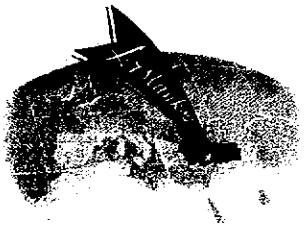
OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

STAGE MOTHERS



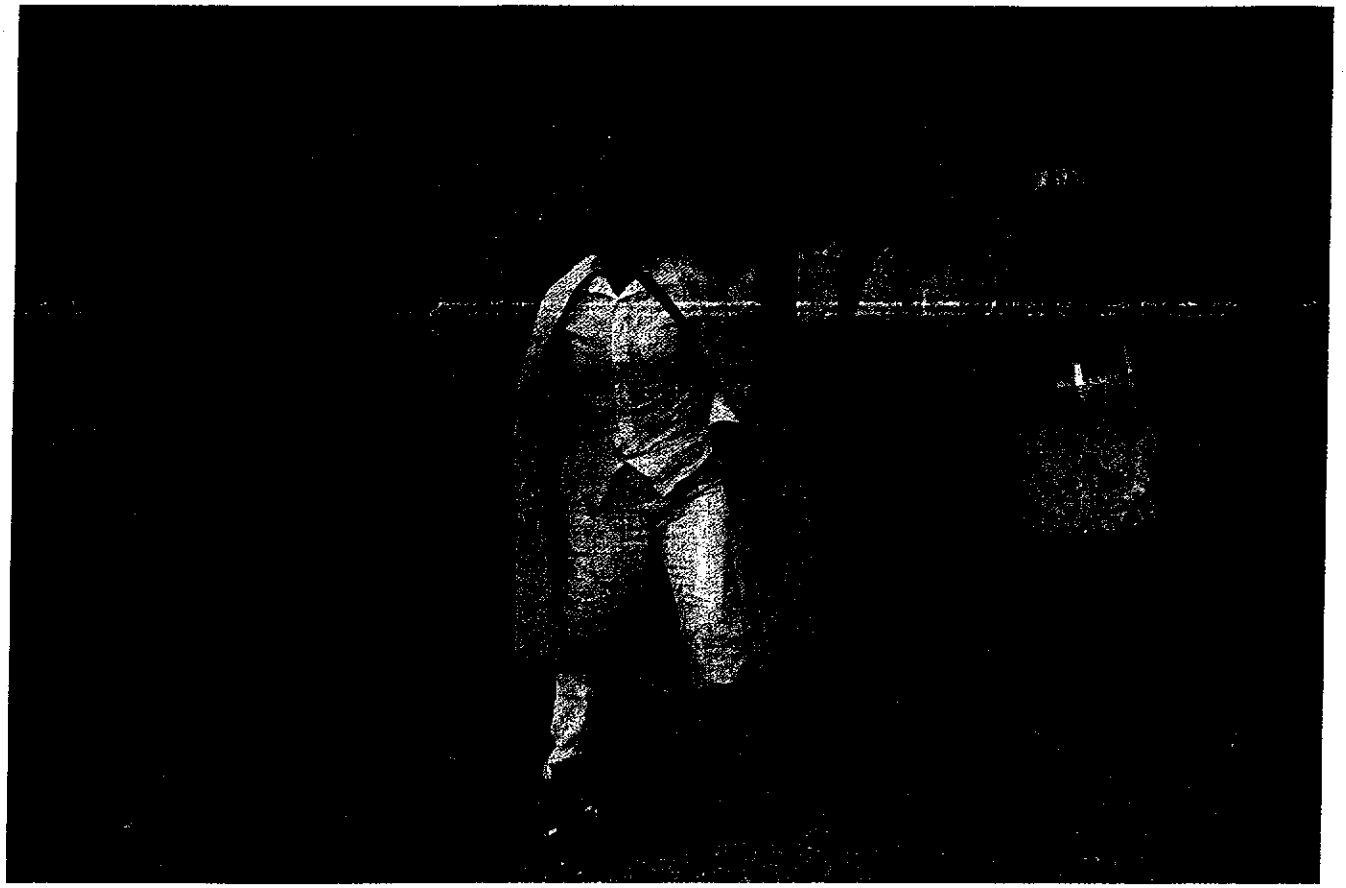
A women's theatre in rural Turkey.

BY ELIF BATUMAN

One afternoon in 2000, a high-school principal in Arslanköy, a village in the Taurus Mountains, in southern Turkey, received an unexpected visit from a middle-aged, blue-eyed peasant woman in a head scarf. Averting her eyes and covering her mouth when she spoke, she introduced herself as Ümmiye Koçak, and asked him to help her start a theatre for the women of the village. "Imagine," the principal, Hüseyin Arslanköylü, later wrote. "She leaves the fields and orchards, and turns up here! . . . Theatre, she says!" He told her to come back when she had assembled a cast and asked permission from the women's husbands.

Ümmiye Koçak, a forty-four-year-old farmworker with a primary-school education, had caught the theatre bug from a school play that the principal had staged the previous year. The play dramatized the village's role in the Turkish War of Independence, in 1919, when a company of locals fired the first shots against the occupying French Army. To honor their bravery, Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's first President, gave the village its current name, which means "lion village." Ümmiye had never seen a play before, and it seeped into her thoughts. For a long time, she had been puzzling over the situation of village women—the many roles they had to play. In the fields, they worked like men; in villas, they became housekeepers; at home, they were wives and mothers. "I kept turning it over in my head, how is it that I do all these things," she later recalled. "Then I saw Hüseyin's theatre. That's when I decided that the thing I'd been turning over in my head was theatre."

