



Article

The Search for Artistic Expression in Uzbek Theatre

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Abstract: The article tries to shed light on the process of artistic expression within the context of the emergence of the Uzbek theatre of the European type. A delicate balance between traditional and modern attributes of artistic forms emerged during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Being unrecognized and since gaining independence of national art, it faced the challenge of absorbing maskharaboz and kizikchi renditions into the creators' European dramaturgical experience and directing directorial experience, and recognizing the national as an object and forming its specific theme. At the same time, a very significant part of the next book allows to draw an unambiguous conclusion about the main gap in the circle of credenza, which should be reduced in this work, which is about how the early experience of artistic experiments affected the development of the Uzbek theatre as a whole. This research aims to analyze the comparative method of this phenomenon by using historical-analytical research, among the most widely known and studied in the field of the local dramaturge; this approach involves paying special attention to the ways in which the prospectuses were carried out and their receptions is rather rare. The source-based book analyzes archives of theatres, debuts, and critical attitudes to the performances of beloved fairy tales, The Princess Turandot, and Khujum. Based on similar sources, the characteristic of the impact of both the authors' and professional schools of the creative positions in the article, the definition of the meaning these approaches had at the time is formulated. The main argument is that the prospectuses allowed the local audience to undeceive their specific interest as Uzbekians. In the following study, I would like to analyze the early experience of the process of creative reading and application that might have promoted further work on ways of forming a specific habit of the Uzbek theatre.

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1. Introduction

The period marking the emergence of literary drama and the formation of a new type of theatre in Uzbekistan was distinguished by a wide range of creative experiments and innovative searches. It was a time of dynamic artistic transformation, when new aesthetic principles began to take shape and the foundations of a professional theatre were being laid. Within the theatrical community, heated debates unfolded, and various opinions were expressed concerning the possible paths for developing a professional, European-style theatre in our country.

Some representatives of the artistic intelligentsia believed that the theatre should evolve naturally from existing traditions, continuing the established principles of folk performances — the maskharaboz and kizikchi theatres — which had long reflected the worldview, humor, and everyday life of the Uzbek people. These artists emphasized the

importance of maintaining the national identity and the unique spirit of popular theatre forms [1].

Others, however, argued for the necessity of creating a theatre of a fundamentally new type — one that would be modern in form and content, in tune with the cultural and social realities of the new era. They advocated adopting elements of European theatrical practice, including realistic dramaturgy, stage direction, and actor training, seeing in them a means of elevating the national theatre to a new artistic level.

Yet, in the subsequent years, artistic development faced significant constraints. The struggle against diverse creative trends intensified, and any forms of artistic exploration that contradicted the dominant ideological doctrines were condemned and suppressed [2]. Interest in folkloric and ethnographic elements, in traditional spectacles, exaggeration, irony, and theatrical convention gradually faded.

The process of ideologization of theatrical art, along with the imposition of a single “correct” creative method — socialist realism — became a serious obstacle to the free and multifaceted development of the national theatre. This dogmatic approach hindered artistic diversity, limiting experimentation and reducing the theatre’s ability to reflect the full complexity of life and the richness of national artistic expression.

2. Materials and Methods

The research’s methodology is based on a historical-analytical and comparative approach. It helps to explore the evolution of artistic representation in the process of the formation of the Uzbek theatre of the European type. A qualitative analysis is undertaken on the basis of the relevant archival documents and newspaper records. Qualitative analysis is used in order to explore the issues concerned via examining several early performances of the three first stages: *The Princess Turandot*, *The Servant of Two Masters*, and *Khujum*. An analysis is made based on the available primary sources, the written works of Cholpon, Tikhanovich, and Uygur in particular, to unveil the aesthetic principles and staging methods which conditioned the first stage of the development of the national theatre [3]. The comparisons of textual interpretations can shed the light of analysis of the peculiar issues to reveal how the performing of the generalizing of the “Uzbekization” process conditioned the peculiar performing and constructing practices. The analysis of the early performing helps to reveal the experimental and the ideological backgrounds of the early period of the development of the professional theatre [4]. The early stage of the “Uzbekization” of the theatrical representation is conditioned under the twofold interaction of the national ecosystem and the foreign one. The comparative analysis of the search for appropriate performing practices and audience adjustment helps to get deeper insights into the relation between ideology, experimentation and artistic representation. Thus, the relevant methodology helps to get an overall idea of how the early theatrical experiments helped to make professional theatre in Uzbekistan and the national-minded representation of art in changing sociopolitical times [5].

