



Article

The Illusion of Life in Visual Interpretations of Drama and Musical Theatre: Performances of the 1930s

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Abstract: Kadirova Dilafuz Mukhsinovna's article, "The Illusion of Life in Visual Interpretations of Drama and Musical Theatre: Performances of the 1930s," examines the process of scenography formation in Uzbekistan. In particular, the author focuses on the characteristics of the 1930s that became a period of innovative type of art entirely dependent on ideology. In the introduction to the article, the author provides the background information about the visibility of theater art on the road to professionalism caused by the role of performances in socialist propaganda. Considering that, the knowledge gap that the article wants to fulfill regards scholars' inattention in studying the interaction of scenography, directing, dramaturgy, and music that can explain the nature of visualization in the Uzbek theater, as an art system.

The research was aimed at describing scenography, directing, dramaturgy, and music design in the context of the creation of a certain visual language using archivists, bills, and stage manager's notes, with a focus on the overview of performances called "History Speaks," "Victory," "The Rich Man and the Servant," and "Farhod and Shirin. Some specific details of performances by artists stage appear, namely, Hamidulla Ikromov, Sh. Shorahimov, including realism, constructivism, and national coloring in their scenographical skill technique development that helps to give a visual illusion of life meaning. Thus, the results show that in the Uzbek scenography before the colorization and on the everyday realism foundation, artists managed to establish an organic combination of the usual with the artistic. Thanks to it, it was possible to treat stage life as a reality being as well as the emphasis on the authenticity of clothing, living ornaments, and the organization of the light in the performances. Additionally, the results confirm the fact that only the combination of scenic-art and dramatic activity made it possible to develop it into independent Uzbekistan theater of a new type. That is what happened, which helped to develop a firm and conditional proper national style that still brings together all subsequent Uzbek Scenography generations, excluded from the universal.

Keywords: Scenography, Artist, Set Design, Technique, Theater, Directing, Dramaturgy, Music, Costume, Stage

Citation: Kadirova, D. M. The illusion of life in visual interpretations of drama and musical theatre: Performances of the 1930s. Central Asian Journal of Arts and Design 2025, 6(4), 168-173.

Received: 30th Sept 2025

Revised: 13th Oct 2025

Accepted: 20th Oct 2025

Published: 31th Oct 2025



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1. Introduction

The 1930s were a complex period for theatrical art, particularly for the art of stage decoration. Theater art took steps towards professionalism. However, culture, especially theatrical art, began to take on a political tone. All creative explorations were suppressed because they did not respond to the calls of socialism. This pushed back the process of professionalization in Uzbek theatrical art.

These contradictions were also reflected in the art of stage decoration. The play "History Speaks" by Ziyoyev Said and Nazir Safarov, which addressed the politics of the era

and premiered on May 5, 1931, was staged by director M. Uygur and artist G. Lazovskiy [1]. This work became a landmark production of its time and was performed continuously for 20 days after its premiere. Regarding the stage design of the play, theater critic M. Rahmonov states: "The walls of the dimly lit rooms where secret meetings were held were covered with black fabric. The powerful spotlight would intermittently illuminate the black masks of the conspirators, a human skull, or a hand with twisted fingers. During the performance, trenches would silently open, and those who disobeyed were thrown into the depths of the earth..." [2]. The scenic designer's dim lighting of the performance space stems from the essence of the work. Indeed, throughout the play, there were numerous scenes depicting clandestine encounters between traitors and the forces opposing them. The use of movable side decorations and the precise division of space along the width and height of the stage, in relation to the backdrop, demonstrates the artist's skill.

Literature Review

In the 1930s, regional theaters experienced a surge in the development of stage art due to the influx of actors and directors who had graduated from the first and second Moscow studios, studied at the studio established in the Hamza Theater, or trained at the Moscow Institute of Theatre Arts, like Q. Khojaev, along with skilled artists. For instance, at the Andijan theater, director M. Muhamedov, composer T. Jalilov, playwright K. Yashin, artists P. Koval and N. Okhunov, and a group of talented actors gained experience in using set design during the staging process [3]. They worked on musical dramas such as "Layli and Majnun" and "Halima", the musical comedy "Arshin mol olon", and productions addressing socio-political themes including "Comrades", "Victory", "Defeat", "Inside", "We Burn" and "History Speaks". While the influence of the capital's theatrical decor was often noticeable in their earlier staged productions, the theater strived to follow its own unique path in the plays staged during the second half of the 1930s, including "Cunning and Love", "The Inspector General", "Intrigue and Love", "The Rich Man and the Servant", "Maysara's Case", "Kholiskhon" and "Gulsara" [4].

