

# CURRICULUM GUIDE



## THE ILKHOM THEATRE ARTISTS-IN-RESIDENCE MIAMI UNIVERSITY APRIL 21-26, 2008

Curriculum Guide compiled by  
Michael Rouland, Visiting Assistant Professor in History  
and Assistant Director, Havighurst Center for Russian & Post-Soviet Studies

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing to let you know that the Ilkhom Theatre Company from Tashkent, Uzbekistan will be coming to Oxford this spring as part of the Performing Arts Series, with other U.S stops in Seattle, San Francisco, and New York City. This residency is the culmination of three years of negotiations by Performing Arts Director Patti Libertore with the company, and we are thrilled at the prospect of having this important and award-winning theatre company in residency from April 21-26, culminating in a performance of *Ecstasy with the Pomegranate* at the Gates-Abegglen Theatre, Center for the Performing Arts, Saturday, April 26, 2008, at 7:30 PM.

The play, "Ecstasy with the Pomegranate," choreographed by David Rousseve and supported by the National Dance Project, explores themes of nationality, identity, religion, Russian turmoil, Central Asian History, homoeroticism, reality/fantasy, and love. The Havighurst Center and Performing Arts Series believe in the artistic value of this play and this company, but are aware of the potentially controversial nature of the subject of this play. It deals with Muslim culture and Central Asian history; and homosexuality in some form is part, but by no means all, of the play's theme.

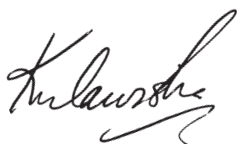
We are especially committed to this partnership with the Ilkhom Theatre, in the wake of Ilkhom Artistic Director Mark Weil's recent murder in the lobby of his Tashkent apartment building. Mark had many close ties to the United States, and we are honored and dedicated to sharing his legacy with the world, and to keeping his particular vision of the possibilities of highly creative and engaged theatre alive. We hope that you will join us in this conversation.

The Havighurst Center is working closely with the Performing Arts Series to support co-curricular activities on this project as it presents a tremendous opportunity to create deep discussions in our community about Islamic culture, sexuality, and the new and fresh art of this artistically superb company. In fact, we believe Miami and Ilkhom can provide the entire community with wonderful opportunities to experience the commonalities and differences of two cultures that seem to be clashing in so many aspects of our lives.

We are inviting potentially interested scholars, community representatives, potential supporters and stakeholders to begin thinking about how best to contextualize and promote this wonderful production. If you'd like to hear more about Ilkhom, please check our website at <http://www.muohio.edu/havighurstcenter>, which we will continually update, and Ilkhom Theatre's at <http://www.ilkhom.com/english>.

The residency is also sponsored by the Center for American and World Cultures, the School of Fine Arts' Scholarship & Teaching Fund, Arts Midwests' Performing Arts Fund and the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Karen Dawisha", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Karen Dawisha, Director  
The Havighurst Center for Russian & Post-Soviet Studies

## Table of Contents

Map of Central Asia .....	1
<i>Uzbekistan</i> , from The World Factbook .....	1
Theater in Uzbekistan	
Past Tense: <i>The Unknown Infamous Ilkhom</i> by Mark Weil.....	4
Present Tense: <i>A Central Asian Theatrical Mecca?</i> by Laura Adams.....	7
Future Tense: <i>The Future of Performing Arts in Uzbekistan</i> by Laura Adams....	10
Usto Mumin's <i>Zeal with the Pomegranate</i> (1923) by Boris Chukhovich.....	15
<i>Ecstasy with the Pomegranate</i> Play Synopsis .....	19
Biographies	
Mark Weil .....	21
David Rousseve .....	21
Usto Mumin.....	21
Discussion Questions .....	22
Additional Resources .....	23

A copy of this **Curriculum Guide** is available online in PDF form (with links to resources) at <http://www.muohio.edu/havighurstcenter/IlkhomTheatre.htm>

A copy of the script for ***Ecstasy with the Pomegranate*** is available online at <http://www.muohio.edu/havighurstcenter/Pomegranate.htm> The script may be obtained in DVD form from the Performing Arts Series Office.

A **Schedule of Events** for programming relating to Uzbekistan and the Ilkhom Theater Company can be viewed online at <http://www.muohio.edu/havighurstcenter/IlkhomSchedule.htm>

# MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA



## UZBEKISTAN

*information derived from the 2008 World Factbook*

### Introduction to Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan was conquered by Russia in the late 19th century. Stiff resistance to the Red Army after the first World War was eventually suppressed and a socialist republic set up in 1924. During the Soviet era, intensive production of “white gold” (cotton) and grain led to overuse of agrochemicals and the depletion of water supplies, which have left the land poisoned and the Aral Sea and certain rivers half dry. Independent since 1991, the country seeks to gradually lessen its dependence on agriculture while developing its mineral and petroleum reserves. Current concerns include terrorism by Islamic militants, economic stagnation, and the curtailment of human rights and democratization.

### Geography of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is located in Central Asia, north of Afghanistan. It covers an area of 447,400 sq km (slightly larger than California), of which 22,000 sq km is water. Uzbekistan borders Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan and is one of only two doubly landlocked countries (a country which is surrounded entirely by other landlocked countries) in the world, the other being Liechtenstein. Its natural resources include natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead and zinc, tungsten, and molybdenum.

Uzbekistan is mostly mid-latitude desert, with long, hot summers and mild winters. Its terrain is mostly flat—to-rolling sandy desert with dunes; broad, flat intensely irrigated river valleys along the course of the Amu Darya, Syr Darya (Sirdaryo), and Zarafshon rivers. The Fergana Valley in the east is surrounded by mountainous Tajikistan



and Kyrgyzstan, with a shrinking Aral Sea in west. The lowest point in Uzbekistan is Sariqarnish Kuli at 12m; its highest point Adelunga Toghi, soars to 4,301m.

The shrinkage of the Aral Sea is resulting in growing concentrations of chemical pesticides and natural salts; these substances are then blown from the increasingly exposed lake bed and contribute to desertification. Water pollution from industrial wastes and the heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides is the cause of many human health disorders. Increasing

soil salination and soil contamination from buried nuclear processing and agricultural chemicals, including DDT, also contribute to health problems.

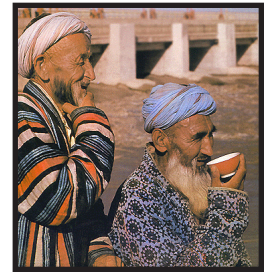
### People of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has a population of 27,780,059, and a population growth rate of 1.732% (2007 est.). The average age is 22.9 years, with a life expectancy of about 64.98 years, with women living slightly longer than men.

The country is comprised of a number of ethnic groups, religions and languages. Uzbeks comprise 80% of the population, with Russians and Tajik at 5% each, Kazakh and



Karakalpak about 3%, and Tatar and all other groups comprising less than 4% total (1996 est.) The predominant religion is Muslim, at 88% (mostly Sunnis), while Eastern Orthodox comprises another 9%. The majority of the population speaks Uzbek (74.3%) and Russian (14.2%), while another 11% speak Tajik and other languages.



### Government of Uzbekistan

The capital of Uzbekistan is Tashkent (*Toshkent*), which means “stone city.” September 1<sup>st</sup> marks the national holiday, Independence Day, in celebration of Uzbekistan gaining independence from the Soviet Union.

The government of the Republic of Uzbekistan (*O'zbekiston Respublikasi*), formerly the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, is comprised of an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. However, the republic is run under authoritarian presidential rule, with little power outside the executive branch. Uzbekistan is led by President Islam Karimov, who has ruled since March 24, 1990, when he was elected President by the then Supreme Soviet. He was recently re-elected, with 88% of the vote in 2007. The President appoints his Cabinet of Ministers with the approval of the bicameral Supreme Assembly (*Oliy Majlis*), which consists of an upper house or Senate (100 seats; 84 members are elected by regional governing councils and 16 appointed by the president; to serve five-year terms) and a lower house or Legislative Chamber (120 seats; members elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms). All parties in the Supreme Assembly support President Karimov. The Supreme Court, which comprises the judicial branch is made up of judges who are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Supreme Assembly.



