

SUBTEXT OF THE PLAY

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Through performance, directors and their like-minded teams outline the form and essence of a play; meanwhile, through subtext they reveal their attitude toward tough reality by giving particular hints. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the theater space has turned into a kind of arena for bold experiments, self-realization. While performing visual “icons” as directors’ opinions, a rebellion is revealed with great caution through decorations, a play of particular items or costumes, their color combinations, their dark colors, plastic “modulations,” methods of expression, or subtexts of the actors.

Performances saturated with subtexts are found in abundance since the period of modernist directors. In this regard, the Russian theater directing in the early 20th century was noted for special activity. Meyerhold, obsessed with copying life’s reality, reflected an epic and satiric image of the new epoch by means of folk slapstick performances, circus and heroic pathos for first time in the history of theater, in this first political performance. The line between theater and reality was obliterated in this performance. Red devils, allegedly sent from the hell, were coming out from the scene hatches.

S. Anski’s *Gadibuk* (1922), a puppet-static play staged by director Eugeniy Vakhtangov, underlines class struggle. The established form of relationship between rich and poor people was reflected via theatric costumes, body movement, gestures, speech, and mimics. Opposite to the women in brocade dresses and men in long black frock-coats, withered, allegedly broken bodies were appearing through the faded, shabby clothes. They, ill with tuberculosis and many other diseases, looked almost like monsters. Conditional makeup drawn with lines around their eyes and mouths made their faces look like masks. Dancing plebs screamed and stopped abruptly. One of them stretched his hand appallingly—and another one his claw—toward arrogant rich people. In their rampant dance mocking, disgust was exploding toward the chosen ones of this world, with a terrible sense of weakness, doom, inequality, and despair fueling their aggression.

Hoppla We’re Alive, staged in 1928, was the first premier of the newly established Kutaisi-Batumi Theater by Marjanishvili. Avant-garde directors (Ervin Piscator, V. Meyerhold, and others) staged plays by a revolutionary and playwright who significantly conditioned the politicization of the theater, and the plays were replaced by manifestations. The autobiographic play of the playwright minding the politization of the theater, titled “*Hoppla We’re Alive* (1927), in which the spiritual degradation or political machinations of the society of the 1920s was considered by some researchers to be a strongly realistic drama bordering on absurd. The main character of the documentary drama, revolutionary Carl Thomas, after perennial imprisonment, still opposed the violence of the government. He was betrayed by his friends and lover; desperate at fathoming a hopeless future, he committed suicide like the author himself.

Hoppla We’re Alive by E. Toler was staged in the same year 1927 by Ervin Piscator, and the version by Marjanishvili alluded to the concepts and worldviews of the rebel Dadaist. The fact of choosing this play by Kote Marjanishvili, the history of previous staging and E. Piscator’s theatrical model, included eloquent information. Marjanishvili aimed mostly at the critical understanding of modern realities, though he did employ artistic innovations. He and his partner, artist D. Kakabadze, used cinema, radio, scenic machinery, lighting (light-writing), and elements of review, an original innovation for that time. Actors using cinematic means moved from the stage to the screen and vice versa. Besides, “acting” light beams, drew the viewer’s spectators’ attention from the condemned people to the couple dancing in the restaurant. The director outlined portraits of a fractured, divided, alienated society. Suffering faces of the imprisoned mentally ill revolutionaries and cheerful mood of the beneficial, indifferent persons were alternated. Charleston, considered as amoral, provocative dance of Afro-American origin, was included in the play, allegedly to stand for the economic collapse, universal poverty, dominating aggression. On the background of the energetic, exhilarating movements

of youth, with the intensified rhythm of the orchestra, Carl is desperate at the betrayal of his loved ones as he transforms into a murderer and his suicidal face is seen on the screen. His doomed face was followed by tragic information conveyed by a concerned radio announcer.... Theater expert Nodar Gurabanidze wrote about the play: "A new person has entered the Georgian stage, one who saw his calling in struggle"¹.

Besides directors' interference with the primary source of the play, allusions to political theater were obvious. Avant-garde artists skilled in cinema excelled in creating a relevant atmosphere, and the director equally skillfully "wrapped" his attitude toward the new regime. Clearly, a Georgian version of Ethel Voynich's *Wasp* was filmed in 1928 by Kote Marjanishvili. Mother Famar's brother, doomed by the communist regime as a renegade, was a reformer of Georgian theater who clearly expressed his support of Christian values, this way defying the atheistic doctrine of communist ideology.

