

# Sinan Ünel



**ast summer, Sinan Ünel's *Pera Palas* became one of the unexpected successes of the Off-Broadway season. Taking place in and around Turkey's famous colonial hotel, Pera Palas, the play intertwines three narratives (from 1918, 1952, and 1994, respectively) to form an ambitious epic in which the characters' personal lives reflect changing political and social attitudes as the old Ottoman Empire evolves into modern-day Turkey. Written in 1995 and developed at Boston University, where Ünel was enrolled in a playwriting program, *Pera Palas*, as the author puts it, "bumped about from theater to theater" until it won the 1997 John Gassner playwriting award and received a reading, directed by Steven Williford and produced by John Clinton Eisner, at Lark Theater Company in New York City. A subsequent workshop production proved such a hit that it transferred to Second Stage's McGinn Cazale Theater for a further commercial run. The next incarnation of *Pera Palas* is likely to be a new production in London or a full-scale commercial remounting in New York. As the Turkish-American playwright tells *The Dramatist*, his newfound success has been nearly two decades in the making.**

BY

GERARD

RAYMOND

**GERARD RAYMOND:** First, let's get some background about you. Did you grow up in Turkey?

**SINAN ÜNEL:** My father is Turkish, and my mother is American. They met in college. I was born here in America, but then we all moved to Turkey. I grew up some in Istanbul and some in the southern Mediterranean region of the country, where my father worked. They still live there, actually. When I was 19, I came back to America to go to college, and I've been here ever since. I'm now 40. So, I have been here twenty years.

**RAYMOND:** Was Turkish your first language?

**ÜNEL:** I spoke both languages, but I felt a little bit out of place in Turkey. I had blond hair when I was a kid, and people looked at me like I was different. I always had this American identity going, but at the same time I was very much embedded in Turkish culture as well.

**RAYMOND:** How did you get interested in the theater?

**ÜNEL:** When I was growing up, I listened to a lot of musicals and read a lot. Turkey actually has a very good theater community, although I

didn't see very much then. When I went to college, I was under quite a bit of pressure from my family to be a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer. As a compromise, I took classes in architecture. I did that for a couple of years and even had business cards made saying "architect" on them, but I wasn't very good at it. Then, one summer, I was passing through New York City on my way back to Turkey, and I saw Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*. That play really inspired me. I thought I would give playwriting a shot. When I got to Turkey, I wrote my first play – in Turkish.

**RAYMOND:** Why Turkish?

**ÜNEL:** At that point, I was more connected to Turkey and felt I could write about that culture. Now, I've been away too long and couldn't do it. Of course, first plays are about family and growing up, and that's what I wrote about. I pursued Ali Poyrazoglu, the famous Turkish actor who was later to perform in *Pera Palas* in New York. I knew he was staying in some vacation village, so I went there and showed my play to him. The play never did get done, but Ali really en-

couraged me to stay and write in Turkey. However, I felt that, at best, I would become a mediocre writer in Turkey. I decided to take the hard route and do it for real.

**RAYMOND:** You returned to the States and continued with your writing?

**ÜNEL:** I came back and changed my major. I started taking some classes in English and wrote my first play in English. It was called *Three of Cups*, which is a Tarot card, and was about three gay college boys. It got some attention in college circles and a small-scale, but very successful, New York City production. Once I started writing, I knew it was what I was going to do. At that point, you're so young and so inexperienced, and everybody tells you "Don't do it. You're going to be miserable. You're never going to make any money, and you'll struggle for twenty years." Of course, it all turns out to be true. I have been writing steadily for the past sixteen to seventeen years, and now hopefully I'm getting a little back.

When I moved to New York City, I stayed for about a year and decided I couldn't wing it. So, I took a summer off and went to Provincetown, Mass. I found that you could work there in the summer and take the winter off to write, which was the ideal for me. I've been there ever since.

**RAYMOND:** How did the writing work out?

**ÜNEL:** I was basically doing it on my own, because I didn't have a teacher and wasn't connected to the theater community. I learned a lot from reading plays and books about playwriting. I've written about sixteen plays. Provincetown is the setting for several of them: social commentary, family-drama type plays. Many of them got productions at The Provincetown Theater Company, which kind of adopted me. I have directed a couple of my own plays there and have a little bit of a following in Provincetown. That's the best thing for a writer. If you find a theater somewhere, anywhere – even if you don't get a lot of exposure – at least seeing your work mounted and hearing the words is really important.

**RAYMOND:** What did you learn from your

writing experience?

**ÜNEL:** I can't sit here now and say I can do this perfectly, because I don't think anybody can really say that. It's always a struggle. The most important lesson that I've learned is to not write until I have planned it out. I have to know where the play is going, always. The way I used to try to write was to start somewhere and go where it took me, but I went on so many different paths and ended up in all these dead-ends. It is a waste of time. *Pera Palas* is the first play that I really sat down and planned where it was going.

**RAYMOND:** What started you on *Pera Palas*?

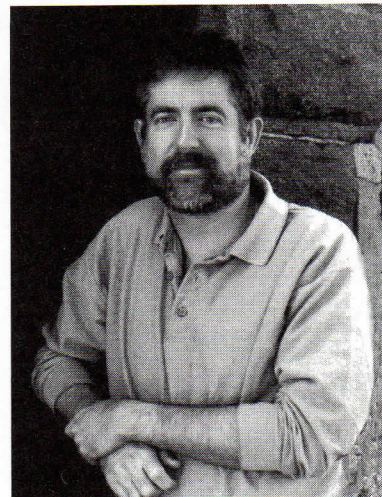
**ÜNEL:** I wanted to write about Turkey. I was really appalled at how ignorant people are about the rest of the world. I wanted to introduce Turkey to people. For several years, I had been reading a lot about Turkish history, trying to find an angle. I didn't want to write a historical play, because I didn't know how. It takes a lot of guts. Finally, I read about an English woman who had traveled to Turkey and written about it. Seeing things from her perspective got me thinking. When I had an appendectomy, I was in the hospital and on morphine. I don't know what it was – the morphine or not – but sometimes great ideas come to you when you're not preoccupied with anything. One day, the idea sort of popped: three stories going back and forth. After that, it was really happy writing.

**RAYMOND:** Is the play autobiographical? In the contemporary story, the central character, Murat, is gay and has lived in America, and he has a confrontation with his father.

**ÜNEL:** *Pera Palas* is largely autobiographical. The older character, Orhan, is definitely based on my dad, and my parents' response to the gay issue was a lot like in the play, but the relationship between Murat and his lover Brian is not my relationship at all. Everybody wants to know if my partner, whose name is John, is an alcoholic, and he's not!

