

**ILKHOM IN TASHKENT: FROM KOMSOMOL-INSPIRED STUDIO TO
POST-SOVIET INDEPENDENT THEATER**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to research the creation of Ilkhom as an experimental theatre studio under Komsomol Youth League and Theatre Society in the late Brezhnev era in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbek SSR. The research focuses on the controversies of the aims and objectives of these two patronage organizations, which provided an experimental studio with a greater freedom in choice of repertoire and allowed to obtain the status of one of the first non-government theaters on the territory of former Soviet Union. The research is based on the reevaluation of late-Soviet/early post-Soviet period in Uzbekistan through the repertoire of Ilkhom as an independent theatre-studio. The sources used include articles about theatre from republican and all-union press.

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Table of contents

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
Table of contents.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1 - After the thaw: the stagnation in the late Brezhnev Era (1976-1984)	16
1.1 Komsomol “Experiments” with a Youth Theatre Studio in Tashkent.....	16
1.2 Evolution of Repertoire: Anti-hero in <i>The Duck Hunting</i> by Alexander Vampilov (1978)21	
1.3 Perception of Respectable Wedding by Berthold Brecht (1979)	26
1.4 Tashkent as a recursion of a larger Soviet picture: <i>Mohamed, Mamed, Mamish</i> (1980) 33	
1.5 Scenes by the Fountain by Semyon Zlotnikov (1981)	34
Chapter 2 – Ilkhom during perestroika and glasnost’ (1985-1990)	39
2.1 Exploring “the blank spots”	39
2.2 Pantomime as a response to “glasnost’”: <i>Ragtime for Clowns</i> (1986).....	40
2.3 Living in a vacuum under the threat of annihilation by a larger vacuum: <i>Clomadeus</i> (1988).....	41
2.4 Ilkhom of late 1980d: time for myth-building	43
2.5 Initial rise of nationalism in Uzbek SSR as a result of <i>glasnost’</i>	49

Chapter 3 – Dissolution of the Soviet Union as a start of new era	51
3.1 Happy Beggars and Monterrey Paisanos in Uzbek Representation (1992-1995).....	51
3.2 Remembering Jadids: White White Black Stork (1998).....	54
3.3 Imitations of the Koran by Alexander Pushkin (2002).....	57
3.4 Ecstasy with Pomegranate inspired by Usto Mumin’s paintings (2006).....	58
Conclusion	61
Bibliography	62
Appendices.....	68
Appendix 1: Ilkhom theater productions from 1976 to 1984	68
Appendix 2: Ilkhom theater productions from 1985 to 1990	70
Appendix 3: Ilkhom theater productions from 1991 to 2006	71

Introduction

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, researches rarely focused on the late socialism, partly due to the opening of the Soviet archives that allowed to re-evaluate the revolutionary and Stalinist periods, as well as Khrushchev's "Thaw" era. Other than that, late socialism had been associated with "stagnation" in cultural, social, and political aspects. The period from Brezhnev's accession to power in 1964 and to Gorbachev's reforms in 1985 was different from the Stalin and Khrushchev's eras, involving new methods of negotiation and dialogue. These processes are being examined in the later scholarly works,¹ focusing on the European part of the USSR, while the processes in the peripheries seem to be understudied.

What did it mean to be a Soviet citizen in 1970s or 1980s? Alexei Yurchak speaks against the binary oppositions qualifying the last Soviet generation claiming that they were neither dissident, nor activist.² Yurchak's central argument is that while embracing anything new, late Soviet generation did not necessarily reject socialist ideas per se. The processes that he reviews would rather fall under category of "interstices" of official structure, the Soviet phenomena that, perhaps, was enabled by the Soviet authoritative discourse in place. The public neither opposed, nor supported the state, but lived *vnye* (outside), which was considered to be "normal" for the Soviet citizen in the late socialism. Yurchak's depiction of contradictory nature of everyday Soviet life in Brezhnev era is largely based on the paradigms of Leningrad, and it makes one wonder, whether these late Soviet processes in cultural capital of Leningrad, may be comparable to the cultural processes in the peripheries, distant from the center, such as Tashkent.

¹ Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (eds), *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964 – 1985* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013)

² Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was For Ever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 5-6

Vladislav Zubok elaborated further³ on the dichotomy of being a patriot, disenchanted in Soviet slogans, and constantly challenging the system, while proceeding to be an integral part of it. Could these people be classified as dissidents, and was the idea of reforms the crucial component, holding this collective identity of Soviet people together?

The search for the new ways of artistic expression... the ethical and linguistic crises of the post-WWII decades indicated the launch of the transformation phase of the society.⁴ In the mid-1970s, the crisis of the system coincided with the peak of searches in the intellectual and cultural life of society that can be interpreted as a transitional phase.

The period of economic stagnation, known as *Period Zastoia* (the Era of Stagnation) is associated with the ruling of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982, Yuri Andropov (1982-1984), and Konstantin Chernenko (1984-1985), although there is some disagreement on when exactly the stagnation started. Some scholars claim that it started as early as Brezhnev's appointment as General Secretary in 1964. However, most of the scholars⁵ agree upon the starting year for economic stagnation at either 1973 or 1975, arguing that there were high growth rates in the mid-to-late 1960s, followed by the economic reform launched by Alexei Kosygin and lasting up until 1973 oil crisis. This study follows the generally accepted timeline of setting the start of stagnation at mid-1970s.

Stagnation, "was in many ways a fitting description, for this was a period of declining growth", although some scholars warn against extrapolating the term into the spheres, as it might be misleading for analysis of non-economic spheres. Nevertheless, stagnation label retroactively attached in reference to this period by Gorbachev, implicated the progressive

³ Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, Harvard, 2009

⁴ Denis Kozlov, Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw, Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2013, p.193

⁵See Frederic P. Miller, Agnes F. Vandome, *Brezhnev Stagnation* (VDM Publishing, 2010)

expansion of stagnation from political and economic life of the Soviet Union to social and cultural aspects. It is generally perceived that the Soviet culture under Brezhnev developed largely by inertia, given her previous period. However, it is difficult to prove that most of the advances were rooted in the very brief Khrushchev “Thaw” era of a relative freedom, and were not a result of a larger processes. Recent attempts to reconsider the stagnation period in order to present a richer picture than stagnation paradigm implies, are mostly related to social and political aspects,⁶ with the remaining gap in revision of cultural life, and theatre in particular.

The social phenomena of *Shestidesiatniki* (the sixties generation) had been analyzed elsewhere in the context of Russian intelligentsia⁷, *but* what was the notion of being if not explicitly a dissenter, but a non-conformist, in the distant Uzbek capital in 1960-80s? Was it immediately echoing the processes in Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev, or did it follow its own timeline? According to Sergei Abashin, Central Asian perspective is underrepresented in Soviet historical discourse⁸ due to disciplinary limitations, including access to sources and lack of local language skills. Consequently, Abashin proposes researching Central Asian history as an important part of the larger Soviet picture, neither exaggerating nor ignoring its role in universal Soviet processes.

“Sovietness had a Central Asian component with which all inhabitants of the USSR were or were supposed to be familiar... A hybrid nature of practices, a universal cultural identity developed more quickly and intensively... In a sense, one could say that the “Soviet

⁶ Dina Fainberg, Artemy Kalinovsky (eds), *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange* (London: Lexington Books, 2016)

⁷ See Inna Kochetkova, *The Myth of the Russian Intelligentsia: Old Intellectuals in the New Russia* who argues that 60s generation was too young to both fear Stalinist repressions or to express deep connection with the regime; Samuel Ramer “*Shestidesiatniki*”, *Journal of Modern Russian History and Historiography* 3 (2010) pp. 233–255; on Soviet dissent in the De-Stalinization era, see Polly Jones (ed.), *The Dilemmas of De-stalinization Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, Routledge, 2009; Miriam J Dobson, ‘The Post-Stalin era: de-Stalinization, daily life, and dissent’ in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* (2011) 12(4), pp. 905-924

⁸ Sergey, Abashin, “Soviet Central Asia on the Periphery”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 2015 (New Series), pp. 359-374

people” formed more quickly in Tashkent and Dushanbe than in Kaluga or Tula”.⁹ However, Abashin proceeds by stating that “no major unofficial or underground cultural movement emerged”¹⁰ in Soviet Central Asia, equivalent to those emerging in larger Russian cities. Rather, Russian-speaking culture coexisted with local culture, resulting in diverse mixture of styles. Abashin notes, however, that there were few exceptions to underground tendencies, such as “Ilkhom” theatre in Tashkent.

Lucille Lisack’s article on the history of independent theater in Soviet Uzbekistan portrays the “Ilkhom” Theatre as “one of the first non-governmental professional theatres in the history of the former Soviet Union, founded in 1976, during the period known *a posteriori* as the “stagnation” period”.¹¹ In her article, she provides careful analysis of testimonials, allowing “to evaluate the status of theatre studio created in 1970s, under the aegis of the Komsomol, and to shed light on the porosity of categories such as non-governmental”.

By 1970s, the early enthusiasm of the Thaw was replaced by disenchantment, Russian playwrights such as Vampilov or Petrushevskaja held pessimistic views toward Soviet society than the previous generation did¹². In this context, was *Ilkhom* only an echo of the avant-garde in Moscow and Leningrad? Would it be effective to draw parallels between *Ilkhom* and early *Taganka*, or *Sovremennik*¹³, that were launched decade(s) earlier in Moscow? Does such comparison help to determine whether Central Asian theatres followed their own timeline

⁹ Ibid, p.371

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Lucille Lisack, *Le Théâtre Ilhom À Tashkent Retour sur les premières années d’un théâtre devenu légendaire* (The Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent: A Retrospective Look at the Early Years of a Legendary Venue), *Cahiers du Monde russe* (2013/3, vol. 54, p. 643-668).

