



Epic Heritage - The Gold Treasure

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the role and importance of folk art heritage in the development of national theater art in Central Asia. To date, the theatrical art of the region has a great experience and it has the opportunity to compare its culture with others. Epic direction is one of the points of support, one of the heights from which you can look at the experience and trends of the world of theatrical art. (72)

In folk epics, various elements of culture and spirituality are traced, and the peculiarities of a particular nationality are revealed.

The entry of the European style of theater into the framework of the culture of Central Asia certainly influenced the development of traditional theater of the people. Creative figures faced the problem of showing their performances on closed stages, in rooms.

In the pieces, folk customs are presented following a common pattern, whereas national theatres offer their own interpretation, reflecting the culture, customs, and the nation's past. Not only essentially different pieces of the same title and subject, created by different nations, differ in style, methods, means of artistic representation and character interpretation, and never a hero of one nation is a repetition of the image created by the neighboring nation. This is how the nation's mentality, culture, spiritual character, and traditional values are exposed. This, in turn, is a dominant feature in the evolution of theatres. Thus, the epic heritage serves as the golden treasure of the theatrical culture of Central Asia.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia, epics, theatre, folk art, culture, transformation, method, history, tradition, trends.

INTRODUCTION

The theater art of Central Asia was formed based on the forms of European theater culture introduced to it. Today, when we talk about the future of national theaters in Central Asia, we reveal its attitude to its origins, its roots. "If other peoples have preserved their past culture, their past history in written literature, sculpture, architecture, theatrical and visual arts, then our entire power of their national spirit, their honor and conscience, their heroic struggle against foreign invaders, their aspirations and dreams, and in some cases, even their historical past, everyday events of real life were embodied in the traditional-constant, oral-poetic genres of the epic" [1.14].

The appeal of the playwright and Director to the epic material makes it possible to penetrate extensively and deeply into the bowels of the national culture of his people, reviving and enriching the national values of the people. Theatrical productions of various folk epics become a clear example and subject of study. Academician M. Rakhmanov wrote that in ancient times folk epics were played as stage performances. The audience of the Central Asian region accepted such performances as theater. And this theater even influenced the development of Chinese theater [2.81]. When the European theater style came, the theater that had been performed for centuries was destroyed.

The epos includes various concepts about fairy tales, epics, myths, legends, etc. The Central Asian epos expands the range of these concepts, including folk dastans and kissas,

which are close to the theater in their architectonics. They are sung in front of the audience, and Akin or Bakshi takes on the duties of both Director, playwright, and artist during the performance. The epic itself began to come to life in other arts; tales are reincarnated in stage forms.

Aristotle wrote about the relationship between the epic and the drama in his *Poetics*. After describing the similarities between the epic and the drama, he writes that "an epic work can be complex in structure and is divided into two types: an epic of characters and an epic of situations. There are many similarities in the complexity of the storyline structure between the epic and the drama" [3.49]. Despite the fact that in the 20s of the last century in the European theater style, the first productions of the folk epic of Central Asia were carried out where there were many omissions: first, the epics were considered from the point of view of social realism (typical phenomenon and typical image), and secondly, in some cases, epic heroes played on the system of reincarnation of realistic images. Despite this, in this creative process, different genres and stylistic directions appeared, and figurative-realistic and heroic-romantic styles of play developed in the acting art. And it was the epic that gave the drama a universal coverage of the material, the direction enriched with fantasy, as well as giving the theater a centuries-old heritage of national and cultural values.

Among the theater systems of the twentieth century, the theory of B. Brecht's epic theater

is the closest to understanding the national epic of Central Asia. The German playwright and theater theorist, already in the very name of his theory, precisely defined the key feature of his theater system, which is based on the specifics of the epic character and conflict. "In Brecht's Epic Theater, what is important is not the conventional, but the visible boundaries between reason and emotion. The same is observed in the interpretations of the epic scenes on the region in which practically no so-called "fourth wall", where the deep emotion and feelings of a hero goes along with the "dismissal" and direct appeals to the auditorium" [4.12]. In practice, the interpretation of epic works in the national theatres of Central Asia which had the most visible proximity were not the words of Stanislavsky, who believed that "the viewer should forget that he is in the theatre" [5.7], nor the words of his disciple E. V. Vakhtangov, who stated "the audience should never forget that they are in the theater" [6.10]. This practice is quite justified, because the heroes of national epics were never ordinary people. Usually, in epics, the Hero-Superman stood in the Central place. He was the highest of all and therefore the performer glorified by his exploits. This tradition was naturally adopted by young theaters in the region.

