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CINEMA AND THEATRE

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The tsarist colonial period

Prior to colonization, there were four main kinds of theatrical performance to be found in Central Asia: courtly performances of oral poetry, music and dance by performers employed by the rulers; popular performances of oral poetry and epics, music and dance supported by merchant or noble patronage at home or in tea houses; dervish performances of religious song, oral poetry and stories of saints' lives during rituals and holidays for a middle- and lower-class audience; and itinerant circus, minstrel and puppet troupe performances for the masses in the bazaars. With the exception of courtiers, performers generally had a low social status. Theatre was akin to a trade and performers were organized in guilds or came from professional theatrical families. In the southern parts of Central Asia, public entertainment was unacceptable for 'virtuous' women, who entertained each other with music and dance in the segregated courtyards of their own homes.

These different types of performers and venues roughly corresponded to differences in the content of what was performed: courtly ballads extolled the deeds of the ruler and his predecessors; oral poetry and song performed for the masses told of the adventures of ancient heroes; the tea-house culture revolved around romantic themes; Sufis propagated a mystical Islamic tradition; and entertainment for the masses was humorous, playing on the dilemmas of domestic life and engaging in political satire and obscenity. There were considerable differences in both the form and the content of theatrical performances between rural and urban, sedentary and nomadic, and Persian and Turkic/Mongol cultural regions.

From the 1850s, Russian colonizers began to introduce into the colonial districts of major urban centres the European forms and methods of cultural production that are familiar to us today as 'theatre'. These were also willingly adopted by the indigenous rulers, who had a long tradition of increasing their social status by successfully emulating (and occasionally improving on) another culture's high art. Also during this period, European cultural forms were making their way into Uzbekistan through the enlightenment plans of educated Turkistanis, known as Jadids, or reformers (see above, Chapter 7). The Jadids wanted to reform their societies by introducing modern schools, new habits such as reading newspapers, and new pastimes such as going to the theatre. The Jadids bridged the distance between nineteenth-century Turkistani culture and twentieth-century Soviet culture by maintaining a continuity with the Islamic values of their society while also using theatre for the purpose of social progress.

Expatriate Tatars (from the European p art of Russia) first began to perform Russian and Caucasian dramas in Turkistan in 1905, and by 1913 had their own standing theatre group in Tashkent. The Jadids appropriated the medium for their own goals and in 1911 the first Jadid play, *Padarkush* [The Patricide] by Behbudi, was performed. Starting in 1916, amateur reformist theatres on a European model were established in the larger cities under the auspices of Jadid cultural organizations. There was no film production in Central Asia until the Soviet period, though films could be viewed in the colonial centres of Central Asia in the 1910s.

The Soviet period

Shortly after the Russian revolution, the creation of republic-level institutions that would foster the 'cultural evolution' of Central Asians, such as the state drama theatres, was one of the main cultural priorities of the Bolsheviks. In the 1920s and 1930s, culture administration became increasingly bureaucratic and institutionalized as Central Asian cultures were given new direction, shaped by new cultural forms as well as socialist cultural content. New theatres were established to foster development in drama, dance and opera, and the politicization of art included rewards for those artists who embraced the proletarian spirit and conformed to the state ideology. Entirely new theatrical genres were introduced, such as opera and ballet, and new kinds of theatrical organizations and schools were opened. Folk culture was institutionalized in professional dance and musical troupes. This flowering of cultural activity should not be naively seen as a Central Asian cultural renaissance, however, since culture was being transformed as it was 'developed'. In areas such as Mongolia, which were under Soviet influence, communist culture also influenced the development of European-style theatre in the 1920s. Mongolia's State Drama Theatre was established in 1931 and during the 1930s performed the same sorts of revolutionary dramas as could be found in the theatres of Russia.

