

Professional Developments in the Uzbek Theatre Scenography

Dilafroz Kadirova

Doctor of Art History, Professor, National institute Fine Arts and Desing after named Kamoliddin Behzad

Abstract: In this article, the author analyzes the development of the Uzbek theater scenography using the performances of the 1920s and 1930s as an example. The author studies the artistic design of the performances, the gradual acquisition of acting skills and stage culture of the European model, that is, work with large texts, theatrical vocabulary, stage speech and diction, etc. The author studies the methods and practice of using scenery, stage equipment, costumes and makeup when creating images. The studio members, referring to the traditions of Russian and world theater and examples of performing arts, sought to create their own national stage culture, a unified direction and new theatrical aesthetics. The artists who worked on the stage scenery closely collaborated with the directors, bringing their creative searches to life.

Keywords: theater, stage, theatrical decoration, scenography, directing, artist, actor, embodiment, interpretation, stage space.

In the 1920s, theatre and drama practitioners in the republic began to be aware of the absence of stylistic integrity and clear guidelines for acting, scenery, costumes and the use of music, having recognized certain shallowness and eclecticism. These ideas were most boldly expressed in articles and reviews by critics who encouraged a thorough learning of the art of drama. As the audiences grew more sophisticated, they were no longer content with amateur or even semi-professional theatre culture.

Time required that the art of drama become professional and that theatre workers study in a specialist school to acquire knowledge and skills. This prompted the idea of having motivated and talented young people trained in the cities of Moscow and Baku. In its implementation, the role of the Uzbek Drama Studio (1924-1927) operating at the Bukhara Education Centre in Moscow was particularly significant. The work was initiated and spearheaded by government official Fayzulla Khodjaev (1896-1938). Director, actor and playwright Mannon Uygur (1897-1955) was persistently searching for potential students throughout Uzbekistan, engaging Russian actors familiar with Uzbek drama in teaching work; by and large, he enthusiastically participated in the teaching process, piece selection, production and performing in major cities such as Samarkand, Tashkent, and Bukhara during studio vacations.

The studio made seven stage productions: "The Miser" (Moliere), "The Watchman's Dream" (a pantomime in eight acts based on a script by L. N. Sverdlin), "Getting Married Again" (a play by Chulpan based on a story by Yusufjon Kizik), "Princess Turandot" (K. Gozzi), "The Inspector General" (N. V. Gogol), "Echo" (V. N. Bill-Belotserkovsky), and "Yorkinoy" (Chulpan). While working on these pieces in the genres of comedy, pantomime, stage fairy tale, publicistic and musical drama, the students gradually mastered acting skills and stage culture of the European model, working with large texts, theatre vocabulary, stage speech and diction, etc. They also studied methods and practices of using set and stage equipment, costumes and makeup in creating characters.

Art and design in "The Miser" was a thorough exploration of ways to represent lifestyle in the seventeenth century France, being also true for costume and make-up. Harpagon, the lead character, appears on stage and addresses the audience, looking for his servant. Actors S. Eshonturaeva and Sh.

Kayumov are sitting in the third row of the auditorium, made up and wearing appropriate costumes; leaning on one another, they appear to be dozing off. “Awakened” by the voice of Harpagon, they jump up and climb onto the stage. The action begins. The production art and design was noted for its historical authenticity; apparently, there was an attempt at exaggerating the characters’ costume and make-up. The engagement of the auditorium in the *mise-en-scène* destroying the ‘fourth wall’ spoke of the interesting finds in professional set design and use of stage dimension.

The performing excellence of Uzbek artists developed as they worked on “Princess Turandot” and “The Inspector General”, the latter adapted under the title “Tergovchi” (“The Inquisitor”).

For the “Princess Turandot” production (premiered on October 31, 1927) the studio company teamed with Ruben N. Simonov (1899-1968), director of the Vakhtangov Theatre, who leveraged the support of his colleagues, Iosif M. Tolchanov (1891-1981) and Osip N. Basov (1892-1934). Simonov was in a way influenced by the grotesque style “Princess Turandot” production staged by the renowned director Yevgeny B. Vakhtangov (1883-1922), the influence manifest not only in the character interpretation, but also in the set design. Simonov noted: “In our interpretation of the “Princess Turandot” we almost unwaveringly followed the approach of the Vakhtangov Theatre. Character interpretation also remained unchanged. At the same time, I sought to introduce features characteristic of the Uzbek nation and identify traits typical of the Uzbeks” (1, p. 134). The play was accompanied by music performed on traditional instruments and included interludes representing lifestyle in Uzbekistan at that time – these were performed by the show hosts wearing the masks of Harlequin, Brighella, Truffaldino, and Tartaglia.