¹² Evgeny Dobrenko, Galin Tihanov eds., *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011

¹³ On chronology of theatre developments from 1953 and rise of Soviet theatre, as well as on the major directors and actors, see Anatoly Smeliansky (trans. by Miles Patrick) *The Russian Theatre After Stalin* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) - the chronological divide is by *the Thaw* (1953-1968) and *the Frosts* (1968-1985) period; and Aleksandr Gershtovich, trans. by Michael Yuriev, *The Theater of Yuri Lyubimov: Art and Politics at the Taganka Theater in Moscow* (New York: Paragon House, 1989)

(delayed Thaw), or these were completely different processes, possibly inspired by, but not directly following art developments in the European part of the USSR?

While due to the increasing censorship in Moscow and other cities of the European part of the Soviet Union right after the end of Thaw era, when many plays of the contemporary Russian playwrights were banned from staging, it was possible to stage them in the Eastern peripheries, including Tashkent (partly due to the oversight of the ministry of culture, and to the remoteness from the center). Therefore, it may be useful to reevaluate the era from a different perspective, i.e. not from the “center” (as the cultural life in the European part of the USSR during this period had been extensively reviewed,¹⁴ while peripheries, such as Central Asia, were rarely a research focus). Starting from the Tsarist era, the theatrical focus was Moscow- and St. Petersburg-centric, while under the Soviet regime, regional theatres mostly copied the repertoires of the major companies.¹⁵

The Ilkhom Theater, as the focus of this study is an exemplary of an independent, non-government studio (among the first in the Soviet Union), which was initially created as a part of the Komsomol Youth initiative. However, the outcomes did not correlate with the initially stated Komsomol goals, which exemplifies contradictory nature of everyday Soviet life in Brezhnev era. Reviewing the development of theatre by decades would allow to trace the cultural, social and political changes in the republic, as this independent theater was highly responsive to the changes in social and political atmosphere. While the vast majority of the governmental theatres across the Soviet Union were staging Chekhov’ *Seagull* and *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière, at the very same time, the repertoire of experimental theatre studios enjoyed more diversity and reflected the spirit of the time.

¹⁴ For re-evaluation of social, political and cultural life in the European part of the Soviet Union, from Brezhnev’s rule to Gorbachev’s reforms, see Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–85* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013)

¹⁵ Laurence Senelick, *Historical Dictionary of Russian Theater* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), p.13

The first chapter studies the preconditions that allowed creation of experimental theatre studios in mid-1970s. The key points under consideration are the Komsomol decree of 1976 on the work with creative youth, which marked creation of Ilkhom studio in Tashkent; emergence of Russian “new wave” drama, followed by post-Vampilov drama; practicing production of bilingual plays in early 1980s. The second chapter focuses on the Gorbachev’s perestroika era and its implications to development of theatre in Tashkent, specifically the first wave of emigration and rise of nationalism in response to glasnost’, and change of repertoire due to new openness, granted by glasnost’, as well as the structural reorganization of theatre due to changes in planned economics. The third chapter evaluates the immediate changes occurring in theater after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The research is based on the reevaluation of late-Soviet/early post-Soviet period in Uzbekistan through the repertoire of Ilkhom as an independent theatre-studio. The comprehensive list of studio repertoire is provided in appendices. The choice of plays for analysis was based on exemplary ones, which were rarely staged in other theatres, or included the elaboration of ideas that were rarely addressed in late soviet/post-soviet theatre productions. The sources used include articles about theatre from republican and all-union press.

Most of the articles published in press during the first decade of Ilkhom’s work, with only a few exceptions, carried ideologically charged information written in the spirit of those years. Unfortunately, in the second decade, up till 1991, objective information is also lacking. However, even analysis of these articles, published during late socialism, provides a picture of discrepancy in setting the objectives by higher authorities in the center and their interpretation and implementation in the periphery, as well as contradictions between various department officials.

In the mid-1970s, the crisis of the system coincided with the peak of searches in the intellectual and cultural life of society that can be interpreted as a transitional phase.¹⁶ The period of economic stagnation, known as Period Zastoia (the Era of Stagnation) is associated with the ruling of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982, Yuri Andropov (1982-1984), and Konstantin Chernenko (1984-1985), although there is some disagreement on when exactly the stagnation started. Some scholars claim that it started as early as Brezhnev's appointment as General Secretary in 1964. However, most of the scholars¹⁷ agree upon the starting year for economic stagnation at either 1973 or 1975, arguing that there were high growth rates in the mid-to-late 1960s, followed by the economic reform launched by Alexei Kosygin and lasting up until 1973 oil crisis. This study follows the generally accepted timeline of setting the start of stagnation at mid-1970s.

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¹⁶ Denis Kozlov, Eleonory Gilburd, (eds.), *The Thaw, Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2013, p.193

¹⁷ See Frederic P. Miller, Agnes F. Vandome, *Brezhnev Stagnation* (VDM Publishing, 2010); Jesse Russell, Ronald Cohn, *Era of Stagnation*

to present a richer picture than stagnation paradigm implies, are mostly related to social and political aspects,¹⁸ with the remaining gap in revision of cultural life, and theatre in particular.

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The terminology relies upon the articulation of an experimental theatre and an amateur theater studio. Experimental theatre, knows an avant-garde theatre, originated in Western theater productions with the Alfred Jarry plays, rejecting the general rules of theatre production. The meaning had shifted over time, as the mainstream theater had adopted many of methods that were previously considered as radical ones. Likewise any other forms of avant-garde, theatrical avant-garde was developed as a response to the general cultural crisis.

¹⁸ Dina Fainberg, Artemy Kalinovsky (eds), *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange* (London: Lexington Books, 2016)

¹⁹ For re-evaluation of social, political and cultural life in the European part of the Soviet Union, from Brezhnev’s rule to Gorbachev’s reforms, see Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–85* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013)

²⁰ Laurence Senelick, *Historical Dictionary of Russian Theater* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), p.13 Jean Benedetti, Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre 1898-1938, in *A History of Russian Theatre*, Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.254-277. Also see James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Today* (New York: University Books, 1970)

Early Soviet avant-garde theatre²¹ manifested in the rise of small amateur studios outside the academic theatres, initiated by Stanislavski, Meyerhold and other luminaries in 1920-1930s,²² with an idea of turning them into professional theater companies over time. Although studios could rarely make it to the theatrical companies (early example of Vakhtangov theatre), there were some notable exceptions including Sovremennik launched by group of Moscow Art School graduates in 1956, and revival of Taganka Theater by Yury Lyubimov in 1964.²³

Number of amateur theatres had increased greatly in 1920s as a Communist propaganda tool and mostly conformed to the socialist realism, some amateur troupes, as *Teatr rabochei molodezhi*²⁴ (TRAM – Theatre of Working Youth) in 1920-s and early 1930-s. However, as of mid-1930-s, on the height of the repressive regime, all the previous privileges that amateur troops enjoyed, were called off.

Acclaimed amateur theater-studios re-emerged in the Khrushchev era only, as soon as the Art Institutes and Houses of Culture were required to involve the youth to creative activities on a larger scale.²⁵ Notwithstanding the temporary silencing of the famous amateur companies in late 1960s, early 1970s marked the creation of new groups after the Komsomol Culture Department order on the involvement of the creative youth. The difference between avant-

²¹Jean Benedetti, “Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre 1898-1938”, in *A History of Russian Theatre*, Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.254-277. Also see James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Today* (New York: University Books, 1970)

²² On Meyerhold’s theatrical experiments in early Soviet period, see Ch. 10 - 1927-1931: The New Repertoire and Ch. 11 - 1932-1938: An Alien Theater in Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theater* (Methuen Drama, 1988). Alexander Burry, *Russian Experimental Performance and Theater: Vsevolod Meyerhold* in Dennis G. Ioffe, Frederick H. White (eds.), *The Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism An Introductory Reader* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), pp.357-385

²³ Aleksandr Gershkovich, trans. by Michael Yurieff, *The Theater of Yuri Lyubimov: Art and Politics at the Taganka Theater in Moscow* (New York: Paragon House, 1989)

²⁴ Lynn Mally, The Rise and Fall of The Soviet Youth Theater TRAM, *Slavic Review*, Vol. No3 (Autumn, 1992), pp.411-430

²⁵ Susan Costanzo, Reclaiming the Stage: Amateur Theater-Studio Audiences in the Late Soviet Era, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 398-424. Also, on theatre studios in the 1950s and 1960s, see Bella Ostromoukhova, “Le Dégel et les troupes amateur Changements politiques et activités artistiques des étudiants, 1953-1970

garde studios of 1920-1930-s and experimental studios of 1970s can attributed to what Furst referred to as the shift from commitment to the ideas of 'building communism' towards development of subcultures and independent thought. Moreover, Furst argued that the shift had been initiated immediately in the post war years, i.e. earlier than it is generally considered to be originated during Khrushchev's thaw era. In order to support her argument, Furst examined inefficient post-war reorganization of Komsomol system that created a gap between Soviet system and youth, followed by non-conformity that later resulted in increasing shift towards cosmopolitanism. Since ideological campaigns were incomprehensible to most of the people, they did not reach initial goals but rather created a specific interplay between state and youth, which gave rise to experimental studios in 1970s.

Chapter 1 - After the thaw: the stagnation in the late Brezhnev Era (1976-1984)

1.1 Komsomol “Experiments” with a Youth Theatre Studio in Tashkent

In early 1970s, when some of the representatives of artistic elite defected to the West on tour,²⁶ Department of Propaganda of CPSU have concluded that *Dvortsy Kul'tury*, the so-called palaces of culture with its traditional set of sewing circles were hopelessly outdated, and creative youth should be kept busy in the new way. The construction of 12 Youth Palaces in large cities of the Soviet Union was launched shortly after, and finalized by 1977²⁷ to celebrate the 60th anniversary of October revolution.