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological framework of this research is based on a historical, analytical, and comparative approach designed to investigate the evolution of scenographic art in Uzbekistan during the 1930s. The study employs a multidisciplinary perspective that integrates the principles of art history, theater studies, and cultural analysis to examine the interrelation between visual design, directing, dramaturgy, and music in theatrical performances. Primary data were collected through archival research, including the study of production notes, sketches, photographs, stage bills, and artists' memoirs preserved in the SITI Archive and other institutional repositories. These materials provided insight into the visual and technical aspects of stage design used in significant productions such as "History Speaks," "Victory," "The Rich Man and the Servant," and "Farhod and Shirin." Descriptive and interpretative analyses were applied to identify stylistic tendencies, focusing on realism, constructivism, and ethnographic authenticity as dominant scenographic techniques of the time. Comparative analysis was employed to assess the artistic methods of prominent figures such as Hamidulla Ikromov and Sh. Shorahimov, highlighting their creative innovations and ideological constraints. The methodology also incorporates visual semiotic analysis to decode the symbolism and narrative function of stage design, costume, and lighting in the formation of the "illusion of life." Through this integrative method, the study establishes how scenography became a crucial expressive medium in Uzbek theater, contributing to the synthesis of artistic, cultural, and ideological dimensions that defined the foundation of national theatrical aesthetics in the 1930s.

3. Results and Discussion

In the play "O'rtoqlar" ("Friends") (a work by K. Yashin, 1930), for example, director M. Muhamedov divides the characters into two groups. This is evident in their external

appearance, costumes, makeup, and acting performances. The set decorations are also not far removed from the reality of life. They are presented in a slightly exaggerated form. For instance, the cotton boll was so enormous that a group of people could sit in its shadow. Similarly, apples and grapes were crafted to be five to six times larger than their natural size. The director believed that such a method would attract viewers. In the play "Victory" (a work by S. Husayn, 1931), M. Mukhamedov's directorial approach also encouraged the artist to use an exaggerated style in the stage design. M. Tojizoda describes the stage design of the "Victory" performance as follows: "A small platform in the middle of the stage. Stairs rise 3-4 meters up on both sides of it. They lead to a domed circular platform. Between the lower and upper platforms is a canvas. It depicts a view of mountainous hills. The scene is covered with a delicate veil, and the hills are illuminated by moonlight. Qunduz and other characters move about in this scene. The audience hears the voices of the actors during the scene of Qunduz's execution. However, they see not the actors themselves, but rather the outlines of their figures [5].

It is worth emphasizing that the Hamza Theater has served as a laboratory for the provincial theaters in their explorations of dramaturgy, directing, acting, and stage design.

The decorations and costumes of the Hamza Theater in the 1930s and 1940s are largely associated with the artist Hamidulla Ikromov (1909 - 1964). He studied at the pedagogical technical school and the art studio of the Tashkent Art Museum, and later enhanced his skills in Leningrad [6]. From 1931, as the chief artist of the theater, he collaborated with directors such as Mannon Uygur, Yatim Bobojonov, and Alexander Ginzburg, designing sets for dozens of plays. The actors' costumes were created based on his sketches. While designing the sets for plays created in the 1930s, such as "Rustam" (U. Ismailov), "The Mask Was Torn" (Z. Fatkhulin), "Springtime Love" (K. Trenev), and "The Rich Man and the Servant" (Hamza), H. Ikromov grew as an artist, and his understanding of scenery and costumes deepened. In the creative work of the artist H. Ikromov, a tendency towards narrative and detail in portraying life on stage is noticeable [7]. This style, which accurately reflects life and was used in both performances on national themes and stage interpretations of translated works, led to the creation of illusory scenery. This approach allowed the actors to depict the reality of life described in the drama and portray the characters' images in both detailed and generalized ways. In particular, Ziyoy Said's work "Niqob yirtildi" ("The Mask Was Torn"), which premiered on June 6, 1932, was highly regarded as the first independent work of the artist H. Ikromov. The authentic artistic design of the stage encouraged the actors to perform their roles accurately within the existing conditions.

In the play "The Rich Man and the Servant" (a work by Hamza, revised by K. Yashin, May 13, 1939), the scenery, costumes, props, and the overall environmental depiction, as well as the external appearances of the participants, are designed to resolve the social conflict, showcasing the best characteristics of H. Ikromov's work. "The authenticity of the setting, the precision and familiarity of everyday elements brought the characters closer to the audience, astonishing viewers with its truthful portrayal of the recent past" [8]. The artist employed the narrative style of the pavilion decoration system in the performance.

The curtain opens, revealing Solihboy's inner courtyard to the audience. On the right side are two grand houses, and on the left is one. The houses have verandas in front. At the back is a gate leading outside, to the left is the kitchen, and there's a pathway leading to the garden. The audience's eyes are dazzled by the intricately carved and patterned doors, and precious items arranged on columns and in alcoves. The veranda stage is covered with Turkmen carpets and velvet quilts. Such a scene, realistically depicting the true appearance of a wealthy household, primarily helps to emphasize the contrast between external pomp and luxury and the moral corruption of the people living in that courtyard. Furthermore, the staging director Yatim Bobojonov, with the assistance of artist

H. Ikromov, has succeeded in immersing both the actors and the audience in the atmosphere of the recent past [9].

Solihboy's guesthouse (Act 2), the house allocated to Jamila (Act 4), and Qodirqul mingboshi's courtyard (Act 3) are also portrayed as lavish. The staging director and artist paid serious attention not only to the scenery but also to the accurate representation of costumes, props, and ethnographic customs such as offering hookahs, laying the tablecloth, greeting, and bowing, not only in the play "The Rich Man and the Servant" but also in other performances [10]. This approach was regarded as a passion for depicting everyday life. At times, it was even attributed to naturalism, which is not accurate. The director and artist believed that the artistic decorations, furnishings, and costumes themselves should evoke delight in the audience and celebrate the mastery of folk craftsmen and seamstresses. However, this is not the only purpose of these auxiliary elements. The main goal is to accurately reflect the socio-historical environment and help to deeply reveal the content of the work" [11].

