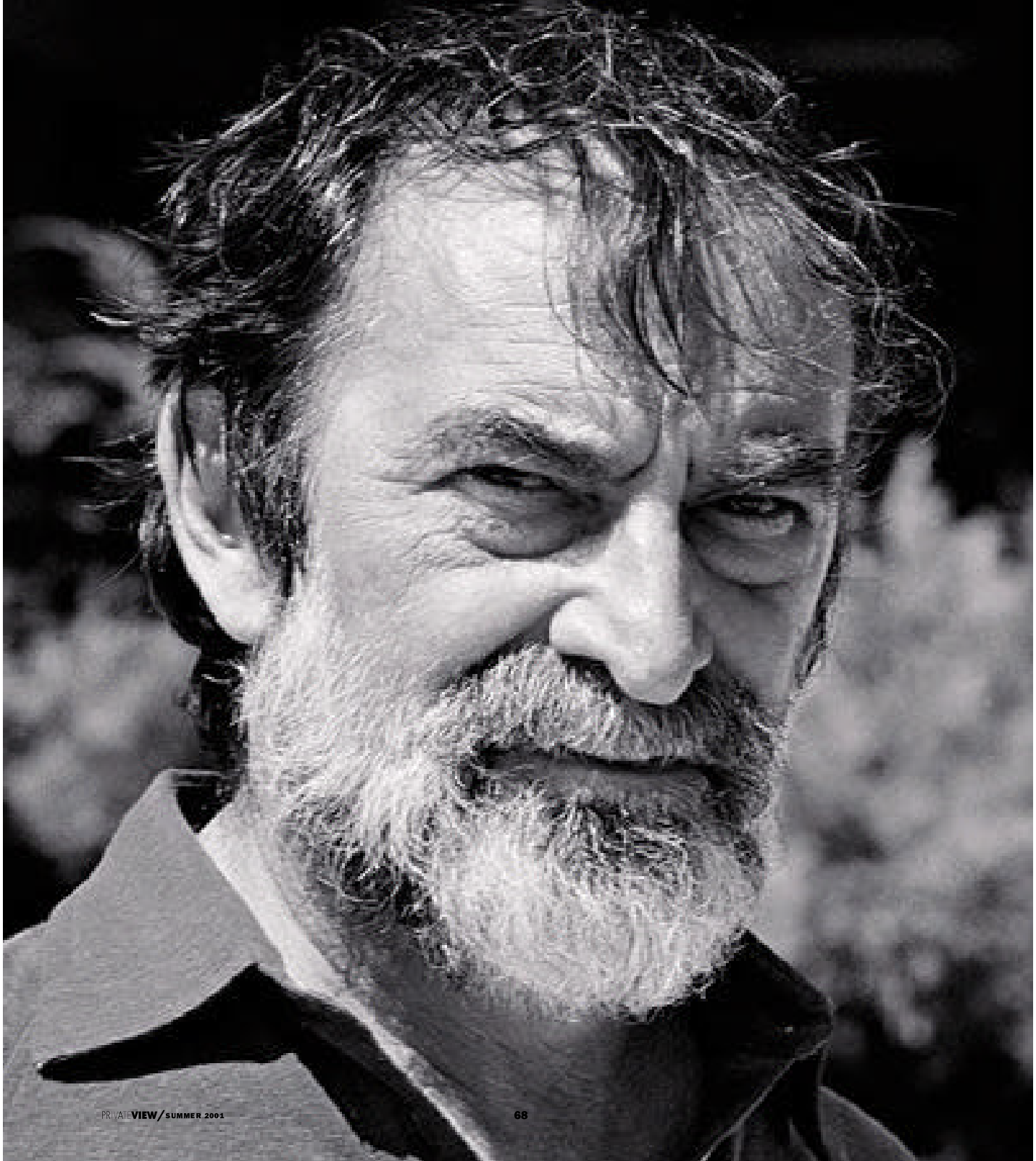


spotlight

A R E N A I S S A N C E M A N



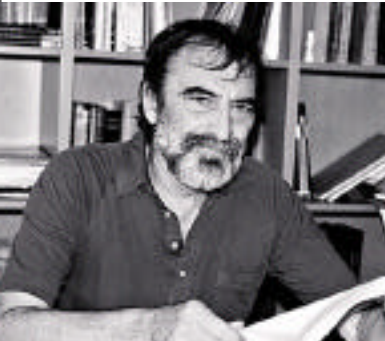
M U R A T B E L G E

Lucky is the person that discovers a refined intellect, a sophisticated political commitment, a deep engagement with culture and the arts in the same friend who crowns versatility with wit. When I boast of my friendship with Murat Belge, I know that I am boasting of the privilege of having enjoyed all of these riches for over twenty years.

Those who lived through the turbulent years of the Turkish history between 1970 and 2000 that witnessed two military coups, a despairing decline in democratic principles notwithstanding the heart-rending violations of human rights, owe a great debt to a handful of intellectuals who stood firm. Murat Belge is one of them. Neither the two-year political imprisonment he suffered following the 1971 military coup, nor the university law that was passed after the 1980 coup discouraged Murat or led him to give up the cause of democracy. To the first, he responded by founding the political journal *Birikim* that became a forum of sophisticated discussion encompassing a variety of subjects from politics to literature and the arts. To the second, he retaliated by resigning from the university and launching the agenda for civic action through the bi-weekly *Yeni Gündem*.

As he stated in his book *Socialism, Turkey and the Future*, Murat Belge believed that the first and foremost commitment of all men and women is to transform the world and to uphold the democratic principles that will ensure the direction of that transformation toward equality. Marked with discerning impartiality, his political writings in *Birikim* and

*Yeni Gündem*, as well as the newspapers *Politika*, *Demokrat*, *Cumhuriyet* and *Radikal*; his books on Turkish Politics (*Socialism, Turkey and the Future*; *What is Turkey's place in the world?*; *12 September: 12 years later*) reiterated unflinching commitment to freedom of speech and resistance to political oppression and exploitation. His books on cultural