**RAYMOND:** Did you go back to Turkey before you wrote the play?

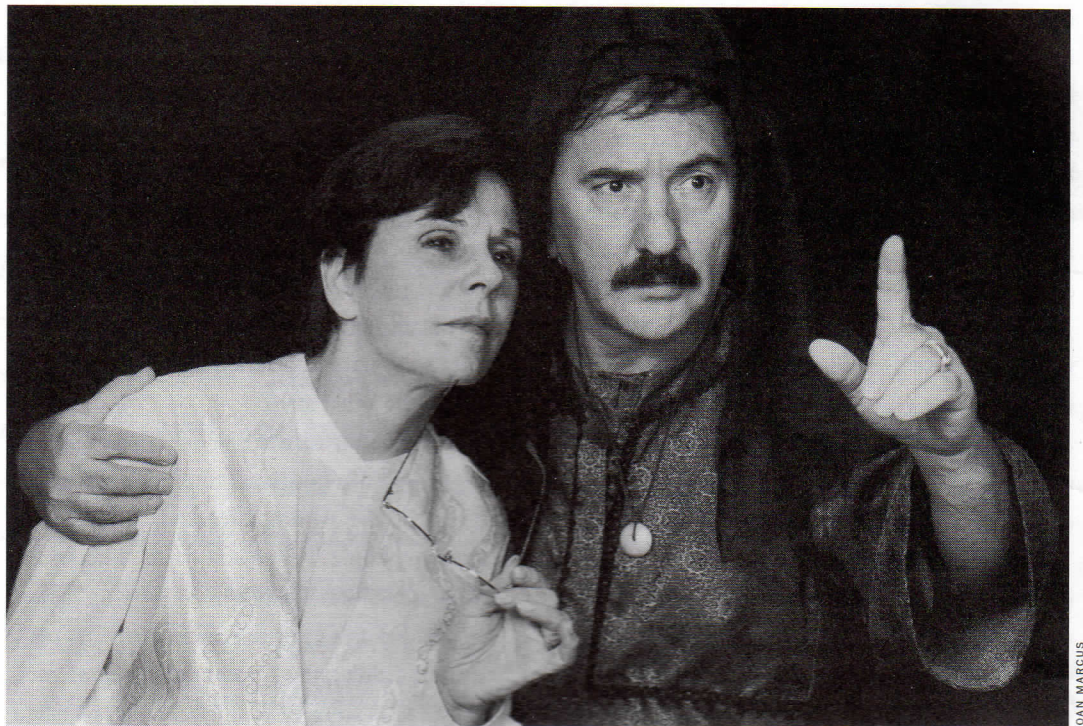
**ÜNEL:** John and I were there briefly. I already had the idea of the three stories, so I was trying



Sinan Ünel.

KEVIN MURPHY

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Maggie Burke and Ali Poyrazoglu in PERA PALAS.

to get a sense of the place. We didn't stay in the Pera Palas but in the hotel facing it. The Pera Palas was much too expensive, but we had tea in its famous old tearoom. A lot of the hotel in the play is really based on the hotel we stayed at, which was not as luxurious.

**RAYMOND:** Would you say the play was a way of getting back in touch with your Turkish side?

**ÜNEL:** That's what the play is about, really. Murat is feeling homeless. He doesn't really have a place where he belongs, and he goes back to see if he still belongs there. The dream sequence at the end of the play is Murat trying to get in touch with his past and also finding hope in the future. It's based on a Jungian theory that, when we are born, we all carry something of the past that we've never experienced, something that is not really from within this lifetime but is in our history.

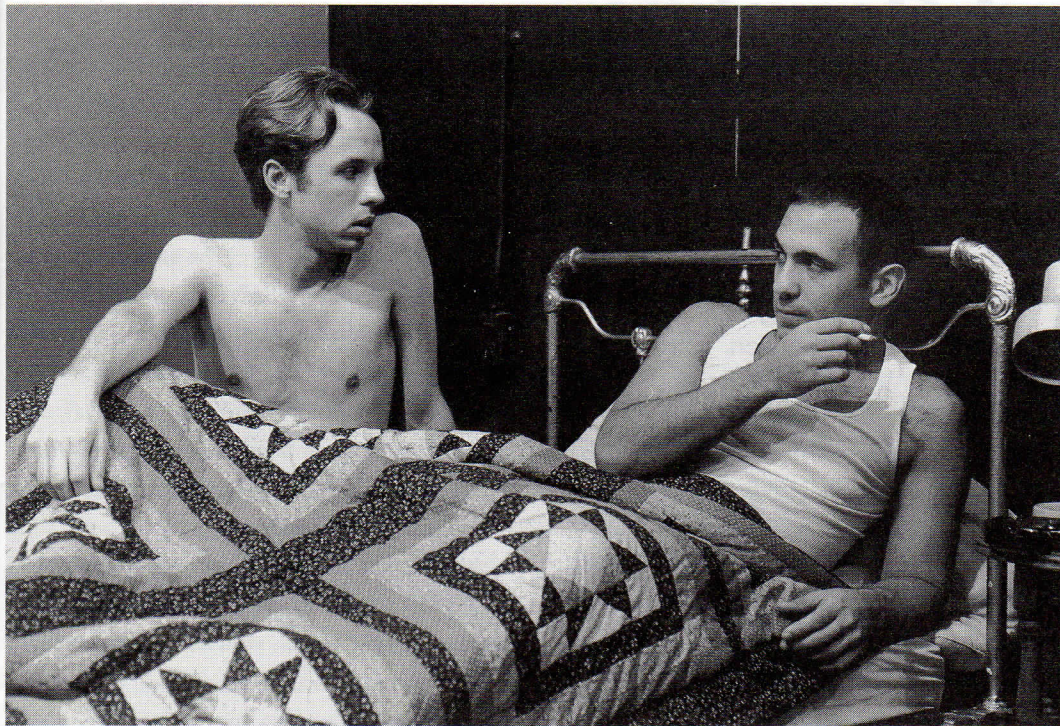
**RAYMOND:** Do you think this play can be produced in Turkey? I understand that recently a playwright there was sent to prison for his writing.

**ÜNEL:** I read something about that, but I think what the playwright was doing was very inflammatory, getting people all worked up and causing rebellions. This is not the same kind of play. I'm not trying to rouse a big movement or anything like that. There's a big fundamentalist movement in Turkey, and some people could be very offended. I certainly don't want Islamic fundamentalists chasing me around the world trying to assassinate me, but I'm told my play can be done there. In fact, Ali Poyrazoglu, who liked the play and came to New York at his own expense to perform in it, now wants to have it translated and do it in Turkey.

**RAYMOND:** Have you noticed a change in your career after the success of *Pera Palas*?

**ÜNEL:** I'm finding people are more open to reading my work. My new play, *Single Lives*, was done [in November] at Boston Playwrights Theater, which is the theater for the Boston University program where I wrote the play. I think this play definitely will have a place to go.

**RAYMOND:** *Single Lives* is the story of a gay cou-



Brian McManamon and Amir Darvish in *SINGLE LIVES*.

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**“All my writing career, I wanted to write a well-constructed linear play ... but I seem to get more excited when I keep going away from that.”**

ple whose lives are portrayed at the start of their relationship, when they are in their 20s, and then when they are in their 70s. The young couple’s story moves backward in time, while the story of their older selves moves forward. Just like *Pera Palas*, you are playing with time-structure again. Could you comment on that?

**ÜNEL:** All my writing career, I wanted to write a well-constructed linear play – something like Lillian Hellman – but I seem to get more excited when I keep going away from that. What is so interesting is what happens to people after many years. That’s what drove *Single Lives*, even more than *Pera Palas* – that aspect of how life changes you, of what choices you make, of where you end up and where you begin. It’s very tragic in some ways, and it’s bittersweet. It’s joyous, but you do lose so much along the way. I haven’t been there, so I can’t speak from personal experience, but that’s what it seems to me. The older men’s relationship is really the projection of my relationship that I see in the future.

**RAYMOND:** Are you working on anything new

at the moment?

**ÜNEL:** I am rewriting a play that I wrote seven years ago. It’s called *Tolstoy’s Den*, and it’s about AIDS. At the time, I wrote it from emotion, but I didn’t have the technical know-how that I have today, so I have built it over. That’s very hard to do.

**RAYMOND:** Is this play also drawn from autobiography?

**ÜNEL:** I was diagnosed in 1987, at a time when there was no hope. They just said to you go home and die. I was very, very sick, but I was very aggressive and pursued all the trials and treatments. I didn’t lose hope. Somehow, I pulled through, and now I’m healthier than I ever was. It really changes your perspective. You let go of all the tragedy and are hungry to live. I’m not going to say that it is a good thing I was diagnosed with AIDS, but I think some good things happened because of it. ☺

*Gerard Raymond is a freelance writer on theater and film.*