

MASTERY OF DRAMATIC ACTING: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UZBEK NATIONAL THEATRE

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Abstract

The article examines the mastery of the dramatic actor on the example of the Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre, from the first performance of the “Turon” troupe in 1914 to the present day. On the basis of scholarly articles, memoirs, interviews and periodicals, it analyses how the main components of acting – truth of experience, transformation, the stage word, ensemble playing and the actor’s ethics – were formed in the work of M. Uyg‘ur, A. Hidoyatov, S. Eshonto‘rayeva, Z. Muhammadjonov and their successors. Special attention is paid to the combination of K.S. Stanislavski’s system with the traditions of Uzbek folk performance and to the role of the native language in the actor’s emotional life on stage. Practical recommendations for actor training are offered.

Keywords: Dramatic acting, actor’s mastery, Uzbek theatre, Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre, Stanislavski’s system, transformation, stage speech, ensemble, folk performing traditions, actor training.

Introduction

The mastery of the dramatic actor is the ability to create on stage a living human character whose thoughts, feelings and actions the audience believes. K.S. Stanislavski described this ability as the unity of inner experience and its outer

embodiment, achieved through the actor's systematic work on himself and on the role [5]. M.O. Knebel showed that the word occupies a special place in this process, since in drama the actor acts upon his partner and the audience above all through the word [3]. These principles are universal, but every national theatre realises them in its own way, depending on its language, its performing traditions and its history.

The Uzbek theatre provides an instructive example of how a national school of dramatic acting is formed. Within one century it has passed from the first amateur performance of 1914 to the Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre, whose actors have created images of Shakespeare's heroes as well as of Alisher Navoiy, Mirzo Ulug'bek and Abu Rayhon Beruniy. In the author's previous articles Stanislavski's system was considered as a whole and in relation to variety art [9], and the theatre was examined as the art of the living word and action [2]. The aim of the present article is to identify, on the example of the Uzbek theatre, the main components of the dramatic actor's mastery and the ways in which they were formed. The study draws on scholarly articles, memoirs of contemporaries, interviews with masters of the stage and periodicals, and uses the historical, comparative and analytical methods.

Long before the professional stage appeared, the Uzbek people had their own performing culture. The maskharabozes and qiziqchis – folk comedians – played improvised scenes at fairs and festivities, and the askiya, a contest in witty repartee, developed quickness of reaction and verbal play. These forms trained qualities that a dramatic actor still needs: observation of life, sharp characterisation, the ability to improvise and constant contact with the audience. It is significant that the first professional Uzbek director, Mannon Uyg'ur, later tried in the production "Hujum" to combine the European theatre with the traditions of the maskharaboz.

The history of the Uzbek professional drama theatre begins on 27 February 1914, when the "Turon" troupe organised by Abdulla Avloniy performed Mahmudxo'ja Behbudiy's drama "Padarkush" in the Kolizey theatre in Tashkent; the evening was directed by Aliasqar Asqarov. The charter of the troupe already set the aim of developing a serious attitude to stage work and of offering the public edifying spectacles [11]. Thus, from the very beginning the Jadids understood acting not

as mere entertainment but as an enlightening and moral mission – an attitude that the masters of the Uzbek stage still regard as the basis of their profession.

The transition to professional acting is connected with the Uzbek drama studio in Moscow, where talented Uzbek young people studied in the mid-1920s [12]. In 1927 the graduates of the Uzbek State Drama Studio returned home and became the core of the troupe that later grew into the Hamza Uzbek Drama Theatre; among them were Abror Hidoyatov and Sora Eshonto‘rayeva [14]. Professional training meant a transition from amateur improvisation to systematic daily work on oneself and on the role, which is the essence of Stanislavski’s method.