The stage was a platform gently sloping towards the auditorium, with a wall, a gate and a balcony behind it; there was a window under the balcony. Actors on the platform changed the set themselves and changed their costumes without dropping the curtain, making of it a vivid and entertaining mockery show. Acting, property, masks and make-up, along with the lines, served to create the types of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*.

The play got mixed reviews. In an article titled ‘Princess Turandot’ (*Enlightenment and Teacher* magazine, No. 5, 1927) Chulpan wrote: “This is a game. Therefore, the actors (except for comedians) are not wearing full stage costumes and makeup. They appear in their usual clothing and then, in front of the audience, attach assorted pieces of fabric becoming to look a little like a Chinese fairy tale characters... just a little! We, the audience, can easily recognize Uygur playing the part of “Altaum”, actors Abror and Khodjikul as “prince”, Tursun as “the girl”, Sora, Zamira, Bakhriniso and others”.

With a note of disappointment, Turgunboy writes about the incomprehensibility of the performance style for the local audience (‘Princess Turandot’, *Qizil Uzbekiston* newspaper, No. 915, January 16, 1928): “Vakhtangov was one of the strongest and most renowned art directors in Moscow. Having sensed that people were tired of the real life tragedy in the times of bloody war and civil conflicts, of famine and calamities, he could no longer stand any tragedy and began to enliven drama pieces with satire and humour, which was very well received by the Moscow audiences... Certainly, for the Muscovites satiated with drama, thirsting for show diversity and seeking novelty and burlesque on a daily basis, this kind of style proved appropriate. However, for the local audience who have not yet satisfied their need for drama that represents real life, who want to see the bitter existential truth on stage and learn their lessons, these shows are probably premature”.

While working on “The Inspector General” comedy (premiered on June 29, 1926), Uzbek actors mastered the methods of creating stage characters. According to Mannon Uygur, the production “paved the way for the studio participants’ professional development, liberating them from declamation pomposity and melodramatics” (2, p. 20). It also helped harness improvisational urges of actors such as Khodja Siddiq Islamov, teaching them to carefully interpret parts, listen to their stage partners and work as an ensemble (3).

While in “Princess Turandot” set and costumes were conventionally generalized and makeup exaggerated, then in “The Inspector General” these are executed in a realistic style. Costumes, facial features and wigs – everything matched the types of noblemen and government officials in a small mid-nineteenth century town described by Nikolai Gogol. Uzbek actors succeeded in creating Russian characters from that historical period. The atmosphere of the time is well translated through the use of narration and simultaneous [*multiple scenery*] stage.

Writing for *Zarafshon* newspaper, critic Abu Munshir made note of these qualities in the play with pride and amazement: “... the dynamism of the action and speech along with harmonious accord in the actors’ movements were apparent right from the start and remained as appealing until the end. It was impossible to recognize the actors by their voices. Watching them act, it was hard to believe they were Uzbeks. Their conduct, appearance, ease of manner and communication were flawless” (4). The performers connected so well with their characters that it was hard to identify their ethnicity, much less who they were! Besides “voices” (speech style and intonation) or “actions” (behaviour) mentioned by Abu Munshir, also important for the character presentation were costumes and facial expression. This is what the critic had in mind using the word “appearance” when speaking about the success factors of the play.

The studio folk learned from the experience of Konstantin S. Stanislavsky and Yevgeny B. Vakhtangov. The students mastered realistic style of acting, psychological theatre, and the making of an integral character, both within and without, following the teachings of Stanislavsky. At the same time, through the Vakhtangov showy drama style with its vivid hyperbole, improvisation, enthusiasm and emotional charge, the actors were able to communicate serious ideas with playful ease and inspiration, employing pantomime and body language. Besides, the studio members were familiar with the discoveries made by the 20th century reformers of drama, namely Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874–1940) and Alexander Y. Tairov (1885–1950). Uzbek artists were interested in the experiments conducted by these directors following the principles of “conventional theatre” and “emotional drama” in acting, theatre process, stage dimension and set design.

