

The World of Games and Georgian Theatre in Baku

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Abstract

The concept of Azerbaijan appeared in the Georgians' mind with the folk song "Urmuli", as in the first line of the song "I'll go to Aghzevan for salt", the word "Aghzevan" means Azerbaijan.

The friendship and cultural relations between Georgian and Azerbaijan peoples have a long history. The best children of these two nations have always tried to develop and strengthen this friendship.

It is important to study and research every form and field of these relations, including traditional theatric-cultural one between the two peoples.

At the end of the 1870s, Baku, which was weakened by Turkey and Iran, turned into a large oil capitalist industry, business society and credit banks. Very soon, Baku turned into a multinational city. Alongside Russians, Armenians, Polish, Ukrainians, Jews, there were more and more Georgians.

How was the city infrastructure affected by the rivalry of different material opportunities?!

The growth of the population caused the growth of the city itself, but this growth was not homogenous, "whichever aspect of people's life we take, - said newspaper "Kaspi" – there are intense contradictions everywhere: on the one hand, rich buildings with parquet floors, mirrors and electric lights, on the other – street huts with smoking oil-lamps" (Newspaper "Kaspi", 1893).

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Introduction

According to newspaper "Kvali", the part of the city with low Asian houses and dirty streets was called "Shamakhia". While the beautiful part with three-four-story European houses was known as "Beli Gorod".

To the left of the station, to the east, there was a third part, the so-called "Cherni Gorod", which "is made up with oil factories, kerosene factories, workshops and taverns, which are blackened by the smoke from the factory. Everything is black there: people, houses, animals, goods, fruit, etc." (Newspaper "Kvali" 1818).

Georgian Theatre in Baku

It is known that the formation of bourgeoisie in Azerbaijan started in the second half of the XIX century and its greater part consisted of oil entrepreneurs. That is why, amidst this capitalist world, there emerged an opposing power – the working class. It mainly consisted of homeless peasants moving to the city and qualified workers from different parts of the Russian Empire. The latter brought both their professional knowledge and skills and revolutionary ideas with them.

The third player, who regulated, united and gathered the opposing sides – the capitalists and the proletariat – was art and culture. As Schiller said: "Art has a moral influence not only because it gives pleasure in a moral way, but also because the pleasure which we get from art is, in itself, the way to morality".

What was happening in the cultural life of Baku at that time?!

The development of cultural life of the nation caused the need for a theatre in Baku. At that time, there were certain theatrical games and puppet performances in Azerbaijan.

In 1873, the first national, half-professional theatre was founded in Baku. The first performance was M. F. Akhundov's "Haji-Kara". In 1883, the capitalist Tagiev built a special building for the theatre,

and the first professional Azerbaijani theatre was founded.

Meanwhile, in Tbilisi, there had been a powerful Azerbaijani drama circle for quite a long time, which later turned into a professional theatre.

The development of cultural and educational links strengthened Azerbaijani and Georgian people even more. A considerable group of Azerbaijani cultural workers got their education in Georgia: M. Narimanov, Efendiev, Mahmudbekov, Hanizade, Mamed Kulizade, S. Akhundov, Kocharli, the painter Iravin and others. A. Bakikhanov, M. Akhundov, Mirzashaf, Narimanov and others lived and worked in Georgia for a long time.

Russian newspapers in Tbilisi – "Caucasus" and "Tifliskaya Vedomost" - regularly published correspondence about Azerbaijan.

Georgian newspapers also contributed to the popularization of Azerbaijani people, their life, literature and culture in Georgia: "Iveria", "Droeba", "Kvali". The articles and letters belonged to Iliia, Akaki, G. Tsereteli and other Georgian public figures.

In the second half of the XIX century, Akaki Tsereteli's works were translated into the Azerbaijani language; Akaki himself brilliantly translated M. Akhundov's "Khanis veziri" in 1898, and Rafiel Eristavi created a wonderful ballad "Koroghli" according to Azerbaijani folklore.

About 1000 Georgians lived in Baku at the time. In 1895, a Georgian community was established there. The first professional actress who settled in Baku in 1898 was Ephemelia Meskhi. One year later, in 1899-1900 Kote Marjanishvili and his wife Nadezhda Zhivokina took part in Russian drama cast. A drama circle was set in Baku in 1900-1902, which was taken over by an actor David Shvelidze.

"Ephemelia's arrival in Baku encouraged those Georgians who lived and worked in different parts of the city. She began uniting them and organizing her favourite activity – the theatre. Not only with her commitment but also with material assistance she established a club and a theatre which put on

performances every season”, - noted the actor E. Amirejibi.