The regional culture of Central Asia is characterized by the variety of its palette, since it includes both nomadic and sedentary subspecies. Therefore, the epics of these cultures were enriched with a wide coverage because the settled culture, on the one hand, gave them the opportunity to enter the literature, and on the other hand, the nomadic culture – gave a widespread and an impetus to

the emergence of new versions of this or that epic.

Traditional customs and rituals communicated to us through oral tradition and folklore are of great interest to our contemporaries. Histrionic art, telling us about them in the language of the stage, provides an opportunity to better understand their essence. The peoples of Central Asia had a custom, whereby the parents of young children, sometimes just newly born boys and girls, performed a ritual of their engagement or betrothal. Such events in the life of heroes, ritualized in the circle of human life from birth to death, as well as various kinds of calendar holidays, rituals and rites are found in a variety of epics in the region. This complex of folklore, ethnographic entertainment and musical traditions is a fertile material for theatrical art. Stories of it are told in many pieces of oral tradition. The basis of the traditional Central Asia epic can be traced in the use of certain patterns in which the characters share similar fates from birth. For example, Bomsı-Bayrak and Bonuchečak ("Kitabi Dede Korkut"), Alpamysh and Oybarčın ("Alpamysh"), Gharib and Shamsanam ("Oshik Gharib and Shamsanam"), Manas and Kenikei, Semetei and Aichurek ("Manas"), Tahir and Zuhra ("Tahir and Zuhra"), Kuzi and Bayan ("Kuzi Kurpesh and Bayan Slu") were engaged from their cradle days. Today, this ceremony is still called "beshikkerti" by the Uzbeks, "bel kuda" by the Kirgiz, "ezhekabil" by the Kazakhs, and "adaglab kuyiladi" among the Turkmen. The essence of beshikkerti is to engage young children to each other while they are still in the cradle, to determine their life partner. This ancient custom is common among many

peoples of Central Asia and is repeatedly reflected in epic stories. As the famous English ethnologist James Fraser wrote, "In many cases the similarity is explained by simple borrowing, with some more or less significant modifications, but there are many cases when similar customs and beliefs among different peoples arise independently of each other, as a result of the same work of human thought under the influence of similar conditions of life. But if this is the case, then it follows that in trying in each individual case the similarity we have noticed between the customs and beliefs of different peoples, we should not proceed from one General theory, whether it is the theory of borrowing or the theory of original education. In each individual case, it is necessary to take into account specific features, subjecting the facts to an impartial analysis, and carefully weigh all the evidence that speaks in favor of a particular reason" [7.64].

Obviously, the beshikkerti ritual was considered sacred in the past. It should be noted that, according to the epic tales, it was believed impossible to separate the engaged; despite all the impediments, destiny was supposed to unite them again. Through the performance of a sacred rite, the love of Tahir and Zuhra, Gharib and Shansanam, Bomsil and Bonuchechak, and Kuzi and Bayan became sacred. Gods will make them endure hardships and the ordeal of separation. A tragic death was also the dictate of God. The Almighty upheld conjugal ties. Professor V. Zhirmunsky wrote about it "If in real domestic relations recently completed this custom often led to sharp conflict between the individual feeling of young people and the Patriarchal parental authority, the interests of tribes and families,

in a perfect reflection of the epic betrothal before birth or in the cradle, in some cases, provides an indication of the provincial, sacred and unbreakable bond that unites loving before birth. This gives the highest sanction to their struggle for their feelings in cases where changed family relations or property considerations cause the parents themselves to violate a sacred custom" [8.21]. Love stories of this type are widespread in the world epic. In Western European chivalric novels, a knight usually saves his beloved from threatening rapists, often besieging her castle. Usually, the knight gets the right to her hand and heart by his feat. In Central Asian epics, such a picture is often found, but they differ from European ones with their interpretation of combat episodes, domestic scenes, as well as the reflection of national customs and rituals in them.

Thus, epic poem characters like brothers Baysary and Bayburi ("Alpamysh"), padishah Babakhan and his vizier Bahir ("Tahir and Zuhra"), and neighbors Saribai and Karabay ("Kuzi Kurpesh and Bayan Slu") long suffered from childlessness, praying to God for heirs. Once during a big festivity, the brothers were reproached for still having no children. In keeping with the prophecy of a holy man, Shakhimardan, after much prayer and a long forty-day fasting, both became fathers. In the house of Bayburi, the son Hakimbek, which means "healer", was born. The long-awaited baby was born to be the sun for his people, and the seers called his mother Kuntugmishbeka (the one who gave birth to the sun and a new day).