The day after her meeting with the principal, Ümmiye returned with seven village women. Some could barely read. Most were in their forties and had several children. She later told me that it hadn't been easy to get them all on board: they kept saying that they didn't know how to act. Ümmiye persuaded them that they already played roles, every day—that the theatre was all around them, whether they



Ümmiye Koçak (in crown), the director of the Arslanköy Women's Theatre, playing the lead in her adaptation of "Hamlet."

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN DRAKE

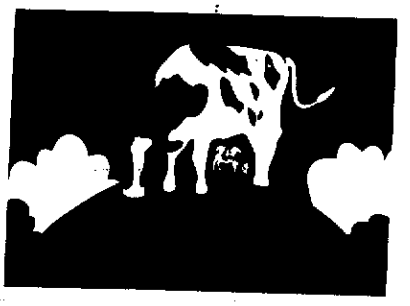
liked it or not. The principal warned them that their theatrical aspirations would expose them to gossip and derision. But Ümmiye thought that she could curtail gossip by excluding men: women would play all the male roles themselves, wearing mustaches made of goatskin.

The Arslanköy Women's Theatre Group met every night at the school, after the women had worked ten- or twelve-hour days on farms. Their first production, a contemporary Turkish play called "Stone Almonds," sold out a theatre in the provincial capital of Mersin, and was written up in the national press. They were invited to Istanbul, to be on TV. None of the women had even been on an intercity bus before. At a rest stop, Ümmiye confronted her first set of revolving doors. For a long time, she remained on one side of the doors, despairing of ever reaching the other side.

Slowly, more productions and more successes followed. In 2003, the women collaborated on a play called "Woman's Outcry," based on their own difficult life experiences, which included kidnapping, forced marriage, and domestic abuse. They performed the play in Arslanköy, in front of their husbands and village officials. In 2006, "The Play," a documentary film about "Woman's Outcry," became an international success, winning prizes at the Trieste and Tribeca festivals. Ümmiye travelled abroad for the first time, attending galas in Spain. She began to dream of staging Shakespeare, and of making a movie. In 2009, she played the title role in her own adaptation of "Hamlet." This spring, she finished shooting her first screenplay, about a downtrodden mother and daughter who herd goats in the Taurus Mountains.

It can be difficult to grasp just how remarkable these achievements are. In the nineteen-twenties and thirties, Atatürk's secularizing reforms put Turkey at the vanguard of feminism. Turkish women got the vote in 1934, before women in Italy and France. Atatürk's daughter was a combat pilot. But in rural Turkey the new secular constitution had little effect on the old patriarchal culture, and women's lives continued much as they always had. Today, some Turkish women are C.E.O.s, best-selling novelists, Olympic gold medalists, and Constitutional Court judges. Other Turkish women—hundreds of thousands of them—are rape victims or child brides. Women make up only twenty-seven per cent of the Turkish paid workforce. An estimated thirty per cent of rural Turkish women haven't completed elementary school, and forty-seven per cent have been beaten or raped by their husbands.

The Islamist party headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been Turkey's Prime Minister since 2003, has signed a charter condemning child marriage. His government has passed laws criminalizing rape within marriage and making honor killings punishable by a life sentence, and it has provided classes to teach police how to handle domestic violence. Nonetheless, during the first seven years of Erdoğan's tenure, the murder rate of women rose fourteenfold. Legal measures are worth little when the Prime Minister openly promotes the patriarchal mores that made them necessary in the first place. Erdoğan has often stated that every married woman in Turkey should bear at least three children. Once, he boosted the number to five. He thinks that Cesarean births decrease women's fertility, and has characterized both Cesareans and abortions as an insidious plot to stunt Turkey's growth. The number of requests filed by parents to marry underage daughters has risen in the past year, and fourteen per cent of all marriages now involve an underage girl.



Ümmiye comes from a world where women don't read books, control their finances, or leave home in the evenings. They keep men's secrets, because when they don't they can't count on shelters or the police for protection. In most documented cases, the police have sent battered women back to their violent relatives. At least three women who went to state shelters were ordered to make peace with their husbands and were later murdered by them. Last year, the blood-stained handbag of a woman shot eight times by her partner on a crowded street was found to contain a legal complaint she had registered against him two days before.

When I drove into Arslanköy on an overcast afternoon in May, it looked like a typical one-street Turkish village, with a mosque, a coffeehouse, a baker, a butcher, and a general store. The store sold Coke, but not diet Coke. The village has twenty-five hundred inhabitants, most of whom are descended from the Yörük, a nomadic people believed to have migrated to the Taurus Mountains from Central Asia in the eleventh century. Perhaps because of the Yörük influence, Islam is observed less strictly in Arslanköy than in some other southeastern Turkish villages. The women are famous for their toughness. They cut wood and work on construction sites. During the War of Independence, they carried ammunition on their backs to the soldiers. In 1946, several Arslanköy women, some of them pregnant, defied the police rather than turn over the village's ballot box to a corrupt headman. Many were shot at and imprisoned, including a certain Grandma Halime, who reportedly threw herself on the ballot box, declaring, "The vote is our honor—we won't surrender our honor."