By 1976, ten government-sponsored theatres operated in Tashkent, the fourth by largest city in the country, exactly at that time the acronym ESTM (*Ekspperimental'naia Studia Teatral'noi Molodezhi*, Experimental Studio for Theatrical Youth) was coined to identify experimental theatres. Ilkhom, as one of these studios, was created under the double patronage of (1) the Central Committee of Youth of Uzbekistan (Komsomol), and (2) the Youth Section of the Theatre Society of Uzbekistan (a union of theatre workers).²⁸ As Lisack noted, simultaneous submission the Komsomol and to the Theatre Society, also helped the *Ilkhom* Theatre to slip through the net”.²⁹ Ostromoukhova, in discussion of amateur theater troops from 1963 to 1970,³⁰ also points out the advantage of subordination to several authorities.

²⁶ The defection of Russian ballet stars Rudolf Nureev in 1961 and Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1974 are most widely known, although there were others as well.

²⁷ Evgeny Rakhmanov, *Moi 70-e*, p.161 in Weil, *Neizvestnyy, Izvestnyy Ilkhom*

²⁸ As early as 1940s, the creation of “Theatre Societies” was initiated in all of the Soviet Union Republics (the Theatre Society of Uzbekistan dates back to 1945). These were the voluntary organizations, created by example and with the assistance of the All-Russian Theatrical Society

²⁹ Lucille Lisack, “The Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent: A Retrospective Look at the Early Years of a Legendary Venue” in *Cahiers du Monde russe* (2013/3, vol. 54, p. 643-668), p.648

³⁰ Ostromoukhova, *Le Dégel et les troupes amateur*, p. 305

Moreover, the shared responsibility of above mentioned 2 institutions complicated the decision making processes³¹. The officials assigned by Komsomol were engaged only in the organizational issues (allocation of space for studios, as well as provision of equipment), while representatives of the Theater Society were in charge of the creation of performances.³² Thus, as the original goals and objectives of the two organizations (the Komsomol as an official entity and Theatre Society as a public creative association) diverged. In addition to that, the absence of immediate ideological control over the repertoire (professional theaters were directly subordinate to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, while amateur studios were not) also contributed to increasing the gap between ideology and practice.

Since in Brezhnev's Stagnation Era the state censorship over the Soviet literature in general, and over the dramaturgy in particular, was getting more and more overwhelming,³³ Ilkhom, located in Tashkent, enjoyed more freedom, not only due to the remoteness from the center as it was highlighted by its director, but due to its amateur status, which relieved it from the direct purview of Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Even though studio was not obligated to obtain an official approval from authorities³⁴ for each of their productions, it was accountable to Theatre Society of Uzbek SSR, and held discussions on staged plays from 1977 to 1989. The

³¹ Natalia Kaz'mina, "Istoria Odnoi Studii" in *Teatr*, 1981, pp.96-106

³² Critique of discrepancies in the work of two organizations in T. Kaplinskaia, "Tvorchestvo Molodyh: kak zhivesh, klub Ilhom?" in *Pravda Vostoka*, May 3, 1979: "A claim to the Komsomol club chiefs is a frequent change of the executive secretary of the board, who is the instructor of the Department of Propaganda at the same time. This work requires not only the qualities of an active Komsomol leader. The appointed official should also be familiar with the peculiarities of work in the theater, in film, in literature, in music"

³³ Pavel Rudnev, "The New Play Dramaturgy in Russia" in Magda Romanska (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (New York: Routledge, 2015) p.64 and Birgit Beumers, The 'Thaw' and After, 1953-1986 in Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (eds) *A History of Russian Theater* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.373-380

³⁴ In Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (1995), p.183: Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs at the RSFSR Narkompros, abbreviated as Glavlit, with final authority over printed materials as well as the performing arts. The latter term was in semiofficial use until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With Gorbachev's rise to power and glasnost, Glavlit was soon stripped of its former power – a decline which accelerated after 1988, and by 1990 its 60-year stranglehold on Soviet theater was over

chairman of Theater Society, Rakhim Kariev,³⁵ was Ilkhom's curator and was praised by Ilkhom for remaining supportive³⁶ even when Komsomol functionaries were displeased with the studio.

Considering that work in ESTM was voluntary, the actor were officially employed elsewhere, therefore the performances in Ilkhom during its early years did not follow any fixed timetable and were usually scheduled after 10 pm. There were neither tickets to be purchased, nor official announcements. However, "by 1989 there were nearly 200 studio theatres in Russia and various republics and countless amateur dramatic circles (in comparison to 650 state-supported theatres)... staged in converted basements, communal apartments, palaces of culture, collective farms... Rehearsals organized around work schedules."³⁷ Thus, neither the working hours and mode of operation, nor the location and the circumstances of its creation, were signifying Ilkhom's peculiarity. The myth making process which declared Ilkhom to be a "Central Asian hotbed of dissent and opposition to the official culture" dates back to a later period (the midst of Gorbachev's *perestroika*), which is discussed in Chapter 2 in greater detail.

Nevertheless, there are two notable particularities that made it possible to position Ilkhom as a focus of this study in a historical perspective: (1) its emergence during stagnation era³⁸, and (2) its "vitality", as Ilkhom originated as an experimental studio in the late socialism and lasted well until the collapse of the Soviet Union and proceeded its work without interruptions in the newly-emerging independent republic. Both of these aspects allow to trace

³⁵ Rakhim Kariev was the Head of the Uzbek Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre named after Alisher Navoi, and the chairman of Theatre Society of Uzbek SSR

³⁶ Iu. Smelkov, "Ilkhom" znachit vdohnovenie", *Nedelia* N36, August 30-September 6, 1981 – Theatre society funded up-to-date music recording equipment, which lead to creation of a recording studio at the theater in 1982. Lighting was also sponsored by Theatre Society, allowing to employ sophisticated lighting techniques which were not available to most (if not to all) theatres of Uzbek SSR in 1970-80s

³⁷ Martin Banham, *The Soviet Theatre in the 1980s: Amateur and Studio Performances* (Russia and The Republics of Former Soviet Union) in *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, p.955

³⁸ Bella Ostromoukhova notes that the flourishing of theatre studios in European Part of USSR ended in the 1970s "La réappropriation de l'espace soviétique par les activités artistiques amateurs des étudiants moscovites (fin des années 1950 - années 1960)," *Ethnographiques*, No. 10, 2006

and compare the evolution of the repertoire, induced by social, economic and political metamorphosis. Perhaps, the vitality of Ilkhom might be attributed to its flexibility and willingness to adapt to spirit of the times.

Ilkhom's late emergence and initial flourishing stage allows to elaborate on specifics of the theatrical life in Tashkent, in contrast to Russian theatre studios in Moscow, which were the influence and the source of artistic inspiration during first decade of studio's existence. Mark Weil, the future director of Ilkhom theatre studio created under aegis of newly-constructed Youth Palace, was a graduate of the Institute for Theatre and Art in Tashkent and prior to that, formed a "youth creativity association" *Sverstniki* in provincial town of Chirchik.³⁹ The Komsomol propaganda work assignment that followed right after the graduation was performance of the "agitation" shows⁴⁰ in the kolkhozes of Nechernozem'ye with a small troupe.⁴¹ Making use of the Uzbek national theater style *Maskharaboz*, the troupe improvised every evening based on the events of the kolkhoz. However, this was a common beginning for a theatre studio, even in the earlier decades.⁴² Amateur troupes went on tour as "agitation brigades" even in 1950s and 1960s,⁴³ often initiated as *Komsomol* clubs staging propaganda works for a neighborhood clientele.⁴⁴ Therefore, the way of its inception does not make Ilkhom to stand out from the variety of similar theatrical experiments.

³⁹ A small provincial town along the river of the same name, founded in 1935, 20 miles northeast of Uzbek SSR's capital city, Tashkent. During WWII it became one of the center of mechanical engineering of the republic.

⁴⁰ In Lucille Lisack, *The Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent: A Retrospective Look at the Early Years of a Legendary Venue in Cahiers du Monde russe* (2013/3, vol. 54, p. 643-668) and in Oksana Khripin, *Oskolki nesvoevremennih myslei o Marke Weile*, ch.1, p.2

⁴¹ Agricultural and industrial region of the European part of Russia

⁴² After graduating from Directing Department of the Tashkent Theatre Art Institute in 1984, Weil was trained by well-known Russian Soviet directors: Georgy Tovstonogov (in Leningrad) and Yuri Lyubimov (in Moscow)

⁴³ Bella Ostromoukhova, "La réappropriation de l'espace soviétique par les activités artistiques amateurs des étudiants moscovites (fin des années 1950 - années 1960)," *Ethnographiques*, No. 10, 2006

⁴⁴ Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p.110

In addition to assigning kolkhoz performances, the Youth Section of the Theatre Society and the Komsomol provided the ESTM with premises in Tashkent,⁴⁵ where the troupe worked late at night⁴⁶ in the basement of the Palace of Youth.⁴⁷

With regard to the vitality of Ilkhom studio, as its director, Mark Weil put it:

Who nowadays remember the young theatre directors of Brezhnev era? Soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many studios, including Theatre of Adolf Shapiro in Riga, Theater of Valera Ahadov in Dushanbe, and Theater of Slava Pazi in Bishkek ceased to exist, while Ilkhom survived.⁴⁸

The survival of Ilkhom was attributed to its adaptability to changing organizational structures, which later gave its creators a voice to construct a myth about an independent theater, which was opposing the regime. However, as Djumaev, who worked with Ilkhom's director, pointed out:

Weil was able to compromise when necessary, therefore, it would be incorrect to portray him as ruthless fighter against the political regime. He was always strongly objecting against drawing direct parallels between *Ilkhom*'s productions and specific political upheavals of the time.⁴⁹

Therefore, mastering of rules of compromising the system, did, perhaps, allow Ilkhom to escape the fate of similar studios scattered across the vast territory of the Soviet Union, and even to outlive the regime itself. The development of theatre repertoire was indicative of changes in the regimes that were in place.

