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Review of Emre Aracı, *Naum Tiyatrosu: 19. Yüzyıl İstanbul'un İtalyan Operası* (Naum Theater: The Italian Theater of 19th-Century Istanbul)

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To cite this article: Süloş, Melis, review of Emre Aracı, *Naum Tiyatrosu: 19. Yüzyıl İstanbul'un İtalyan Operası* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010), *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 1 (2011), <<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/446>>.

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/446>

Online Publication Date: 15 June 2011

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Naum Tiyatrosu: 19. Yüzyıl İstanbulu'nun İtalyan Operası (Naum Theater: The Italian Theater of 19th-Century Istanbul)

Emre Aracı

Istanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010, 408 pp., 37 TL, Paperback

ISBN: 978-9750818011

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Naum Tiyatrosu: 19. Yüzyıl İstanbulu'nun İtalyan Operası (Naum Theater: The Italian Theater of 19th-Century Istanbul) scrutinizes one of the most influential agents of Ottoman Westernization: Naum Theater. Naum Theater acted as an imperial institution, as an intellectual center and as an Italian opera for the Ottoman bourgeoisie during the second half of the nineteenth century. By scrutinizing the history of the Naum Theater, the book sheds light on the cultural life of late nineteenth-century Istanbul.

Emre Aracı takes a multidisciplinary approach, combining his studies on the history of nineteenth-century Ottoman performance with his mastery of Ottoman Turkish music. Aracı defines his book as “an inclusive and didactic account that brings social, economic, architectural and artistic histories of Naum Theater together” (p.12). Throughout the book, the author tries to map the intellectual network that surrounded the Naum Theater. In so doing, he tries to document Naum Theater’s musical and theatrical repertoires during the nineteenth century. He examines the patronage patterns of the artists performing at Naum Theater, and informs the reader of the international artistic and intellectual networks dominating cultural life in Ottoman Pera during the second half of the nineteenth century. Aracı surveys the *Journal de Constantinople*, a bilingual newspaper (English and French), and gives information on the visits of a number of European “celebrities.” Among a number of names, the visits of Gustave Flaubert (pp. 151-173), Charles Dickens (pp. 220-233), and Adelaide Ristori (p. 309-319) are some of those showing the social and cultural interactions between Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

While focusing on the artistic repertoire of the Naum Theater, Aracı’s account also illuminates the transformation of leisure activities, particularly among the growing non-Muslim Ottoman bourgeoisie. The book takes the life of Naum Theater (1844-1870) as the timeframe, and flows chronologically. Aracı chooses to apply a metaphorical organization, and names his chapters as: Act I (1840-1847); Act II (1848-1852); Act III (1853-1861); Act IV (1862-1869); and the Last Act (1870). While the introduction and the first chapter set the stage for the subsequent chapters, they lack any theoretical framework that could have helped to transcend the boundaries between the disciplines of history, anthropology, literature, political science and performance studies. The subsequent chapters focus on the establishment and the development of the Naum Theater. Aracı does not problematize his subject, but rather chooses to form a descriptive narrative of the history of the Naum Theater. In so doing, he includes a wealth of information on each season’s program at the Naum Theater. He also informs readers about the recruitment of the performers and the visits of foreign artists.

Aracı’s work offers very rich data for researchers. However, pouring out so much information without framing it with specific questions impedes clarity and the flow of the

narrative. The flow of the narrative, on the other hand, is enhanced by the illustrations. Aracı includes a number of illustrations depicting the Naum Theater, its visitors and actors, and successfully helps the reader to visualize the artistic, social and political milieu of the époque.

The success of the book lies in its ability to combine performance studies with the history and politics of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. What the book offers is a study of some of the forgotten agents of Ottoman modernization: European performers, Ottoman audiences and a Western-style Ottoman repertoire. My only criticism of Aracı's well-crafted book would concern the primary and secondary sources the author used. His five-page bibliography lists mostly English, French and German primary sources rather than Ottoman ones. European newspapers and travel accounts provide the basis of Aracı's study. The reader notices in particular the dominance of the *Journal de Constantinople* over all other sources. Aracı used a few Ottoman newspapers (namely, *Hulasatü'l-Efkar*, *Terakki*, *Tercüman-ı Ahval*, and *Ruzname-i Ceride-i Havadis*), yet I think the book could have further benefited from a variety of Ottoman theater journals, theater pamphlets and flyers. Moreover, the richness of the subject would have benefited from a broader survey of secondary literature. In particular, different studies linking theater, politics and elite culture, developed since the 1970s by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Marvin Carlson, and Stephen Greenblatt, would have provided a useful theoretical perspective.

Overall, the book offers rich material on the nineteenth-century Ottoman experience of Westernization through an analysis of the intellectual network encircling the Naum Theater. Emre Aracı offers an interdisciplinary approach by combining nineteenth-century Ottoman history, performance studies and politics. The book contributes to the growing body of literature exploring the history and politics of performance in the Middle East.