I met Ümmiye at her house, a little way from the main street, up a wooded slope. She was dressed in the loose shalwar pants, head scarf, and bright-blue vulcanized-rubber shoes commonly worn by Anatolian village women. Now in her mid-fifties, she projects an air less of strength than of tenacity. She has a distinctive voice—soft and almost girlish, but with a piercing quality. One of ten siblings, she was the only girl to receive any formal schooling. When she was eight, a new initiative required families to send at least one daughter to primary school. A younger sister was six, the right age to enroll, but she was shy. Ümmiye took her place. She was dying to learn to read. Her village, some distance from Arslanköy, had no library, but she talked people into lending her books. The first book she borrowed, from a teacher, was "Mother," by Maxim Gorky. It taught her that people everywhere were basically the same. "He wrote about people like us in the village," she told me. "The stove was a stove like ours, the shivering was shivering."

When she was in her early teens, Ümmiye began writing stories herself. Her

first one, "The Goat Beauty," was about a childless woman who prays to God, "Please give me a daughter, even if she's a goat at night." God gives her precisely such a daughter, who grows up to be so beautiful that a rich man's son wants to marry her. "Ah, my girl, you can't marry anyone," the mother says. "Just look: at night, you become a goat." The rich man's family decks the girl out with bracelets and gold watches, and the mother prays again: "Either make her a full-time girl or take her back!" In the morning, she goes to her daughter's bed and finds her dead.

Ümmiye describes her own mother as young, uneducated, and innocent: she would pick up cigarette papers on the street and, because they had Arabic writing on them and looked to her like pages from the Koran, kissed them and kept them in a high place, as befits the word of God. A few years ago, a reporter asked Ümmiye if she knew the meaning of her name. She didn't, and wasn't pleased to learn that *ümmi* is Arabic for "illiterate." (It's one of the epithets of Muhammad, who is said to have been illiterate at the time he received the prophecies.) *Üm* is also the Arabic word for "mother," and thus the two preoccupations of Ümmiye's dramatic work—education and mothers—were prefigured in her name.

As one of the few literate girls in the village, Ümmiye wrote love letters for older girls. When her brothers were in the military, she wrote them letters from the family. She liked to listen, and to know everything about everyone. She says that's why she doesn't have to invent anything in the plays she writes. When I asked how the plays were received by the people she wrote about, she said that they usually didn't recognize themselves. She left school at the age of twelve. At nineteen, she married a man from Arslanköy, in an arranged marriage. She has two sons and a daughter, who acts in, and helps manage, the theatre.

In 2006, Ümmiye wrote an autobiographical play called "Flowers of Longing," describing her philosophy of theatre. The first act is about a woman called Hatice, whose daughter Elif wants to go to school, but whose husband needs Elif to work in the fields to finance his drinking habit; he has already promised her in marriage to a village man. When Hatice objects, he beats her, causing her to miscarry their fifth child. In despair, she decides to drink poison. Elif stops her just in time, and tells her that all mothers are "flowers of longing." The second act isn't a continuation of the first but a new story, about a woman who starts a theatre. Her name is Hasret, which means "Longing." The title, "Flowers of Longing," has a double meaning: the play narrates the creative flourishing of a woman called Longing, but it also represents the artistic transformation of Hatice's longing.

Ümmiye keeps an archive of her theatre at a rented cottage on the outskirts of Mersin. One afternoon, she invited me over for lunch, with some of the theatre members. We sat on a blanket on a concrete patio, by a little grove of apricot, fig, and lemon trees. Prickly pears were just turning red on the cacti. Ümmiye and her daughter, Duygu, brought out tomatoes, cucumbers, and mint, which some of the theatre members started slicing for tabbouleh. Ümmiye's husband followed them out of the house. Kindly and dishevelled in appearance, he didn't impress one as a forceful personality. Ümmiye sent him back to the kitchen to fetch boiling water for the bulgur.

Duygu came out with some of the archive: armloads of plastic folders, typescripts, and appointment calendars given away by banks, which Ümmiye uses as notebooks. I began perusing nine years' worth of yellowed newspaper clippings. One headline—"WITH DOUGH ON HER HANDS, SHE WILL SHOOT A FILM"—alluded to a venerable idiom of Turkish patriarchy: "Those with dough on their hands shouldn't meddle with a man's work." There were many articles about "Woman's Outcry," the 2003 production based on the theatre members' life experiences.

The plot drew most heavily from the stories of two of the women: Zeynep and Ümmü. In the documentary about the production, Zeynep describes how, when she was heavily pregnant and suffering from cramps, her husband, who beat her when he drank, gave her one-way bus fare to take their sick toddler to a clinic. The doctor took one look at Zeynep and said that she was about to give birth. Alone, with no money, she delivered the baby and got seven stitches. Later, as she collected wood to heat water for the baby's bath, she wondered why God hadn't let her die in labor. Ümmü's story was about her longing to become a teacher: she had

made it all the way to the second year of high school, when her elder brother kidnapped a thirteen-year-old to make her his wife. To avoid a blood feud, Ümmü's parents insisted that she marry the girl's brother. They locked her in a room for three days and wore her down. Two months later, Ümmü ran away, but she had nowhere to go. Later, she got married again, to a lazy drunk.

"Woman's Outcry," written by the school principal, combined these stories into two acts. In Act I, a battered wife gives birth to a premature daughter, whom her husband names Aytül, after an old sweetheart. (Two of the nine actresses had been named after a former girlfriend of their father's.) In Act II, set fifteen years later, Aytül's brother has kidnapped a thirteen-year-old girl. Ordered to marry the kidnapped girl's brother, Aytül—played by forty-seven-year-old Ümmiye—runs away to her teacher's house.