⁴⁵ Svetla Beneva, "Ilkhom" znachit vdohnovenie" in *Narodna Kultura*#6, 1986 (Bulgarian newspaper)

⁴⁶ Work in ESTM was classified as amateur performance, and was, in fact, voluntary. Therefore, all of the studios actors were officially employed either in *Gorkyy* Russian Academic Theater of Drama, *Iosh Gvardiia* Theater, Russian (Youth Theater) TYuZ, or Uzbek TYuZ named after Yuldash Akhunbabaev. It should be noted that the theatres in Union Republics were subdivided by the language which was used in the performances (in Uzbek SSR, it should have been strictly either Uzbek or Russian). However, Ilkhom opted out of this division, staging multi language performances.

⁴⁷ More on the organizational structure of ESTM in T. Kaplinskaia, "Tvorchestvo Molodyh: kak zhivesh, klub Ilhom?" in *Pravda Vostoka*, May 3, 1979

⁴⁸ Mark Weil, "Igra v klassiki, v teatr, v zhizn'" (an article was commissioned by *Teatr* magazine in 2002)

⁴⁹ Alexandr Djumaev, "Nuzhno Delat' Chto-to Osmyslennoie" in *Teatr*№2(14) 2009

1.2 Evolution of Repertoire: Anti-hero in *The Duck Hunting* by Alexander Vampilov (1978)

The first performance of the theater studio often sets the future direction. In 1950s, Sovremennik started off with *Alive Forever* by Rozov, and Taganka in 1960s with *A Good Person of Szechwan* by Brecht, both depicting everyday realism of a “kitchen drama”. As the monumental realism and depiction of the positive hero were gradually receding, new theater generation of 1970s was marked by the emergence of a new hero. Putting an end to the anticipation of a positive hero was the innovation of the “new wave” which followed in the wake of Vampilov. While the bulk of literature on new wave theater performances of 1970s is focused on productions in European part of the Soviet Union, there is little known on the Central Asian theater developments that took place during the same period.

Theater critic Il'dar Mukhtarov recalled that:

The impact of “Sixties” had reached Tashkent relatively late, just like circles on the water: books of Sartre, Camus, and Kafka at book bazaars in Tashkent with “wet ink”... the main theme of the theatrical conversations without any doubt was Taganka.⁵⁰

Ilkhom declared itself with staging of Vampilov's *Duck Hunting*,⁵¹ which was considered to be its first professional performance, not the most representative one in terms of theater aesthetics though. A decade later, during *perestroika*, the choice of this piece contributed to the aura of non-conformism, helping to build a myth of Ilkhom as a theater which was ahead of its time. Vampilov became widely known as a precursor of a “new wave” of the Soviet theatre, preceding the emergence of a so-called post-Vampilov generation, who shifted even closer to grotesque and absurdist forms of representation.⁵²

⁵⁰ Il'dar Mukhtarov, “Vzglyad Istorika” in Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p.26

⁵¹ First published in the anthology “Angara” in 1970. Miraculously, the play bypassed the censorship, due to the fact that anthology's publisher, Mark Sergeev, waited for the moment when the chief censor was on vacation, and put the “Duck Hunting” into print without approval

⁵² Birgit Beumers, Mark Naumovich Lipovetskiĭ (eds) *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Chicago: Intellect, University of Chicago Press, 2009) p.27

Nevertheless, was Ilkhom director intended to declare the studio as oppositional by staging this play, or was it simply a dialogue about the problems of his contemporaries, which were not addressed by Uzbek theatres before? In the foreword for the book dedicated to Ilkhom's 25th anniversary, Weil noted that he was just experimenting with theatre forms and styles, rejecting any ideology.⁵³ However, in addition to that, Weil demonstrated awareness of the fact that the play at that time was not recommended for staging by Repertoire Commission, although it was published in 1970. Thus, Weil realized that staging of this piece was not an ideologically correct decision, however, he had a feeling that Vampilov was a playwright of his generation:

Therefore, as soon as we got the rehearsal room and a small stage, Vampilov's name just popped up. As it came to be known later, a theatre troupe from Riga started rehearsing the same play in the same year. It premiered in Riga earlier than at Ilkhom.⁵⁴

The Duck Hunting was written by, and staged by the people of the same generation, and elaborated on the utmost hidden fears – of a continuous inner struggle against becoming someone they did not wish to be. *Vampilov's* play challenged a man of his time, a veiled critique of the regime through representation of a disillusioned character. The world depicted by the playwright, is a dull space lacking large-scale events or emergency situations, which usually most clearly reveals human character. Ordinary Soviet citizens are bogged down in the daily routine, interrupted occasionally by minor incidents. *Vampilov's* heroes are passive, dissatisfied with their environment,⁵⁵ the drama unfolds through the life of a reflective middle-aged man. The protagonist is more of an anti-hero.⁵⁶ It represents the author's complete awareness of the fate of his generation at the transition from the euphoria of generation of 1950s and 1960s, their hopes and expectations for new life with more freedom of expression. The

⁵³ Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p.20

⁵⁴ Mark Weil, "Liki Teatral'noi Studii" in *Teatr* №10 (1986), p.98

⁵⁵ See Neil Cornwell (ed), *Reference Guide to Russian Literature* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2013) p. 864

⁵⁶ Alla Demidova, "Pokuda serdce b'etsia," *Teatr*, No. 9, 1976, p. 38-46

finale depicts the loss of illusions, and understanding of being the forerunners not of a complete social transformation, but only of the temporary "thaw".

The protagonist Viktor Zilov is a literary heir of Chekhov's Ivanov and other "superfluous men" in Russian drama. Thus, Vampilov continued the tradition of Russian literature and at the same time permeated with a very precise and clear forefeeling of the present time, when a decision to take action turns out to be equally as harmful as not taking any actions at all. From the recollections of Ilkhom director: "The actors were standing on the wooden scaffolding throughout the performance, creating an illusion of the lack of solid ground under their feet ... the characters of Vampilov's play are not divided to positive and negative ones: all of them, without an exception, are representing an encyclopedia of our conformism".⁵⁷

Although a premiere of *Duck Hunting* in Tashkent was a revolutionary act for Ilkhom in 1978, it is important to note that it was not its very first production in USSR. 1976 marked 2 premiers of this play: the one directed by Veniamin Apostol in Teatrul Luceafărul in Chisinau, followed by the performance of the Russian Drama Theatre in Riga. Roman Viktyuk staged "The Hunting" in the student theater of Moscow State University in 1977, followed by the premiere in Ilkhom. The play enjoyed the greater prominence with Oleg Efremov's (as both actor and director) successful premiere⁵⁸ in the Moscow Art Theater in 1979. The film based on the play was completed in the same year of 1979 and "put on the shelf" for almost a decade,⁵⁹ as upon further critical review of the film, it was considered to be a straightforward portrayal of unacceptable way of life (referred to as *zilovschina*), which lacked the condemnation of such behavior.

⁵⁷ Mark Weil, *Vzglyad Rejissiora*, in *Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina*, 2002), p.38

⁵⁸ Birgit Beumers, *The 'Thaw' and After, 1953-1986* in Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (eds) *A History of Russian Theater* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 373

⁵⁹ A film *Otpusk v sentiabre* (Vacation in Fall) was produced in 1979, but premiered only in 1987 (Director Vitaly Mel'nikov, Oleg Dal' as Zilov)

What is more important here is that Weil stressed the idea of Zilov as a symbol of his generation, that his actors were not acting the hero's drama, they were simply "representing themselves". That aligned with Smeliansky's vision of this play, as he highlighted the shortcoming of Sovremennik's production,⁶⁰ based on the idea that although Efremov staged the play almost simultaneously with Ilkhom, in the course of 10 years ban of the play prior to its publishing in 1970, Efremov and Sovremennik were no longer "contemporaries" of 30-year old protagonist Zilov. Efremov reflected on the regrets of a man who had known better times when life possessed a meaning, while the piece required another type of acting and directing. Weil's vision of the play stood out due to the appeal to the life of his contemporaries, which was apparent even from choice of music,⁶¹ the production finale included *Time*, a Pink Floyd song from the album *Dark Side of the Moon*, which was used as a double allusion to actors' and the audience's belonging to the same generation through reference to western rock music (which was just recently introduced to the Soviet citizens).

In verbatim report of the discussion of Duck Hunting's Premire in Ilkhom, there is an opinion on finding the audience of their own: "I do not think that there is need to stage this performance in anarchic way... You have to work with greater efficiency and find the specific audience."⁶² Perhaps, it suggested that the topic of the production was not of the great interest to the public. But was not the characters of the plays so familiar to many?