Meanwhile, Oybarchin, the symbol of feminine perfection, gave birth to a daughter Altinoy

(The Golden Moon). The beshikkerti ritual was performed for Alpamysh and Oybarchin (the Moon and the Sun). The quiet pace of passing days was disrupted by differences that emerged between Baysary (the richest) and Bayburi (the ravenous wolf among the rich).

Already elderly, Manas finally sees the birth of a long-awaited son, Semetei. Without delay, the father performs the beshikkerti ritual for his son Aichurek. Unaware of it, grown-up Semetei marries another girl named Chachikei. Wise Aichurek resolves to find her betrothed Semetei to protect herself and her people from invasion. Soaring above the earth as a white swan, she flies across the universe. The lovers become separated many times, but being originally connected by fate, they meet over and over again.

In the national epic tradition of Central Asia, the beshikkerti rite is the most frequently encountered means of creating a climax and a plot of theatrical performance. Often one of the parties to the engagement disavows the commitment, following which events unfold. After a long absence (for instance, Bomsy was away for sixteen years, and Gharib and Alpamysh for seven years), the hero reappears disguised as a singer or storyteller attending the wedding of his betrothed fiancé. In dastans, they compete in eloquence, singing, or story-telling arts, while in epic tales the hero makes people aware of himself and the events that took place during his absence through a heroic feat. As a result, the lovers are united.

With “Tahir and Zuhra”, dastan stands separate among pieces dedicated to the story of lovers. The peoples of the East performed it

in 6 or 7 versions. In the 17th century, the poet Sayeed Mohammad Sayedy, and later in the 19th cc., the Turkmen classic Mullanepes (1810-1862), taking the folk version as a basis, wrote the dastans. In the early years of theatrical art evolution, these pieces drew the attention of playwrights. In 1923 Khiva theatre “Halk uyi” that united independent companies, staged an amateur play by Fotih Burnosh called “Tahir and Zuhra”. The actress Khanckaya performed the role of Zuhra, Yakub Devanov appeared as Tahir, and Masharif Palvanov played the khan who was the founder of the Khoresm Theatre.

In the 1920s, theatrical performances were considered unacceptable for Muslims in Turkmenistan. Under the influence of reactionary movements in Turkmenistan, those who staged the performances and those who watched them were considered to be violating public order. Turning to folk art contributed greatly to the evolution of the Turkmen theatre. The development of the new theatrical forms was served well by the staging of a Tatar version of “Tahir and Zuhra” in Ashgabat in 1926. Despite the fact that most of the actors were Tatars and the translation still contained a lot of Tatar words, the playbill was in Turkmen language and the play was based on folk material, which attracted a big audience. Turkmen theater critics noted that for two days the theater hall was overcrowded. “Turkmenskaya iskra” newspaper reported that the play “was an important event in the development of the national culture of Turkmenia” [9].

The Uzbek professional stage presented “Tahir and Zuhra” dastan that was based on a

playwright by S. Abdullah, which he wrote in 1937-1938.

It should be noted that our ancestors regarded the beshikkerti rite as an intervention of supreme forces. All conflicts usually began after the vizier's death and the refusal of the padishah to keep his oath. But it is impossible to separate the betrothed – fate will reunite them anyway. Sobir Abdullah had a creative approach to the character rendition. His piece shows fair love with a tragic outcome, and a struggle between brutality and justice in a feudal society. The music was written by composer Tukhtasin Jalilov.

For the first time, the musical drama “Tahir and Zuhra” by S. Abdullah and composer T. Jalilov was staged by directors Abduvahab Azimov and Abbas Bakirov in the Andijan Theatre (1940, July 1). The play was a big success, and the folk tale characters lived again on stage, performed by Mashrab Yunusov (Tahir) and Fatima Hujaeva (Zuhra). The characters appeared before the audience as bearers of the best human qualities, representing the aspirations of the people. The play demonstrated that in times of violence and ignorance human values can be trampled on, but love can have power over viciousness and meanness.