One rehearsal of "Woman's Outcry" was broken up by the police, because the women hadn't applied for a permit to stage a play. Police oppression was duly incorporated into the script. In the final scene, an officer tries to stop Aytül and her teacher from starting their own theatre. When Aytül talks back, he beats her to the ground. The play's narrator steps forward and deplores Aytül's fate: "She received her first beating from her father, when she was in her mother's belly. Her last beating came from the police. . . . This theatre, it seems, is over." But then Aytül stands up. "This theatre isn't over," she declares. "Our children won't suffer what we suffered." The cast chants the final lines in unison: "We will work, and we will succeed. We are humans! Humans!"

In the documentary, you can see a large assembly of villagers at the opening night of "Woman's Outcry." Many women in the audience seem completely lost in the performance, eyes shining, mouths ajar. The men's reactions are more complicated. Most look alternately bemused, uneasy, and proud. At least two husbands have come out to support their wives. They seem not to be bad sports. One of the women says that her husband praised her performance as a wife-beater. "You guys made him just like me," she quotes him saying. "It came out good."

After "Woman's Outcry," Ümmiye decided to start writing and staging plays herself, with a new group of actors, from the Mersin area. (The school principal continues to write for the original group, now known as the Arslanköy Tent Theatre Women's Group.) While writing, Ümmiye slept, like Napoleon, three or four hours a night. Every morning, she got up a little after two to do the day's baking. At three, a truck came to take her to an orchard two hours away, where she picked oranges and lemons for up to twelve hours. Then, after cooking dinner for her family, she wrote for two hours before bed. Ümmiye has written ten plays, most involving mother-daughter relationships. The new group included two high-school graduates. One, Seher, married at sixteen, and completed high school as an adult. She is forty-six, and has two grandchildren. She has a large, expressive face and wide-set eyes, and can play pretty much anyone, from dramatic leads to comic characters. The other, Ayfer, who is forty-one, started acting in her teens. She gave it up when she got married, and joined Ümmiye's group after she got divorced. She specializes in male roles, especially villains. Men's clothes suit her trim figure, and she has a knack for handling a whip. She lives with her sixteen-year-old daughter, selling aloe-vera products, cleaning houses, and making occasional trips to Istanbul to play bit roles in soap operas.

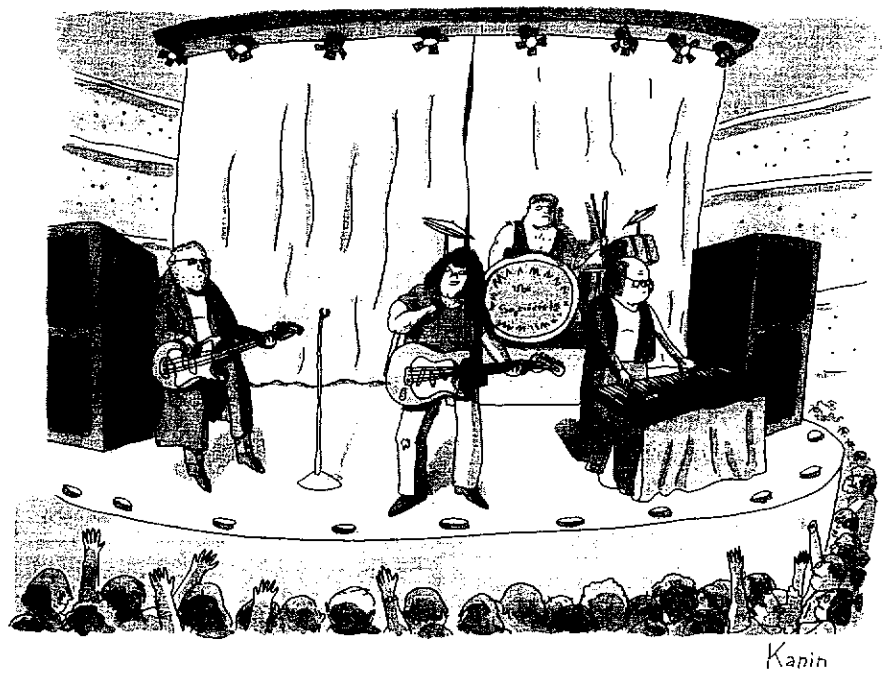
Sorting through the pile of scripts in the archive, I found a copy of Ümmiye's "Hamlet," and opened it at random.

"Alas, poor Yorick!" I read aloud.

"I knew him," Ümmiye said promptly. "He had a way of joking, of conversation." Her expression turned serious. "You know," she said, "there's something I'd like to ask you about that scene. When Hamlet says, 'How many times I kissed this one, this Yorick, on the lips.' Well, Yorick is a man. And Hamlet is also a man." She asked if I had any explanation, and I confessed that I did not, observing only that Hamlet was a little boy at the time. "Well, of course he was," Ümmiye said. "But it still seems odd. With us in Turkey, little boys don't kiss grown men on the lips."

Everyone agreed that it was odd. "Hamlet was a homosexual," Seher said quietly, not looking up from the tomato she was dicing, and this theory was debated for some minutes. Ümmiye couldn't accept it, because wasn't the whole point that he was in love with his mother?