Meyerhold believed that stage dimension should be capable of transformation in every aspect; in width and height and in the lower section, stage should be completely open, its floor and ceiling be not flat but three-dimensional. Productions by the famous director subordinated to conventional and poetic symbols, and the leading role belonged to stylized pictorial and ornamental design. Chulpan wrote an article entitled “The Theatre of Meyerhold” (January 1927) commissioned by the *Er Yuzi* magazine. It reads: “Meyerhold has earned praise ... as ‘the classic of Russian drama’, while his opponents criticize his work calling it ‘a mistake made by one of the greatest educators’”.

Efforts Meyerhold invested in nurturing a new stage culture in his theatre are described by Chulpan as follows: “Perhaps, his energy and initiative resulted in the emergence of new principles in this theatre. One of them is that the art of drama is not free from politics and serves the interests of the working class that took power in the country. Another new principle concerned stage arrangement. Apparently, there was an intent to use simple objects to create an easy and economical scenery, as opposed to opulent stage set. This was also a political move, as the simple stage was intended for ordinary people who constituted the majority of the population”. Chulpan refers to the Meyerhold Theatre as “the actor’s theatre” highlighting “stage simplification” as its second core principle. Chulpan wrote: “We do need the simplicity of this theatre, we need its nearness to the masses. Some elements of local traditional drama can be found there, too. That is the reason why our new theatre cannot escape it ... It may well be that the Moscow-based Uzbek Drama Studio has taken the first step in this direction”.

At the same time, an article about stage design in “*Tergovchi*” reads (the Uzbek language adaptation of “The Inspector General” comedy by Gogol was produced by the studio with Meyerhold’s assistance): “One would not err to say that several thousand roubles were spent on the “*Tergovchi*”

set. All the costumes were made of high-quality materials, women's dresses were made entirely of silk, and accessories were as rich as in the movies. Formerly, the Meyerhold theatre stage had no curtain, no set, no lighting. In "Tergovchi", the curtain turned into a wall". If in other plays Meyerhold aspired for conventionality, for this production he designed the stage in keeping with the instructions of his teacher Konstantin S. Stanislavsky (1863–1938).

In the *Qizil Uzbekiston* newspaper article (No. 149, July 5, 1926), Ziyoy Saeed offered his characteristic of Meyerhold: "He introduced innovations not only in the content of drama, but also in its form. He openly declared that from the 17th century, theatre and circus drifted apart, the former becoming dependent on the palace, embellishing and ennobling life, cladding it in silk, and that it was imperative to bring manufacturing onto the stage". In other words, Meyerhold criticized the dependence of theatre on aristocracy, which resulted in excessive embellishment of reality on stage. Bringing "manufacturing" on stage is the key idea of Meyerhold reflecting the desire to bring theatre closer to the real life of the working class. "Manufacturing" here may refer to both the depiction of labour processes and the use of actual industry elements in stage design.

The studio folk, turning to the Russian and world theatre traditions and performing art samples, sought to create their own national stage culture, one single vector and new drama aesthetics. In the process of establishing a new theatre based on the European model, the studio trainees were exposed to the influence of different drama styles and trends. They attended productions by Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold and Tairov in Russian theatres of the capital city and learned to work with makeup, costume, set and property. For instance, director Tairov believed that stage space should be devoid of flat lines and the show events should unfold along several horizontally aligned three-dimensional levels of different height. In a space free from the square of stage and pavilion set, an actor can demonstrate his skills more vibrantly. These experiments excited keen interest among the Uzbek trainees at the studio.

"Princess Turandot" and "The Inspector General" were repeatedly staged in the 1930s at the Hamza Theatre that toured the provinces with these productions founded in the stage culture and acting excellence attained at the Moscow Studio. The styles of these shows were established as two important vectors in Uzbek drama of the 1930s.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the Hamza Theatre employing graduates of the Moscow and Baku studios and members of a Samarkand-based theatre company experienced difficulties in its operation. Its new art director V. V. Tikhonovich did not know the company well and had different managing style; he was later substituted in this position by V. S. Witt.

