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## A NEW TURN IN THE ART OF KAZAKH DIRECTING

If we cast a glance at the history of Kazakh theatre, we will see that a number of prominent stage directors have made a contribution to the development of Kazakh theatrical art. Among them is the People's Artist of the USSR, laureate of the State Prize of the USSR and the KSSR, People's Hero Azirbaizhan Mambetov who joined the Kazakh theatre in the 1950s and brought important innovations to Kazakh stage. At that time, in many Soviet theatres a generation of renowned directors, who opened up new horizons in their profession, came in sight. There were N.P.Okhlopkov, O.N.Yefremov, A.V. Efros, M.A.Zakharov in Russia, V.Panso in Estonia, M.Tumanishvili in Georgia and others. Azirbaizhan Mambetov who worked at the Kazakh Academic Theatre named after M.Auezov belonged to that cohort.

The renowned master of Kazakh theatre and cinema, great artist, wise mentor, Professor Azirbaizhan Mambetov takes an important place not only in the local, but in the world culture as well.

He went down in history as an artist with a peculiar creative style who maintained a busy directing career. For more than 35 consecutive years he served as the head of the theatre named after M.Auezov, which was a flagman Kazakh theatre, and made it famous throughout the world. He headed the Union of Theatre Workers of Kazakhstan for more than twenty years. At the same time, as a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the KSSR and the member of party committee of the city he performed numerous duties. He was a prominent figure of social and cultural life of the Republic and dedicated years

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to doing important work and contributing to the development of culture.

After the country had gained independence, he successfully staged *Birzhan-Sara* and *Kyz Zhibek* at the newly opened Opera and Ballet Theatre named after K. Baiseitova in Astana. Being the head of the Musical Drama Theatre named after K. Kuanyshbayev, he spared no effort to develop the young theatrical company. He helped to enliven the cultural life of Astana. In retrospect, the eventful life of the great master who turned into a legend all over the world can be seen as an example of dedication to theatrical art.

Theatre critic L.I. Bogatenkova wrote: “A. Mambetov is one of the brilliant representatives of director-dominated theatre who bravely and enthusiastically uses directorial devices that have formed in the world theatre. Despite the fact that he mastered skills of contemporary directing to perfection, Mambetov continued to develop the best traditions of Kazakh theatre: its epic grandeur, poetry and musicality, and the richness of the stage language with metaphors. He proved that he was a real artist of his nation”. [2, 11] In these words she accurately characterized peculiarities of Mambetov’s directing style. In fact, it is not difficult to ascertain now that in A. Mambetov’s performances done in accordance with his directing principles there were spectacular achievements in terms of stage adaptation of national classics. It is worth mentioning *Abai*, *Karakypshak Kobylandy*, *Aiman-Sholpan*, *Karagoz* by M. Auezov, *Kozy Korpesh-Bayan Sulu* by G. Musrepov, *Mother Earth* by Ch. Aitmatov, *Blood and Sweat* by A. Nurpeisov and others. The national style of acting in the above mentioned performances reached a new quality level.

From the first steps in his career at the Academic Drama Theatre named after M. Auezov A. Mambetov understood well one thing, that to bring innovations to Kazakh theatre he would have to reconsider national stage traditions, to single out the necessary ones and to reject the rest. It was the only possible decision. The young director started to gradually introduce his method.

In his first year at the theatre the director faced a lot of

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problems. They arose because he came to the theatre with fully formed traditions. Nobody doubted these traditions there. However, in other cities, for example, in Moscow where the audience was very discerning, theatrical art was developing in a new way following the call of the times. At that period even in Moscow theatres there were no performances staged in a traditional psychological way. And being a demanding director, A.Mambetov understood that the status quo of Kazakh theatre that kept aloof from any radical innovations was such that it necessitated fundamental changes. He applied himself to the task with ardour of youth. His directorial devices clearly manifested themselves in his productions revealing his civic stance and artistic views. The energetic directing style of Mambetov embodied new artistic principles. As a talented and progressive director of his time A.Mambetov tried to make acting subordinate to his elaborate directorial decisions and the main idea of the performance. Carrying on the traditions set up by the experienced theatre practitioners of the previous generations, Mambetov resorted to those elements of national acting school that could be adapted to his needs. He did his best to avoid clichés and tried to bring a touch of novelty into crystallized acting devices. Before that time, acting tended to dominate the stage in Kazakh theatre, and now directing being on a par with it, acting turned into an important integral component of the performance.