During the 1930s, these cultural changes took a much more repressive direction than they had during the experimental 1920s. The state began not just to reward those who cooperated with Soviet ideology, but to punish those who dissented. During the Terror, not only dissenters but also too-successful communists were jailed or killed. Many Central Asian artists and intellectuals were killed or sent into exile during the purges of the 1930s. Other less ominous developments took place as the state began to implement in Central Asia socialist policies that had previously been mere rhetoric or had been implemented only in the European part of the Soviet Union. Professional theatre workers' associations and schools for the arts were established to ensure that culture was properly channelled through the organs of the state.

From the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, European theatrical genres began to incorporate local literary and folkloric traditions and theatre-goers could visit both Russian-language and local-language performances. During this period, each of the Central Asian republics had its first 'national' operas and ballets performed. The earliest national opera was the Kazakh *Kyz-Jibek* (1934) and the earliest national ballet was the Uzbek *Pakhta* (1933). Also during this period a number of local-language musical theatres were opened in Central Asia, enjoying more success during the subsequent decades than theatres employing European musical genres.

In 1924 the first Central Asian film studio opened in Bukhara (Uzbekistan) and in the years that followed, all the Central Asian republics set up their own studios: Turkmenistan (1926); Kazakhstan (a documentary unit in 1929 and a film studio in 1934); Tajikistan (a documentary unit in 1930); and Kyrgyzstan (a documentary unit in 1942). Mongolian cinema began in the mid-1930s but the production of feature films was intermittent until the 1960s. Most of the films made in Central Asia before 1940 were silent, and documentary films preceded feature films by several years. Due to the fact that even feature films were subject to the Soviet goals of education and enlightenment, there was frequently little difference in the content of documentary and feature films. One of the artistically most outstanding of these documentaries was *Turksib* (1929), which tells the tale of the motivation behind and the challenges involved in building the Turkistan–Siberian railroad.

Since cinema was entirely a foreign import to Central Asia, most of the early feature films from these studios were made by ideologically sound but less talented directors and film crews from Russia. This resulted in films that displayed Central Asian exotica for European audiences while clumsily projecting a pro-revolutionary message to local audiences. Titles such as the Tajik film *From Cotton to Cloth* indicate the deadly earnestness and agitprop orientation of these early Central Asian films. Cinema (as well as theatre) in Uzbekistan first focused on the liberation of the 'Eastern woman' (*Musul'manka*, 1925; *Vtoraia zhena* and *Chadra*, 1927) and then on the civil war and anti-Soviet resistance (*Shakaly ravata*, 1927; *Krytyi furgon*, 1928; *Posledniy bek*, 1930). In 1931 the first Turkmen feature film, *Zabyt' nel'zia*, was produced. Kyrgyz film did not really take off until the 1940s and Kyrgyzstan's film industry languished until the mid-1960s. Cinema in Kazakhstan was somewhat more developed than in the other republics and began using Kazakh actors in the late 1930s. The film *Amangeldy* (1939), about the role of the Kazakh worker in establishing Soviet power in Kazakhstan, is considered the foundation film of Kazakh national cinema.

The content of Central Asian theatrical productions closely paralleled the content of film. Productions of the mid-1930s to the early 1940s reflected the artistic doctrine of the time, socialist realism. For example, the first multi-act Tajik drama was *Bor'ba* (1933), about the struggle against the anti-Soviet Basmachi movement. In Kazakhstan, the plays of the contemporary author Auezov, such as the historical drama *Abai* (1940), were very popular. The main exceptions to the iron grip of socialist realism were plays by ideologically correct Russian authors such as Gogol, Western authors whose work was acceptable to the Communist Party (such as Schiller, Molière, Gozzi and Goldoni) and classics, such as Shakespeare's *Othello* (which was first performed in Tajik in 1939, in Uzbek in 1941 and in Turkmen in 1954). Plays by Shakespeare and other foreign authors such as Brecht remain popular to this day.