In 1946, a new, refined, version of the “Tahir and Zuhra” play staged by director Muzaffar Mukhammedov was also produced in the theaters of Samarqand, Fergana, Kokand, Bukhara and Osh, and in 1949, the opera “Tahir and Zuhra” was created and produced by E.N. Yungwald - Hilkevich. A struggle between the people and the brutal Shah is the leitmotiv of the opera. In creating the musical

interpretation of the piece, composers T. Jalilov and V. Brovitsin, using S. Abdullah's libretto as the basis, created a synthesis between rich Uzbek folk melodies and Russian operatic music. However, the already familiar and popular arias and duets lovingly performed by people everywhere did not yield to the canons of opera.

The stories of Uzbek romantic dastans, such as “Tahir and Zuhra”, “Oshik Gharib and Shansanam”, the Kazakh “Kuzi Kurpesh and Bayan Slu”, and Bashkir “Kuzi- Kurpesh - Mayan-hilu” share the same outline. The complete text of “Kuzi Kurpesh and Bayan Slu” was published in 1936 by M. Auezov, who provided a comprehensive analysis of the story in his subsequent academic works. In different years, Ch. Valikhanov, A. Divaev and P. Semenov-Tyanshanskiy did their share of research. The researchers note that many elements associated with the culture of the people date back to the period of Arab invasion. Starting from 1939, dastan “resurrected”. For more than 700 years it has lived on stage. Kazak playwright Gabit Musrepov exercised a creative approach to the creation of the play, strengthening some of the characters' qualities and introducing new characters. Written in 1939, the drama was performed in many stages abroad. The Kazakh film “Dastan about Love” was made on the basis of his script.

Under the auspices of UNESCO, the Millennium of the “Manas” was held in 1995 in Kyrgyzstan, the Millennium “Alpomish” was held in 1998 in Uzbekistan, the 1,300th anniversary of “Kitabi Dede Korkut” was held in 2001 in Azerbaijan, and the 1,500-year anniversary of “Kuzi- Kurpesh - Bayan-Sulu”

was held in 2002 in Kazakhstan. These anniversaries played a huge role in the study of folk heritage and opened the way to new creative searches, new inspirations.

Today, the independent States of Central Asia determine the path of further development. What kind of theater is more accessible to the Central Asian audience, what stage play is closer to the performance of folk heroes; these questions were faced by theaters in the 20s of the twentieth century, and they are also relevant today. To resolve these issues in the future, the national theaters will find their own irresistible path through centuries-old spiritual values and national identity, which are embedded in folk epics. The study of the achievements and problems along this path is currently relevant in theater studies.

There is a tendency with directing and with the question of the theatrical dialogue to associate the East and the West. The synthesis of modern art with archaic elements of folk poems has resulted in original stage versions, so interesting that they were able to enter the world stage in the original language. In the works of Uzbek Director Bahodir Yuldashev, Kyrgyz Directors Bekbolat Farmanov and Nurlan Asanbekov, Tajik Directors Farukh Kasimov and Barzu Abdurazakov, and Turkmen Director Kakajan Ashirov, the search for a new style began, merging into a single spectacle element of square performances, a variety of archaic rituals of the so-called "paratheatre". In the development of the acting schools of the region, experimentation with elements of the skill of folk storytellers, ancient shamans, meditation, etc. were used.

Professor H. Korogli noted that although oral tradition could not be superior to professional work in terms of status, degree of generalization, and the refinement of poetic form and methodology, it was nonetheless significant as a specific type of information that shows the particular nation's character and customs. As an information source, it enables one to better understand and adequately appreciate the spiritual character of the people [10.42]. Folklore, being a national asset, contains ethnic and historical philosophy, as well as stages of the nation's ethnic identity evolution. Folk art has always played an important role in cultivating a caring attitude towards the ethnic values of the nation. Theatre enthusiasts of our time keep turning to this invaluable treasure.

The transformation of the epic in the theater requires an endless search for new forms, styles, and modern artistic solutions. But this difficult path of search is extremely fruitful, thanks to the rich artistic resources inherent in folk art. Therefore, it was realized that the national epic should not remain under the influence of monotonous methods of study, and stage interpretation should be free from the influence of patterns of sociological, politically biased reading.