In 1958 the young director A.Mambetov staged *A Wolfing under a Hat*, a comedy by K.Mukhamedzhanov that posed a number of topical questions for that time. It is common knowledge that this production caused heated debates between its supporters and opponents. Such prominent theatre figures as Sh.Aimanov, T.Akhtanov and Z.Shashkin published their not very favourable reviews in the press. These articles dealt not only with the flaws of directing and acting, but also contained fair critical opinions concerning the shortcomings of the play itself.

Taking into account these critical opinions, he successfully directed such comedies as *A Matchmaker Has Come* by

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K.Mukhamedzhanov, At the Party by A.Tazhibayev, Hey, Girls! by K.Shangytbayev and K.Baiseitov. A number of comedies that started with The Servant of Two Masters by Goldoni became an important part of Mambetov's directing. He took the lead in staging comedies on Kazakh stage. He tried to explore genre conventions of comedy, the nature of laughter and artistic means using a set of directing criteria. That is why in his productions there are no satirized characters whose presence might have brought light-hearted humour. Everything stems from peculiarities of the play and develops in a natural way.

After that Mambetov decided to prove his strength in a classical comedy and in 1960 directed Aiman-Sholpan by M.Auezov. These were his first steps in staging masterpieces of Kazakh classics. The production of Aiman-Sholpan was hailed in the press as his first artistic achievement. But critics did not pay enough attention to the fact that in this performance he had brought some innovations: had stripped the stage of unnecessary everyday objects and had skillfully used music to express the idea of the production. Not analyzing in great detail the acting of the cast, the reviewers seemed not to notice the striving for innovation that permeated the performance. Despite that, the young director who started to believe in himself now wanted to stage a serious play based on a conflict of complex characters and capable of giving the director and the cast an opportunity to look for new artistic solutions.

In 1962 Azirbaizhan Mambetov decided to stage Abai tragedy by M.Auezov and L.Sobolev. The director understood very well how valuable Abai's legacy was to Kazakh people. This meant that he had to be especially careful staging the play. He also remembered that the stage version of 1940, and the image of Abai in particular, received great critical acclaim and was very dear to the audience.

A.Mambetov had a new perspective on the play and worked on it using a different, fundamentally new method to distinguish it from the first version based on The Path of Abai novel. He perceived historic events from contemporary point

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of view. To create dynamic action he refrained from showing details of everyday life on stage. Using metaphoric solutions, he strengthened the rhythmic, physical side of the performance and made subtext underneath the words palpable.

In the process of staging Abai tragedy Mambetov made the main character, a great Kazakh poet, a true son of his nation defending the interests of ordinary people. This method “hints at the fact that the path of Abai is the path of the nation” [3, 119]. So, Abai always shared with ordinary people joys and sorrows of their everyday life. While staging the play, the director showed Abai as a fighter and supporter of ordinary people and in every scene strived to stress these traits of his personality in acting. This artistic solution was close to the idea of the play.

The most important thing was that in this performance A.Mambetov was able to fully express his ideas of “new turn”, i.e. of revitalizing artistic means and abandoning acting clichés.

It is common knowledge that in Kazakh theatre the art of declamation stemming from folk poetry and the art of folk performers was highly appreciated. For Kazakh actors it was of utmost importance to pay attention to the spoken word and the manner of reciting. In 1926 – 1960 in performances based on the national classics the art of declamation was the strongest side of the production. The figurative language of Abai tragedy full of aphorisms, the portrayal of characters in a philosophical manner and combination of multiple plots gave the actors a great opportunity to develop action through words.

The director understood well that the actors possessed a unique ability in working with the spoken word. However, as a director he wanted to create a dynamic conflict in the performance. For A.Mambetov it was not enough to stage a play in the traditional psychological mode. Thoughtfully looking into the past of his country, the astute director came to a conclusion that he could show the pace of history through a dynamic rhythm of action. In other words, using an energetic rhythm he did not have to divide the multi-event play into

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separate acts and could present it as a whole theatrical piece. In order not to slow down the rhythm of the performance, the stage settings had to be changed quickly. To achieve this aim the director significantly reduced the number of props and made space for a free movement of actors. Mambetov deliberately avoided showing the minute domestic and ceremonial details to foster the escalation of dramatic conflict, continuous flow of action and smooth scene progression. At the same time, the few props necessary for development of action served as “visual signs”. They added information on the character of *dramatis personae*. (For example, the book in the hands of Kerim meant that he was a learned man). A quick change of settings was an unexpected novelty for the actors who got used to playing in traditional historical performances. Instead of familiar yurts and silk carpets there was on stage only their symbolic representation. Through this Mambetov helped the actors to brilliantly demonstrate their psychophysical abilities not shadowed by the unwieldy props. The attention of the audience was focused only on the actors. The actors had to convey the feelings and ideas of their characters with energy and precision.

