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the leslie bates interview: "east side story"  
commentary by patsy moore published 8 august 2006

Very soon—on the evenings of August 24 and 25, to be exact—Hollywood's John Anson Ford Amphitheatre

a diverse group of Europeans and Asians found themselves inextricably bound by the common threads of human experience. Said transformation will occur because of "East Side Story", a dance-theatre production adapted, choreographed and directed by the renowned Aysun Aslan and made possible, in part, by Los Angeles-based film production company, uniCvisions. will be magically transformed into the 1970s Cholera District of Istanbul, where.

Recently, I asked uniCvisions CEO, writer/producer Leslie Bates, to elaborate on this forthcoming ambitious and timeless tragicomedy, sure to bring new color and vista to the Western stage.

**PATSY MOORE:** My understanding is that this is a joint effort of the **Turkish Ministry of Culture**; the **Los Angeles County Arts Commission**; and your company, uniCvisions. Can you tell us how this troika originated?

**LESLIE BATES:** A friend came to visit, on business from Turkey. She wanted to do something to introduce Turkish cultural events to the American audience. Since her business, here in Los Angeles, wasn't actually in the Arts industry, she passed it to us. Of all the projects she had, the one that interested us (me and my husband/business partner, aClan) most was "East Side Story". But it required a huge venue, and we had *no* budget. Then, I saw that the Ford Amphitheatre had a grant program, their **Summer Season Program**. The Los Angeles County Arts Commission provides the venue, lighting, publicity, ticketing and a lot of help. I submitted a proposal and a DVD of the Turkish production, and was thrilled beyond words when the eMail came saying that we had won. But, then, we had to find the money to bring 50 dancers to the States! This is where the Ministry of Culture came in. They agreed to provide the hotel money and the per diems, if we could find the airfares. The Prime Minister's Promotion and Publicity Fund bailed us out at the zero hour by buying the tickets!

**PM:** First came the book by Metin Kacan, then a big screen adaptation—*Agir Roman* (or *Heavy Novel*). Had you read **Kacan's work** or seen [Mustafa] Altıoklar's film, upon which "East Side Story" is based?

**LB:** First, although the very literal translation of "Agir Roman" is 'Heavy Novel', the actual colloquial translation is "Dangerous Gypsy"; anyone who sees the production will immediately see the tie. Several years ago, our director, Aysun Aslan, read the novel and immediately started picturing the movements in her head. But it took years of preparation to [have them] come to fruition, the first performance taking place three years ago, long after Mustafa's film. As you know, it can be even more difficult to get support for performance art than for film.



**PM:** In your opinion, were there aspects of the book and/or film that lent them easily, inherently, to an operatic interpretation?

**LB:** The film is a completely different, grittier interpretation of the novel, although brilliantly conceived. Aysun wanted to stay with the story contained in the book and place it in the Cholera District, staying more true to life. After all, dance theatre requires that the audience be able to follow the story, without the luxury of dialogue. Telling a story that the audience can relate to makes for a more successful performance.

**PM:** Many have an antiquated and rather romantic idea of Turkey. "East Side Story" has a different, more modern tale to tell, doesn't it?

**LB:** Turkey's image varies. If you ask 20 people on the street what they think about Turkey, all 20 will mention *Midnight Express*, and then you'll get 20 different ideas of what kind of country and society it is. Many believe it's still the land of Oriental art from the **Ottoman period**; some think that, since it *is* a majority Moslem population, it has a religious government and a fundamentalist population; some think that it's filled with nomads and camels, and the various ideas go on. All of these are false. "East Side Story" shows life in **Istanbul** in the '70s, in an area where several different ethnicities, though all Turks, live, love and work together—not unlike the major cities of the United States or Europe. Istanbul is probably one of the *most* beautiful cities of Europe—literally. Half of the city sits on the European side of the **Bosphorous** and half on the Asian side.

**PM:** I've attended events at the Ford Amphitheatre—none on as large a scale as yours promises to be. Is this, in fact, among the biggest productions that Ford has hosted?

**LB:** At first, although we were awarded the grant, even the Ford was skeptical about how we were going to put on such a large show. However, we're building out the upper level of the stage and using even the hill *behind* the stage for scenery. It's really one of the most inspiring venues I've seen. And, yes, this is *definitely* one of their largest productions ever.



**PM:** Beyond the apparent artistic merits of this production, do *you* see "East Side Story" as an opportunity for the advancement of Turkish expression and culture, here in the U.S.? How important is that to you? To uniCvisions?

**LB:** Over the last couple of years...well...since *9/11*, we've seen a great deal of misinformation on television regarding Turks and Turkey. Unfortunately, because of the location of the country—sharing borders with several not-so-nice Middle Eastern countries—TV and film writers depict Turks as being of the same culture as [those of] their neighboring countries. Turkish doesn't even *resemble* Arabic, although a couple of [Arabic] words are used to express things like exasperation and anger. uniCvisions is, in reality, a film production company, and we decided, a few years ago, that the best way to rectify this misinformation is not by writing letters to studio executives, but by making films and doing shows that *show* the truth, not just talk about it. This is extremely important to us, and we've been taking great risks in order to bring it to fruition—both personal and financial.

**PM:** This is a big deal: We have Aysun Aslan, a leading name in the still relatively new arena of Turkish modern dance, acting as director and choreographer; **Fahir Atakoglu**, one of Turkey's most celebrated musicians/composers contributing the score; all of this being performed by the **Istanbul Opera and Ballet**, which is known for taking on ambitious projects. Of course, opera is, by nature, ambitious, drawing not only from story, words and music and—in this case—dance, but from the painting, scenery and sculpture essential to creating visual spectacle. In preparing for your run, later this month, have you had a sense of the weight, the potential significance of such an extensive and visionary collaborative effort, or have you primarily been steeped in the challenges and logistical nightmares that these types of undertakings tend to present?

**LB:** This is easy. We *immediately* knew the importance of such a production; and, based upon that, we agreed to *take on* the logistical nightmares—and, I must say, there have been some *incredible* ones. Some are ongoing. Bringing 50 dancers from a Moslem country, no matter how mixed a group it is, is *not* an easy task in this post-9/11 world.