anthropology (*The historical and the mundane*) and literary theory (*Marxist Aesthetics*), although seemingly remote from current political issues, are conceived within the same framework of judicious political commitment of a very refined intellectual to all things human. So when Murat became the chairman of Helsinki Citizens Assembly during 1995-96, the European community for citizen action could not have claimed a more enthusiastic and experienced spokesman to promote its principles in an international arena.

The inexhaustible energy with which Murat performs all these tasks do not make him sacrifice one bit of that *joie de vivre* which brightens his life and that of his friends. A blue cruise with Murat Belge has many more colors than just the blue. One has to be there

to witness the pleasure he takes in gathering friends around a table on which is laid exquisite food, and, of course, drinks. On land he generously shares his wide knowledge about historical sites as he takes friends for walks in the heat of the Mediterranean sun. Those who do not have the stamina to follow him through with such sightseeing nevertheless become addicted to these voyages inspired by the energy that radiates from so enthusiastic a guide. And Murat transforms himself from a fisherman in the morning to a local guide at noon, a cook in the afternoon and a host in the evening. He enters into these roles naturally and elegantly provided he is not stung by a bee. Being very allergic to that species, he gets terribly swollen and incapacitated for a day or two to which inconvenience he resigns himself with the wisdom of a man who will take from nature what it chances to offer.

And I don't know when and how he spares the time, but he has recorded all these experiences in publications as diverse as guide books, anecdotal narratives, and even a historical account of cooking.

In 1995, Murat started a Comparative Literature department at Bilgi University, the first undergraduate program in Turkey that offers a degree in this discipline. If comparing literatures is comparing cultures, it is gratifying, for such fellow comparatists as I am, that the program should be founded by one who has made cultural exchange and interaction, non-academic engagement as well as scholarly thinking a life-long pursuit.

Essay by Jale Parla • Photographs by Taşo Toprakidis