In the land of “black gold”, there were a lot of foreign capitalists, entrepreneurs, commercants, intellectuals. They were frequent guests at popular “Georgian evenings” hosted by a Georgian woman.

Most frequently, the hostess was Lisa Tarkhnishvili, who was the wife of an oil entrepreneur Musa Nagiev. There were occasions, when they invited the wife of another oil entrepreneur Tagiev as a hostess. This way, the evening became more popular among rich Azerbaijani.

Mass media played a great role in the life of Georgians living in Baku. In 1897, newspaper “Iveria” wrote: “There are a lot of people of different nationalities in Baku and almost all of them have their own churches, schools, library and many other institutions...

Unfortunately, the Georgians have neither school or church nor a library”. The author of the letter addressed the Georgians if they could pay three rubles each, “they would establish a book depository and a reading hall for them” (Newspaper “Iveria”, 1897).

This was really timely as a few months later, a Georgian book depository and a reading hall were opened in Baku. “At last, our long-term dream has come true and now we have a Georgian book depository and a reading hall which was founded with the commitment and assistance of D. Kervalishvili. This May, we officially opened the reading hall which is located opposite Marine’s garden. Innumerable people were present at the opening” (Newspaper “Iveria”, 1898).

This first culture institution became a place of meeting and support for Georgians. A journalist from “Kvali”, Aridze, wrote: “There were few Georgians in Baku. Indeed, what do Georgians do here? Baku is a city of entrepreneurship and trade, but a Georgian is not a trader... There are a couple of Georgian capitalists, but they are very small compared to Azerbaijani capitalists. On the other hand, there were professional revolutionaries among Georgians: Stalin,

Tsulukidze, Ketskhoveli, Sturua, Irodion Evdoshvili, Abel Enukidze and others... How could their life and work in Baku not have an influence? It did have a deep influence!” (Newspaper “Kvali”, 1898).

While mentioning a couple of capitalists, the author must have meant the fact that “the oil industry which developed on Apsheron peninsula in the XIX century turned Baku into the largest industrial centre in Transcaucasia. In 1872, the government sold kerosene industries to private people, among whom were Georgians: Zubalashvili, Eristavi, Jakeli and others” (Gugulashvili, 1941, p. 277).

In 1900-1902, a Georgian drama circle was established. At first it consisted of just theatre-lovers, but since 1906, it filled with professional actors. Soon, with the help of rich Georgians, all Georgian institutions were moved to a building located at Nikoloz Street: the theatre, the school, the reading hall, etc.

In 1908, Ephemie Meskhi’s husband, Ivane Gepner and the director Kote Meskhi, opened a cinema in the same building. The cinema was run by Vasil Amashukeli, a mechanical engineer, who had just returned from Moscow. Encouraged by the Meskhis, Vasil Amashukeli started making short films: “Georgian actors Ephemie Meskhi, Kote Meskhi and others in the park”, “Work at Ramishvili’s publishing house”, “Work at oil bore”, “Transferring coal on camels”, “Baku views”, “Kebab salesmen”, “The Caspian Sea shore” and others.

Vasil Amashukeli’s films taken in Baku are among the first Georgian ones shown abroad.

With the initiative of Georgian educators, a primary school was opened in Baku. Since September 11, 1909, the school started functioning. It was equipped with all necessary things. It was mainly funded with the money from performances. There was one performance a year to support the school. In 1904, Stepane Zubalashvili donated 10,000 rubles to the school.

Georgian culture was appreciated not only by Georgians, but also by the representatives of Azerbaijani intelligentsia. In 1914, Lisa Kanum

Mukhtarova and her husband Murtuz Mukhtarov donated 500 rubles to the Georgian school.

The creative group of the Georgian theatre in Baku raised money to help the victims of repression from Guria, the victims of Armenian-Tatar opposition and poor Ajarians.

Jacob Mansvetashvili established the house of Georgian culture in Baku. On the 23 of December, a Georgian school was opened on the first floor of the building. A women's circle was also established here. There were also circles of sewing, embroidery and other handicraft.

In 1907, in order to manage the theatre successfully, the Georgians in Baku invited Kote Meskhi to be their director. He was in charge of it for two years and turned it into a powerful professional theatre.

After his leave, the theatre chose Nino Gamrekel-Toreli as its director. She was the first woman director, who had got theatrical education in Moscow at Polinskaya's private courses.