Artist H. Ikromov emphasizes everyday details on stage based on the director's vision. However, accurately portraying such minor details has helped to sufficiently reveal the theme. At this point, harmony between the director's solution and the artist's idea emerged in the play. Artist H. Ikromov was able to fully express Y. Bobojonov's direction in the performance, creating a stage image in the theatrical space. This performance demonstrates the increased emphasis on everyday detail in the decorative arts of this period.

By the 1930s, artists specializing in set design emerged in musical theatre (musical drama, opera, and ballet). At the State Musical Drama Theater (1929-1939) led by Muhiddin Qori Yoqubov and the Alisher Navoi Grand Academic Opera and Ballet Theater (1939-1945), artists such as Sh. Shorahimov, Ye. Baranovsky, M. Gvozdikov, V. Afanasyev, and A. Dulevsky worked to ensure that the stage decorations and actors' costumes were proportionate to the on-stage actions and characters, maintaining a professional standard. The set design and costumes for "Buron" (music by M. Ashrafiy and S. Vasilenko, libretto by Yashin, 1939), the first Uzbek opera, were created based on M. Gvozdikov's sketches. However, in musical drama, opera, and ballet theaters, the artist Sh. Shorahimov designed the sets for most of the national stage productions. Performances such as "Farhod and Shirin" (1933), "The Storm" (1934), "Gulsara" (1936), and "Layli and Majnun" (1933) serve as evidence of this [12].

Especially, the decorations of the play "Farhod and Shirin" were created with love. The treasury, mountain views, Khusrau's tent (scene 3) attracted attention with the proportionality of colors, the poetic expression of space. Although Sh. Shorahimov's plans in drawings and models were not always realized, his creative pursuits had a fruitful impact on the work of artists working in regional theaters. For instance, the artist I. Margunov, inspired by the work of Sh. Shorahimov, designed the set for the play "Farhod and Shirin", staged at the Kashkadarya Regional Theater, in an elaborate manner, paying special attention to external effects [13]. The artist primarily employed the visual decoration style typically used in musical theaters.

Sh. Shorahimov set himself the goal of revealing the tragic plight of Eastern women in the play "Gulsara". In the final of the work, as a symbol of Gulsara's victory and her liberation, the women throw their paranjas into what appears to be a blazing fire. This final scene was also preserved in the revised version of 1937.

In general, during the second half of the 1930s and the years of World War II, artists such as Sh. Shorahimov, H. Ikromov, S. Milenin, I. Valdenberg, and D. Ushakov made significant contributions to the activities of Uzbek theater, particularly in the high-quality production of sets and costumes [14]. At the Hamza Theater, T.P. Suleymonova set an example with her creative approach to tailoring costumes based on the artist's sketches,

ensuring they suited both the performer and the character. In makeup artistry, B.P. Luchikhin gained recognition for his work [15].

During this period, interest in another trend in stage practice, “naturalism” intensified. Direct replicas of streets and houses began to be incorporated into stage decorations. Theatrical ethnography and everyday scenes became clearly visible. According to D. Rakhimov, an Honored Artist of Uzbekistan, “real horses were brought onto the stage... In the play ‘Arshin mol olon’ the horse brought on for the scene of the girl’s abduction nearly killed Shahodat Rakhimova, who was playing the role of Gulchehra” [16].

4. Conclusion

The analysis of 1930s period of the theatrical scenography in Uzbekistan illuminates the fact that it became one of the formative stages in the visual identity of the national theater. This is despite the fact that this period is characterized by political repression and the ideological control that can suggest a tendency towards uniformity and conservative approach. The analysis of the scenography created by artists such as Hamidulla Ikromov and Sh. Shorahimov shows that they managed to unite the principles of realism, constructivism, and ethnographic authenticity to develop vivid “illusion of life” on stage. In this regard, the painting as a scenography was not only the decoration of the play but an extremely powerful element of expression, and often was the fourth component of the art of performance, along with dramaturgy, directing, and music. At the same time, it was the unique performance because many of the proposed solutions in the lighting, the design of the stage and costumes precisely reflected the socio-political and ethnic aspirations, sometimes forming the entirely new scenery principle of Magyvil in the Uzbek theater. Therefore, the research’s implication is that 1930s should be considered the constriction decade, when the principles of the national scenography and its unity with the dramaturgy, directedness, and music were determined. At the same time, this is a period confirming the possibility of dynamism and adaptation of graphic plastic arts to new conditions that contribute to the cultural and artistic development. For this reason, the research should be further developed in the aspect of other decades (post-war and independence), analyzing the impact of political, technical, and artistic content and considering the relevance of these tendencies for the contemporary theater in Uzbekistan.

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