3. Results and Discussion

At the same time, a method known as adaptation or “Uzbekization” emerged in the 1920s, shaped by the practical needs and social realities of the time. This approach proved to be both necessary and effective. It should be remembered that during this period, a large portion of the population remained illiterate. Progressive intellectuals and representatives of the theatrical arts sought to make translated dramatic works more accessible to local audiences by adapting them to the national way of life — introducing familiar everyday scenes, folk melodies, and traditional dances.

In 1922, in Kokand, M. Mirakilov staged N. Gogol’s comedy “*The Marriage*” in the Uzbek language under the title “*Ziyrak Kuyov*” (“*The Clever Groom*”). The names of the characters, as well as their relationships and interactions, were transformed in accordance

with Uzbek cultural norms and audience expectations. This creative adaptation reflected the spirit of the time, when theatre served not only as an artistic platform but also as a means of cultural education and social communication [6]. Naturally, the performance differed considerably from Gogol's original ideas and artistic conception, yet it played an important role in shaping the foundations of the emerging national theatre.

As is well known, in 1924, due to the shortage of professional personnel for the emerging national theatre, a group of young Uzbek talents was sent to Moscow for a three-year course of study at the theatrical studio affiliated with the Uzbek House of Enlightenment. This period coincided with a time of remarkable diversity and experimentation in Russian theatre, when various creative movements and directorial methods were actively developing, and new forms of stage expression were being explored [7].

During their studies, Uzbek students had the opportunity to witness first-hand the performances of the great masters of Russian theatre. They observed the psychologically profound and realistically staged productions of Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, which emphasized inner truth, emotional depth, and the actor's spiritual experience. At the same time, they encountered the visually expressive, stylistically unconventional, and symbolically rich performances of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Yevgeny Vakhtangov — productions that combined theatricality, irony, and a sense of play, resonating deeply with the national temperament of Uzbek actors, whose artistic roots were nurtured by the traditions of folk theatre [8].

One of the final productions of the First Moscow Studio was "The Princess Turandot" by Carlo Gozzi. There were, of course, several reasons why the studio members chose to work on this play. It is evident that in turning to "The Princess Turandot," the students sought to realize their own artistic aspirations and creative ideals. Moreover, at that very time, Yevgeny Vakhtangov was also working on his famous production of "The Princess Turandot," which became one of the most significant theatrical events of the 1920s.

Vakhtangov's interpretation of "The Princess Turandot" had a profound impact not only on Russian theatre but also on the young Uzbek artists studying in Moscow at that time. His creative approach — a synthesis of psychological depth and theatrical playfulness — demonstrated how national and classical traditions could coexist harmoniously within a single performance. Vakhtangov's theatre was distinguished by its brightness, irony, stylization, and a joyful theatrical spirit, qualities that deeply resonated with the Uzbek students, whose artistic temperament was close to the performative and improvisational nature of traditional folk theatre.

The experience of witnessing Vakhtangov's production and participating in the creative life of the Moscow studio significantly shaped the artistic worldview of the future founders of the Uzbek professional theatre. Upon returning to their homeland, they brought with them not only the technical skills of acting and directing acquired in Moscow but also a new understanding of theatricality — as a means of expressing both national character and universal human emotion through vivid form, rhythm, and play.

Inspired by Yevgeny Vakhtangov's production, the students of the studio created a vibrant, improvisational, and visually expressive performance filled with laughter, humor, joy, lyrical emotions, moments of sadness, irony, and optimism [9]. The performance was staged under the guidance of directors and instructors R.Simonov, I.Tolchanov and O.Basov. During the production, the actors achieved notable progress in mastering stage technique and acting methods.

Under the influence of Vakhtangov's approach, the studio's performance acquired a sense of harmony with the spirit of the time. Its festive atmosphere, emotional openness, and physical freedom perfectly matched the temperament of the future Uzbek professional actors. The production also incorporated elements familiar to them from the folk

performance tradition — sarcasm, improvisation, and exaggeration. However, the improvisation and theatrical convention used in the performance demanded a high level of artistic discipline and responsibility from the actors.