The Second World War era was, compared to the Terror, a time of cultural liberalization in the Soviet Union. In Central Asia, the arts were influenced by two phenomena related to the war. First, both male and female performers joined the army and entertained the troops, coming into contact with performers and soldiers from other parts of the Union, sharing their national cultures and becoming decorated war heroes and veterans – this conferred special status and privileges in the Soviet Union after the war. Second, evacuees from European Russia who lived in Central Asia had a huge impact on local cultural institutions. Many of the Soviet Union's leading artists lived in Tashkent or Alma-Ata (now Almaty) during the war, and some of them stayed even longer or made Central Asia their 'second home' after their return to Russia. These refugees established theatrical institutes and choreography schools so that they could continue to work during the war, and these institutions lived on even if their founders departed after the war. While this was not an intentional policy of Russification, the activities of these European refugees led to increased Russian influence over local cultural development.

Central Asia became the centre of Soviet film production during the Second World War, when many artists were evacuated to the region from the European parts of the Soviet Union. *Ivan the Terrible*, one of the most famous films by the great Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, was shot in Alma-Ata. Dushanbe (Tajikistan) became a centre for the production of Soviet children's films. As would be expected, most of the Central Asian films of the 1940s focused on patriotic and heroic themes and these films (mostly by directors from Ukraine and Russia) focused on the struggles taking place in the European parts of the Soviet Union more than on so-called national themes, which had been the focus of film in the 1920s and 1930s. The exception to this was Uzbek cinema, which continued to produce feature films such as Ganiev's *Takhir i Zukhra* (1945), based on pre-revolutionary literary themes, a trend which spread to Tajikistan in the 1950s and to the other Central Asian republics in the 1960s.

By the 1950s the Central Asian republics and Mongolia boasted most of the main theatrical institutions found in every Soviet republic: opera and ballet theatres, conservatories, drama theatres, dance schools and ensembles, a writers' union and a ministry of cultural affairs. Regional cultural diversity had been thoroughly institutionalized through schools and professional troupes that performed and propagated distinct styles of national dance and song. The repertoires of professional theatres throughout northern Central Asia focused on works by European playwrights such as Shakespeare, Brecht and Gorky, though local playwrights were also encouraged to produce works on revolutionary themes.

The 1950s were also an era of intensified development of Central Asian rural and folk culture. The state accumulated the resources to act on its promise to raise the cultural level of the rural population, establishing *kolkhoz* (collective farm) music schools and theatre troupes through local 'houses of culture'. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, cinema also became more institutionalized with the formation of a Union of Cinematographers in each of the republics. Between 1955 and 1960, the relatively tiny film industries of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan averaged one feature film a year. The larger studios in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were able to diversify their production. While Kazakh and Uzbek films still focused on historical themes, the genre of films about everyday life began to develop during this period.

The power of the Soviet state over culture increased in the 1960s, even as the Khrushchev thaw gave opportunities for freer creative expression. The policies of Kul'tprosvet, the state's cultural enlightenment organization, became even more standardized and dogmatic than they had been during Stalin's time: the ideology had always been there but the state had not been able to fully implement it until the Brezhnev era. The material resources of the state allowed the system of houses of culture to greatly expand during the 1960s and the 1970s, institutionalizing amateur arts activities. The state was able to turn its energies from basic cultural tasks such as literacy and elementary education to more subtle forms of cultural engineering such as imposing new socialist ceremonies and expanding the activities of the Komsomol (the communist youth organization) to include youth theatres and other edifying artistic pastimes. By the mid-1980s, youth theatre in Soviet Central Asia was actually one of the most dynamic realms of culture production, often daring to perform works that would be considered too radical by professional theatres.

In this era of prosperity and Soviet expansionism, Tashkent became the Soviet Union's model city of third-world development, serving as a shining example of Soviet cultural policies for Marxist regimes and parties around the world. Tashkent hosted the Soviet Union's main film festivals, art exhibitions and writers' conferences attended by artists from all over Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. From 1968 through the 1980s, Tashkent hosted the International Film Festival of the Countries of Asia and Africa. Soviet international cultural influence was also felt in other parts of Central Asia under communist influence. By the 1970s, Mongolia was producing about three feature films a year.