The central figure in the formation of the Uzbek school was Mannon Uyg‘ur (1897-1955), the first professional Uzbek director, who headed the company for more than thirty years [12]. In the early 1920s he staged up to twenty plays a year, including G‘. Zafariy’s “Halima” (1921), regarded as the first Uzbek musical drama. Uyg‘ur combined directing with teaching: among his pupils I. Mukhtarov names A. Hidoyatov, S. Eshonto‘rayeva, Sh. Burhonov, N. Rahimov and Z. Sadriyeva. Both Uyg‘ur and the poet Cho‘lpon, the translator of “Hamlet”, were followers of V.E. Meyerhold. The Uzbek school therefore took shape at the junction of two traditions of the Russian theatre: the psychological truth of Stanislavski and the expressive form of Meyerhold.

The highest achievements of this school are connected with Shakespeare. In 1935 Uyg‘ur staged “Hamlet” in Cho‘lpon’s translation, with A. Hidoyatov in the title role [10]. Before the Second World War Uyg‘ur and N. Ladygin staged “Othello”, which remained in the repertoire for eighteen years, until Hidoyatov’s death. According to A. Kurbanov, the actor played Othello more than five hundred times, usually to full houses, and it was this role that made him famous. Hidoyatov’s path to the stage is also characteristic: the son of a bricklayer who was a storyteller in the evenings, he taught himself the dutar and was a well-known singer by the age of fourteen. Folk performing culture became the soil of his tragic art.

Hidoyatov’s Othello also raises one of the central problems of acting – the relation between experience and control. S. Eshonto‘rayeva, who played opposite him, recalled that during the performance he became so carried away that he could have hurt her [14]. Stanislavski’s system requires that genuine experience be combined with the actor’s artistic control over his own creative state: the actor

lives the life of the role and at the same time guides its action [5]. The legend of the “Uzbek Othello” shows both the power of complete immersion and the necessity of this second, controlling consciousness, which future actors should be taught from the very first exercises.

Sora Eshonto‘rayeva represents another side of mastery – transformation. Among her roles were Princess Turandot and Tursun in “Hujum”, and contemporaries noted that her distinctive appearance allowed her, with the help of make-up, to turn into completely different characters. For her, however, transformation was not only external. The role of Tursun in “Hujum”, a play connected with the movement for women’s emancipation, demanded from the actress not only technique but also personal civic courage.

The next generation is represented by Zikir Muhammadjonov, who worked in the theatre from 1938 to 2012 and played more than a hundred roles, among them Navoiy, Beruniy, Ulug‘bek and Furqat. Critics noted two features of his art. First, he sought something positive even in negative characters and avoided “poster-like” depictions of evil; second, he was distinguished by precise and pure Uzbek literary pronunciation. The actor himself said: “I am a stage actor to the bone” [6]. These features illustrate Stanislavski’s well-known advice to look for the good in an evil character, and Knebel’s thesis that the cultivated word is the main instrument of the dramatic actor.

From 1945 the training of actors was concentrated in the Tashkent theatre institute, today the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture. The memories of People’s Artist of Uzbekistan Turg‘un Azizov show how mastery was handed down there. Having studied at a Russian school, he entered the institute and was taught by Toshxo‘ja Xo‘jayev, who made him translate Russian plays into Uzbek every day; Azizov says he owes this teacher a lifelong debt [1]. He also recalls the words he heard at the beginning of his studies: if you do not know your mother tongue, “neither tears nor feeling will come to your eyes – such is the theatre”. This observation is of fundamental importance. The native language is not only a means of communication with the audience but also the channel through which the actor’s own emotional memory is awakened.