Pravda Vostoka, the main Russian language newspaper of the Uzbek SSR, published an article in 1977: "The studio is rehearsing several productions based on plays by

⁶⁰ Anatoly Smeliansky, *The Russian theatre after Stalin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 84

⁶¹ Mark Weil, "'Utinaia Okhota'" Aleksandra Vampilova. Vzgliad rezhissera", in Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnyi izvestnyi teatr Marka Vailia "Ilkhom"*, p. 39

⁶² Verbatim report of performances' discussion (stenogramma obsujdeniya spektaklia): Duck Hunting in ESTM Ilkhom, June 10, 1978 // The Library of Theatre Society of Uzbekistan, documentN486, p. 2

Mayakovski, Lorca, Vampilov, and Durrenmatt. It is next to impossible to predict the outcome, but what is important is the civil position and the interpretation.”⁶³

The reviews in the local press after the premiere were predominantly positive, Kamariddin Artikov, an art critic, who was Weil’s classmate at the Art Institute, wrote a positive review on the same performance for the Uzbek-language newspaper:

...The general public appreciated the performance. The discussion that was held right after the premiere, had been attended by members of the international symposium “Makro-78”... This performance promises a successful future for the studio.”⁶⁴

The studio was not allowed to work for profit until *perestroika*, but they could collect ticket fees for charity:

Duck Hunting by Vampilov and *Songs Do Not Die* based on Garcia Lorca’s writings were performed in Ilkhom studio, with an intention to transfer the tickets fees to the Peace Fund.⁶⁵

Duck Hunting is a play based on the inner conflict, directed against opportunism. It calls for the rigorous fight against the flaws of a human soul,⁶⁶

reports *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, without acknowledgement that “the conflict” and “the flaws of the human soul” depicted in the play, were in reference to an ordinary man’s controversy with the everyday life under the Soviet regime. Only in 1980s, Uzbek newspapers seem to acknowledge and praise the staging of a contemporary drama piece addressing current problems of society among the first in USSR. *Pravda Vostoka* addressed the importance of the play in 1981 and 1987:

Nowadays, this play is recognized as a milestone in Soviet drama. In 1978, our studio staged it among the first in the Soviet Union.⁶⁷

Every subsequent year, all of the Tashkent theaters, not to mention the regional ones, rely on the repertoire criteria set by the capital cities. The latter, by the way, were not always able to serve as the best and most advanced models. Since staging of *The Duck*

⁶³ Tvorchestvo Molodyh: Chtobi obresti sebia in *Pravda Vostoka*, March 2, 1977

⁶⁴ Kamariddin Artikov, Ilhom qadamlari in *Uzbekistan Madaniyati* (in Uzbek), March 13, 1979

⁶⁵ N. Vladimirova, V Fond Mira in *Pravda Vostoka*, March 2, 1979

⁶⁶ G. Yudina, V Klube Ilhom: V Fond Mira in *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, February 28, 1979

⁶⁷ A. Sosnovskaia, “Tvorchestvo Molodyh: Segodnia v 22:00” in *Pravda Vostoka*, October 13, 1981

Hunting, directed by Mark Weil, ESTM challenged this tradition. The very fact that this play was not included in the repertoire of theatres in Leningrad or Moscow, that it bore a “stigma” of an undeclared ban, did not scare the studio...⁶⁸

However, according to Chukhovich, the impact of *Duck Hunting* was limited.⁶⁹ Considering that this was the first professional production of Ilkhom, and the studio did not take part in All-Union theatre festivals as of yet, it was a predictable outcome. *The Duck Hunting* was notable for addressing social drama as such. Ilkhom had just started its experiments and have not developed the theatre technique of its own, therefore it borrowed from Lyubimov’s plays. Sophisticated lighting and the choice of the musical accompaniment which was not typical for Soviet theatre are similar to Taganka’s productions of late 1960s. Ilkhom theatre’s approach to staging plays was developing gradually, influenced by the local Uzbek theater traditions, and largely by Russian contemporary theatre, the combination of the two were developed in the next productions.

1.3 Perception of Respectable Wedding by Berthold Brecht (1979)

It is a grotesque comedy, written under the strong impression of the WWI, during the time of political cabarets in beer-halls, and ‘A Respectable Wedding’ can be seen as an extended cabaret sketch. As in much of early Brecht’s plays, it is clear what he is against (a satire on the cult of the growing middle class). One of the most important techniques Brecht developed is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the “*alienation*” effect, which allows to look at familiar things in a new way. Ilkhom theater made use of the distancing effect in their own way.

⁶⁸ T. Akhmedzhanova, “Tvorchestvo Molodyh: Ilkhom 10 Let Spystia” in *Pravda Vostoka*, June 10, 1987

⁶⁹ Boris Chukhovich, Teatr ‘Ilkhom’ i Tashkentskii underground, original text published in *Kul’turnye Tsennosti*, Bibliotheca Turkmennica Yearbook, 1999, pp. 109-118

And so it is a wedding reception, with nine characters, including a pregnant bride, a father who puts everyone off their food with disgusting stories, a groom who is proud of making all the couple's new furniture himself, and as the party disintegrates, so do the chairs.⁷⁰

"The small space of the stage is curtailed to a minimum. Spectators seated opposite each other at a minimum distance from the actors, and look as guests at the wedding table. A large reception table is set in the middle of the stage."⁷¹ This communal congestion creates a sense of communion, and complicity with what is happening on the stage. However, the characters of the play do not seem to create any sense of a solid society. This is, a *Petit Bourgeois Wedding* to be exact in translation of play's original German title. In order for a satire to work, it has to create its target. Perhaps, this is the reason the director transferred the setting from the 1920s to the 1950s. "Unlike *The Duck Hunting*, *The Wedding* was much more straightforward in terms of theatrical devices: real food on the table, real costumes of their grandmothers that actors brought in."⁷² It might be one of the reasons the audience responded so emotionally, as "everyone wished to consider a neighbor as petty bourgeois, and themselves as intellectuals".⁷³ "Brecht's idea of a grotesque, as theater critic Smelkov pointed out, was performed ... as if it is not a grotesque at all, but as if the actors were playing the exact truth of life and the situations they present are not exaggerated even a bit."⁷⁴

Apparently, there was a number of reasons for provoking a hostility towards this production, and some of them were evident: challenging of theatre's aesthetic canons by presenting a real food on the table and demolishing the furniture. A sharp critique by Moscow

⁷⁰ Natalia Kaz'mina, in *Teatr#9* (Moscow: 1981), pp.96-106

⁷¹ Oksana Khripun, MA Dissertation, *Ilkhom – Teatr Marka Vailya*, 1996, St. Petersburg Institute of Arts

⁷² Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p.46

⁷³ Natalia Kaz'mina, in *Teatr#9* (Moscow: September 1981), pp.96-106

⁷⁴ Yuri Smelkov, "Ilkhom" in *Malyy Stseny* (Moscow: Znanie N2, 1984), p.28

theater critic, Galkin, who visited Ilkhom in 1980, contributed to authorities' discontent, and local newspapers⁷⁵ joined the libelous press campaign:

Actors break glasses and throw bottles of wine at each other on stage. Apart from that, they destroy the furniture, especially chairs.... Well, vulgarity must be fought. But not by sinking to vulgarity themselves! Where is the grotesque, irony, and humor, which are supposed to denounce various social vices?⁷⁶

Weil's intention in making actors break the chairs on stage is the direct allusion to Thaw era playwright, Rozov, whose plays were frequently staged at Sovremennik. In one of Rozov's plays, "In Search of Joy", the hero demolishes furniture, which is a symbol of petty-bourgeoisie, therefore, this gesture became a symbol of break with tradition.⁷⁷

Galkin then proceeded by accusing Komsomol for their oversight, stating that "Rumors about the uniqueness and genius of Weil are being spread very skillfully. However, the most surprising is that the studio operates under the auspices of the Komsomol of Uzbekistan!"⁷⁸

The authors went as far as interviewing Komsomol officials, who instantly hastened to absolve themselves of blame: "With a heavy heart, I went to the Central Committee of the LKSM of Uzbekistan. I was received by the director of the Propaganda Section, Anvar Akhmadzhanov, and his assistants". Komsomol officials stated they did everything in their power:

We supported Mark Weil and his troupe; we provided them a wonderful venue. However, as paradoxical as it may sound, Mark Weil even told us that we know nothing about the art and our role is restricted to simply financing their productions. We are very patient with the studio members and we hope that the situation will get better over time.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Interestingly, prior to *Komsomolskaia Pravda*'s attack on Ilkhom, local Komsomol periodical, *Komsomolets Uzbekistana* wrote a positive review of this production (K. Kabanova, "Liki I Maski Meshanstva", *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, June 15, 1979, p.2)

⁷⁶ Yuri Galkin, "No zachem zhe stul'ia lomat'? O tom, kak molodomu kollektivu izmenilo chuvstvo mery", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, Moscow, April 10, 1980

⁷⁷ Neil Cornwell, Reference Guide to Russian Literature, p.46

⁷⁸ Yuri Galkin, "No zachem zhe stul'ia lomat'?"

⁷⁹ Ibid

This response by Komsomol functionaries demonstrates why, even despite existing disagreement, Ilkhom would rather remain under Komsomol league's supervision - they could reprimand, call for discussion, but they were unable to call the play off the repertoire, in contrast to the officials of the Ministry of Culture.

The critique in Uzbek press was even more condemning:

...Another evident manifestation of eclecticism in the play is that the director opted out to use the real food on the table instead of props. It is a general knowledge that the work of art is primarily required to carry an educational value. Other than promotion of highly immoral behavior by setting up half nude scenes, the bride and the groom, according to scenario, naturally lie in bed on a semi-lit stage. What educational goal does all of these serve to?⁸⁰

Theatre critic Egoshina described the play as a challenge, allowing anyone to find their own personal characteristics in the depiction of its characters.⁸¹ The audience in Macedonia,⁸² Hungary and Yugoslavia⁸³ also welcomed the play during the short exchange visit, sanctioned by Komsomol. Indeed, looking at this "family portrait" the audience in Russia, Uzbekistan, and Yugoslavia alike, perceived it as a familiar way of life, not "about them", but rather "about us". There were even ambiguous thoughts on "international fraternity".⁸⁴

A transcript of the arts council discussion demonstrates that despite the fact that in staging of the play, director clearly indicated the ongoing parallels with present day life, representatives of the culture department allowed the comparison with the previous decades only, unable to admit an idea that the play may be topical, and refer to present-day situations:

⁸⁰ Sotimkhon Inomhodzhaeva, "Ochig'ini Aytganda", *Madaniyat va San'at*, 1982 (Uzbek language periodical)

⁸¹ Olga Egoshina, "Dom, Kotorii Postroil Weil", *Teatral'naia Zhizn'*, 1986, p.24

⁸² Interestingly, the Macedonian press referred to Ilkhom as to "Russian theater from Tashkent" – "Dve svad'by v Bitole" in *Ekran*, September 21, 1981, Macedonia.