The audience responded with laughter to the interludes and amusing episodes inspired by contemporary life — additions that were absent in the original play and emerged spontaneously from the actors' improvisation behind their masks. Cholpon described the style of "The Princess Turandot" performance as follows: "The production does not appear as a representation of any real-life event, but rather as a well-crafted, light, and gracefully played piece. The actors — except for the comedians — do not come on stage in theatrical costumes with painted faces. Quite the opposite: they appear before the audience in their ordinary clothes and, right in front of them, throw on various pieces of fabric, transforming themselves into characters who somewhat resemble heroes from a Chinese fairy tale... Indeed! We, the audience, meet Uygur, who played King Altoum, Abror and Khadjikuli as the Prince, Tursunoy, Sara, Zamira, Bakhriniso as the Maidens, and others. To make us believe in this story through the art of acting, certain creative measures were taken" [10].

In staging "The Princess Turandot," the leadership of the studio primarily sought to teach the students precision and elegance in stage movement, as well as the ability to handle props and external objects skillfully. Uzbek melodies were interwoven throughout the performance, adding a national flavor to the overall atmosphere.

Particularly great responsibility fell upon the actors portraying the comic masked characters. The roles of Tartalia (performed by E.Babajanov), Pantalone (H.Islamov), Brighella (L.Nazrullaev), and Truffaldino (Sh.Kayumov) were presented with lightness, playfulness, and vitality. The success of these portrayals stemmed from the fact that the actors combined expressive techniques of the European theatrical tradition with elements of the oral performance heritage of Uzbek folk theatre.

These characters served as a symbolic bridge linking the past with contemporary reality. As is well known, irony and improvisation dominated the performance style, revealing a creative synthesis of traditional spontaneity and professional theatrical discipline [11].

When the studio members returned to their homeland and presented this performance, the audience's reaction was mixed. One of the reviews of the production stated: "Perhaps for people like us, who have not yet had the opportunity to enjoy real theatre, who wish to see the bitter reality of our own lives and learn lessons from it, productions of such plays come too early" .

Indeed, the very theatricality of the performance — its irony, stylization, and excessive improvisation — was not easily understood by the audience. Cholpon, who had translated the play, had anticipated such a reaction and wrote: "The work was not staged as an ordinary play, but through an understanding of what was happening" [12]. In fact, not everyone perceived the play in the same way, yet for the studio members it became another important step toward mastering the secrets of professional stage art.

In 1927, director V.Tikhanovich staged Carlo Goldoni's comedy "The Servant of Two Masters" at the Hamza Theatre. At that time, Tikhanovich was actively searching for ways and forms to develop a truly national theatre, arguing that "Eastern theatres must be entirely different from Western ones." In staging both Gogol's "The Government Inspector" and Goldoni's "The Servant of Two Masters", he translated the dialogues and relocated the action into an Uzbek setting. The performances were enriched with elements of local culture — Uzbek melodies, songs such as yor-yor, and references to folk wisdom and customs. Thus, a play originally rooted in Italian life was presented to audiences in a fully "Uzbekized" form. In "The Government Inspector", for instance, Khlestakov appeared on stage wearing a traditional Uzbek robe and skullcap.

As noted in *The Uzbek Soviet Theatre*, Tikhanovich identified two main directions for national theatre: the “Easternization” of Russian and Western European plays through the introduction of familiar local elements and the selection of works thematically close to Eastern life and legends; and the “Europeanization” of national dramas [13]. Tikhanovich strongly opposed the second approach. In his view, European culture could not be directly transplanted into Uzbek artistic soil, which had deep national roots. Instead, he proposed a third way — the method of “Easternization” — arguing that isolating the theatre within a narrow national framework was equally detrimental to art. He believed that any translated work, regardless of its origin or historical context, should be adapted to Uzbek life when staged in an Uzbek theatre. At that time, the theatre was still defining its own artistic direction, and therefore this method had every right to exist as an experimental approach.

“We are right in the path we have chosen,” wrote Tikhanovich. - “Eastern art is not ‘naturalistic’, it is theatrical by its very nature. Therefore, from the standpoint of real life, it is inherently conventional. The contemporary Uzbek audience is unfamiliar with debates on various theatrical questions. What it needs is a performance that is clear in meaning, engaging in content, and striking in form”. This statement encapsulated the core of Tikhanovich’s artistic philosophy. His mistake, however, lay in believing that this method was the only possible path for the further development of the Uzbek theatre.