The Uzbekistani flag is made up of three equal horizontal bands of blue, white, and green, separated by red fimbriations, with a white crescent moon and 12 white stars in the upper left quadrant.

### Economy of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is a dry, landlocked country, of which 11% consists of intensely cultivated, irrigated river valleys. More than 60% of its population lives in densely populated rural communities. Uzbekistan is now the world's second-largest cotton exporter and fifth largest producer; it relies heavily on cotton production as the major source of export earnings. Other major exports include gold, natural gas, and oil. Following independence in September 1991, the government sought to prop up its Soviet-style command economy with subsidies and tight

controls on production and prices. While aware of the need to improve the investment climate, the government still sponsors measures that often increase, not decrease, its control over business decisions.

Potential investment by Russia and China in Uzbekistan's gas and oil industry may boost growth prospects. In November 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Uzbekistan President Karimov signed an "alliance," which included provisions for economic and business cooperation. Russian businesses have shown increased interest in Uzbekistan, especially in mining, telecom, and oil and gas. In 2006, Uzbekistan took steps to rejoin the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurASEC), both organizations dominated by Russia. Uzbek authorities have accused US and other foreign companies operating in Uzbekistan of violating Uzbek tax laws and have frozen their assets. US firms have not made major investments in Uzbekistan in the last six years.

<b>Agriculture products:</b>	cotton, vegetables, fruits, grain; livestock
<b>Industries:</b>	textiles, food processing, machine building, metallurgy, gold, petroleum, natural gas, chemicals
<b>Export commodities:</b>	cotton, gold, energy products, mineral fertilizers, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, textiles, food products, machinery, automobiles
<b>Export partners:</b>	Russia 23.7%, Poland 11.7%, China 10.4%, Turkey 7.7%, Kazakhstan 5.9%, Ukraine 4.7%, Bangladesh 4.3% (2006)
<b>Import partners:</b>	Russia 27.8%, South Korea 15.2%, China 10.4%, Kazakhstan 7.3%, Germany 7.1%, Ukraine 4.8%, Turkey 4.5% (2006)
<b>Currency:</b>	Uzbekistani soum (UZS)

### **Military and Law Enforcement in Uzbekistan**

Military branches include an army, air and air defense forces, and a national guard. All men and women 18 years of age must complete compulsory military service of 12 months.

Prolonged drought and cotton monoculture in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have created water-sharing difficulties for the Amu Darya river states, resulting in field demarcation of the boundaries with Kazakhstan; and leading to serious border disputes with Kyrgyzstan around enclaves and elsewhere.

Uzbekistan is a source and, to a lesser extent, a transit country for women trafficked to Asia and the Middle East for the purpose of sexual exploitation; women from other Central Asian countries and China are trafficked through Uzbekistan. Men are trafficked for purposes of forced labor in the construction and agricultural industries to Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan is also a transit country for Afghan narcotics bound for Russian and, to a lesser extent, Western European markets, with limited illicit cultivation of cannabis and small amounts of opium poppy for domestic consumption.



## Theater in Uzbekistan: Past Tense

### An Excerpt from THE UNKNOWN INFAMOUS ILKHOM

*An attempt to survey the history of the Ilkhom Theater for those who don't have the slightest idea about it*

–Mark Weil–

The history of the Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent is a fragment of the history of an entire generation of the young artistic intelligentsia of the 1970s. People of our circle were described as such by officials authorized to control and “to create conditions” for our development. This is a history of people who showed their worth during the Brezhnev crisis, leading to perestroika and to the disintegration of a huge country with a sonorous name – the USSR. Just mentioning the name of my no longer existing country where I nevertheless managed to be born and to grow up brings up a huge wave of associations, myths, and prejudices.

Apparently people of my age who were born in the 1950s – the second half of the 20th-century, after Stalin's death, and who escaped the fear of repression and mass detention in Stalin's camps - turned out to be the last generation that managed to stand on their feet and that somehow showed their worth on the scale of the Soviet Empire. I do not know what it means or whether it means anything at all, but the fact that someone heard our names and the name of Ilkhom in the space of a huge country left a certain imprint on our minds and our way of living. And not just that fact.

Ilkhom's history is an involuntary reflection on a small scale of the cultural history of a big country that had always been full of spiritual struggle with every political system since the time of the Russian Empire. Full of an excruciating search for truth and for God, the role of Theatre, and of Art and of Literature in general, was always extremely, perhaps, overly, important.

Those who are a little familiar with Russian history and its influence on the present Commonwealth of Independent States can understand why the first Russian Social Democrats (Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Hertsen, one after another) called theatre: “the highest instance for answering questions of vital importance” and “a university for the training of minds.” Finally, developing Voltaire's ideas, they were sure that “theatre” must replace “the Church.” Something similar could also be found among the views of the Jadids, the “new” people in Uzbekistan who came into existence at the beginning of the 20th-century.

Theatre was really something special in the life of the Soviet intelligentsia. The best theatres, as we understood them (there were not many of them), had a spirit of opposition to the system. However, the latter was watched and the party bureaucracy guarded its interests, declaring real war on those unwilling to follow suit. The winner of this war was already known.

In the mid-1970s, the crisis of the system coincided with the climax of various, sometimes painful, quests in the intellectual and spiritual life of the society.

It was at this time that Ilkhom was created - when nobody believed in anything - when ten years prior to the Gorbachev era it was impossible to foresee how history would go. Ilkhom was born when the apologists of the system were up to their ears in lies, and the new generation did not want to put up with that.

The history of Ilkhom is also my personal history, the story of a young man who, just because of his young age and the independent views inherent in it, did not find himself in any of the governmental institutions and, contrary to common sense (for no one was able to win his independence in the Soviet system), created his own theatre. His own venture would become, as it turned out later, the first independent, non-governmental professional theatre company in the USSR.

Now, when I look back, I can analyze and assess what was going on, but as a participant, I can only say one thing: none of us ever thought that we would go down in history, and by no means did we think that our theatre would be able to survive in the depths of a totalitarian country.

But something even bigger happened: Ilkhom lived through the disintegration of the USSR, went through the crisis and again took up a special place in the new country - the Republic of Uzbekistan – whose politicians proclaimed the concept of “oriental democracy.”

There are different ways to look at the ideologists of the “oriental democracy,” a concept that explains the nature of a “castrated democracy” during the transition period and that stresses the unpreparedness of society to exploit democratic institutions, and, finally, that reveals the specificity of the “oriental” understanding of democracy. However, in reality we are witnessing the development of an old concept that justifies the totalitarian motto: “all for the people.” In reality, we are witnessing the exclusion of every person’s rights to influence his/her own country’s political and social system.

If the reader of these lines wants to see them as political criticism, she will be mistaken. The conclusion is altogether different. Flying from one time zone to another, working in the East and in the West, I gradually grew accustomed to a simple truism: one can easily change one’s clothes but not one’s mentality or traditions. As there are flowers and fruit appropriate for each season, there is history suitable for each country. And another mistake would be to think that Uzbekistan is too special in its formation.

Once, working on the performance *Mohammed, Mamed, Mamish* (1980) adapted from a novel by Chinghiz Guseinov who wrote a family saga about corruption and lies in the highest levels of Soviet society. I asked the author how censorship had allowed this novel to be published in Moscow. And he answered that “the officials decided that the novel does not touch the Moscow bosses, as the action takes place in the province, in the eastern republic of Azerbaijan.” Then he added, “And they were mistaken, they forgot that our whole country (the USSR) is located in the East.”

Today, we come across numerous declarations: in Moscow, that Russia is a European country; in Tashkent, that Uzbekistan has found its own way. But with all the gradations and nuances, it can be seen from “wonderfully far away” – as the great Russian writer Gogol put it. Despite all the attempts of new countries to part with their past result in reflecting it. This past is a heavy burden to bear and new statements are often only variations of old habits and vices. By the way, the monument to the Russian satirist Gogol was dismantled in Tashkent during the struggle for independence, apparently in order for it not to insult the new face of the capital.

All attempts to rewrite history, to tear away the past from the present, to declare a “New Happy Era” rarely end in success. And, as usual, ordinary human life follows its own laws. A special history continued to develop in our theatre as well.

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As I have already said, when Ilkhom was only starting up, we could not imagine that we would create our own company; and, fortunately, we could not care less about going down in history. Our first performance, *Maskaraboz-76*, was made in the street theatre tradition. At that time, I was strongly influenced by the ideas of the New Left and the heroes of the Western student revolutions of the late-1960s; but, as a student back in the 1970s, I could hardly find any information about their new art in Soviet publications.

During the Perestroika years, in the West I met with many of my former idols, who were doing quite well in life over the past decades, and I saw how different we were in reality, in our biographies, in our life experiences, and in our ideals. In the 1970s we were probably united just by one thing: our desire to express the views of our generation and to tell the truth the way we saw it.

Whereas in the West people my age were struggling with the bourgeois values of society, with consumer society, its morality and conformity, I seemed to be living in a happy nation that, although far from being overfed, was free of power of money and open to new ideas and renovation.

Western people my age did not know that in my society, free of “bourgeois ideals,” people had begun to long for them passionately. Our “classless society” headed by the owners of the country – workers and peasants, as well as those of the intelligentsia “allowed” to join their rule – were in reality exploited by the armies of party and government bureaucrats living in luxury and enjoying numerous privileges for serving the people. They had much to lose and therefore they guarded the system like family jewels.

In the past one was not allowed to discuss the situation I just described. Officially we lived in a free society, full of optimism and bright perspectives, which may have had some individual problems, but, according to state doctrine, was free of social tension.

That was the situation we started to think about in our performances. On stage we introduced a character who was a product of our society, who lived with double moral standards thinking in one way, speaking in another, and behaving in yet another way. Independent of official control, Ilkhom was able to put on a whole series of performances in the style of New Wave drama which was impossible to stage in the official theatres of the USSR.

We acted recklessly, working on plays that had not been examined by the censorship. According to existing laws, we could have been charged criminal law for anti-Soviet activities. Our older colleagues watched our performances with horror. And we simply did not understand the reason for that fear. This showed that we were different, we who were born in “Khrushchev’s relatively warm time” that saved people from the generalized fear caused by Stalin’s terror.

We were not a political theatre, we did not appeal to anyone in our performances, and we did not moralize – a feature characteristic of the Theatre of the New Left or its predecessor, the Theatre of Brecht. We just reproduced unedited life and real people on our stage. They could be eccentric as in the absurdist Scenes by the Fountain by Semyon Zlotnikov; or they could be absolutely realistic characters: cynical, pragmatic, who did not believe in love, family, serving the homeland; or they could be like the characters of Duck Hunting by Alexander Vampilov. Finally, we were simply free in experimenting with form and style in our performances, not following any ideology. Nevertheless, when Ilkhom had just started, those performances were seen as “anti-Soviet” because their attitude, characters, and artistic means did not conform to the accepted stereotypes.

I often muse on how it happened that Ilkhom was born in Tashkent. I think this was due to several circumstances. First of all, the fourth-largest city in the USSR with a population of about 2.5 million accumulated the energy that synthesized cultural traditions for a city with people of more than a hundred nationalities.

Over the past century Tashkent absorbed hundreds of thousands of those who found their homes in the sunny city, “the city of bread,” as Tashkent was called in the folk legend coming from the hungry post-revolutionary 1920s. During World War II, Tashkent became the rear capital that hosted the Academy of Sciences, dozens of theatres, the film-studios of Moscow and Leningrad, and gigantic evacuated factories and industries. They formed a basis for the development of culture and of science in Uzbekistan in the post-war years. Back then, the largest Institute of Arts in Central Asia was established, with students coming from Alma-Ata, Kazan, Frunze (Bishkek) and Dushanbe. After the break-up of the Soviet Union this institute nearly died, deprived of its flow of students from this huge area and of its best professors, who suffocated in the atmosphere of nationalism and provincialism.

But that happened recently. The generation that created Ilkhom had received an excellent education and was able to get additional training in the best theatres of Moscow, the Baltic republics, and other regions, and they were capable of competing when they stepped into their mature lives.

Finally, and this is very important, the situation in Tashkent in the 1970s was much more laid back than in Moscow, where the officials of ideology followed each step of the dissidents. This was again due to the remoteness

of the region and the queer mixture of oriental and Soviet atmosphere. Officials simply missed the period when Ilkhom was created, and when they noticed it, it was already too late. The theatre became very popular not only in Tashkent. The myth and talk about the young independent theatre could be heard the entire country.

In 1982, the theatre toured in Moscow and Leningrad. A scandal burst out.

This article continues online at the following website: <http://www.ilkhom.com/english/vaill/articles>

## Theater in Uzbekistan: Present Tense

### *A Central Asian Theatrical Mecca?*

by Laura Adams

Central Europe Review in Transitions Online

30 July 2003

<http://www.tol.cz>

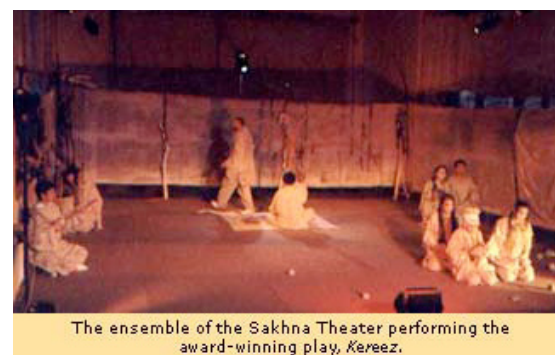
*Showcasing innovation and local adaptation in the theater arts in Central Asia has been hampered by the lack of established arenas for cross-border collaboration. A new festival is trying to change that.*

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan—Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the lack of opportunities to share culture through touring theatrical productions has been one of the greatest blows to the theater arts of Central Asia. The first-ever Bishkek International Theater Festival Art–Ordo – held last month in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek – was designed to partially alleviate that problem, giving opportunities to playwrights working in Turkic languages to see their work performed before a multinational audience.

During Soviet times, different Turkic ethnic groups communicated with each other mainly through the Russian language, but the 15–21 June Art–Ordo festival – planned as a biannual event – demonstrated that Turkic cultural cross-pollination is not only possible but fruitful.

Twenty theaters participated, including regional theaters from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, state theaters from Kazan and the Altay region of the Russian Federation, and experimental theaters from Ufa and St. Petersburg. The largely Kyrgyz audiences enthusiastically received the performances, many of which were presented in one of the Turkic languages related to Kyrgyz.

Pan-Turkic linguistic commonality wasn't the only thread running through the festival's performances. The festival also highlighted the various ways theaters in these regions are weaving ethnic culture together with contemporary tastes. Sakhra, a local experimental theater, took the festival's grand prize for its performance, *Kereez*, a play that combined an ancient myth with contemporary theater arts. *Kereez* and many of the other performances gave a glimpse into the avid interest in Turkic linguistic and cultural revival from Kazan to Ashgabat.



The performance of European-style theater in Central Asian languages is nothing new. In fact, Tashkent's Hamza theater, which performed plays in Uzbek, was one of the Soviet Union's most prominent cultural institutions. However, the Russian language heavily influenced the idiom of the plays performed in local languages, while the Art–Ordo festival reflected more recent linguistic concerns related to the de-Russification of local languages. Indeed, the language of many of the performances was carefully crafted to avoid reflecting the reality of Russian influences on everyday speech. The Tatar of the Kazan Tatar State Theater for Young Viewers, for example, was not the Tatar of Kazan's contemporary youth, but rather a purified Tatar of an imagined past.

## TURNING BACK TIME

The concern with linguistic purification is closely linked to concerns over ethnic identity and historical roots. Although the festival organizing committee did not set any thematic limitations on the festival entries, a fair number of the plays dealt with ethnic identity through explorations of the real or mythic past. The Kazan theater's performance of R. Batulla's *Sak-Sok* evoked the completely mythical past of a fairy tale, and the Drama Theater of Bashkortostan presented N. Abdykadyrov's *Poslednoe More Chinggisqaghana*, which contained a play within a play about the travels of the historical Chinggis Qaghan (Genghis Khan).

Other performances expressed a vision of ethnic tradition through form, rather than content. The Ashgabat Theater Avara, for example, performed its rendition of Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a one-man show. The ethnic spin in this piece was that director Ovliakuli Khodjakuli and actor Anna Mele presented *King Lear* in the form of the traditional Central Asian clown, the maskharaboz. The tragedy of Lear turned absurd and strangely touching as the scruffy "king" conversed with his "daughters," represented by crude stick puppets. The irony in Shakespeare's words was even more striking in this setting as Lear the vagabond repeatedly uttered the phrase, "I am a king!"

Also under Khodjakuli's direction was the performance of the Eski Masjid (Old Mosque) Theater Studio from Karshi, a city on Uzbekistan's Afghan border. The visually lush performance of *Raksu Samo'* seamlessly integrated music and dance.

"This could be considered an authentic Uzbek musical," Uzbek theater critic Kamariddin Artikov, one of the festival judges, said. "Of course, we didn't have the form of the musical before, but this is the theatrical expression of authentic musical and dance traditions."

*Raksu Samo'* was a delightful and elegant dramatization of a Sufi parable based on Seven Planets by the 15th-century poet Alisher Navoi. In contrast to many of the festival's performances, there was a religious element in *Raksu Samo'*, but it was expressed more in the context of Muslim heritage than of Islamic faith.

## YOUNG TURK(IC)S

Director Khodjakuli was one of the more interesting characters of the festival. A slight young man with the piercings and goatee more commonly found on artists in the West, Khodjakuli revealed his Turkmen ethnicity only through the colorful caps he wore to each of his three shows in the festival. Turkmenistan has proved an especially hostile environment for artists – the government banned opera and ballet in 2001 – but Uzbekistan is not a much more likely candidate for open expression, given that the authoritarian government runs all but two of the republic's theaters. (Festival participant Eski Masjid is one of the independent theaters.) Most theaters are only partially subsidized by the government in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, both of which have a much higher proportion of independent theaters and greater freedom of expression in general. In order to exercise his artistic freedom, Khodjakuli has had to live and work abroad, mainly in Almaty and Moscow.

Khodjakuli's cosmopolitan flair showed up in his rendition of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which was performed by Kazakh and Kyrgyz actors in an alternating rhythm of Russian and Kyrgyz lines. *Salome*, a play about the madness of sexual desire, is practically guaranteed to shock a conservative audience, which may explain its popularity among avant-garde directors in Central Asia. During the 1990s, the play was in the repertoire of Tashkent's Ilkhom Theater, an internationally respected independent theater. The nudity and sexuality in *Salome*, as in many of the Ilkhom's productions, scandalized even the cosmopolitan Uzbek elite of Tashkent and provoked criticism that the Ilkhom's productions are offensive to Central Asian values.

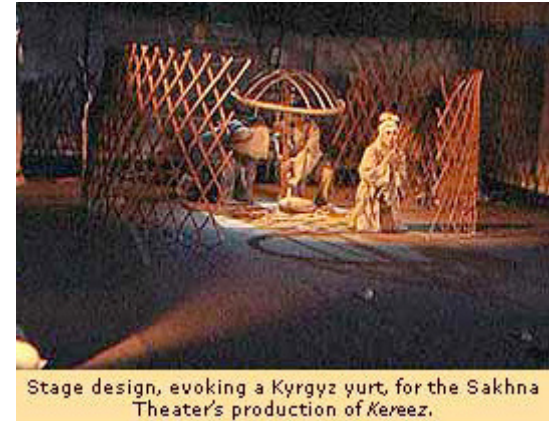
There may be a link between *Salome's* reception in Tashkent and Khodjakuli's decision to mount a multinational production with all Central Asian actors, as if in reply to the critics who claimed that such works "are not for us."

However, most of the directors did not draw their material from European sources, even though the European roots of their training were very much in evidence. European-style theater is being used to revive the indigenous artistic traditions of Central Asia in ways that fundamentally alter their performance. For example, the Central Asian minstrel tradition was one of the most popular festival themes, but when the minstrel tradition is revived through the form of European-style theater, improvisation and idiosyncrasy are sacrificed for predictability and professionalism: The clown knows in advance exactly what the jokes will be, and the bard becomes a character in a play reciting scripted lines.

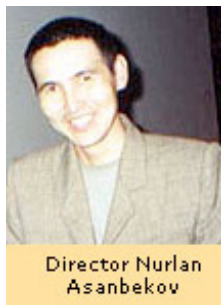
What's more, these local traditions are often seen through the lens of the European theatrical tradition. For example, in the Bashkir theater's performance of *Poslednoe More Chinggisqaghana*, it seemed that the director's image of traditional itinerant theater was based at least partly on the traditions of another country: Italy's *Commedia del Arte*.

### REDISCOVERING TRADITIONS

Some directors are finding new ways to synthesize European-style theater and traditional culture that come closer to the spirit of local traditions. One example of this at Art-Ordo was grand-prize-winner *Kereez*. In the play, contemporary environmental concerns are linked with ancient spiritual beliefs. The play is based on the Kyrgyz epic of Kojash, whose tribe lives in harmony with nature until the hero believes he is stronger than nature, bringing about his own downfall and endangering the tribe. *Kereez* was written and directed by Nurlan Asanbekov and performed by the Bishkek independent theater Sakhna.



*Kereez* is part of a larger project supported by various international and local organizations to revive the “small epic” of Kyrgyzstan. (Manas, a much longer epic, is the centerpiece of the government's campaign to build a contemporary Kyrgyz cultural identity). Sakhna is attempting to revive the lesser-known epics through the means of what Asanbekov calls “nomadic theater,” which synthesizes the art of the dastanchi (bard) and ritual theater.



Asanbekov is a serious-looking young man, in spite of his ponytail, who speaks rapidly in a soft voice about his desire to find new expressions of authentic Kyrgyz culture. He describes *Kereez* not as a play but as “ceremonies on the theme of Kojash” and indeed, an air of shamanistic ceremony pervades the entire piece. The performance begins with the actors entering into a meditative state in order to become spiritually closer to the story they are about to enact. Also, the program invites the audience to meditate on a prayer that connects God and humans through nature.

Asanbekov's bold attempt to link the performance of theater to the spiritual transformation of the actors and the audience is an exciting innovation in the theater of Central Asia, and one to which both audiences and critics have responded.

In that, *Kereez* resembles the new festival at which it took the grand prize: Art-Ordo – at least from its debut – represents a promising forum for encouraging dialogue between artists, critics, and audiences about new directions for Turkic-language theater.

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## Theater in Uzbekistan: Future Tense

### THE FUTURE OF THE PERFORMING ARTS IN UZBEKISTAN

[Published in Analysis of Current Events 15/3 (September, 2003), 9-13]

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Since independence, gradual changes have taken place in Uzbekistan's cultural institutions and in the discourse about culture in the public sphere. Over the last few years, there has been a gradual liberalization in terms of what topics are allowable for artistic exploration and in terms of what is considered possible on an institutional level. A wider range of historical topics is now open for discussion, including the repressions of the Stalin era and their impact on ordinary people. There is also a greater openness on the part of directors of certain theaters, especially those that are more marginal, to find alternate means of funding as well as new ways of doing their work. And, while state salaries for culture workers are pitifully low (like all government salaries), the government has spent substantial sums renovating old buildings and constructing new ones. For the officials who decide the budgets, it's just as important to have a modern facade as it is to have a quality product inside.

However, there is a crisis in Uzbekistan's culture production that goes beyond the economic decline that has caused hardships for so many of Uzbekistan's culture workers. Uzbekistan's culture producers were trained in an environment that encouraged creativity within limits set by the Party. During the first decade of independence in Uzbekistan, the state continued to dictate from the top down what topics were appropriate for the stage and many artists were very happy with their work because the topics were new and dealt with ideas about nationhood that they themselves were eager to explore. Accordingly, few cultural elites challenged the limits set by the state. But what happens when the state ceases to explain what those limits are? In 2002 President Islam Karimov officially disbanded the media censorship bureau and called on intellectuals to create a new and better national ideology. Suddenly, the engine of culture production stalled as the limits of state ideology were no longer clear.

This change has caused a lot of anxiety among artists who, from longstanding habit, look to the official discourse for their creative inspiration. The culture bureaucracy (always the main customer for artists in a command economy) is uncertain, casting about in various ways to regain their control by asking the intelligentsia to formulate a new and better ideology. Meanwhile, the bureaucrats encourage culture producers to take creative risks, though they are rarely willing to take risks themselves by giving permission to their underlings to actually put on the performances they come up with. Thus culture producers in contemporary Uzbekistan are faced with multiple dilemmas. They are at the mercy of the middlebrow taste of their bureaucrat bosses who retain control over the final product but have become paralyzed, seemingly unable to provide any creative direction.

Culture producers are also faced with the task of the decolonization of their culture, but they are stranded within the institutional and conceptual framework of their Soviet past. Declining audiences are certainly a sign of economic hardship, but there is also some sentiment that audiences are losing interest in productions due to their uneven quality. Without true market mechanisms in place, artists continue to be out of touch with their audiences, viewing them through a patronizing lens. Since they see their audience members as simple and conservative, they pitch their productions at a lower level, simplifying complex themes. The result is often boring art. Finally, culture producers are predisposed by their Soviet internationalism and provided incentives by international organizations to find ways to give their work global appeal. This creates tension between performers who tour abroad and those forced to stay local, as well as between the desire to focus on Uzbek culture and the desire to be internationally validated.<sup>1</sup>

## The Problematic Relationship between Artists and Bureaucrats

By all accounts, the 'level of culture' in Uzbekistan has declined since independence, and according to those I interviewed, the economic crisis was only the initial cause. As one theater critic put it, "the audiences can't afford to go to performances and very few theaters seem to be finding independent means for themselves, so of course the other theaters are forced to play to their client base – the bosses who control the purse strings." Artists I interviewed heaped scorn upon the bosses of their bosses, the people who control the funding for their work without really understanding it. In some ways, this situation is even worse than it was during the Soviet period because what used to be separate bureaucracies (the theater department at the Ministry, the theatrical workers' union, etc.) have now been subsumed under one organization, UzTeatr. Whatever this increasing centralization was supposed to accomplish, one of my interviewees said that "everything works the same way even though the names have changed," he said. "It's all the same people. The same nachal'niki crushing all sorts of innovation." He implied that everyone was tired of fighting with these people and their middlebrow tastes, and that things work smoothly only when the ideas come from above.

Of course, such complaints about those who are unappreciative of high culture can be heard in many countries, and are certainly not unique to Uzbekistan. More interesting is the charge that the bureaucrats are lost without the dictates of Party ideology and that their confusion about what kind of cultural work they should support affects the quality of the artistic decisions of culture producers. One theater critic told me: "People don't know what Uzbek theater should be. There isn't yet any direction from the top on this and even people who would like to do something independent of the top don't really have a direction. Some look to Turkey or China or somewhere. Some look to national traditions. Others look to world theater. They don't know for whom they are creating. Without the ideological structure, it seems like the will has collapsed. What is the purpose? They don't know... basically, in this situation what determines theatrical production is the taste of the nachal'niki."

Interestingly, the attitude that the creative impulse behind theater should come from the top is rarely questioned, even by the more experimental artists I interviewed. Whereas the lack of direction from above might be viewed as freedom from interference, many culture producers in Uzbekistan feel that they have been dropped into a dark and dangerous wood with no clear path. According to some, the artists are tired and simply do not understand what the government wants. One interviewee explained that though this idea that inspiration should come from official ideology seemed very 'Soviet,' it reflects the reality of a system in which the government controls culture production. Without a strong ideology, even opposition becomes problematic. "The fact is that everyone understands that theater is a government institution and there is hardly any experience in creating theater apart from the government. ...[What's more,] when there's a clear ideology, it's clear how to be opposed to it. Now nobody knows how to oppose anything, what to be against, so they're in the same position as the people who are in support of the government – with no impetus."

## The Touchy Issue of Cultural Decolonization

A debate begun in the early 1990s continues in whispers today about why European high art forms are necessary in contemporary Uzbekistan. Most Uzbeks neither like nor understand opera and ballet and do not believe that the government should continue to support these 'alien' art forms. Some Uzbeks even see the presence of opera and ballet in their country as a sign of Russian cultural imperialism.

Opera and ballet are maintained in Tashkent as a part of keeping up the appearance of a civilized nation. "Of course there should be opera," one of my interviewees said, "this is the twenty-first century after all." However, the government is not willing to pay enough attention to opera and ballet to make them as good as they used to be. Unsurprisingly, most of the best performers in the former companies have moved to other countries where they can make a decent living. The ones who stayed get \$20/month for their official salaries. Many people in the company do not actually perform; they just collect their salaries like a pension. Everyone knows that the theater should downsize and redistribute the salaries to the active performers, but nobody in the administration

of the company is willing to do it. With such prospects, there are few students enrolling in the ballet track at the choreography institute and few studying opera at the conservatory. There are even fewer quality teachers, so the next generation of opera and ballet performers are not likely to be of a high quality. The Soviet attempt at synthesizing Uzbek and European culture resulted in Uzbek language operas based on local legends, which are performed these days to an audience of 'five old ladies,' according to another interviewee.

Theatre, however, is not seen as alien. Indeed, this is one European cultural form whose prestige is hegemonic among the cultural elite in Tashkent. No one I encountered questions the appropriateness of European theatrical forms for the expression of national identity and there is little support for reviving traditional theatre in its original forms. Whereas Tashkent's other European genres such as opera and ballet are suffering from a lack of interest on the part of the government (and a lack of money on the part of their audience), theatres have survived the economic downturn relatively well. One interviewee explained that because there were indigenous cultural forms resembling theatre, the relationship of the Uzbeks to European theater was automatically closer than it was to opera and ballet. Theater, after all, is more of a popular (*narodniy*) form, whereas opera and ballet are considered courtly, that is, of aristocratic roots.

However, the content of theater in Tashkent usually deals with issues of national identity. The quality and impact of this national content is mitigated in part by the weak or vacillating guidance from the bureaucrats. Also, the bureaucrats' sense of national tradition is far from the type of living tradition that would serve as true creative inspiration. One of my interviewees commented that real local theater is dying out now because of the way that theaters now use national traditions is hollow: productions are about national traditions instead of being national traditions. For example, the clowning traditions of maskharaboz and traditional comedians (*qiziqchi*) are used in national holiday extravaganzas as emblems of national traditions. However, their traditional role as satirists and their traditional style as improvisers are neutralized by the use of a pre-recorded soundtrack. My interlocutor contrasted this approach with *Happy Beggars*, a production in the repertoire of the Ilkhom Theater since 1993. *Happy Beggars* keeps maskharaboz alive in its original spirit; there is actually improvisation and *qiziqchi* in *Happy Beggars*, whereas the other theaters "don't dare preserve the spirit of these forms, just their appearance." Uzbekistan's artists are all struggling with the question of how to create culture that gives people this sense of identification. Serious culture producers keenly want to create authentic expressions of a modern Uzbek culture without copying European high or pop culture or propagating the now ubiquitous folklore genres developed during the Soviet era as markers of Uzbek culture.

### The Problem of the Imagined Audience

Many culture producers in Uzbekistan have the attitude that they are members of an elite segment of the population that appreciates and understands high culture, but that they are performing for a very different audience of 'the people' who, they say, have a cultural predisposition towards simpler, more emotive cultural genres. One interviewee, who told me that Uzbeks do not understand opera, attributed it to their national mentality. Like many other Uzbeks I interviewed, he seemed aware that his attitude was Eurocentric but could not help characterizing Uzbeks in an Orientalist way. Another interviewee talked about how comedy and tragedy seem to be best suited both to Central Asian audiences and to the talent of the theater in which he worked. He said that drama and psychological nuances do not play well in Uzbekistan; that naturalistic theater does not work well but theatrical theater does. (Interestingly, just such a "naturalistic" play opened the 2002 season at his theater and it played to an overflowing full house the night I attended.) I asked him what he thought was the difference between Russian and Uzbek theater. He said, "like it or not, Uzbeks perform more from the heart, with more emotion, while Russian actors perform with the mind." He went on like that for a while: heart vs. mind, emotion vs. reason, warm climate vs. cold, etc.

Another interviewee answered my question, "for whom do you create?" by talking about how she does her work for the people, to make them experience something, to make them forget their real lives, forget even that

they are in a theater. Uzbek audiences, she said, “are naïve, childlike, and forget that they are in a theater.” One consequence of this attitude of viewing the imagined Uzbek audience as children is the extreme simplification of themes. Another consequence is that directors who imagine their audience as conservative and traditional tend to limit the subject matter with which they deal. One interviewee talked about how important the subject of the play was to Uzbek audiences and that it was important to avoid things that “aren’t right for our audiences.” In the absence of audience research and market-based feedback mechanisms, the plays at her theater are adapted for the imagined tastes and sensibilities of an urban Uzbek audience, avoiding avant-garde themes that might shock such an audience.

### The Increasing Importance of a Global Audience

During the Soviet period, cultural modernization in Uzbekistan was accompanied by an increasing emphasis on internationalism in the arts. The arts in Uzbekistan became self-consciously international because of the way that Soviet culture production was set up to necessitate exchanges between the republics. My interviewees all seemed to regret the demise of the Soviet Union precisely because this obligatory internationalism and interdependence was what made the production of ‘great culture’ in Uzbekistan possible. Nearly everyone with whom I spoke, in every genre, mentioned the inability to tour as one of the most devastating post-independence changes in their work. This is evidence of a very significant idea: they consider the quality of their work to be dependent upon performing before audiences of different cultures, and in turn, viewing the productions of companies from different parts of the world.

International organizations and collaborators abroad are beginning to have an effect on the theme, form and content of culture production in Uzbekistan. For example, the Russian Youth Theater premiered a show in May 2001 that was sponsored by the UN. The show, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, was voted the best show of the year in the annual competition sponsored by UzTeatr. The funding came from a UN campaign against the use of narcotics and the director of the theater created a production about this issue that was based upon the biblical parable about *Sodom and Gomorrah*. The show was a rock ballet without words, which made it more appealing to an international audience, and the theme addressed concerns of the international community that also clearly pertain to the local community. The director of the Russian Youth Theater, Nabi Abdurakhmanov, has been remarkably successful in attracting the attention of international organizations and foreign theaters for his productions, in part because he has been so willing to experiment with theater without words.

However, if the local audience is imagined as oriental, the international audience is imagined as Orientalist. One director said that he is fighting an uphill battle with his contemporary productions because, as he complained, “most of these international organizations look at Uzbek culture as exotica. But we have real, developed culture here, not just exotica.” The taste of international audiences has also led the Ministry of Culture to devote more resources to promoting folk culture groups, a move that some fans of European culture may interpret as nationalism, but which really has more to do with ‘supply and demand’ considerations of an increasingly global cultural economy. Officials explained that the development of amateur and folk groups was even more important than that of professional groups because local color was what foreign audiences wanted to see.

### Conclusions: What does the Future Hold?

Tashkent has an extremely rich legacy in the performing arts, but its institutions of high culture are burdened by the remnants of a Soviet infrastructure without the benefit of Soviet-era subsidies. The government has shown an interest in capital investment in culture, in one case spending \$5 million to renovate a major theater, but it is hesitant to renovate organizations and methods. Talented people have little incentive to continue their work in the republic and the current generation of performers in certain European genres may be the last. Somewhat less dire is the situation in hybrid genres, which merely face a crisis of content as they struggle with conceptions of what a contemporary (yet authentic) Uzbek culture should look like. The international community has all but

ignored the problem of Uzbekistan's cultural degradation, with the laudable exception of UNESCO's recognition of the Baysun area as an intangible cultural heritage site. The government of Uzbekistan has been greedy in its control but stingy in its material and meaningful ideological support.

With its diversity of talent and institutions, Tashkent has been a vibrant center of world culture, representing a unique synthesis of European and Muslim cultures, as well as of socialist and internationalist ideas. Culture producers in Uzbekistan are a rich international cultural resource, but they will need outside assistance if they are to learn ways of creating and producing art that are not dependent on the state financially or ideologically. Without being exposed to alternative methods of culture production and being able to access alternative sources of funding, most artists in Uzbekistan will be trapped in a cycle of the reproduction of kitschy nationalism that prevents any sort of dialogue between state and society. Democracy in culture is thwarted when artists are preoccupied with providing ready-made answers to questions only the state is allowed to ask. The realm of culture production is one in desperate need of democratization.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>My research is based on more than 20 in-depth interviews conducted with people in the performing arts, mostly theater, in September 2002, May 1998 and during 1996.

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### Zeal with the Pomegranate (Usto Mumin, 1923)

*The following analysis of the painting “Zeal with the Pomegranate,” which inspired Ilkhom’s ‘Ecstasy with the Pomegranate,’ is by Boris Chukhovich, a scholar in the research groups Le soi et l’autre, UQAM, Poexil, University of Montreal, and LAMIC, Laval University – Musée d’art contemporain de Montreal. He is also the Curator in chief of the Musée d’art centre-asiatique.*

This painting is a complex construction of ten images, arranged around an eleventh central image. The ten framing images correspond to ten different episodes that altogether paint a life of the saints and can be reconstructed in ten acts, as follows:

#### Scene I: The urban square



Two young men are meeting in the square. One is dressed in a ruby-colored jacket and one is dressed in a ruby-colored jacket and a dark-terracotta dressing gown and is carrying a tray with pomegranates on his head. Another is dressed in a dark-blue chapān (Uzbek traditional dress), a satin jacket, and an amber colored head wrap. He’s come to a halt. The pomegranate salesman hands out a pomegranate to the young man in the amber head wrap. An old man in a yellow-white striped chapān stares disapprovingly.

### Scene 2: The country garden



Rugs are spread out on the green grass; six young men are sitting on them. One of them is playing a tambourine; the others are clapping out a rhythm. A dancer is dancing in front of them.

### Scene 3: The uninhabited green meadow in the country garden



Two young men in white robes are sitting on a rug. One, in a gold head wrap, is playing on the tambourine. The second, in an amber head wrap, is listening to him, infatuated.

### Scene 4: The garden before the bathing pavilion



A green hill with a mosque dome growing above it is rising behind the pavilion. A rug is spread out on the grass; on it is a young man in slumber. He is having a dream.

### Scene 5: The dream of the young man



Inside the bathing pavilion, someone is splashing around in the pool. The bather left his gold head wrap by the poolside. The water from the pool rises in streaks of steam. Another young man, hidden on the roof of the pavilion is watching the bather. He is wearing an amber head wrap.

### Scene 6: The uninhabited country garden



A rug is laid out on the grass; two young men are sitting upon it. We have seen these two characters before and can recognize them by the dark-blue dressing gown, satin jacket, and an amber head wrap of one, and the gold head wrap of the other. Underneath the white dressing gown of the second, you can see a dark-terracotta cover and a scarlet jacket. It is the same garment worn by the young man with a tray of pomegranates in the first scene. Judging by the content of the following scene, this episode seems to be a proclamation of love between the two lovers. Each young man has a cage with a bird inside it. The first

holds the cage in his hands while the second has placed it on the ground in front of him. The cage held by the first man is empty; his collocutor is holding its inhabitant trying to demonstrate how to feed water to the bird from his mouth. The first young man looks slightly embarrassed.

Scene 7: The uninhabited country garden (same characters as in the previous scene)



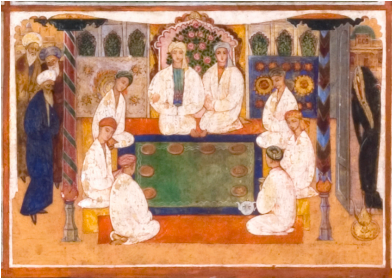
The birdcages are left on the ground. The two lovers embrace.

Scene 8: Stairs before the mosque



An old mullah is sitting in the center; a massive book is opened in front of him. Two young men are positioned along the sides: one is wearing a dark-blue dressing gown with an amber head wrap, the other a gold head wrap. The first young man has his head inclined to the ground; he dares not look at the mullah. The second directly faces the mullah, listening to his speech. Judging by the following scene, the discussion seems to concern the religious and social legitimation of the young men's relationship together.

Scene 9: The court of a private house with a festive dastarkhan (Uzbek table for eating)



Two young men are sitting in the center of the dastarkhan with a symbolically combined niche placed behind them. Their six friends, who participated in the “zeal,” are around the dastarkhan also. Outside of the yard there are old men in long chapans on one side, and a woman in parandja on the other. Their poses imply both condemnation and surprise.

Scene 10: The green cemetery



A dual grave with a lantern is in the center. In the background, there is a semicircular green hill, “the stairs of sinners” and blue cupolas of Shah-i-Zinda, are seen distinctly upon it.

In the Russian language, “Zeal” implies a performance of a specific ritual by a group of people with the purpose of driving themselves into ecstasy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, certain Russian sects practiced a similar ritual with the use of whips. In the context of the Central Asian tradition, the ritual applied to sacred acts performed by the Sufis. In this particularly case, however, it is not the act of Sufis, but rather the dance of the Bacha dancers that is implied. Polovsov once witnessed and later described this phenomenon in his memoirs:

“In a room, but more often in a garden or a backyard, a space is cleared and covered in rugs for a performance. The rugs are often covered with specific thick, homogenously colored mats. The bare feet of the dancers and the intricate movements, with which they move, become sharper and easily distinguished upon the white, gray or raspberry colored surfaces of the mats. The audience is assembled all around the performance area, with their legs crossed, and only leaving one small corner for the musicians and a stack of warm, perishing coals that the musicians use from time to time to heat the stretched and the softened surface of the tambourines in order to tune them. [...] The first dancer steps out on his tiptoes and begins to circle around the performance area cleared for the dance. He glides with short and rhythmical steps, with his hands on his hips; then he stops at the center and begins to bend forward, curve, circle and jolt his body precisely when the “white” man least expects it. At that point, a second dancer follows, then the third and so on, until about half a dozen dancers or more join each other in an eccentric grace. At first, their movements appear to be more improvisational, but little by little one can clearly distinguish the rules of this ancient and intricate art, recognizing that nothing one sees is random and that everything is performed according to tradition full of intricacy and meaning.”

The second scene of the “Zeal” captures the moment when the first dancer comes out in front of the audience to the rhythm of the tambourine; note that the musician is positioned among the cheering audience and not in a separate place. And finally, the central element of the “Zeal” is the portrait of a young man sitting in white robes. We recognize this previously seen character by the distinct golden head wrap. This scene compels us to crave and see his fantasy come to life: his dreams of life, love, and death. But all he has in his hands is a pomegranate that’s slightly cut open. The image once again evokes an interesting tug of war between reality and fantasy, a game that takes a perceiver into a territory that explores the themes touched upon in the episode “the dream” (in which the boy hidden on the roof watches the bather). The episode of “death” and the “dual grave with a lantern” appears to be another fantasy, because only a living human being can conjure a vision of himself dead. The first episode “the offering of the pomegranate” however, can be either imaginary or a real memory, because the pomegranate cut open by the young man is real. It is also possible that as he was cutting open the pomegranate, the action restored certain memories in his mind, upon which he may have fantasized taking them to alternative endings.

## Ecstasy with the Pomegranate

*Ecstasy with the Pomegranate* takes place in 1916–1917 Tashkent and deals with cultural interactions between Sufi Islam, Uzbek culture, and the Russian (and later) Soviet military stationed in Tashkent. It focuses on the painter, Alexander Nikolaev (who later became a Muslim and took the name Usto Mumin and painted under that name) and his assimilation into the Muslim religion and culture, especially his involvement with male Bacha dancers who portrayed women.

*Ecstasy with the Pomegranate* is a synthesis of several genres, combining unique historical documents, which we have been able to discover through archive research, dance, an authentic score composed by Artem Kim, as well traditional theater. The play also contains some nontraditional use of multimedia, bringing original artwork painted by Usto Mumin and other documentary materials into the play.



This collaborative project joins the forces of the Ilkhom Theatre (Tashkent, Uzbekistan), an American choreographer David Rousseve, and the late Mark Weil, in an attempt to recreate a story of the forgotten art that has completely disappeared from the culture of Central Asia. This forgotten art, previously very prominent in the cultures of Tajik and Uzbek populations, is the art of dance, performed exclusively by young men called *bachas* (boy dancers). Bacha dance could be compared to the art of actors from the Beijing Opera, which traditionally has been performed exclusively by young male actors and developed during a specific period in time. Historically, it was common for the art of theater and dance to have male-only cast and performers (*à la* Shakespearean theater). In the cultures of Central Asia however, the idea was further complicated by the growing popularity of Islam, which overhauled teachings of Zoroastrianism and Sufism, and hid women behind paranja (between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries) forbidding them to express themselves through any kind of art performed in public.

Prior to Soviet rule and the obliteration of strict Islamic traditions, the art of Bacha Dance was the only traditional type of dance that existed in Uzbekistan (then known as Turkistan). When in 1920s women were officially allowed to dance in public, they took all the elements from the existing Bacha dances and essentially recreated them. Thus the dances have remained almost the same, the only difference being the gender of the performers. This was the beginning of a new era for the history of Uzbekistan, an era that has unfortunately demolished all traces of the original participants of the traditional Uzbek dance.



The play, however, is not simply a documentation of this period in history, but rather a rich fictional story based around the life of a real-life Russian painter, Aleksandr Nikolaev, who attempted to take refuge in the Central Asia during the October revolutions. Aleksandr Nikolaev for a long time was neither accepted nor recognized by the rigid and constantly oppressive Stalin Administration. Upon his arrival in Turkistan, he fell in love with this new land. In order to dissolve himself in this new land close to his heart, he learned to speak Uzbek, converted to Islam and even took up a new name, Usto Mumin (The Quiet Master). His paintings captured dozens of images and scenes of the life of the Sufis and their philosophies on life, love, art, and eternity. One of the earliest themes explored by Usto (prior to the Stalin era of terror) was the youth and the art of the young Bacha boys and their graceful dance.

The play's almost detective-like plot will develop against the background of the rich historical calamities of the period; a unique period in Turkistan's history (1915-1917), which captures the transition between the rule of the Imperial Russia and the Soviet Russia in Turkistan. A period, during which many artists died, taking with them many cultural traditions, freedom of self-expression, as well as the freedom for various ways of living.

The project involves the participants of the "Laboratory of the Young Directors Of Central Asia," who contributed to the creation of separate elements and in the process learned the usage of historical documents, painted art incorporated into the creation of a modern performance and general synthesis of theater and dance.

Play – Mark Weil, Dmitry Tikhomirov

Composer – Artem Kim

Choreographer – David Rousseve

Scenography – Bobur Ismailov

Video Art – Evgeniy Padalkin

Director – Boris Gafurov

Assistant to the Choreographer – Nikolay Leonov

Musical Adviser – Shavkat Matyakubov

Assistant to the Director – Maxim Tumenev

English Translation of the play – Aleksandra Weil, with Tyler Polamsky and Anastasia Leliukh

Translation for rehearsals – Maxim Tjumenev, Evelina Uysupova

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Mark Weil (1952–2007)** was the founder and the Artistic Director of the Ilkhom Theatre (Tashkent, Uzbekistan). Ilkhom Theatre was founded in 1976 as the first independent theatrical company in the Soviet Union without state censorship and government subsidy. Weil's theatre served as a bulwark against the increasing oppressiveness of the Uzbek state and as a forum for free speech. His persistent and deep love of the city of Tashkent provided a source of cosmopolitan inspiration for a multi-lingual populace that loved his plays. He was stabbed to death outside his apartment in Tashkent in September 2007. His murderers have not been found.



A number of Weil's productions, such as *The Petty Bourgeois Wedding* by Bertolt Brecht, *Happy Beggars* by Carlo Gozzi, *Ubu Rex* by Alfred Jarry, *Imitations of The Koran* by Alexander Pushkin, *Loves Labour's Lost* by William Shakespeare, and *Babel Inn* by Mark Weil and Daniel Shapiro, have been presented in more than twenty one International festivals in seventeen countries, including Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Russia, France, Holland, Norway, Germany, and the United States. Previous Ilkhom Theatre Productions in the United States include *Imitations of the Koran* (Los Angeles, CA and Tucson, AZ – 2004); *Babel Inn* (New York, NY – 1998); and *Ragtime for Clowns and Clomadeus* by Mark Weil (New York, NY and Philadelphia, PA – 1991).



**David Rousseve**, a choreographer, writer, director and performer, is a magna cum laude graduate of Princeton University. In 1989 Rousseve created REALITY, a New York based multi-racial dance/theater company of seven performers that became an important voice in contemporary American dance. From 1989-2001 Rousseve choreographed, wrote, and performed lead in ten evening-length works for the company. Rousseve has created new works for the Houston Ballet, Ballet Hispanico, the Atlanta Ballet, Pittsburgh's Dance Alloy, and Denver's Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Theater. His awards include a 2000 New York Dance and Performance Award ("Bessie"), a 2000 L.A. Horton Award), 1999 and 2001 Irvine Fellowships in Dance, a 2000 California Arts Council Choreography Fellowship, the 1996 CalArts/Alpert Award in Dance, "First Place Screen Choreography" at the IMZ International Dance Film Festival, and seven consecutive fellowships from the NEA as well as a screenwriting fellowship in the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab in 1997 and 2002. Currently he is Full Professor of Choreography and Chair of UCLA's World Arts and Cultures Department.

**Alexander Nikolaev (1897–1957)**, a Russian graphic artist who arrived in Uzbekistan in 1920 and changed his name to Usto Mumin. His work before this move is unknown. It is only known that he was deeply affected by the Suprematist movement in St. Petersburg. Despite the constraints of the early Soviet era, he not only studied but also converted to Islam. One of his key areas of research was the art and dance of the Bacha boys. This came to replace the centrality of geometry in Suprematism with the cultural implications of the Islam.



## Discussion Questions

### Politics, Society & Economy

- How many countries in the world are doubly landlocked? What are the consequences of this feature?
- What are some of the current political and social concerns in Uzbekistan?
- What is significant about the Aral Sea?
- Which goods fuel the Uzbek economy?
- What are the most important holidays in Uzbekistan?

### Theatre & the Arts

- How does “Ilkhom” translate into English?
- What roles do the arts play in repressive or authoritarian societies?
- How does independent theatre function differently than state-funded theatres?
- What are the implications of the global appeal of Greek and Shakespearean plays?
- What role do the arts play in national identity formation?
- How important is Tashkent in the regional art scene?
- According to Mark Weil, what role did theatres play in Soviet society?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### INTERNET

Ilkhom Theatre Company [<http://www.ilkhom.com/english>]

#### Memorials for Mark Weil

Remembering Mark Weil [<http://www.remembermark.com>]

Obituary from The Times Online [<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article2507785.ece>]

Mark Weil, “The Unknown Infamous Ilkhom,” [<http://www.ilkhom.com/english/vaill/articles>]

Uzbekistan: Director’s Death Fuels Cultural Despair, Transitions Online (13 September 2007) [<http://www.tol.cz>]

#### Uzbekistan – Politics

BBC News Country Profile [[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1238242.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1238242.stm)]

Republic of Uzbekistan: Portal of the State Authority [<http://www.gov.uz/>]

Eurasianet.org: Uzbekistan [<http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/uzbekistan/index.shtml>]

Lonely Planet: Uzbekistan [<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/uzbekistan/>]

Library of Congress Country Studies: Uzbekistan [<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/uztoc.html>]

Human Rights Watch: Uzbekistan [<http://www.hrw.org/doc?t=europe&c=uzbeki>]

#### Uzbekistan – Arts & Culture

The Silk Road Project [<http://www.silkroadproject.org/>]

Architecture in Uzbekistan [<http://www.washington.edu/ark2/archtm/Uzbekistan.html>]

Timurid Architecture in Samarkand [<http://www.oxuscom.com/timursam.htm>]

Master of Images Gallery: Fine Arts of Central Asia [[http://www.geocities.com/art\\_uzbekistan/intro.html](http://www.geocities.com/art_uzbekistan/intro.html)]

Ferghana.ru: New Arts Center closed in Uzbekistan (11/29/05) [<http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=1166>]

Sogdiana Central Asia Art Gallery [<http://www.artsogdiana.com/>]

Central Asian Holidays [<http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/cenashol.html>]

The Karakalpak Rug Collection of the Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow [<http://www.rugreview.com/1karakal.htm>]

Introduction to the Uzbek Language [<http://www.oxuscom.com/250words.htm>]

Karabair Horse [<http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/karabair/>]

“Invention, Institutionalization, and Renewal in Uzbekistan’s National Culture,” Laura Adams, European Journal of Cultural Studies 2/3 (September 1999), 355-373 [<http://ecs.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/2/3/355>]

#### Uzbekistan – Theater, Music & Dance

Tashkent Theaters [<http://www.tashkent.org/uzland/theater.html>]

Silk Road Dance Company [<http://www.silkroaddance.com/>]

Uzbek Dance and Culture Society [<http://www.uzbekdance.org/>]

Yalla-popular music group in Uzbekistan [<http://www.ipl.com/imagina/artists/Yalla.html>]

“Hearts of the New Silk Roads,” Richard Covington, Saudi Aramco World 1 (2008): 18-33

[<http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200801/hearts.of.the.new.silk.roads.htm>]

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Robert W Ferguson, The devil and the disappearing sea: a true story about the Aral Sea catastrophe [DK944 .F47 2003]

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Pauline Jones Luong, ed., The transformation of Central Asia: states and societies from Soviet rule to independence [HN670.22.A8 T73 2004]

David MacFadyen, Russian culture in Uzbekistan: one language in the middle of nowhere [DK946 .M33 2006 ]

Vitaly Naumkin, Radical Islam in Central Asia: between pen and rifle [BP63.A34 N38 2005]

Douglas Northrop, Veiled empire: gender & power in Stalinist Central Asia [HX546 .N67 2004]

Martha Brill Olcott, Central Asia's new states: independence, foreign policy, and regional security [DK859.5 .O43 1996]

Yaacov Ro'i, ed., Democracy and pluralism in Muslim Eurasia [JC423 .D439797 2004]

Acacia Shields, Creating enemies of the state: religious persecution in Uzbekistan [JC599.U93 S56 2004]

Jean Soustiel, Tombs of paradise: the Shah-e Zende in Samarkand and architectural ceramics of Central Asia [NK4670.7.I7 S69 2003]

Unrest in Uzbekistan : crisis and prospects: May 19, 2005, briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe [ Y 4.SE 2:UZ 1 ]

Uzbekistan a country study [Internet Resource LC 1.60:UZ 1]

Monica Whitlock, Beyond the Oxus: the Central Asians [DK265.8.U9 W458 2002]