However, Ilkhom never declared itself to be "Russian" or "Uzbek" theater, with both Uzbek and Russian language performances produced on the same stage. As of 1980, even a few bilingual performances were produced (refer to "Mohamed, Mamed, Mimish," 1980; "Happy Beggars," 1992)

⁸³ Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p. 57

⁸⁴ Ibid

I would like to see the representatives of bourgeoisie as not only unspiritual, I would still insist on making them violent. So that the play would call for a mobilization not only against the petty-bourgeoisie habits, but against fascism as well. That is why it is crucial to represent the mother as a person who can beat up a Russian girl, and this ardent young man is capable of shooting down innocent people, and the husband is someone who can conduct an interrogation.⁸⁵

Critical appraisal of low morality at ESTM after the devastating article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* required a response from Komsomol. Therefore, Central Committee of Youth formally responded to the statement, reporting that they considered the matter and concluded that overall performance of ESTM was positive, with only a few “ideological shortcomings” by negligence. Therefore, Komsomol’s recommendations were reduced to recruiting young talented playwrights of Uzbek SSR and ordering Propaganda Department to instruct the studio on interpreting the facts from the standpoint of socialist realism. The remark demanding to use socialist realism was driven by the fact that the play was contradicting to almost all of the generally accepted Soviet theatre aesthetics. The art that merely reflected life was not acceptable, it should have been antinaturalistic in order to comply with the requirements. Weil was completely aware of the impression his productions were making, stating that “their attitude, characters and artistic means did not conform to acceptable common stereotypes”.⁸⁶ The depiction of excessive drinking, demolishing the furniture, - for Soviet critics, it looked more like a call to action than criticism of the petty bourgeoisie. Conscious deviation from norms was driven by an intention to follow theatre practices of Russian avant-garde theatre, with no political background, unlike in Lyubimov’s plays that Weil borrowed from, too. Therefore, the reasons behind the choice of similar artistic means differed for Lyubimov and Weil, labeling the first as oppositional, and the later as a non-conformist. The latest studies on dissident movement and its origins in the Soviet Union call for a clear distinction between

⁸⁵ Report on discussion of “The Respectable Wedding” in ESTM Ilkhom, April 30, 1979 (The Library of Theatre Society of Uzbekistan, documentN426, p. 31)

⁸⁶ Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol’* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel’skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p.20

paradigms of political dissent and opposition to the regime versus any other display of non-conformism.⁸⁷ “Experimental” title of the youth studios and the absence of explicitly stated dissent towards the regime may also have contributed to its more lenient treatment by the authorities.

To assure the better control, the Creative Council of the studio was obligated to pre-approve the annual repertoire plan with Komsomol, as well as to provide an active involvement of young talented playwrights,⁸⁸ depicting the life of contemporaries.⁸⁹ The studio formally complied with these conditions of the Komsomol by staging plays of national playwrights, very selectively, based on the topics that concerned the studio. Thus, the theater announced the production based on the novel of Chinghiz Guseinov from Azerbaijan SSR (about the corruption and fraud in the higher echelons of power) and a play by Semen Zlotnikov (a local playwright, born in Samarkand). However, Zlotnikov’s plays were not approved by censorship. As a final conciliatory act, studio scheduled production of several plays⁹⁰ by Sharof Boshbekov, who was the member of the Union of Soviet Writers of Uzbekistan, and mostly known by his play *Temir Hotin* (The Iron Woman), which was approved as “ideologically correct” and was being performed throughout Soviet Union.⁹¹ However, even from Boshbekov’s plays, Ilkhom chose two less known social dramas, which were accepted by audience and critics rather indifferently.

Therefore, it was a formal compromise, between the studio and Komsomol, so that Komsomol functionaries could report an improvement in the repertoire, while the studio proceeded mostly by staging the drama pieces of their choice. The tendency of picking the least

⁸⁷ Irina Romankina, *Tipologia Dissidentskogo Dvizhenia v SSSR (1950-1980 gody)*, monograph, Moscow, 2013, pp.16-18

⁸⁸ “Vzyskatel’nost’ k Tvorchestvu”, *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, May 15, 1980

⁸⁹ XXV Congress of CPSU in 1976 promoted the “production theme” in drama, compelling playwrights to depict a hero at work. Therefore, Uzbek local authorities were attempting to follow these guidelines

⁹⁰ *Tikansiz Tipratikanlar* (Hedgehogs without Thorns), 1981 and *Oq Otlar Uchun Val’s* (Waltz for the White Horses), 1983. Both performances were entirely in Uzbek.

⁹¹ Iu. Smeliakov, “Sovremennyi Geroi. Kto Oni?”, *Sovremenniaia Dramaturgia*, 1984, №1

known plays by the well-known authors was typical for Ilkhom, and had been maintained throughout decades. As a support of this statement, Brecht's most frequently staged (and actually, the most conformist) play in the Soviet Union was *Threepenny Opera*, while Lyubimov chose *A Good Man of Szechwan* as a start for Taganka, and Weil focused on even more contradictory *Respectable Wedding* from Brecht's anarchic period. This type of behavior was referred to as *zaigrivanie s vlastiu*⁹² "flirting with the authorities", and while in other capital cities like Moscow, it might have been severely punished,⁹³ it was not the case in Tashkent.

It is important to note that local Russian-language Komsomol newspapers expressed their discontent with the studio's performance (1981) only after an article published by Moscow correspondent in central press (1980). However, it is still uncertain what exactly triggered negative responses from local Uzbek-language press at a later time (1982-83), was it the wish to align to the opinion of the central press, the reflection of cultural and social reservations of Uzbeks, or the combination of both? Considering that prior to the article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in 1980, local press reacted far more favorably in regards to the same play,⁹⁴ it was not the social theme, but its representation which displeased the press. As Chukhovich noted, "this production still remained in repertoire after 3 decades, it outlived 4 CPSU General Secretaries and the regime, and considered to be as imperishable as "The Swan Lake" by Grigorovich."⁹⁵ The approach which Ilkhom developed was a mixture of Russian classical theatre elements (typical for Meyerhold and Vakhtangov), and Uzbek folk theatre

⁹² See *The 60s: The World of the Soviet Man*, Peter Weill and Alexander Genis, 1996

⁹³ Director of Taganka, Yuri Lyubimov (who was, in fact, one of Mark Weil's instructors in Moscow and was in a clear opposition to authoritarianism), was deprived of his Soviet citizenship after Andropov's death. Andropov held a protective hand over Taganka Theater from 1982 to 1983, but later Lyubimov had had to pay dearly for his choice of repertoire. In Birgit Beumers, *Yuri Lyubimov: Thirty Years at the Taganka Theatre*, pp.162-163

⁹⁴ Interestingly, prior to *Komsomolskaia Pravda*'s attack on Ilkhom, local Komsomol periodical, *Komsomolets Uzbekistana* wrote a positive review of this production (K. Kabanova, "Liki I Maski Meshanstva", *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, June 15, 1979, p.2)

⁹⁵ Boris Chukhovich, *Teatr 'Ilkhom' i tashkentskii underground*, original text published in *Kul'turnye Tsennosti*, Bibliotheca Turkmennica Yearbook, 1999, pp. 109-118

maskharaboz. The main feature of the latter was different from Stanislavsky system, which required an actor to share the disposition of the character, while *maskharaboz* technique rather represented acting as a game, where the personality of the character was intertwined with the personality of the actor, and therefore, was organic and improvisational. This technique, which was initially tried in *The Duck Hunting*, when actors played themselves on the stage, had been developed further in the subsequent productions.

1.4 Tashkent as a recursion of a larger Soviet picture: *Mohamed, Mamed, Mamish* (1980)

This family saga about the corruption and fraud among top levels of Soviet society was an adaptation from Guseinov's novel. Mark Weil asked Guseinov how the novel escaped the censorship: "The story is set in the provinces, in Azerbaijan, therefore, officials assumed that the novel is harmless since it does not directly relate to Moscow bosses. However, they forgot that the entire Soviet Union is oriental in its nature."⁹⁶ Guseinov was referring to the idea that by virtue of its geography, Russian state was influenced by both Eastern and Western cultures.

Bilingualism was definitely one of the most important techniques, applied by Weil in this production for the first time, it served as a simultaneous allusion to orient-occident dichotomy, and to the "double-thinking" of the protagonist. Some of the scenes were performed in Uzbek with translations through the loudspeakers, the rest of the performance was in Russian. Moreover, a protagonist Mamish (referred to as Mohammed, or Mamed at different instances) was performed by two actors, as a representation of his two, often contradictory identities. An impression was reinforced by the fact that the protagonist was represented by

⁹⁶ Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p.19

actors of Russian and Uzbek theaters,⁹⁷ and the message to the audience was that this performance is about each and all of us.

The mirror boxes⁹⁸ were the main element of scenography (one more reference to Lyubimov's plays). "The audience saw their own reflection in the mirror right in the theater hall, and then in the corridors, while walking to the auditorium."⁹⁹ These mirrors were forcing to see oneself through the eyes of others, realizing that although the performance was about a man from Baku, it more or less reflected the life of every Soviet republic, alluding to the fact that corruption and fraud in both Azerbaijan SSR and Uzbek SSR were also a common issue. The so-called 'Uzbek Affair' or "Cotton Scandal" broke out only during perestroika, however, the origins of the corruption and defrauding the government were deeply rooted in Brezhnev era.¹⁰⁰ Thus, even though the production was about Baku and staged in Tashkent, it was thought provocative in a sense that it was not only about the Soviet periphery. Rather, it was a reflection of a larger image within itself in a *recursive* manner.