In her adaptation, Ümmiye changed many of the names to ones that a Turkish audience would know. Hamlet became Hamit, Horatio became Hurşit, and Polonius became Şahin, which means "hawk," perhaps because Hamit knows one from a handsaw. Only Shakespeare's name couldn't be changed, which was unfortunate, because the women couldn't



"Well, that's the only song we know, so we can play it another two or three times, or we can cut our losses. Waddya say, Cleveland?"

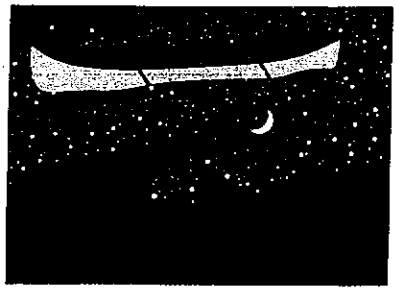
pronounce it. Ümmiye wrote the Turkish transliteration, Şekspir, on their hands, so they could contemplate it while working in the fields.

"Hamit" toured in several Turkish cities, drawing sizable audiences. At some point, the actress playing Gertrude reached her eighth month of pregnancy and couldn't fall dead to the floor anymore, so Ümmiye wrote an alternate ending in which nobody dies and Hamit just goes really crazy.

During our first meeting, I asked Ümmiye if it had been difficult to go really crazy. She said that she had a nervous temperament, so it came to her naturally. "I just did this," she said and, raising her eyes to the ceiling, set about the most terrific shrieking and wailing. "Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God, what's happening, you're a murderer!" We were at her house in Arslanköy, and a neighbor stuck her head in the door to see who was being killed. "Nothing's wrong—we're just doing 'Hamlet,' " Ümmiye said. "If only this body would blow away or dissolve, turning into a dewdrop. Or if only God hadn't forbidden suicide!" The neighbor wordlessly withdrew.

The success of "Hamlet" in Arslanköy might attest to Shakespeare's universality. Alternatively, it might attest to certain similarities between Shakespeare's world and a twenty-first-century Anatolian village. Rural Turkey is a place where revenge killings, honor suicides, and blood feuds are real. The question of whether it's better to be alive or dead is a genuine one for village women, many of whom have had the occasion to ask themselves, quite literally, "who would fardels bear,/ To grunt and sweat under a weary life." Often in "Hamlet," the farmer's lot is a stand-in for the futility of life. The lines Ümmiye recited, about her body turning into a dewdrop, are from the first soliloquy, "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt," which goes on to describe the world as "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable . . . an unweeded garden,/ that grows to seed": lines likely to resonate with anyone who does much weeding. In her staging of the graveyard scene—the one about the secret brotherhood of "gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers"—Ümmiye expressed the metaphor neatly by using pumpkins for skulls.

Her production opens with the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father, played by a woman wearing a white sheet with eyeholes. It's funny, because it looks a bit like Charlie Brown awaiting the Great Pumpkin, but it's also scary, because what's under the sheet is something the women have suffered at first hand, whether you call it tradition, economy, patriarchy, or fate. "Hamlet" and "Woman's Outcry" ask a lot of the same questions. Who *is* this guy who's ordering me to leave school and come home, to die in the place where I was born: a real father or



a fictive demon? Is my life mine or does it belong to my parents? Is it a blessing or is it a curse?

When Ümmiye first told the school principal that there would be no men in her theatre, he expressed surprise, and asked if she was a feminist. It was a word she had never heard before, but the absence of men is a powerful part of her theatre. It reflects a certain reality about the villages, where the women's emotional lives center on children, animals, and other women, and the men are always elsewhere—loafing, drinking, gambling, working, or dead. In Ümmiye's plays, men are a backdrop, like weather: either they cause problems or they don't. It's the women who perform actions, who reach decisions and change as people. In general, Ümmiye is far less concerned with reforming men than with educating women. Once you educate the women, she says, they'll bring up their sons and daughters as equals, and then the men will come out better anyway.

One day, I accompanied Ümmiye and her group to a remote village, smaller and poorer than Arslanköy, where they were to take part in a women's outreach program run by the Human Resources Foundation of Turkey. Following presentations by a health educator and a psychologist, there was to be a performance of "Free Clinic," a play that Ümmiye wrote, based on a woman she knew, who wouldn't go to the doctor even when it was free.

The village was in the mountains, about an hour's drive from Mersin. We passed a Coca-Cola plant, a vineyard, a graveyard. I noticed a village called Dalakderesi—Spleen Creek—and a row of gigantic shirts flapping on a clothesline. At the beginning of the session, some twenty attendees were given a questionnaire about marriage and pregnancy. A few, unable to read or write, dictated their answers. The women looked physically different from the members of Ümmiye's group, their faces more coppery, their relationship with furniture more cautious. Many had missing or gold teeth. Despite their open expressions and ready smiles, their unhappiness was like an object in the room, to be wrestled with and made the best of. Everyone knew that it was why we were there.

The health educator's talk touched on cervical cancer, the morning-after pill, and I.U.D.s. Projecting a giant diagram of the female reproductive system on the wall, she pointed out the clitoris, explaining that it was the source of female sexual pleasure, and could be thought of as a tiny penis. The psychologist talked about happiness and endorphins, and explained that endorphins were released during sex. "I know you're all taught to do it only when your husbands want," she said. "I know you're all thinking, Why should I create extra work for myself at night, when I could be sleeping?" They had to overcome such thoughts, she said, because deriving pleasure from sex was their right. The women burst out laughing.