Sh. Dadiani's famous staging of the heroic *Tetnul-di* (1931) play by another reformer of Georgian theater, Akhmeteli, portrayed the generation of war and conflict of values, and featured monumental, effective, and dynamic decorations created by I. Gamrekeli—enormous Svan towers in the middle of the stage. Suddenly, the towers form two opposite groups, with Tetnuldi Mkinvartsveri towering between them, and in the white space below, a group of singing women in sackcloth, horrified by the tragic collapse of traditional values and beliefs.

Accompanied by the sounds of an ancient Svan funeral hymn, Svan *bapi* priests enter the half-darkened stage. Their tormented faces, gray hair and beards radiate spiritual strength, mystical images of loyal votaries. They cannot accept the collapse of the pride of Svane-ti, one acknowledged as a sacred harbor of supernatural powers. The news of a leader of alpinists dying in an attempt to conquer Tetnuldi is taken as a fair decision by supreme powers, and angry expressions are replaced with festive manifestations of joy. With the hands clasped on each other's shoulders, they make a circle and start a slow dance that gradually grows stronger. In

euphoric, triumphant elation, they scream emotionally, jump and whirl, an ancient ritual of victory over a failed youth defying traditional values. Their dance is related to the moves of Greek Choro, though the troubled, unpredictable attitude of the 1930s is outlined in the staging. The performance "reflects revolutionary struggle against patriarchal life... defiance of traditions and customs, the origins of the tragical understanding of events...."²

The opening of the Small Stage once conceived by Akhmeteli was made a reality in the 1960s by Mikheil Tumanishvili, who advanced the classic art in directing to new heights. The inaugural play on the experimental stage, *Chinchraka* by Guga Nakhutsrishvili (artists Olek Kochakidze, Alexander Slovinski, Yury Chikvaidze, choreographer Yury Zaretski, Small Stage of Rustaveli Theater, 1963), sought direct contact with the audience. They play was "double faced," according to Akaki Bakradze, and action developed simultaneously in two eras, fictional and contemporary—"allegorically it was responding to the pressing issues of the time."³ Baqbaq Devi, a regular character of Georgian fairytales, appears in the performance together with his "spiritual father" Qosa—advisor and a quartette of animals: a jackal, a fox, a bear, and a wolf. As a result, the stage is "occupied" by savage beasts. This fact also outlines the director's attitude towards reality. The feeble-minded and aggressive Baqbaq Devi invades the kingdom of the kind king. His "games" with the pomegranate-atomic weapon is destructive to the world, hinting at a real catastrophe, but the animal quartette is still quietly preparing for the Olympiad. They represent modern indifferent and pseudo-intellectual people involved in a violent marathon through their passiveness.

The play is mocking the unruly cruelty, ignorance and philistinism of the officials exasperated with the caprice of authority. In the fight of *Chinchraka* and *Mzia* against the dominance of Devi, or the animals in the evident or hidden conflicts, the director outlines reigning oppression, the struggle of unarmed people against injustice and oppression. "The director attached global importance to the self-evident truth"⁴. The term "political grotesque"

1 Gurabanidze N., "Expressionistic drama and "issue of new persons in Georgian Theater" (chapter from the book "Revolutionary contemporary and theater").

2 Collection Sandro Akhmeteli, Tbilisi, 1958, p. 42

3 Bakradze A., Cinema. Theater, Tbilisi, 1989, p. 268

4 Gurabanidze N., Mikheil Tumanishvili Theater, Tbilisi, 2010, p. 169

was used here for the first time....

The 1970s are rightfully hailed as another Golden Age theater. This period was important in Russian theater as well, where Taganka Theater dominating, and *Hamlet* by Yury Lubimov (1971) turning into a manifesto by the new generation. In this political satire or pamphlet tailored after Soviet reality, spectators saw the charismatic Vladimir Visotsky in the lead role. He portrayed a modern youth strongly opposing the government. Upon entering the auditorium, viewers see Hamlet the bard clothed in a black wool sweater and jeans and sitting in the depth of the stage, as though he had just walked from the street.