T. Azizov, known to film audiences as Bakir Nazarov in “Maftuningman”, later became a director and staged dozens of plays, among them “Hamlet”. The

continuity is evident: a nephew of A. Hidoyatov, the first “Uzbek Othello”, he carried the Shakespearean tradition of the national stage into the next generation. In 2001 the theatre received the status of the Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre [6]. The years of independence also brought broad international contacts. Uzbek actors took part in Central Asian festivals: People’s Artists Yorqinoy Hotamova and Gulnora Ravshanova received awards for the best female roles, and director B. Yo’ldoshev’s production “Iskandar” at the Abror Hidoyatov Uzbek State Drama Theatre was awarded at the “Navruz” festival for new directorial approaches [13]. Foreign directors worked in Uzbekistan too, among them David Kaplan, who staged “King Lear”. Reviewing one Uzbek production, the Almaty critic S. Kabdieva noted that the director’s interpretation had been absorbed into the actors’ performance and a single ensemble had been created. This is precisely the ideal of ensemble playing formulated by Stanislavski.

The modern national theatre consciously relies on this heritage. In an interview given at the start of the theatre’s 106th season, which opened on 1 November 2020 with the play “Jaloliddin Manguberdi”, its head Yodgor Sa’diyev named the masters whose traditions must be preserved – A. Turdiyev, S. Eshonto’rayeva, O. Xo’jayev, Z. Yo’ldoshev, U. Nazarov, Y. Ahmedov, F. Ma’sudov and others. He stressed that theatre, unlike serials and clips, gives the artist “unbreakable wings” [4]. About thirty young actors were entrusted to the experienced director Bahodir Yo’ldoshev to master professionalism, and a joint Uzbek–Karakalpak project was planned in Nukus. People’s Artist of Uzbekistan Erkin Komilov, who by 2023 had served the theatre for 56 years, says that he goes on stage each time after ablution and recitation of the Qur’an. This testifies to an almost sacred attitude to the stage, in which the Uzbek tradition meets Stanislavski’s ethics.

Generalising the experience of the Uzbek theatre, the following components of the dramatic actor’s mastery can be distinguished:

- truth of experience combined with artistic control (A. Hidoyatov’s Othello);
- transformation, both external and internal (S. Eshonto’rayeva);
- the cultivated stage word in the native language as a channel of emotion (Z. Muhammadjonov, T. Azizov);
- ensemble playing and the actor’s understanding of the director’s interpretation (the productions of M. Uyg’ur and B. Yo’ldoshev);

- the ethics of the actor – a serious, enlightening attitude to the stage, laid down in the charter of the “Turon” troupe and maintained by the masters of today.

These components correspond to the main sections of Stanislavski’s system, yet in the Uzbek theatre each of them acquired national features. Experience was nourished by the emotional openness of the folk performer, and transformation drew on the qiziqchi’s gift for sharp characterisation. The stage word was inseparable from the melodic culture of Uzbek speech and singing, as the biography of the singer-actor A. Hidoyatov shows. The ethical attitude to the stage grew out of the enlightening mission of the Jadid theatre. This synthesis of a universal method and a national tradition is, in our view, the essence of the Uzbek school of dramatic acting.

The Uzbek experience is directly relevant to the training of actors in the national schools of the region, including Karakalpakstan. First, the roles of the great masters – recordings of their performances, memoirs and critical descriptions – should become material for classes in acting, so that students analyse not only the text of a play but also the way a particular actor solved it. Second, work on the stage word in the native language should begin in the first year and be linked with exercises in emotional memory, as T. Azizov’s experience shows. Third, the etude method should be complemented by exercises based on folk improvisation (qiziqchilik, askiya), which develop quickness of reaction and contact with the audience. Finally, the ethical side of the profession – the actor’s responsibility to the stage and the audience – should be a conscious part of education rather than an unspoken tradition.

In conclusion, the history of the Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre shows that the mastery of the dramatic actor is formed where a universal method meets a living national tradition. From the “Turon” troupe and the Moscow studio to the Shakespearean roles of A. Hidoyatov, the historical heroes of Z. Muhammadjonov and the work of today’s young actors, the Uzbek theatre has developed a school in which truth of experience, the native word and a high ethical attitude to the stage form a single whole. Studying this experience helps to train actors who not only master technique but are also able to serve the audience with the full measure of their talent.

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