Most of all, Baku audience liked the plays depicting the heroic past of Georgian people, and later "democratic plays, where authors mainly depicted the existing economic and, partly, political inequality and superstitions and other fallaciousness". Baku Georgian theatre was a platform, which voiced anxious and hopeful ideas of freedom-loving people.

An Azerbaijani theatre in Tbilisi is developing simultaneously with the Georgian theatre in Baku. On January 14, 1910, the first issue of Georgian weekly political-literary and scientific-historical newspaper "Martsvali" came out in Baku (there were 10 issues altogether). Since January 1913, a weekly political-literary journal "Tskaro" came out.

On more than one occasion, famous actors from Tbilisi were invited to take part in performances in Baku: Mako Safarova-Abashidze, Elizabeth Cherkezishvili, Babo Avalishvili, Vaso Abashidze, Vladimer Alexi-Meskhishvili and others. On January, 1912, Georgia traditional evening party hosted Vano Sarajishvili, the solo opera singer from La Scala, who

delighted the ear of the audience with arias in Russian, French, Italian and Azerbaijani languages.

It is very interesting to remember what one of the popular singers of the USSR, Biul-Biul, writes: "I saw Vano Sarajishvili for the first time in 1911. At the time I was 14 years old. I was imitating a nightingale and produced strange sounds. This was why I was invited to Tbilisi... They said after the performance that Vano Sarajishvili was coming to see the singing nightingale. Indeed, when he approached me, he put one hand on my shoulder and he touched my throat with another and said something in Georgian. As they told me later, he had said: if you don't check the throat, you will think that there is a real nightingale in the throat. That evening, Vano Sarajishvili sang "Tavo chemo" and left me with such unforgettable impression that even 22 years later, I can't forget the singer with that great voice" (Kashmadze, 1962, pp. 205-207).

Another singer who sang in Baku was Elene Tarkhnishvili. Famous directors and actors worked in Georgian theatre in Baku: Shalva Dadiani, Valerian Gunia, Alexandre Tstutsunava, actora Keto and Eo Andronikashvilis, G. Mataradze, Vladimer Amashukeli, the doctor Niko Gamrekeli. The Georgian theatre served every event going on in Georgia, especially, in its cultural life. In different years, the Georgian theatre in Baku celebrated jubilees of Ilia and Akaki and staged their plays.

At that time, people of different nationalities worked in different industrial institutions. These people were friends and in the evening, despite differences in social background and thinking, they met one another in theatres and attended performances.

"As there were Georgian performances in Baku, there must have been audience as well. Who were the audience? Besides Georgians, you could find educated, progressively thinking people of different nationalities. First of all, there were the Azerbaijani", - wrote newspaper "Iveria" (Newspaper "Iveria", 1898).

How did the Georgian theatre in Baku manage to attract such versatile audience?! Each Georgian actor and theatre lover was well aware of one

thing, that “the theatre is a publicly revealed mirror which should reflect the good and the bad, the kind and the evil, positive and negative”.

The Georgian theatre in Baku managed to attract audience by reflecting socially important events. The theatre revealed luxurious entertainment and conversations about trade, miserable life of the working class, the issues of culture, science and social life. All the voices, all various ideas, melodies, all thoughts and wishes made a great influence on the feelings and minds of the audience.

In the 1920s, which were full of cataclysms, the roles in the world of games changed. The working class who wanted revenge turned into a raging crowd and shed people’s blood together with Bolsheviks. During this time, the life of the theatre in Baku nearly stopped.

The cast of the Georgian theatre in Baku “was wandering in the street with a lit torch in the hand... hunger, thirst, cold were nothing to it... the theatre was not only art but it is a school, a platform, which wakes feelings, alerts senses, lights fire in hearts and fills it with hope”.

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Conclusion

And so, the Georgian theatre in Baku stood up to time. It continued its functioning at Nikoloz Street for more than 30 years, staged about 200 performances and lived a full life.

On December, 1936, on decision of the Azerbaijan authorities, the Georgian theatre was closed down, but it left an indelible trace in the cultural and educational activity of Georgia.

The Georgian theatre of Baku was the temple which was lit by the love of culture and the belief that “art belongs to all people”, “art has no borders”, “the theatre is the public sign of nationality”...

The life and work of the founders, theatre-goers or actors of the Georgian theatre in Baku is the spiritual will left by one generation to the next one. Each of them possessed a great sense of responsibility and dignity. Even today, the life and work of the cast of the Georgian theatre in Baku and its history shines like an eternal torch.

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