The psychologist told them to go home that night and tell their husbands how lucky they were, to have such fantastic wives. She said that they had to love themselves, because you can't feed someone else when you're hungry; and that you could get through to anyone if you found the right language. If you hadn't got through yet, you hadn't found the right language. Men were implied in every sentence, but in such a theoretical way that they started to seem like God, or terrorists—entities who affected you, but whom you would probably never see face to face.

Finally, it was time for "Free Clinic": the story of a doctor who opens a free clinic and is visited by a series of patients with humorous complaints that can't be solved by modern medicine. A thirty-year-old "old maid" comes to the doctor

5

with complaints relating to not being married. "What am I supposed to do about that?" the doctor demands. At first, the women in the audience, who had never seen theatre before, stared at the cast with incredulous expressions. Gradually, they started laughing at the jokes, and answering the rhetorical questions. The pedagogic content of the play lay in the story of the one patient with an actual medical complaint: a pain in her breast. Defying her husband, who considers it shameful, she goes to the doctor, who diagnoses a serious disease: if she had waited any longer, she would have died. After a moment's silence, the local women seemed to recognize this as a happy ending, and applauded loudly.

Until the twentieth century, Turkish women did not perform on the stage. Female roles were played by men or by non-Muslim women, mostly Armenians. The tragic fate of Afife Jale, the first Muslim woman to defy this convention, is still well known. When the teen-age Afife appeared onstage, in 1919, covering for an absent Armenian, her father called her a whore and disowned her. The police raided all her subsequent performances, and the Ministry of the Interior issued a formal decree banning Muslim women from the stage. Atatürk revoked the ban in 1923, but Afife had already succumbed to ignominy, migraine, and morphine addiction. She died, destitute, in a mental hospital, in 1941. Today, the Afife Theatre Awards are among the highest honors in Turkish theatre. Ironically, although "Woman's Outcry" received a mention at the 2007 Afife Awards ceremony, only the high-school principal was cited, and none of the women. Ümmiye wept bitterly. Afife Jale had been an inspiration for her—someone she thought about a lot when she was building her theatre.

In the Turkish theatre, comedy is older than tragedy and melodrama, which became known only in the nineteenth century, through Western examples. Previously, the main dramatic form was the shadow-puppet play, which grew popular in the late sixteenth century. Shadow plays feature two recurring characters, the yokel Karagöz and his refined friend Hacivat, in a series of satiric dialogues and skits. The main "plot," staged as a play within a play, is typically a device bringing Karagöz and Hacivat into contact with a range of human types: Karagöz and Hacivat enter a poetry contest, and Karagöz wins by beating up all the other poets; they set up shop as scribes, and Karagöz writes crazy letters; or Hacivat puts Karagöz in an insane asylum, and then feels sorry.

During the time I spent with Ümmiye's group, they were touring the Mersin school system with a play called "The Price of Two Oxen," performing up to five times a day. I watched this play many times, and was often reminded of the shadow plays, which used to be on television when I was little. The central plot, about a father who decides to sell his schoolgirl daughter for the price of two oxen, is presented as a play within a play. In one sketch, a city woman comes to Arslanköy, trying to sell the village women tickets to their own theatre, which results in some Karagöz-and-Hacivat-style back talk. Another features a cooking contest, in which three contestants come to blows over whose village has the most authentic *lepe* (a tomato stew with bulgur and potatoes). Last comes the story of the schoolgirl sold for the price of two oxen. This plot, although more serious, still received a relatively lighthearted treatment, with slapstick interludes and a happy ending.

At the last performance before summer vacation, I watched the play from backstage. When I arrived at the school theatre, Seher was adjusting the grotesquely padded bosom and posterior of her "city woman" costume, and Ayfer was bandaging her heel, blistered from ill-fitting men's shoes. As usual in Ümmiye's productions, everyone played five or six roles. Ümmiye, who played three village women, started out the show wearing three near-identical shalwars layered on top of each other, and she furiously peeled down to the next layer between scenes. For her fourth character, she pulled on an enormous purple dress and momentarily got lost inside, unable to find the sleeves or the neck opening. The dress turned out to have a tear, and the other women urged her to change into something else. But Ümmiye said that the tear deepened her character's backstory: "That's the kind of man her husband is. He sells his own daughter, but doesn't give his wife money for clothes."

The others were impressed by her quick thinking. "Let's say that in the play," someone suggested.

"Absolutely not!" Ümmiye declared. "The perceptive ones will perceive it anyway, and the unperceptive ones are in God's hands."