During this period of artistic experimentation and conflicting viewpoints, the theatre staged the musical buffoonade “Khujum”. This production was a unique artistic response to the controversial political campaign of the same name — the “Khujum” movement — launched under the slogan of liberating Uzbek women from the paranja (veil) and from the “chains of slavery.”

“When we look at the history of this movement from today’s perspective,” writes one researcher, “we cannot overlook the fact that thousands of girls and young women perished as a result of this reckless party policy, which ignored the spiritual condition of the peoples of the East, raised in reverence for Islam. Their blood flowed in streams, even if it did not form a river” [14].

The musical comedy-buff “Khujum”, written by V.Yan and Cholpon, was directed by M.Uygur. The performance premiered on July 21, 1928. Cholpon is often mistakenly regarded merely as a translator who rendered the work from Russian into Uzbek, but this view does not correspond to reality. As N. Karimov rightly notes, “Cholpon participated in the creation of this work not only as a translator but also as a literary and ethnographic consultant. He took part in shaping its overall concept and composition and later breathed new life into the play during the process of translation” [15].

In particular, the fourth scene — the bazaar scene — clearly bears the imprint of Cholpon’s authorship. His deep knowledge of folk ethnography and oral traditions is evident in the vivid depiction of market life, the authenticity of dialogues, and the lively rhythm of everyday speech, which bring to the stage the atmosphere of Uzbek social reality of that era.

The play “Khujum” occupies a special place in the history of Uzbek theater, being one of the landmark productions of its time. It became not only an artistic response to the political processes of the late 1920s but also reflected the theater’s creative search for new stage forms.

In the production of “Khujum”, director M.Uygur continued his experiments in creating performances in a national spirit, striving for a synthesis between the traditional Uzbek oral theater and the aesthetics of the new European stage. Although the play was later accused of formalism, in essence, Uygur sought to express a serious social theme through the expressive means of traditional theater, giving it scenic depth and vivid national imagery.

“Khujum” was a musical performance that organically combined elements of national life, the artistic conventionality and spectacle of the maskharaboz and qiziqchi theaters, as well as folk dance and music. This combination created a lively and rhythmically rich stage texture that resonated with the popular audience.

Some confusion among viewers and critics arose from the fact that the theme, which had previously served as the basis for the tragedy “Halima”, was here presented through the means of comic art. However, as I.Mukhtarov rightly notes, “M.Uygur began his experiments in the field of stage form; in the production of “Khujum” he sought ways to synthesize the European-style theater with the traditions of the Uzbek folk theater of maskharaboz performers” [16]. In our view, in creating this performance, M.Uygur relied more on the expressive means of traditional theater than on the formalist experiments of V.Tikhonovich, thereby striving to preserve an organic connection with the national stage culture.

The play “Khujum” was a grand production, distinguished by its abundance of large-scale scenes that combined elements of both traditional folk street theatre and European stage art. As a result, the contemporary theme was expressed in a theatricalized style. For this reason, the characters, makeup, and stage movements in the production were intentionally exaggerated. Indeed, the performance bore a clear propagandistic tone, yet it was marked by artistic integrity. Actors with a strong sense of comedy felt particularly confident on stage, as they were given full creative freedom — the opportunity to be expressive, to enrich their performances not only through dialogue but also through dynamic stage action. Both those who portrayed negative characters and those who embodied positive ones performed with lightness and joy, employing techniques of exaggeration, irony, and improvisation.

In one way or another, Uygur sought to create a unique national performance based on the play. The director elaborated the market, teahouse, and wedding scenes in detail, vividly illustrating the clash between the new and the old, and ridiculing societal flaws. Through their performances, the actors developed characters with distinct personalities. With this production, the theatre proved that, provided original plays of this kind were written, it was capable of creating works that met a truly professional artistic standard.

4. Conclusion

Today, considering the level of our audience, is there still a need to adapt the works of foreign authors? Do we have the moral right to apply the method of adaptation, especially when staging classical works? In essence, “Uzbekization” was one of the stages in the development of the Uzbek theatre. In the 1920s, this experiment was entirely justified and produced excellent results, as it allowed audiences to experience the works of previously unfamiliar authors in the Uzbek language.

In the formation of the new European-style theatre, this stylistic approach could exist as a creative experiment but could not serve as the only direction in the development of theatre. There are other approaches and stage techniques that make the palette of contemporary Uzbek theatre rich and multidimensional.

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