



**Dramatic intent:** Mehmet Ergen is hoping to make the Arcola central to plans for a 2012 cultural Olympiad

# Best little theatre in London

**M**EHMET Ergen's motto, if he has one, is probably: "Why not?" The 42-year-old Turkish director set out from Istanbul for London 20 years ago, never doubting that a complete inability to speak English would hamper his planned acting career. He ended up creating first Southwark Playhouse and, after losing control of that venue, the Arcola Theatre in Dalston. In each case he turned an empty industrial building into an artistic destination defined by excellence and eclecticism, and anticipated the regeneration of a neglected area. And now, he speaks better English than I do.

Over eight years at the Arcola, as well as winning countless artistic plaudits, he has secured funding and proper staffing levels ("we have handrails and disabled lifts and everything now"), and the support of local people (60 per cent of his audience, speaking 86 languages) for whom he also provides youth and OAP groups, video workshops and so on.

Following on from his pioneering season of Turkish over last year, this June he will bring over several leading companies from his homeland. "But we will probably only sign the deal in May — in Turkey we only think one month ahead," he says.

His work at the Arcola has embraced themed German and Russian seasons, collaborations with Oxford Stage Company and Out of Joint and a revival — apt for this former sewing machine factory — of the rag trade musical *We Can Get It For You Wholesale*, with a cast of 40.

Right now, Ergen is working to make the place carbon-neutral by installing hydrogen fuel cell and solar technology, and preparing to open Hannah Eidinov's production of *The Lady from the Sea*, starring Lia Williams. This is the follow-up to his own acclaimed staging of *An Enemy of the People* with Greg Hicks, in a season of Ibsen plays newly translated by leading play-

Mehmet Ergen has built Dalston's Arcola into a buzzing fringe venue that attracts big names. Now, he says, it's time to expand

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wrights and performed by a high-calibre ensemble. Oh, and next month he opens Arcola Istanbul, which will transfer productions to and from its London sister. Why not?

"I can't help it," says Ergen. "I can't walk past a derelict factory without wanting to turn it into a theatre. I was paid quite well for a couple of long-running shows in Istanbul last year, so I took the lease for a year on a lorry assembly line built by Ford in the 1950s, right in the middle of town."

He will open it with Rebecca Gilman's *Boy Gets Girl* as part of the Istanbul International Theatre Festival and hopes that this stalker drama will shake things up. "We don't have a tradition of social-realist playwriting in Turkey," he says. "People are more concerned with form than content, which needs to change: people need to talk about things."

Such things, Ergen has said in the past, include taboo subjects like homosexuality, terrorism and shameful events in his country's history such as the 1919 massacre of Turkey's Armenian minority — even though the notorious rule 310 outlaws "criticising Turkishness" and has been used to mount prosecutions against novelists Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak.

"Oh, you can get round that," says Ergen blithely. "You just have one character criticising Turkey and another who beats him up for doing it."

He remains fiercely proud of his home country, especially of the secular, urban younger generation, which he believes

will have far greater sway over Turkey's future than resurgent, rural Islamic conservatism. When I ask if he considers himself a Muslim, he replies: "Muslim? Nah, Marxist Leninist. I never cared for religion. But maybe it'd help if I mentioned it in a letter — if I said to [National Theatre director] Nick Hytner: 'Hey, you've never had a Muslim director in this theatre, have me,' it'd help me get a slot. Otherwise, I wouldn't mention it." He's joking. I think.

Having always felt a bit of an outsider — he says no one was interested in incorporating Middle Eastern or Mediterranean culture into theatre before 9/11 — Ergen is now surprisingly close to the mainstream. Yes, he says, he could probably get Hytner on the phone if he wanted. And yes, given the proximity of Hackney to the 2012 Olympic site, he is talking to those planning the cultural Olympiad alongside the games about involving the Arcola.

The theatre itself is now smarter as

well as greener, without having lost its appealing rough edges and "found space" mystique. Ergen is negotiating with his landlords about extending into the upper part of the building, giving the low-ceilinged auditorium more height. Or, if the owners won't play ball, moving the Arcola to a bigger venue.

"It's not about size or big star names," he says. "We are still part of the middle range of 200 to 300-seat theatres, which keep the canon of theatrical literature alive — Brecht, Ibsen, Tennessee Williams. But as we have grown, people have come to expect certain standards from us. And although we will never be as posh as the Almeida, we now pay actors the same as they do."

Having conned people into believing he was a "famous Turkish director" when he first arrived in London aged 20, Ergen went back to Istanbul brandishing the three Peter Brook Empty Space awards he had won at Southwark and the Arcola. "I was treated like some kind of hero and

given these massive revolving stages at the national theatres, million-dollar budgets. I did a new musical I commissioned with 65 people in it, just because, having been successful in London, they assumed I knew how to do these things. So when I came back here I said, 'Right, we have to make some changes.'"

With funding secured, the theatre now employs 11 people full-time, including a production team who have taken over all the administrative duties, and a bar manager (which means the bar now makes a profit for the first time, unlike when Mehmet ran it). As artistic director, he himself now earns a basic wage for the first time in his career: back in the early days, he lived illegally in Southwark Playhouse to save on rent.

"When I'm directing, I still find it hard to leave the theatre," he says. "And I'm still not used to money. We were discussing an extra 10 grand for the budget of *Enemy of the People* and I was thinking, 'Ten grand? I set up Southwark Playhouse for £2,000.'"

But a certain amount of stability is welcome now, as Ergen has other responsibilities beyond the Arcola and his European theatre.

"I got married last year," he says, looking slightly bemused. "Her name's Esra Bezen Bilgin and she's one of the best actresses in Turkey. She played the Rachel Weisz part for me in Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* in Istanbul last year and won every best actress award."

Does this mean he will be spending more time in Istanbul and less in London, I ask. "I don't know," he replies, again, looking nonplussed. "Thing is, she's pregnant. And it's twins. And they're due in October. Two theatres. Two countries. Two kids. I don't know what will happen. I just have a vision of the two of them sleeping in a basket in a dressing room somewhere." Why not?

■ *The Lady from the Sea* previews from tonight at the Arcola Theatre (020 7503 1646, [www.arcolatheatre.com](http://www.arcolatheatre.com)).



**High calibre:** Greg Hicks in Ergen's recent production of *An Enemy of the People*, part of his ambitious Ibsen season