1.5 Scenes by the Fountain by Semyon Zlotnikov (1981)

Tashkent critics at best expressed bewilderment by this play, and strongly criticized it at worst. One of the Komsomol officials referred to it as "a model of social pessimism". Zlotnikov read the play to Weil in Tashkent, in the spring of 1981.¹⁰¹ There were few productions based on Zlotnikov's plays in Moscow and Leningrad already,¹⁰² all of them just

⁹⁷ Il'dar Mukhtarov, *Vzgliad Istorika*, p. 51

⁹⁸ Presumably, it is an attempt to create a *droste effect* (a depiction of a smaller version of the image within itself in a *recursive* manner) by setting two plane *mirrors* parallel to each other, so that the objects that are set between the mirrors appears to be reflected in infinity.

⁹⁹ Nargiza Tashpulatova, "Stenography, Zarisovka 1", p.51 in Weil,

¹⁰⁰ Daniel R. Kempton, Terry D. Clark, *Unity Or Separation: Center-periphery Relations in the Former Soviet Union*, pp.266-267

¹⁰¹ Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoie Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p. 57

¹⁰² *Scenes by the Fountain* first premiered at the Leningrad Comedy Theater in 1978, directed by Gennady Rudenko. The performance was shown to the public three times, after which it was banned based on censorship. Repeatedly staged in Moscow in 1983 at Taganka Theater, directed by Raichelgauz. The performance was shut down after four performances due to the same reason.

one-act plays though. *Scenes by the Fountain* was a contemporary production about ordinary Soviet people whose lives were lacking meaning, challenging them to seek the answers to existential questions. Protagonist Lev Koshkin is recognizable as an antipode of Lev Myshkin from *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky. Almost documentary "neo-realism" of Zlotnikov, as a "new wave" playwright was met by the hostility even in Tashkent, as Ilkhom's self-expression challenged the plays that were staged in Khamza Uzbek Drama Theater or Gor'ky Russian Drama Theater. Here are just a few statements made at the discussion of the play after the first performance in Ilkhom:

As a director, you just simply display the manifestation of alcoholism. But what is the author's and director's attitude towards the alcoholism? Art should not only establish the facts, but rather reflect upon them... Quoting Lenin, a mere fact does not mean anything all by itself. The interpretation of facts that is what really matters.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, can this opposition to the official culture be regarded as an opposition to the regime? The youth studio represented Tashkent intelligentsia at the first place, and the contradictions in aesthetical tastes of intelligentsia and working class youth were considered as a counter-culture. Pre-perestroika social nihilism of Ilkhom's productions were ironically depicting the life of petty-bourgeois, as well as the lives of marginal characters from *Duck Hunting* and *Scenes by The Fountain*, without providing an interpretation.

According to Zlotnikov, Lyubimov called him in 1978, requesting permission to stage *The Scenes* at Taganka, the play was approved for staging, but did not pass the censorship board. After its staging in Tashkent in 1981, the production was also going to be banned, but remained in Ilkhom's repertoire only by chance. Gorin, Baklanov and Granin happened to be in Tashkent at that time, attending the days of Soviet literature, and their appraisal of the

¹⁰³ Discussion of the production of *The Scenes by The Fountain* in Ilkhom Studio, March 14, 1981 // The Library of Theatre Society of Uzbekistan, documentN14, p.9

performance saved it from ban.¹⁰⁴ The play was approved by Glavlit afterwards,¹⁰⁵ and Zlotnikov received an official recognition as a playwright. However, by 1983, when the play already passed the censorship, Raihelgauz repeatedly staged it at Taganka, the production was shut down after 4 performances again. It seemed to be related to high degree of decentralization in censorship system (what Weil mentioned to be a favorable condition for periphery). Monitoring of theatre repertoire was subordinate to 2 institutions, fulfilling different functions:¹⁰⁶ Glavlit (Main Administration for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press) was accountable for approving and banning the plays, while GURK (Main Directorate of Control Over Repertoire) in contrast to Glavlit, was not limited to only approving or banning certain productions as it had major monitoring functions. Even if play was approved, the performances were monitored by GURK to ensure that they remained within prescribed limits. For this reason, the inspectors controlling the repertoire, worked closely with Ministry of Culture of the USSR, RSFSR, and other Union Republics. Local theaters were under the control of local censorship organizations, and Moscow interfered only in controversial and complex cases. That explains how the performance, based on the play, which passed Glavlit censorship, was closed at Taganka in Moscow (1983) by the recommendation of organization that controlled the repertoire.

Ilkhom's productions of mid 1970-1980s demonstrated a sense of skepticism and depression from the inability to realize themselves and change anything under the regime which was in place. It differed from the vast majority of the plays which were produced in state theatres based on allusions and metaphors, so that censors would not guess the actual meaning.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Weil, *Opyt vizhivania iskusstva v usloviakh tsenzury*, 2001

¹⁰⁵ Reminds of the initial hostility towards Lyubimov's production of *A Good Man of Szechwan* in 1962, when an official acknowledgement followed only after Konstantin Simonov's favorable review in *Pravda*.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathon Green, Nicholas J. Karolides, *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: Theater Censorship, (Infobase Publishing: New York, 2014) p.592

Although it is clear that regime was not ready for freedom of expression yet, 1983-1984 already marked the changes that happened to be inadvertent. The authorities lost control of cultural processes taking place in different parts of the vast country, and were responding to them in untimely manner, different official institutions in charge of cultural affairs often acted in discord with each other.

In 1982, Ilkhom director requested a permission from Ministry of Culture of Uzbek SSR to take part in All-Union festival of creative youth in Moscow. He got response from a Ministry official, stating that Ilkhom was not registered as a professional theatre with the Ministry, moreover, the decisions on the participation in the festival were made a year ahead. However, another official approved the request, as the tensions were growing, and there was no consensus even within the same department members.

Moscow tour, even though a very brief one, became a turning point for Ilkhom. *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, in 1982, reacted to Zlotniko'v play by stating that:

...Some of the author's thoughts are not explicitly stated and the whole idea of the play requires some revision. But questioning whether or not experimental studios have to stage unapproved drama, the answer is clearly a yes.¹⁰⁷

...Not only Tashkenters should be proud of this studio.¹⁰⁸

Tashkent, as a periphery, was not catching up with the cultural and political processes taking place in Moscow. As controversies were piling up, *perestroika*, declared in 1985, changed the course of events. At the same time, *perestroika* and *glasnost*' marked the first creative crisis in the life of the theatre. Chapter 2 will elaborate on the idea that decision-making

¹⁰⁷ O. Kuchkina, "Chetyre Vechera", *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, March 18, 1982, p.4

¹⁰⁸ N. Agisheva, "Zametki o Vsesouznom Festivale Tvorcheskoi Molodezhi: Spektakli i Sud'by", *Pravda*, April 8, 1982

processes were easier under restrictive regime, and once the limitations were lifted, the studio faced with the fact that it did not know which direction to follow.

Chapter 2 – Ilkhom during perestroika and glasnost’ (1985-1990)

2.1 Exploring “the blank spots”

Soviet policy of glasnost’ – a greater freedom of information, promoted by Gorbachev in 1986, caused a shift towards staging pantomime in Ilkhom Theater. There is number of reasons for this shift. As of 1986 Soviet theatres no longer need a pre-approval from the Ministry of Culture for their productions, the Committee for Surveillance over State Secrets, could react on the choice of repertory only if it spots propaganda, counterrevolution, appeals to violence, war, or overthrowing the regime. Therefore, the productions based on the plays by Razumovskaya, Vampilov, Zlotnikov became possible in almost every theater. Thus, the Ilkhom studio which was staging uncensored plays by these and other playwrights as early as 1976, almost a decade before glasnost’, lost its peculiarity and was forced to react to glasnost’ in a different way. As a result, it immersed in experiments on silent plays from 1986 to 1989, acting out a story through body motions, without use of speech.

Overall, the credibility for the Soviet government catastrophically devaluated. Unbelief, confusion, loss of ideological values – all of it can be used to describe the state of public consciousness of this period. The youth was in a particularly difficult situation due to the revision of the past, often in a negative form. Therefore, Ilkhom’s “silent reaction” to *perestroika* proves the inability of theater to attract the audience by previously utilized means. According to Weil’s depiction of Uzbekistan of late 1980s it was evident that mass media poured too much conflicting information to the general audience, making it almost overwhelming and difficult to process. As a result, the audience was unable to perceive and empathize the ordinary life stories of their contemporaries performed on stage, as they felt related to the life stories from previous decades. The demand shifted towards consumption of some shocking or scandalous productions. As Weil recalled, “the audience lost interest in

theater as such, as it was focused on finding solutions to the immediate problems caused by perestroika.¹⁰⁹ Tashkent, as a multinational city, was encountering the first massive wave of emigration, when people of different nationalities were facing the tough choice whether to emigrate or not, and if yes, then where.¹¹⁰ 1986 which marked a decade from Ilkhom's creation, appeared to be the first important milestone, because even the new drama of the 1970s seemed to be no longer applicable to the current situation in the Soviet society.

