

STAGES

From family stories of the Armenian genocide, a play emerges

By Joel Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 03, 2012



MICHELE MCDONALD FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Playwright Joyce Van Dyke and dentist H. Martin Deranian, whose family histories inspired Van Dyke's play, "Deported."

Nearly a century ago, on the other side of the world, two women were each other's strength through horror: the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks. Next week, the story of their survival comes to the stage, thanks in part to one man's struggle to keep history alive.

“My mother, who went through all of this, died when I was not even 7 years of age,” says H. Martin Deranian, an 89-year-old Shrewsbury dentist, “so what I’ve done for the rest of my life . . . is tried to devote myself to seeking the truth as to what happened to her and all these heroic women who went through this horrific genocide.”

“Deported / a dream play,” by Elliot Norton Award-winning Newton playwright Joyce Van Dyke, is based on the friendship between her maternal grandmother, Elmas Sarajian, and Deranian’s mother, Varter Nazarian. The women came to America and started a new life after losing everything, including their husbands and children. More than 1 million Armenians were slaughtered in the genocide, beginning in 1915. Many others were expelled from the Ottoman Empire - “deported” - in forced marches.

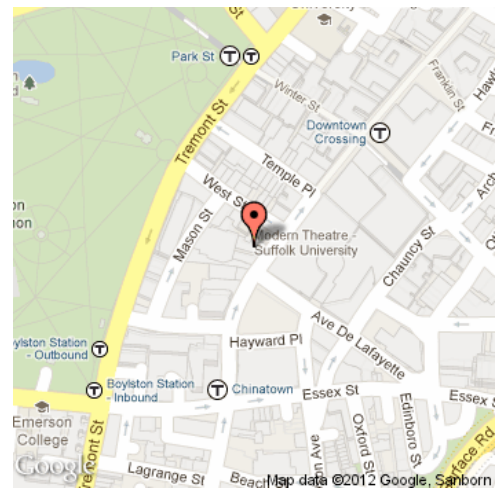
CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

As a girl, Van Dyke sometimes asked her grandmother what had happened to her back then.

“She would start to say, ‘We were deported,’ and then she would stop there, and she could never go on,” says Van Dyke, whose play will have its first full production at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, beginning Thursday. “So that word just hung there in the air and kind of haunted me my whole growing-up time. I only knew shadowy bits and pieces of that story, because [the family] never talked about it.”

Elmas and Varter were “deported” with their children from the city of Mezireh and sent on foot across the harsh desert, amid much violence and cruelty. Elmas had three children, Varter seven. All were dead or lost to them by the time the two women eventually reached safety in Aleppo, now part of Syria.

In 1920, the two women sailed together for the United States, where each married an



[Larger map / directions](#) →

DEPORTED / A DREAM PLAY

525 Washington St., Boston MA 866-811-4111.

Presenting organizations: Boston Playwrights’ Theatre

Date of first performance: March 8

Date closing: April 1

Ticket price: \$40

Company website:

<http://www.bostonplaywrights.org>

Armenian man and had one more child.

Varter, who lived in Worcester, had various health problems, which her son attributes to the events of 1915, and died in 1929 at age 44. Elmas, who lived in Providence and later in Fresno, Calif., died in her sleep in 1977 at 92, without having told her granddaughter any more of her story.

“I didn’t ask that often, because you could tell it was very painful,” Van Dyke says. “If I had known I was going to become a playwright, I probably would have tried a lot harder to ask her about it. Of course, when you’re young, you think you have all the time in the world to ask these things.”

Flash-forward to 2003, and a performance at New Repertory Theatre of Van Dyke’s play “A Girl’s War,” a contemporary Armenian story. An older gentleman came up to her in the lobby and introduced himself: Deranian, Varter’s son. They had heard of each other, but never met.

“He said, ‘You know, your grandmother and my mother were very close friends, and they had been deported together . . . and I think you should write a play about them,’” Van Dyke recalls.

“I had always said I’m not going to write a play about the genocide, it is too hard, it is too difficult, it is too painful,” she says. “I put him off when he said I should do it. But he is a very, very, very persistent and very, very, very sweet man, and he just kept calling me up and sending me things in the mail. And after a while I guess I couldn’t resist any longer.”

That dialogue played out over “several years in which I shared with her what I had, and we bonded,” says Deranian. “I went to the play hoping that I could open a door with her and share what I had.”

What he had was her grandmother’s story. He had gotten Elmas to talk - or, rather, his emissary had. A clergyman who knew the women back in Armenia had settled in California, and in the 1960s went to Fresno at Deranian’s behest to see Elmas and ask her about Varter. And for once, she talked. The clergyman sent Deranian a written account of her story, along with a short “biography” of Varter that she’d written for him. Deranian passed copies along to Van Dyke.

“My grandmother, who would never tell her own story . . . told the story of what happened to Varter, and because she was there at the time, she ended up inadvertently telling things that happened to her also,” Van Dyke says. “When Martin gave me this, I suddenly had a story about what happened to my grandmother. . . . I had this amazing story about these two women and what they’d gone through.”

In 2007, Van Dyke finally began to assemble the play in collaboration with director Judy Braha, who is directing the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre production. The script skips through space and time and memory, summoning the past sometimes with no more than a scrap of lace drifting down through the spotlights.

“Writing the play is a way for me of carrying on that conversation with [Elmas], about things I was never able to ask in real life,” says Van Dyke.

“My goal was to share this terrible, terrible story and bring it to attention, so that it wouldn’t happen again,” Deranian says. “We who are the children of the survivors, it’s difficult for us to do this, but it’s a moral imperative for me to see that I do address these issues as long as I am alive, in a constructive manner.”

Deranian, who still practices dentistry in his Worcester office, has published several books, including a history of Worcester’s Armenian community that ends with a chapter on his mother. He has attended readings and workshop productions of “Deported,” and will be there on opening night.

“Can you imagine what it was like for me to sit in an audience and see an actress portray my mother?” Deranian says. “Who would have ever thought that this would come to fruition? Joyce and I think that her grandmother and my mother are up there, pulling strings.”

Strindberg and Swellegance

The Harvard Strindberg Symposium we told you about recently happens today and tomorrow with staged readings, workshops, lectures, and screenings. Events take place primarily in Barker Center, 12 Quincy St., Cambridge, on the Harvard campus. All are free and open to the public. A complete schedule is at

www.scandinavianstudiesharvard.com/site/Strindberg.html.

Also of note: Tickets are on sale for the 2012 Swellegance Gala Benefit with Tony Award winner Chita Rivera performing her concert, “Chita Rivera: My Broadway,” at

the Citi Performing Arts Center Shubert Theatre on May 4 at 8 p.m. All proceeds go to Boston Youth Moves, a nonprofit, after-school arts education program. Tickets, \$45-\$250 (the latter including a VIP party), are available at 866-348-9738, www.citicenter.org, and the box office.

Joel Brown can be reached at jbnbpt@gmail.com

© 2012 THE NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY