

WORLD PANTOMIME AND GEORGIAN THEATER

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Although pantomime, founded in the early period of societal development, was quite primitive at its early stages, has developed tremendously in due course. Today, as we watch Marcel Marceau, Charlie Chaplin, Jean-Louis Barrault, Ladislav Fialka, Tomaszewski, Amiran Shalikashvili (whose name is associated with the creation of Georgian pantomime theater), we realize that pantomime has undergone a significant evolution.

We see the basics of pantomime in the Paleolithic populations who, dressed in skins, imitated the animals they hunted. With this, they tried not to scare the animal and make the most of homemade weapons. In the ensuing period, people began to use pantomimes during holidays and ritual ceremonies.

Ancient Greece is considered the birthplace of European pantomime. Here pantomime was born along with ancient myths and religious holidays. As you know, everyone danced at holidays, adults and children alike. Antique dance was pantomimic in character, as evidenced by Plato, who also believed that dance moves imitate the same moves we make in our everyday activities. Ancient Roman philosopher Lucian argued that the performer must be flexible and have talent for rhythm and music. Plutarch argued that “dance is silent poetry” and “speaking painting.”

The first pantomime performances were performed at the feasts of Dionisius and Demetra. Initially, the actor hid his face with a mask and explained the plot with bodily moves, mainly with hands. In Rome, during Caesar’s time, pantomime was very famous. The Roman Empire was inhabited by hundreds of different peoples. Such an international genre as pantomime helped bring people closer together.

It is based on Greek and Roman drama, notably on pantomime, that an Italian form of masked performance

known as *commedia dell’arte* emerged. The synthesis techniques of Italian theater actors enabled them to use not only words, but also songs, dances, acrobatics, especially pantomime. These elements were combined and improvised to allow actors to express the inner world of the characters. Characters were portrayed via bodily suppleness to make them understandable to viewers of different ethnicities.

Pantomime also had a Georgian predecessor. The roots of Georgian pantomime can be found in the mysteries of the deities Telepinu and Kizele of Hittite origin. The mystery celebrating Telepinu, the god of nature and birth, carried on for a week. A large number of people took part in it. Similar mysteries are depicted on the famous silver Trialeti Bowl (14th-15th cc. BC). Round dance was also part of cult processions.

In the mysteries of Telepinu, dances played an important role. In the middle of the masked participants stood a *mimos* who, through bodily movements and facial expressions, conveyed the plot of the sung story. Such dances were performed in villages in several regions until the end of the 19th century. For example, in Svaneti, the dance Meliai Telepai was performed at the celebration in honor of the awakening of nature. The title of this performance indicates that this festival, with its performers wearing fox tails, must have descended from the mysteries of Telepinu. In some regions of Georgia there is a folk performance Datv-Berikuli. The bear is a frequent hero of Georgian folk tales. Some of them talk about the relationship between a bear and a woman and the heroic adventures of their child, the bear-man¹. Professor D. Janelidze points to the folk performance of Datvobia in the Didi Tianeti village, where the main characters, a woman and a bear, stand in a circle and perform a pantomime to the accompaniment of a choir singing².

Georgian folklore has retained the terminology of the

1 ქართული ზღაპრები. მ. ჩიქოვანის რედ. თბ. 1939. გვ. 85-90.

2 ჯანელიძე, ქართული თეატრის ხალხური საწყისები. 1948 წ.

pantomime. In Kakheti, pantomime was known as “shadow making,” and mimes were known as “bretsia.” But we think that the greatest and most interesting materials about the roots of the Georgian theater can be found in the theatrical performances Berikaoba and Keenoba dedicated to the revival and fertility.

According to theater expert D. Janelidze, the participants of Keenoba should have been good actors with a good command of the art of gestures³. Berikaobas’s characters include Berika, a wild boar, a bear, a doctor, a bride, a salesman, and others, and the performance included songs, dances, acrobatics, pantomime and improvisation, where facial expressions and gestures were important means of character development. The unity of these properties is reminiscent of the characteristics of *commedia dell’arte*.

Georgian scholars took a keen interest in Berikaoba-Keenoba celebrations as early as the 19th century. Berikaoba was rediscovered and the roots of Georgian theater were traced. For us, these holidays are interesting as the first steps of pantomime in Georgia, where improvised scenes were performed. Elements of pantomime in Georgian folk dances can also be found. For example, the dance *Khorumi* has an indispensable element for the development of stylized gestures and plot base. The same is true of the *Khevsurian Suita* based on Old Tbilisi scenes, *Kintouri* stemming from on the old sports dance *Lelo*, and others performed by the Sukhishvili Ensemble.

The first pantomime performances in Georgian theater are linked with the name of Kote Marjanishvili. In 1922 K. Marjanishvili staged *Attractive Light* in the Russian New Theater of drama, also *Mzetamze* in Rustaveli Theater in 1926 (to which he also wrote lyrics), and *Fire* in the Kutaisi-Batumi Theater on March 30, 1930.

