation creates an intimacy that underscores the emotional depth of her portrayal.

About her, one cannot simply say, "A star is born." Instead, one might declare, "A small star has turned into a giant!" As the 2024/25 season begins, it's easy to predict the many awards that await her for this transformative performance.

Back in 2015, after watching *Twelfth Night* directed by Serdar Biliş at Harbiye Muhsin Ertuğrul Stage, I offered this evaluation in our magazine:

"Of course, without the material resources provided by a state-funded theater—such as space, equipment, and effects—such a rich visual spectacle could not have been created. Yet all this 'hardware' would have remained idle without the presence of a 'software'—a talent well-versed in the art of theater."

Today, I'd like to conclude my reflections with the closing sentence of that review:

“With this production, so promising in every aspect for our theater, the season has begun on a high note—may it continue just as strongly!”

HÜRRİYET

Melis Yılmaz

LINK: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/hurriyet-cumartesi/afife-olmak-cesaret-etmek-demek-42559537>

"To be Afife means to be courageous."

‘Afife,’ one of the most eagerly awaited productions of the new season, has finally taken the stage.

This one-act play, inspired by the life of the legendary Afife Jale, features Demet Evgar in the titular role. To explore the story behind the production, we spoke with the distinguished theater artist Haldun Dormen, the play’s director Serdar Biliş, and journalist-author Osman Balcıgil, who has written a book about Afife Jale.

Afife Jale: A Trailblazer Who Redefined the Stage for Muslim Women

Afife Jale, a groundbreaking figure in Turkish theater, is renowned for being the first Muslim woman to perform on stage—a legacy that has left an indelible mark on the country’s theatrical history. Her life continues to inspire, with books written in her honor, plays staged to celebrate her story, and the prestigious Afife Theatre Awards bearing her name for decades.

This season, theater enthusiasts have eagerly awaited *Afife*, a new play starring Demet Evgar in the lead role. The production premiered last month and is set to continue

captivating audiences throughout the season. Director Serdar Biliş describes the period portrayed in the play as “a vibrant and complex world.”

To gain deeper insights into Afife Jale’s life and legacy, we spoke with the play’s director, Serdar Biliş; Osman Balcıgil, author of *The Woman Who Breathed Passion: Afife Jale*; and artist Haldun Dormen, the visionary behind the Afife Theatre Awards.

‘SHE SPARKED A REVOLUTION’

Haldun Dormen, Actor and Theater Legend

– Mr. Dormen, you initiated the Afife Theatre Awards and have often expressed how much Afife Jale means to you. What place does she hold in your life?

We share a strong bond, though I never met her (laughs). When I was about 12 or 13, I used to follow a magazine called *Curtain and Stage*. That’s where I read about the death of someone named Afife. As a theater-enthusiast child, I was deeply intrigued. That day, I told myself, “I must do something for this woman.” God granted me the chance, and I was able to start the Afife Awards.

Erhan Dumanlı, the former General Manager of Yapı Kredi Sigorta, made it all possible. Now, Yapı Kredi continues the tradition every year. The responsibility has since been passed to my former assistant, Murat Ovalı, who started this journey with me.

– What significance does Afife Jale hold for Turkish theater, in your opinion?

As you know, Muslim women were not allowed to take the stage, but Afife Jale defied that. She faced threats from time to time, but they couldn’t stop her. She wanted to perform, but obstacles stood in her way. Everyone spoke of her remarkable talent as an actress, yet her dreams remained unfulfilled. This struggle led her to substance abuse.

Later, she married composer Selahattin Pinar. He even wrote many songs for her, like “*Why Did I Fall for That Cruel Woman.*” They were deeply in love, but sadly, Afife couldn’t sustain her life due to her addiction.

In 1923, thanks to Atatürk, women were finally allowed to perform on stage. However, by then, Afife was no longer in a condition to embrace this freedom. Today, we try to honor her from afar, through the awards in her name.

– **She was a trailblazing woman of her time. Yet, her life was deeply tragic...**

Through my research, I’ve discovered that Afife Jale led an astonishing life. Just imagine what it meant for a Turkish woman to step onto the stage for the first time! Until then, no Muslim woman had ever performed in theater.

I believe some women used Armenian names to act on stage and stayed hidden, but Afife Jale stood boldly, using her real name. She sparked a revolution with her courage.

‘SHE REACHED FOR THE FORBIDDEN GARDEN OF HER DREAMS’

Serdar Biliş, Director

– **Being Afife means being brave.** This story, for me, is about the determination, ambition, and sorrow of trying to enter a world where you’re seen as an outsider. It’s about refusing to accept the limits imposed on you, stubbornly fighting to exist, venturing into dark paths just to let the jewel within you shine, and daring to risk being unloved. The Afife I envision is far more thorny, disruptive, and revolutionary than the later portrayal of her as a victim or martyr.

