I ASK YOU, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN (excerpt)

By LEON Z. SURMELIAN
Adapted by Yehuda Hyman
For Cornerstone Theater Company

What you are about to read is an adaptation of Leon Z. Surmelian’s novel, “I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen.” The novel was adapted for Cornerstone Theater’s “Literature to Life” program. Yehuda Hyman and Cornerstone Theater Company were participants in the Theatre Residency Program for Playwrights, a project of the National Endowment for the Arts and Theatre Communications Group.

The play was performed by one actor, a shadow puppeteer, and a musician.

“I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen” was published in 1945. Permission to adapt this work was granted by the estate of Leon Z. Surmelian and executor Torkom Postajian.

“...Leon Z. Surmelian came out of the old country to America, and proceeded to mend the wrecked legend of his life.
This book tells the story of that mending.
It is a story without hate, for hate and death are partners, and this is a story of life.”

- William Saroyan
(From introduction to the novel)
(The stage is the poet's space.
There is a giant piece of paper - a canvas to write on. There is a writing instrument, a pen or perhaps it's a paintbrush.
There is also a SCREEN OF MEMORY - images appear and disappear.
A man enters. Tentative. Is he ready to tell this? He is in his forties, neatly dressed in a suit.)

LEON: Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Leon Surmelian.

I am an arrogant Armenian.

(He smiles. Armenian music. He takes off his suit jacket, rolls up his sleeves. He picks up the pen and paints/writes words in Armenian characters-big bold letters.
He finishes, points at the words. He speaks them in Armenian, then translates into English:)

LEON: “INTRODUCTION TO MORTALITY”

(The lights change. The music dims - he begins his story:)

LEON: One morning, when I was eight years old, my Uncle Harutiun came back from Paris.

He had a small pointed beard, like a French artist’s and a mysterious bundle of manuscripts which I regarded with awe. It was the year 1911. Outside, the pomegranates were bursting with crimson joy in the gardens of Trebizond and a warm wind blew from the sea, but it seemed
Uncle Harutiun was very tired and needed rest. My mother took him upstairs and put him to bed in a sunny room. He never came out of that bed. He lay there, like Jesus. Sometimes I found him writing in bed. I was half-consciously aware of the fact that Uncle Harutiun was a poet. He made altogether an extraordinary impression on me.

In a few months, he was reduced to skin and bones.

God did not call back the angel of death.

Uncle Harutiun was the first person I had seen die. I asked my brother, Onnik, two and a half years older than I, many questions about death.

(Note: ZAVEN is LEON’s name as a child)

ZAVEN: Onnik, do you mean to say that Father and Mother will die too, that you and I also will die?

ONNIK: Yes, Zaven, Father and Mother, you and I, all of us, everybody will die some day.

ZAVEN: I’ll never die