The premiere of *Mzetamze* took place on March 16, 1926. T. Vakhvakhishvili writes about the significance of the performance: “*Mzetamze* played an important role in the formation of the style and methods of Georgian

theater. Long-term work in pantomime has established in young performers skills that later became a characteristic feature of Georgian actors: suppleness, lightness, rhythm, romance, and heroic attitudes.”⁴ The plot was based on Georgian folk legends and the opposition of good (Mzetamze: T. Tsulukidze, Tengiz: Gr. Laghidze) and evil (Temuri: Vano Laridze, Patmani: Sesilia Takaiashvili, Persian leader: B. Maglakelidze), and the struggle against the Persians embodies patriotism and love of freedom. With this experimental performance, K. Marjanishvili sought to promote suppleness and the use of gesture, rhythm, music among young actors.

S. Akhmeteli attended and conducted the rehearsals: “Akhmeteli sits at the table, takes an interest, gradually begins to take part in the rehearsal process, gives interesting advice on how Georgian men with a lion and a tiger should play the role, and, while at it, he quotes *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* and Vazha-Pshavela’s poems.”⁵ T. Vakhvakhishvili notes that S. Akhmeteli became interested in this work seeking national forms.⁶ Ak. Paghava wrote on the day of the premiere: “S. Akhmeteli, a great artist, was able to complete the artistic quest of Kote Marjanishvili’s incessant artistic imagination.”⁷ It should be noted that tempo, rhythm, suppleness, music, dance played a very important role in the work of S. Akhmeteli, which gave the performances a vibrant dynamic. Critic I. Klainer wrote about him: “This rhythm is created not only by the fusion of words, gestures, and dance, but also flowers, costumes, and their symphonic landscapes.”⁸

Given the importance of the foregoing, rhythm, suppleness, facial expressions, music played an important role in the further work of S. Akhmeteli, which helped manifest the behavior and temperament of characters. For example, K. Kapaneli wrote about of Ak. Khorava’s Karl Moor: “Pay attention to the facial expressions of Khorava, to his muscles, and you will see the social-class emotions of a real, living, acting person. At this time, light, colors, music, stage entourage speak about what

3 ჯანელიძე, ქართული თეატრის ისტორია. გვ. 361.

4 კრ. „უკოტე მარჯანიშვილი“, 1961, ვახუშტისილი „მუსიკა მარჯანიშვილის თეატრში“. გვ. 183-184).

5 *Ibid.* გვ. 171.

6 *Ibid.* გვ. 184.

7 *Ibid.* გვ. 185.

8 კიკნაძე, სანდრო ახმეტელი. 1977. გვ. 287.

the actor is talking about.”⁹ Thus, S. Akhmeteli actively used elements of pantomime to portray characters.

Fire, staged in the Kutaisi-Batumi Theater on March 30, 1930, was not as artistically appealing. Dedicated to Georgian traditions, it did feature an excellent wedding scene with its own ritual (where live fish brought on-stage) and dances.¹⁰ The performance was successful on tour in Kharkov. According to T. Vakhvakhishvili: “I really did not expect that my pantomime would become so successful. They praise me very much in the reviews.”¹¹

K. Marjanishvili was one of the first promoters of this genre in Russia. In Moscow, together with a group of actors, he successfully staged *Tears* by A. Voznesensky in 1912, followed by *Pierrette's Veil* by Arthur Schnitzler (music by Donanni) in 1913, at the Free Theater. This mime-drama was an attempt to find new means of expression. He also published his theoretical views on pantomime in the press. *Narodnaya Gazeta* and Moscow-based newspaper *Theater*¹² published an interview with K. Marjanishvili in 1912 and 1913, respectively. Especially interesting the views formulated while working on *Pierrette's Veil*. Theater expert Et. Gugushvili says that Marjanishvili, in searching for synthesized theatrical art, used the possibilities of pantomime. He viewed panto-

mime as a deeply psychological genre. Marjanishvili discerned deeper meaning and content in it. He wanted to link pantomime to mime-drama, the content of which he saw in the combination of this genre with theater. Marjanishvili differentiated between pantomime and mime-drama. He believed that in pantomime, actors' gestures aligned with music share commonalities with ballet; while in mime-drama, the ties between music, actions, and gestures are tighter, more meaningful. With this method, he wanted to deepen the experience.¹³

K. Marjanishvili dreamed of creating an independent pantomime theater. On March 26, 1933, before his trip to Moscow, he said to Tamar Vakhvakhishvili: “So, let's release *Don Carlos* and *The Bat* and I'll come back right away. I'll come and start working on our projects—we have so much to do. We can make a pantomime based on your ballet too.... I will open the first pantomime theater, of course, in Georgia, with the help of young people.”¹⁴ After K. Marjanishvili, it took almost 50 years to revive pantomime in Georgia. Finally, in the early 1960s, actor Amiran Shalikashvili created a pantomime group, which became the first and only All-Soviet state pantomime theater in 1976, but that is a different story.

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9 კაპანელი, რიტმი, კოლექტივი, 1934 წ. გვ. 39.

10 გუგუშვილი, კოტე მარჯანიშვილი, სთს. თბ. 1972, გვ. 48.

11 ვახვახიშვილი, თერთმეტი წელი კოტე მარჯანიშვილთან, 1976. გვ. 116.

12 Газ. Театр. 1913 г., Рубрика „Наши неседы“.

13 ვახვახიშვილი, თერთმეტი წელი, 1976, გვ. 222-223.

14 ვახვახიშვილი, თერთმეტი წელი, 1976, გვ. 154.