One of the Central trends in the development of theatrical art in Central Asia today is the trend of deep awareness and understanding of their own origins and the unique features of artistic expression of the world and man, which are embedded in national aesthetic traditions. Indifference to the national heritage is fraught with sad consequences – theaters have already passed through this in the recent past. Currently, national theater art

has the right to operate with all available theatrical methods and techniques; the entire palette of theatrical ideas is available in the practice of the world theater. In understanding the national heritage, it is impossible to limit oneself to just one theatrical method. As practice shows, for a full interpretation of the epic heritage, the theater requires free orientation and knowledge of creative methods not only for K. Stanislavsky, but also E. Vakhtangov, V. Meyerhold, B. Brecht, P. Bruck, E. Grotovsky and other major figures of the world theater.

The audience of the new time does not need ready answers to simple questions; they are interested in deeper, thought-provoking performances. Giving a person immersed in the world of modern technologies and mass culture a chance to think is a task worthy of the art of theater. This task can only be solved if the theater sees each viewer as a person. The formation of an individual who thinks independently was the main goal of the epic direction in theatrical art. Maybe that's why so difficult was the way the scene is epic heritage in the times of the totalitarian regime when not a person but the masses were subject to the impact of ideology. The unique significance of the national heritage has become all the more valuable today, when it is evaluated on its own merits.

Nowadays in the development of the epic direction of theaters in the region, the following problems will be solved:

1. The character and plot of epic poems that passed into classical literature were distorted under the influence of social realism, and therefore at this stage they

must be re-read, and new dramatizations and plays based on the original classical poetry must be written. This is an acute and yet insufficiently solved problem of creating fundamentally new dramaturgical versions of classic epics.

2. More and more often, there are new spectacular interpretations based on the epic, with an abundance of plastic elements. However, unfortunately, they are often far from the national style; they are eclectic. In such performances, the actors do not pay due attention to the meaning of the words – all their efforts are spent on plastic scenes. It seems to us that the novelty in the transformations of folk epics should be closely connected, first of all, with national and, of course, universal values. In the transformation of epic works, a special place belongs to the actor. Today, we are concerned about the general decline in the level of acting skills. The epic needs pathos, heroic characters - this is its nature. And the trends of heroic and romantic art are going into the past. Great style, romance, temperament, special attention to the meaning of the words of outstanding artists like Abror Hidoyatov (Uzbekistan), Muradbek Riskulov (Kyrgyzstan), Asanali Ashimov (Kazakhstan), Amon Kulmamedov (Turkmenistan), and Ato Mukhamedzhanov (Tajikistan) should continue in the acting of the region. How can we return to the theater the style of heroic and romantic performance of epic works? And, is it possible? These are debatable but relevant questions.

3. For a long time, the Tashkent Theater and Art Institute trained actors, directors, and playwrights for the region. It was the only educational theater center in Central Asia. Since independence, all the republics of the region have established theater Universities, or departments at universities. But so far, no relationships between these Universities have been established. Although having common ethnic roots, common historical destiny, and common folk epics, we all need the creative experience of our neighbors. It seems necessary to radically change this situation – institutions need to exchange teaching methods of special disciplines, textbooks and manuals, and establish educational and scientific relationships between Universities in the region. It is necessary to practice mutual invitations of leading specialists to give lectures and special courses.
 4. At the time, to strengthen creative contacts and identify new names and trends in the theatrical art of the region, the regional festival "Navruz" was regularly held. This festival managed to travel around the entire region in the past, but now has stopped its activities. Another one has not yet been created in its place. Although such international festivals such as "Art Ordo" (Bishkek), "Tuganlik" (Ufa), and regional festivals in Almaty and Tashkent are currently held, their activities and concepts are not yet permanent. Thus, today we do not have a link between the regional theaters of the festival.
 5. Nowadays in the active processes of the globalization of culture, learning and theatrical comprehension of the national epics of Central Asia – a path, on the one hand, leading to the past, to their roots, on the other hand, to the future – the updated world of universal tolerance and understanding. In this complex creative process of the worldwide cultural exchange of values, theaters in the region can and should play a leading role in creating a dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures. They should and can make a significant contribution to the popularization of folk masterpieces, in communicating to the rest of the world the high spirituality and unsurpassed artistic features of the epic heritage of the peoples of Central Asia.
- Central Asia's European-style theater has come a long way. On this path, there were many successes, mistakes and omissions. Today, theaters face questions that were asked in the 20s of the last centuries: What should the national theater of Central Asia be? Today, the theater art of the region has a lot of experience and it has the opportunity to compare its culture with others. The epic direction is one of the points of support, one of the heights from which you can look at the experience and trends of the world's theatrical art.

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