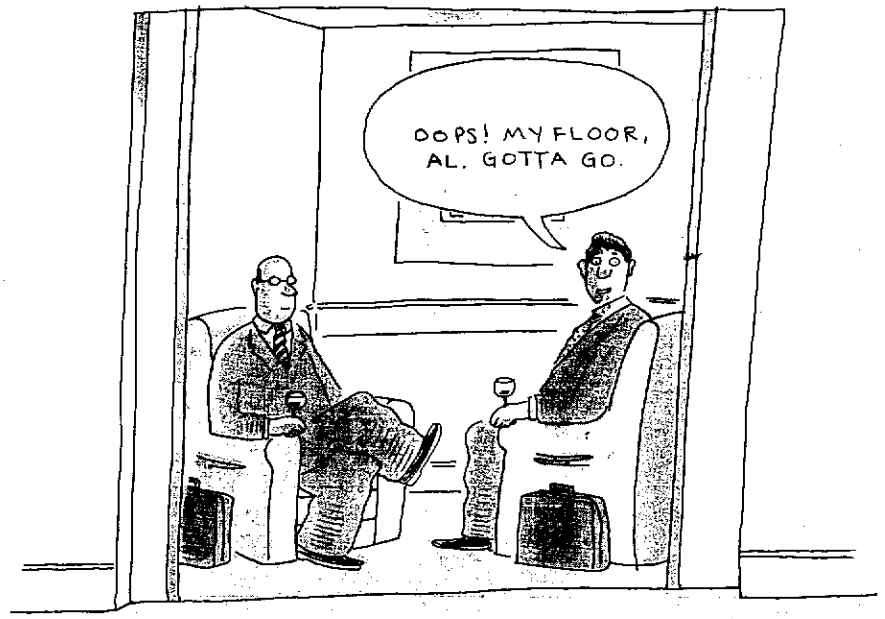
"Wool Doll," the movie that Ümmiye finished shooting in the spring, is set among the Yörük, some thirty years ago. It tells the story of a mother and daughter, Hatice and Elif, who lead a life of oppression at the hands of Hatice's mother-in-law. (Many of the daughters in Ümmiye's plays are called Elif, which is the Turkish word for the first letter of the Arabic alphabet: to say that someone "doesn't know *elif*" is to say that the person is illiterate.) Ümmiye directed it with the help of Yasin Korkmaz, a twenty-six-year-old Mersin-based filmmaker. The budget, eked out from local government agencies, was less than seventeen thousand dollars. Ümmiye wrote the script as if it were a play, and Yasin edited it for film. The first thing he did was cut out all the male characters. Women with fake mustaches were O.K. in theatre, he said, but not in film. Elif's father is still part of the story, but he never appears onscreen. He's always about to come, or he's just left. Then he dies. Ideally, Yasin told me, a viewer might not notice that the father had never appeared; someone might watch the whole film and not notice that there weren't any men.

The action was supposed to take place in springtime, when the Yörük bring their sheep to pasture in the mountains, but, owing largely to fund-raising troubles, shooting did not begin until the start of 2012, when Arslanköy lay buried under more than ten feet of snow. Anyone who could leave town had done so. Practically, the only souls remaining were the street dogs, the village lunatic, and the mayor. "And the dogs and the mayor mostly stayed indoors," the cinematographer told me.

"What was the lunatic doing?" I asked.

"The same thing as us! Being a lunatic! He would give us this look, like he recognized us."

It had been difficult to cast Elif, since no parents wanted to let their children outside in such weather. Nobody would even let out the goats. It took two days to get together enough goats to shoot a scene with goats in it, and two weeks to find a little girl. In the end, the projected fifteen-day shoot lasted two and a half months. The women slept in Ümmiye's two-room



EXECUTIVE ELEVATOR

house, sharing a single outdoor toilet, while the crew—seven men, at first—occupied a vacant boarding house. They installed a stove and pushed together three beds, and all seven of them squeezed into the three beds. Ümmiye gave them a duvet and some sheets, which had originally been intended for Duygu's trousseau. The village imam contributed some blankets from the mosque. The blankets had been used for transporting corpses.

Every night, the crew members slept in dead people's blankets, and every morning they got up to confront a frozen auto transmission. Once, the producer—a semi-professional singer of melancholy Turkish ballads—opened the trunk and leaned in to get something, and the lid came crashing down on his head: the hydraulic mechanism had frozen. A sound technician fell off a ladder and broke something in his back. There was no doctor, and the roads were closed, so he had to be treated by the village bonesetter. Eventually, four crew members decamped to the lowlands, leaving only the cinematographer, the producer, and the director. Seher, who was playing Hatice, broke her wrist and had to wear a cast. At least that fit into the story of a woman who had been beaten by her wicked mother-in-law. Meanwhile, the wicked mother-in-law broke her pelvis.

Some actresses got fed up with the cold and quit, meaning that new actresses had to be found and the scenes shot again from scratch. Retakes were often impossible. When you'd once asked a woman to walk across a yard carrying seventy pounds of firewood on her back, sinking to her waist in snow with each step and slowly turning purple, you couldn't ask her to walk across that yard a second time. Even if you could have, she had already left a track in the snow.

In May, I joined Ümmiye and her cast and crew for the last day of filming: a scene in which the village teacher and a city official try to persuade Hatice to send Elif to school. We met in Arslanköy, where the cast and crew distributed themselves between my car and Yasin's minivan, and we headed into the mountains.

Clouds hung low and heavy overhead. Farmland scrolled by on all sides, so green it hurt your eyes. As the road wound up into the mountains, the minivan vanished for longer and longer intervals, smaller each time it reappeared. "Don't try to keep up with Yasin—it's hopeless," the cinematographer advised, sitting in the back with his wife and their five-month-old son.

A light rain began to fall. The snow was long gone, but the roads were muddy and pitted. Often, I had a choice of driving either into a ditch or over a boulder. I usually chose the boulder, which would scrape against the undercarriage of the car. Once, for variety, I tried a ditch and the tires spun alarmingly in the mud, before catching again. We were looking for a pasture with sheep, a lake view, and a Yörük goatskin tent. It wasn't clear to me whether this description referred to a particular place or whether the filmmakers were, like the ancient Yörük themselves, simply wandering the mountains with an eye out for somewhere matching their requirements.