The continuous flow of action and uninterrupted chain of events implied special intensity of acting. In the years following the staging of that performance the troupe was not able to unlock its potential and played in a perfunctory manner. Some performers who got accustomed to the pompous style of traditional acting did not seem to fit into the production. In the process of staging there was increasing controversy over the old and new ways of acting. The actors who got used to the psychological nuances peculiar to the traditional way of directing could not fulfil the task set by A.Mambetov that implied collective work on the complex material requiring high professionalism. In other words, the director wanted the actors to be the sole creators of their characters.

Although in *Abai* of 1962 there could be seen a number of achievements, such as a completely new artistic solution, unlike that of 1940, topical ideas, unparalleled dramatic power

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and impressive crowd scenes, it lacked in-depth exploration of the characters' psychology. For that there were several reasons. The first one was the manner of acting, especially that of the performer of Abai, which was not remarkable enough. Whereas in the 1940 version Sh.Aimanov showed the spiritual downfall of Kerim with philosophical complexity, in the production of 1960 K.Karmysov created the image of an ordinary envious person decreasing the caliber of the role. Reduced tension in the conflict between Abai and Kerim resulted in the fact that the figure of Abai also seemed less important. Despite the fact that I.Nogaibayev revealed the inner life of Abai really well, his character did not have an equal opponent and as a result the philosophical significance of the performance diminished and its main emphasis was changed. It looked as though Abai was only fighting with the supporters of outdated traditions, which meant that outer conflict received much more attention in the performance.

With the passage of time the actors began to feel confident and free in this strictly structured performance. They got accustomed to the directorial solution that at first seemed so unusual to them and gradually reached the state of artistic freedom.

Mother Earth was one of the influential performances that fostered development of Kazakh school of acting and changed the perception of actors' life on stage. The theatre that only a few years before had successfully adopted an intellectual manner of acting was able to demonstrate in this performance the whole gamut and intensity of emotions. The complex stage language and expressive artistic solutions applied by the director A.Mambetov made the actors refuse from slow exploration of their characters that was typical of their predecessors. The dynamic rhythm of the performance left no room for idle rhetoric. Everything was measured. The task set for the actors was to show with the help of a limited number of indispensable techniques the objectives and inner world of their heroes and, reflecting in acting their civic stance, to create three-dimensional characters. It is worth mentioning that the actors managed to do this task not straight

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away. However, the young generation of actors in the troupe fulfilled the strict director's demand very well. This period that went down in the history of Kazakh theatre as "the era of Mambetov" can be described as the golden age not only of the Kazakh Academic Drama Theatre named after M.Auezov but also of Kazakh theatre in general. The years from 1965 to 1990 when Mambetov maintained a busy directing career were the happiest time for Kazakh theatre. A constellation of stars from the troupe left their mark in history.

A.Mambetov staged classical works in a new way and skillfully showed in these productions a talent for improvisation, declamation and singing peculiar to Kazakh actors which they inherited from folk performers.

A.Mambetov put on the best Russian and European plays and thus broadened the artistic range of directorial work. His popular and long-lived productions such as Don Juan's Feast (Don Juan or the Love of Geometry) by M.Frisch, Stars of Vietnam by V.Kupriyanov, Coriolanus and Romeo and Juliet by W.Shakespeare, Uncle Vanya by A.Chekhov impressed the spectators with the director's power of imagination and his keen sense of the pulse of time. These performances were highly appreciated because of their capacity for showing the inner world of a person, acuteness of social problems and civic-mindedness of the troupe. Mambetov's productions that enchanted the audience by the magic of his directing were also on tour in other republics of the USSR. Even the discerning spectators of Moscow theatres who had seen a lot of good productions enthusiastically applauded to A.Mambetov's talent more than once. The fact that such theatre stars as Oleg Efremov, Michael Ulianov, Oleg Tabakov, Kirill Lavrov, Galina Volchek recognized A.Mambetov's talent and his constant search for artistic innovations and made friends with him meant that he had reached the top of his profession.

The prominent director not only opened up new horizons for Kazakh theatre but also made a great contribution to the development of other national theatres in Kazakhstan. He focused attention on updating of their repertoire. He was often invited to work in theatres of the former USSR republics.



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The fact that he directed *Blood and Sweat* at the National Theatre of Czech Republic, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* at the Theatre named after E.B.Vakhtangov in Moscow not only proved A.Mambetov's creative maturity but also fostered recognition of Kazakh theatre all over the world.

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