The film industries of the Soviet republics also began to develop more rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s, as local directors returned from their training in Moscow and Leningrad full of inspiration. During the Khrushchev thaw of the 1960s, directors took advantage of the relative freedom they found working far from Moscow, and many interesting films were made both by Central Asian directors and by Europeans working in Central Asia with Central Asian themes. The most famous example of the latter is Vladimir Motyl's *Beloe solntse pustyny* [The White Sun of the Desert] (1970), a Central Asian action film that takes place during the Russian civil war. Representing the former, the films of Ali Khamraev such as his 'Soviet Easterns', and his film about early Soviet Uzbekistan, *Bez strakha* [Without Fear] (1972), continue to stand today for the best of Soviet Central Asian cinema. While Khamraev's work set the story-telling style of subsequent Uzbek cinema, Tolomush Okeev's lyrical cinematic style set the standard for Kyrgyz cinema (e.g. *Lutiy* [The Fierce One], 1973). Films from the Kyrgyz SSR, such as *Pereval* [The Mountain Pass] (1961), *Znoi* [Heat] (1963), *Pervyi uchitel'* [The First Teacher] (1965) and *Djamilia* (1969), interwove Soviet socialist values, the profundities of everyday life, and Central Asian concerns with family and the environment. One of the highlights of Kyrgyz cinema was the production of films based on the work of the well-loved contemporary writer, Tchinguiz Aytmatov (b. 1928).

Kazakh cinema took off in the late 1980s in what is known as the Kazakh new wave. In 1984 Russian film-maker Sergei Soloviev organized a workshop at the Moscow State Film Institute (VGIK), specifically for the training of young Kazakh film directors. The effort was a deliberate attempt by Moscow to boost the quantity and quality of production in Kazakhstan and by all accounts it was a spectacular success. New-wave directors included Ardak Amirkulov, Serik Aprimov, Abay Karpykov, Rashid Nugmanov, Ermek Shinarbaev and Talgat Temenov. Highlights of the new wave that continue to be shown at international film festivals include *The Needle* (1988), *The Last Stop* (1989), *The Fall of Otrar* (1990) and *Kairat* (1991). The simple, bleak films of the Kazakh new wave tended to be refreshingly free of the didactic tone of most previous Soviet cinema, and focused mainly on the alienation of youth and the social problems of Soviet society.

Unlike the capitalist countries, where market-driven organizations such as film studios, the recording industry and audience research companies are the means through which innovation and quality are fostered or held back, a very different configuration of entities shaped the development of Soviet culture in Central Asia during the Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras. Nearly all culture production was channelled through the ministry of culture and various professional unions. For example, amateur performers were affiliated with a local house of culture, which provided them with scripts, costumes and venues. Professional actors received salaries from theatres, television and radio companies, or film studios.

At the top of the theatrical hierarchy were the professional associations closely linked with the ideological apparatus of the Communist Party. Theatre and cinema policy was decided or at least funnelled through the Union of Theatrical Workers and Goskino, which controlled all film production in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, actors, script writers and directors lived well and were taken care of by their trade union. They received fairly high salaries, and awards and bonuses from the state, were provided with housing by the union, and were well respected in society. The Soviet state also provided Central Asian artists with opportunities for extensive travel and touring productions, mainly throughout the Soviet Union, but most performers also travelled abroad on state-funded tours at least once in their life. Central Asian theatres often participated in so-called ‘decades of culture’ (festivals featuring the culture of a particular nationality), which were held in communist bloc countries on a regular basis. Touring became one of the sources of pride for Central Asian theatres and the exposure to theatrical traditions in other p arts of the world was an important source of inspiration for artists. Much of this changed very rapidly with the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union.