After driving for two hours, we arrived at a grassy ridge overlooking a lake, complete with a pasture, a flock of sheep, even a tent. The clouds had parted, and the pasture shone golden-green in the late-afternoon sun. Unfortunately, the tent was made of blue plastic, and not traditional goatskin, so the crew couldn't shoot inside it. Yasin, who is of Yörük descent, remembered goatskin tents from his childhood, but nobody here used them anymore.

As the crew set up the equipment, I sat on the grass next to Melisa Yıldız, the eight-year-old girl who plays Elif. Dressed in a red knitted vest and a child-sized shalwar, she was occupied in some mysterious way with two rocks and a stick. Her acting was serious, with an undercurrent of fierceness. In one scene, Elif, who has never owned a toy, sees another little girl playing with a doll and is consumed by every kind of emotion, the way children sometimes are. Her mother gives her a hank of black wool swaddled in a blanket. This eponymous "wool doll" looks somewhat like a baby, but has coarse black tufts where its face should be. It's a frightening, almost repulsive object, but Elif cradles it as if it were the most precious thing on earth.

Finally, the equipment was ready. Seher, as Hatice, sat on a rock, and the women playing the schoolteacher and the official stood in front of her. "We've come to see to Elif's education," the teacher said.

"But we're Yörük—we don't have anything," Hatice replied.

"The state has resources for children like Elif."

Every minute or two, something went wrong, and the scene had to be reshot. The boom—a grayish moplike object, partially eaten by goats—cast a shadow on someone's face. The microphone picked up the sound of an airplane flying overhead. The noise could have been filtered

out in the studio, but then the distant sound of croaking frogs would have been lost. Next, Yasin stopped the teacher when she repeated her line about the state having resources for children like Elif.

"Do you realize that you smile every time you say 'state'?" he demanded. "Does the mention of the state fill you with uncontainable joy, or what?"

"I'm not smiling, I'm squinting," the actress replied. "The sun comes in my eyes. It's not because of the state."

"It might be related," Yasin said. Everyone sighed, thinking about the state.

Ümmiye pulled a large housedress out of her bag, clambered up a nearby slope, and stood there, arms outstretched, like Batman, shielding everyone from the sun. Shooting resumed. The city official told Hatice that the state could give Elif a scholarship to a boarding school. Hatice started to cry. "But my daughter is all I have," she said.

"Cut!" Yasin called.

"What is it this time?" the teacher asked.

I heard a small voice say, "An engine." It was Elif. She was right: a moment later, a car came up the winding road.

The actors took the scene from the top. This time, the state was spoken of with appropriate gravity. The sheep stood placidly in the golden light, occasionally clanging their bells. The sky remained free of airplanes, while the frogs continued their whirring chorus. A lonely mother was persuaded to give her daughter up to the powers of state education. As the sun slowly dropped behind the mountains, the company started loading up the cars to head home.

The closest airport to Arslanköy is in Adana, my father's home town. On the way back to Istanbul, I stopped by my grandparents' old apartment, where my aunt now lives. Her younger daughter, Umut, was visiting from Kahramanmaraş, where she studies business administration, a subject that she isn't crazy about. As usual, my aunt brought up her regret that her older daughter and I both live alone and spend all our time working. Umut, a peacekeeper by nature, promised to have ten children to make up for us. She already had names picked out. "Abdüllatif, Abdurrahim, Selahattin, Feyzullah . . . " she said pensively.

"What about the girls?" I asked.

"I'm not going to have girls," she said, deadpanning.

Conversation turned to an anti-abortion speech that the Prime Minister had made the week before. "Every abortion is an Uludere," he declared, alluding to a botched airstrike last year that killed more than thirty Kurdish civilians near the eastern city of Uludere. He couldn't understand why people cared more about murdered Kurds than about murdered fetuses.

Back in Istanbul, I kept thinking about the situation of women in Turkey. I started paying more attention to the Turkish papers—to the sensationalistic headlines I used to avoid. In September, my eye was caught by "THE PRICE FOR RAPE: FIVE SHEEP, ONE COW, AND A BRIDE." The story read like a cross between "Woman's Outcry" and "The Price of Two Oxen." E.D., a thirteen-year-old village girl from Erzurum, was forced to marry a relative who had raped and tortured her; in exchange, the relative's parents gave E.D.'s father five sheep and a cow, and his thirteen-year-old sister had to marry E.D.'s brother. (The rapist was later arrested.) That same month, in an echo of "Flowers of Longing," a fifteen-year-old kidnapped bride from a town near Adana hanged herself from a window grille, after her husband kicked her in the stomach and caused a miscarriage.

Ümmiye is currently working on a screenplay called "Footless on Her Own Feet." It tells the story of a handicapped girl whose fifty-year-old mother pushes her to school every day in a wheelbarrow. Eventually, she wins a national drawing contest, making a super-realistic picture of herself in the wheelbarrow. With the prize money, she buys a wheelchair. Like the Arslanköy theatre, the girl's drawing uses artistic representation to change the thing represented. By drawing a truthful picture of the humiliating wheelbarrow, she transforms it into a dignified wheelchair—much as a theatre, by representing the injustice of village women's life, might make that life more just. Nabokov once claimed that the inspiration for Lolita was an art work produced by an ape in the Jardin des Plantes: a drawing of the bars of its cage. It's a good metaphor for artistic production. What else do we ever draw, besides the bars of our cage, or the wheelbarrow we rode in as crippled children? How else do cages get smashed? How else will we stand on our own feet? ♦