Tikhonovich introduces the technique of orientalization (or Uzbekization) of Western drama in the production of "The Servant of Two Masters" comedy by the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni. The production demonstrates the lifestyle of the Uzbeks; 'Italians' wearing Uzbek costumes eat local food, drink tea from traditional *piala* cups and sing folk songs to the accompaniment of traditional instruments. The production art and design was also made in the ethnic style appreciated by the audience of that time (5). In other words, Tikhonovich took the way of "Princess Turandot" rather than of "The Inspector General". In the history of the theatre, the work of Tikhonovich was condemned as formalistic, although his intentions were genuine.

Tikhonovich believed that the audience might have better understanding if translated pieces by Western and European playwrights were "orientalised" in the Uzbek style productions employing traditional instruments, costumes and rituals. Information gained from the sources of that time suggests that the audiences being new to the European style stage culture preferred to see the plays telling about their own lives. Most of the studio productions created by people who went through professional training in the new stage culture were received enthusiastically, although some of them were not easy to understand. One reason might be that those who laid the foundations of the new type drama had not

yet made a final decision on the style and development vector of the Uzbek theatre. A mistake Tikhonovich made was his belief that “orientalization” was the only correct method for the Uzbek theatre.

Tikhonovich was not alone in this belief. In the “Khujum” production (based on the play by V. Yan and Chulpan, premiered on August 21, 1928) Mannon Uygur also used conventionality and grotesque. The play included elements of an entertaining show characteristic of the Uzbek traditional theatre, and the actors extensively employed conventional means of expression. The characters of the ishan, the healer, the executive committee chairman, as well as those of the teahouse owner, the barber, the tinker, the drug user, the panegyrist singer, the profiteer, the middleman, the followers of the ishan and his disciples were exaggerated and grotesque. Music played the lead role, which is why the production was called a “musical buffoonery”.

The production by Uygur not only complied with political requirements of time, but also followed the trends in the Uzbek theatre evolution. The Uzbek director, ahead of his Russian colleague Tikhonovich, was able to combine the expressive means of centuries-old Uzbek traditional theatre, folk dances, music and street performances with the elements of the European art of drama. In the production of “Khujum”, the tragic theme was interpreted through humour and irony.

Artist P. Ryabchikov created set design in keeping with the director’s decision, having added elements of hyperbole: on the stage one could see painted giant bunches of grape, apples, teapots and jugs as tall as a man. From the few photographs of the play one could visualize the famous scene at the bazaar and its characters: the ishan (Kh. Islamov) busily leafing through a huge book, the short executive committee chairman (M. Mirokilov) with a voluminous briefcase under his arm and a big watch on his neck suggesting his perpetual busyness, the tall policeman (O. Jalilov) ...

To amplify the healer’s character (S. Tabibullaev), the director and artist ornamented his costume with Arabic inscriptions alluding to the man’s learnedness. The healer’s appearance is comical: a pointed beard, a long nose and an agile body. Hyperbole in the show was manifest not only in the scenography, but also in the makeup. Both good and bad characters had exaggerated features. For instance, large ‘noses’ were glued to the white-painted faces of Oyjamol (Z. Khidoyatova), mother Tursunoy and father Akhmadjon (G. Nizomiddinov) – the makeup helped emphasize a critical attitude towards these characters. Mannon Uygur, unlike Tikhonovich, did not consider “orientalization” the only style applicable to the Uzbek theatre.

Actors who were seeking professional excellence in studios, eventually defined the Uzbek theatre development vector. This period could be described as intense searching and making inevitable mistakes. Theatre productions of that time represented different styles, ideas and currents. Theatre companies staged both realistic shows and productions reflecting life and its problems in an entertaining spectacular form, as well as “orientalised” performances and productions combining traditional dramatic expressive means with European theatre practices.

Artists working on stage set design collaborated with directors, implementing the results of their creative inquiry. Progressively, set was created in a way that not only pictured the scene of the action, but also matched the style of the show.

References:

1. Исмоилов Э. Ф. Маннон Уйгур. – Тошкент, 1983.
2. Маннон Уйгур. «Ревизор» на сцене театра им. Хамзы // Звезда Востока. 1952, № 2.
3. Қодиров М. Х. Ўзбек театри аъналарари. – Тошкент, 1976.
4. Абу Муншир. Янги санъатимиз // Зарафшон. 1926 йил. 31 июль.
5. Қизил Ўзбекистон. 1928 йил. 7 февраль.