The stage is used sparingly to emphasize the place of action and the essence of the event. In fathoming the difficult 1970s, the director/artist tandem refuses rich decoration. Ground shoveled out from the excavated grave and a skull above the pit are indicative of the troubled spirit of the ex-governor hastily sent to eternity, inclined to revenge, an omen predicting the quick fate of the murderers. "Rough crossed boards located in the depth of the stage" (A. Efros) are a generalizing place of action of the stage characters, indicating the reality of Soviet life, where they engage in a life-and-death struggle for power.

The director and the artist dress the actors in prosaic woolen sweaters. Only Queen Gertrude by Ala Demidova and Claudius by Veniamin Smekhov have massive, rough chains over their necks, a symbol of the punishment for their crimes. The prince himself, in the words of famous Shakespeare expert Alexey Bartoshevich, "was completely simple and always frowning." His hoarse but sonant bitter voice borders on a scream and fluctuates rapidly, with sudden sharp reactions. This modern earthly person ponders how to continue his life, how to struggle with Claudius and his rotten retinue.

Ophelia by Natalia Saiko resembles a frightened child afraid of her father, brother, and prince, with whom she has no ties. In turn, Hamlet also sees a puppet of Polonius's political theater in front of him. Everyone seems to be toying with Ophelia. Thus, no love line is found in the play. Instead, hypocrisy rules, with no sincerity present, much the way it was in the 1970s.

One of the main actors is a moving, heavy, massive woolen curtain. The director's and artist's brilliant finding it is a metaphor of faith. Created by artist David Borovski, it moves unconventionally, crossing the stage

sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly. It is chasing someone, struggles, collapsing after a strong blow in the feet, flees to the excavated graves, but it is indifferent to Hamlet. This magical creature unmercifully razes characters from the stage, and after that crosses the swept, emptied, "cleaned" space in a calm manner, and subsides. Seems like it opened a new page in the stage life.

In the early 21st century, when judgment against intelligentsia prevailed again, performances staged by Giorgi Margvelashvili, *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters*, delivered a harsh sentence against the passive, impractical character of the intelligentsia. In *The Cherry Orchard* (2004), the cyclic nature of existence is proclaimed, and so is the philosophy of the tragic existence of intelligence. In *Three Sisters*, the perennial dream of a famous intelligentsia family turns into the ashes and the youngest daughter of the Prozorovs', in her madness, attempts to commit suicide.

The stage plank in *The Cherry Orchard* is perceived as a destructive space. A bundle is hanging over the stage like a chandelier resembling an empty hanger. Trees drawn on the scene resemble enormous spooky black clouds. The music is joyful at times but sometimes evil and ironical. People onstage are often dancing seemingly freely, thoughtlessly, but their attitude is as tragic, as though wearing the mask of those marked by death despite their self-sacrificing attempts. All characters aware of their helplessness against the fateful court. The biggest value in the world is for sale and demolishing, nowadays branded as expired. Formerly the most valuable "cherry orchard" is associated with the end of intelligentsia.

Lopakhin by Roinishvili is a merchant or businessman in a new pragmatic era, a descendant of a former servant; he is portrayed by the director and the actor as one involved in the life of intelligentsia. Elegant, white-handed Lopakhin, according to his own words, is an avid reader, and theatergoer, one who dresses in neat clothes and rushes to Moscow to ascend the next hierarchic level in the capital of the Empire. Ranevskaya's forced laugh descends into an unrestrained, desperate mourning a doomed woman. The attitude Roinishvili's Lopakhin is not calm, self-confident. His self-control is radiating melancholy and fear of a serious, busy and doubtful man. He does not see himself as the uncontested owner of that splendid estate, and the fragile future also startles

him. The intuitive ability to access circular cycle of life may be observed in the acting of the intellectual G. Roinishvili playing the role of Lopakhin. "I earned much money, but still I'm a peasant," he says. His soul is terrified by constant melancholy, a sense of the insidiously implicit play of fortune. Although he is boldly planning to set up a modern, profitable business, he still realizes that at the

end of the circular cycle of human existence, he will meet the tragic end of the cherry merchant.

By referring couple of plays of 20th century, it is clear that directors are public keeping their figure on the pulse of their time. They boldly express their opinions about ongoing processes through their plays and provide accurate information about probable faith.

REFERENCES:

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2. Bakradze A., Cinema. Theater, Tbilisi 1989
3. Gurabanidze N., Mikheil Tumanishvili Theater, Tbilisi 2010
4. Collection by Sandro Akhmeteli, Tbilisi 1958.