The post-Soviet era

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, theatre and cinema in Central Asia have struggled to survive. In the years following independence, the Central Asian states have taken rather different paths in their cultural policies, but in all cases the personnel in the theatre and cinema business have suffered economic hardship and crises of artistic and professional identity. Throughout Central Asia, the abandoning of the doctrines of socialist ideology has also meant both localization and globalization: a new stress on national heritage as well as a growing orientation towards international tastes. In the major cities of Central Asia, tourists and expatriates make up much of the population who can now afford a ticket to the theatre, but in many cases, indigenous audiences also support plays which explore local historical or cultural themes and experimental productions that comment on contemporary life. In most of the capital cities, theatre continues to be performed in the local language as well as in Russian and in the language of minority nationalities such as German or Uighur. Puppet theatre, seen as an indigenous theatrical tradition, is now even more popular than it was during the Soviet era and numerous new puppet theatres have been created, especially in Uzbekistan.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have both withdrawn most of the state subsidies that supported theatre in the past, with the result that many theatres have closed. Those that survived the first decade of independence, however, have revitalized their repertoire and are more interesting than they were before. One example of the revitalization of theatrical life in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) is the Art-Ordo Theatre Festival, which showcases plays by theatres from several Turkic-speaking countries and regions of the Russian Federation. The Kazakh new wave set the stage for an international appreciation of post-Soviet Kazakh and Kyrgyz cinema, with international ‘Silk Road’ film festivals composed mainly of Kazakh and Kyrgyz films. The films that attracted the most attention are *Jylama* [Don’t Cry] (Kazakhstan, 2003), *Killer* (Kazakhstan, 1998), *Altyn kyrghol* [My Brother Silk Road] (Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan, 2001), *Beshkempir* [The Adopted Son] (Kyrgyzstan, 1998), *Ovuz* [The Orator] (Uzbekistan, 2000) and *Mal’chiki v nebe* [Boys in the Sky] (Uzbekistan, 2002).

Central Asian cinema from the 1960s onwards was generally characterized by a low-key sensibility: simple stories about simple lives. The trend in post-Soviet Uzbek cinema has been in a different direction, with film-making taking inspiration from Bollywood, not in terms of musical content, but in terms of a more bombastic aesthetic. This is largely due to the fact that with 25 million people, Uzbekistan has a large consumer base for Uzbek-language films, whereas film-making in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is still more oriented to the art-house market. The state also continues to subsidize cinema in Uzbekistan, leading to a duller, more pedagogical content that is sometimes reminiscent of the Soviet era. The same is true of much of Uzbekistan's theatre, since all but two of the country's theatres are still state-run. While the main Russian and Uzbek academic drama theatres (Fig. 1) in Tashkent continue to produce high-quality plays, the Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent and the Eski Masjid from Karshi are the only theatres free of direct state control.

Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, each with a population of just a few million, all face a similar problem: a very small market for theatre and cinema in the local language. However, since they had very different political regimes during the early post-Soviet period, the arts are thriving to a greater degree in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan's president has not only removed many state subsidies, but has closed most of the country's cultural institutions. Turkmen directors can often be found working in exile (even neighbouring Uzbekistan's authoritarian climate attracts some Turkmen directors), though many Turkmen artists have simply fled into exile in Moscow or Almaty.

After Tajikistan's civil war (1992–7), Tajik cinema was brightened by the films of Jamshed Usmanov and Bakhtior Khudoinazarov, who have overcome some of the

FIG. 1. Tashkent. Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre. (Photo: Courtesy of L. L. Adams.)

limitations of the Tajik film industry by engaging in joint-venture productions with studios in Europe and Asia. Cinema in post-Soviet Tajikistan has also been heavily influenced by the flourishing film industry in the Islamic Republic of Iran, since the Tajik language is closely related to Persian.

Theatre in Tajikistan has struggled for survival. The repertoire of Dushanbe's Lakhuti Tajik Academic Drama Theatre includes classics such as *Oedipus Rex*, historical dramas written in response to state-sponsored nation-building campaigns (e.g. *Ismoili Somoni*, a play about the national hero of Tajikistan), as well as contemporary dramas and plays based on Sufi and Greek parables. In short, theatre in post-Soviet Tajikistan is being sustained but cannot be said to be thriving.