– **The period we’re addressing is a world both complex and vibrant.** The realities born from war paved the way for transformations in many social arenas, including the increased participation of women in the workforce and their visibility in daily life. These were significant shifts, and the role of Turkish-Muslim women stepping onto the stage became a widely debated and written-about issue during the nationalization process.

Unfortunately, breaking deeply entrenched prejudices and behavioral norms wasn't something that could happen overnight.

MİLLİYET

Efnan Atmaca

LINK: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/kultur-sanat/afife-olmak-cesaret-etmek-demek-7193575>

"Being Afife means daring to walk through the darkest paths and risking being unloved, all so that the jewel within you can shine."

This season's most anticipated production, *Afife*, raised its curtain early, anticipating the audience's eagerness. On stage, where Demet Evgar delivered a towering performance as Afife, Tilbe Saran, Necip Memili, and Bora Akkaş embodied diverse characters, crafting a distinctive theatrical realm. İdil Sivritepe, Bedir Bedir, Orkuncan İzan, Bilge Çınar, Öyküsu Okur, Basma Seiba, Ekremcan Arslandağ, and Atılğan Gümüş also deserve their share of applause.

The play pays tribute to all the heroes who have dedicated themselves to the art of theater, illuminated by the fire Afife ignited for Turkish women. Through the struggles and passions celebrated within a theater company, they depicted on stage what Afife Jale achieved, why she was a trailblazer, and the sacrifices she made.

Written by Selin Cankı Ceylan, *Afife* is directed by Serdar Biliş. We spoke with Biliş about the play and the legacy of Afife Jale.

■ What does bringing *Afife* to the stage mean to you?

Like Prometheus stealing fire from Mount Olympus to gift it to humanity, Afife extended her dreams, desires, and actions into a garden forbidden to her. As Muhsin Ertuğrul

described, Afife, believed to have succumbed to an eternal slumber, emerged as a great spirit among Turkish women. By dedicating herself to theater, she shattered the shackles of old, oppressive dogmas.

To be Afife is to dare. For me, this story reflects the struggle, ambition, and sorrow of wanting to step into a world where you are seen as "the other." It speaks of resisting the boundaries imposed on you and insisting on your existence with unyielding determination. Being Afife means having the courage to traverse dark, treacherous paths and risking being unloved, all to let the jewel within you shine.

The Afife I imagine is far more defiant, disruptive, and revolutionary than the victimized and sacrificial figure later highlighted.

Today, unfortunately, private theaters are trapped in the harsh reality of balancing box office revenues with exorbitant production costs. Yet, productions like *The Time Regulation Institute* and *Afife* have defied these commercial limitations, challenging norms and breaking conventions. This progress has given me immense courage in my own artistic journey.

■ **You favor an adaptation where dreams and reality intertwine—a story of a woman striving to exist and a theater rediscovering its fearless voice as it struggles to endure...**

From the very beginning of this long journey, we were clear that this would be a story about *being Afife*. Beyond the impossibility of creating a detailed biographical work with the limited information available, there was also the risk of focusing solely on Afife's tragic end rather than her extraordinary achievements as a young woman. However, we wanted to celebrate her Dionysian energy, her unwavering existence, and the inspiration she offers, spreading that spirit to everyone filling the theater. She was a soul who chose being over disappearing.

Naturally, the stage she passionately dedicated herself to had to take center stage in the story. It was also essential to honor the theater masters of that time. Unfortunately, we

neither know, remember, nor keep alive the names of those Armenian masters. Let this serve as our tribute to them as well.

What a dizzying period: the World War, Istanbul under occupation, the ideals of independence, and the vibrant streets of the capital... All of these historical and sociological elements enrich and deepen the story, serving as a textured backdrop for the narrative.

"Our spiritual source is our madness, and our material source is usually persuasion."

■ **The universe you've built on stage resembles the dream of many theater artists. You bring together exceptional actors and create an entirely new world with its set, costumes, lighting, and multimedia. How do you manage to create this universe and secure both material and spiritual support?**

Theater is a collaborative art. It's not something you can retreat into a corner to create like a painter or a novelist—though sometimes I find myself wishing it were! Jokes aside, the director's job is to meld all the creative energy gathered around a story into one cohesive vision. But the magic of theater lies in the team itself. Hours are spent in rehearsals, calculations, and problem-solving to make a single fleeting moment on stage flow like water.

The spiritual source of this arduous effort is our madness, while the material source is almost always persuasion, persuasion, and yet more persuasion. If we as a society understood that theater and art are essential for our collective mental health and development, perhaps we wouldn't compel our artists to such relentless rounds of convincing.

In a world where subsidies are often siphoned off by central and local authorities, and where support for the arts in the private sector is intertwined with advertising strategies, it's hard to say we've found the balance.