2.2 Pantomime as a response to “glasnost”: *Ragtime for Clowns* (1986)

At the height of *perestroika*, Ilkhom initiated a new search of theatrical form of expression, which would carry an independent artistic value, apart from words. *The Ragtime for Clowns* became the first experiment of such kind.¹¹¹ “This production embodied the emancipation of eccentricity. A clown lost his social concreteness and was turned into a philosopher of his time.”¹¹²

There was nothing startling about *Ragtime for Clowns*,¹¹³ noted one of the Moscow art critics. Other than audience could recognize themselves in those real life situations presented on stage by means of the silent pantomime. The images, keyed to personality transformations, were fresh and able to communicate on several levels. The play was attended by young amateurs Oleg Lugovskoy, Rishat Valitov, Eugene Brim, Rustam Nuritdinov, from the clown troupe *Ptitsy S Iuga* (Birds of the South).¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Mukhtarov, Weil, Aleksandrov, *Neizvestnii Izvestnii Ilkhom: opyt sozdania teatra s otmetki nol'* (Moscow: Literaturno-izdatel'skoe Agentstvo R.Elinina, 2002), p. 78

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ In 1991, Ilkhom performed as part of the New York International Festival of the Arts with “*Ragtime for Clowns*.” It was essentially a mime show.

¹¹² Tatiana Garmash, “Vremia I Teatr Ilkhom”, *Sovetskaia Kul'tura*, March 5, 1988 (Moscow)

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ “Smeh v Pustote, ili Probuzhdenie Sobstvennogo Ia”, *Vechernyy Tashkent*, November 24, 1988

The black costumes of clowns, the scene covered by a black fabrics (minimalist scenography by designer Georgy Brim in the spirit of the poor theater) – all of these aimed to evoke a feeling of immediate improvisation. The choice of the music accompaniment of the production is not accidental either, since ragtime (precursor of jazz) is characterized by a specific syncopation, with melodic accents occurring between the metrical beats. The term ragtime is thought to originate from “ragged time”, which was used as an allusion for the turmoil of perestroika.

2.3 Living in a vacuum under the threat of annihilation by a larger vacuum: *Clomadeus* (1988)

Clomadeus stands for the “clown”, accompanied by the name of Amadeus (as the performance of clown troupe is supplemented by the music of Mozart).¹¹⁵ There are only the few phrases uttered at the very beginning of the show: “What to say, when you have nothing to say, when everyone is so tired of talking?!”¹¹⁶ It was an ambiguous reaction to the fact that *glasnost*’ created an opportunity to elaborate on all sorts of subject matters that used to be taboo in the Soviet society. Publicity, extending the scope of the previous prohibitions, plunged the theater into a borderline state between confusion and euphoria. Theaters immersed in revealing the “weak points” of Soviet reality: Gulag labor camps, the cult of personality, praising Gorbachev’s perestroika and condemning Brezhnev’s stagnation, reacting to anti-Semitism - all of these and other “hot topics” were placed to the same semantic differential. The selection of plays i for performing on stage was based solely on the criteria of their prior prohibition in the recent past.¹¹⁷ These reasons caused the devaluation and loss of meaning of anything said or printed prior to *perestroika*. The general audience started to realize that the ideological

¹¹⁵ Lidia Pugacheva, “Ilkhom – Znachit Vdohnovlenie”, 1988 and Natalia Tabachnikova, “Potomki Skomorohov” *Sovetskyy Teatr*, N4, 1989, pp.46-47 (Moscow)

¹¹⁶ Kamariddin Artikov, in *Neizvestnyy, Izvestnyy Ilkhom*, p.48

¹¹⁷ Ui. Agler, “Byt’ v Forme”, *Sovetskaia Kul’tura*, January 24, 1989

speeches of previous years were an “empty shell”, causing the “crisis of confidence” towards the regime.

The performance consisted of the display of small parables, jokes, pantomime, allegorical scenes, and grotesquely hypertrophied buffoonery. The finale of the performance included the spelling of Russian alphabet, which represented an associative thinking, where the letter ‘P’ stands for ‘perestroika’, ‘G’ for glasnost and so forth.¹¹⁸ One of the mime scenes represented standing in line for food rations, and redeeming food coupons.¹¹⁹ These kaleidoscopic images of everyday life became ordinary not only for citizens of the Uzbek SSR, but for many of the Union republics in the late 1980s, making audience to relate themselves to what was performed on stage.

“One of the four characters is a bully, one a crybaby, one an innocent, and one a refined cynic - an intellectual if you will. The distinctions sustained by each actor through the 90-minute piece kept it throbbingly and often hilariously alive.”¹²⁰ (The actors are Mikhail Kaminsky, Mukhammad Iso Abdulkairov, Georgi Korshunov, and Bakhram Matchanov).

American press during the first international tour of Ilkhom, described the production as follows:

...Pervading the seriocomic tenor of Clomadeus was a sense of actors living in a vacuum, under the threat of annihilation by another, larger vacuum. Is this air of desolation an inevitable response to – and commentary on – life in the Soviet Union? Perhaps. But I suspect that Beckett is as large an influence.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Yuri Rybakov, “No Ponimali Sliozy” *Ekran I Stsena*, June 12, 1991 (Moscow)

¹¹⁹ Kamariddin Artikov, in *Neizvestnyy, Izvestnyy Ilkhom*, p.67

¹²⁰ Anna Kisselgoff, Dance in Review: Ilkhom Triplex Theater, *the New York Times* (June 24, 1991)

¹²¹ Nancy Goldner, Balinese Clowns At MTI Festival, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 28, 1991

Soviet critics would, perhaps, notice more similarities with productions of Anatoly Efros, which were based on the concept of “psychophysics”, where actors’ movements function as a manifestation of inner psychological changes of the character.

2.4 Ilkhom of late 1980d: time for myth-building

After 1986, reforms affected both organization of Soviet theaters (by transforming state plans to market-oriented management and artistic standards (by replacing The All-Russian Theatre Society VTO by Theatre Workers Union (STD)). According to Weil, the studio enjoyed an official recognition and appraisal only after 1986, when local press was able to express their opinion more freely, and the censorship rules were loosened for all cultural institutions throughout the Soviet Union. Ilkhom was nominated for the Prize of Lenin Komsomol as early as 1982, but received it only in 1986. Weil emphasized the importance of the “transitional period” that the studio was undergoing. He proceeds by saying that studios were run by enthusiasm during 1970s, but 1980s marked the primacy of financial solutions, as theatres were turning into for-profit enterprises which had to be financially self-sufficient. Due to the fact that Komsomol organizations which, even in previous decade, were not providing enough financial support, are experiencing structural and organizational issues nowadays, theatre studios’ goal is to ensure the financing on its own.¹²²

Now, instead of rehearsing and staging the plays, all theaters are looking for sponsors, adds theater critic Nina Agisheva. She proceeds by stating that theatres should not be equated to the industrial or agricultural sectors. The reform, cost accounting, grants - these terms infiltrated art reviews. Suppose we measure the benefits of the performance in terms of its artistic value, then staging Shakespeare’s plays would be highly appraised, although at price of

¹²² Alexei Altayev, Vladimir Klimentko, “The Economic Experiment: Soviet Theater of the Last Decade”, *Theater*, Fall, 1989 20(3), pp18-20

forgoing the high income, while staging a comedy would ensure a full house at the expense of losing the artistic value.¹²³

Such was the dilemma that theatre studios faced in late 1980s during restructuring period. Ilkhom, apparently, did not want to make a choice between staging plays to please the public, or losing financial stability. As soon as studios were allowed to be registered as for-profit organizations operating on semi-independent basis (to setup a bank account and sell tickets, which was previously prohibited) in 1986, administration of Ilkhom developed a plan of their own. This was the starting point of myth building about the idiosyncratic independent theatre from Uzbekistan, which stood in opposition to the system during Brezhnev era and successfully resisted the regime. The myth of Ilkhom was aimed at attracting the audience in Uzbekistan and at festivals abroad alike, bypassing the need to sacrifice the repertoire choice. By the time of dissolution of the USSR, when the number of independent theatres skyrocketed, the myth, which was already in place, allowed Ilkhom to remain at the forefront of successful studios, strengthening their position as the first private theatre in Uzbekistan, and one of the first in the former USSR.

Up until 1989 Ilkhom existed under the auspices of the Komsomol holding the status of an amateur experimental youth studio and Lisack also notes it.¹²⁴ However, in the late 1980s, after several tours in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities of the Soviet bloc, Ilkhom has toured and became more widely known even beyond Soviet boundaries, it became particularly important to emphasize the status of the theater as a professional rather than amateur. Therefore, points of comparison with professional studios, which took off from the academic theaters back in 1950-60s were put forward.

¹²³ N. Agisheva, "Ustalyy Arlekin", *Pravda*, May 11, 1989

¹²⁴ Lucille Lisack, p.19

In showing the continuity with other studios, the parallels were drawn between Ilkhom and Russian theater, with Meyerhold's Studio on Povarskaia Street, Vakhatangov's studio, which transformed from a studio to professional theaters.¹²⁵ Besides that, Ilkhom was appealing to Sovremennik, which was started as Studio of Young Actors from MXAT school, the very name "Sovremennik" was referring to the fact that the audience, the playwright and the actors were people of the same generation. In staging *Duck Hunting* Weil highlighted the same idea, claiming that there were no boundaries between theater and the audience. Why the comparison with Moscow theaters was so important to Ilkhom, were there any successful examples of the studios dissociated from the academic theater in Uzbek SSR as to date?

Weil published an article on the fate of theatre studios in Uzbek SSR,¹²⁶ providing three examples of studio life: two in the provinces and one in the capital. The first example was related to the city of Navoi, where GITIS graduate, Voloboev had organized a theatre studio, which is fighting for survival since 1986. The fact that the representatives of the Party Committee and local Executive Committee strongly advised to exclude some performances from the repertoire (*Bath by Mayakovski*) seemed to be alarming to Weil, making him question the possibility of staging a thrilling performance without any reference to real problems of contemporaries. Weil used the terminology of *perestroika*, stating that "democratization of our lives proceeds adherent to the old principles." New leadership of Party Committee took over Navoi region, however, Voloboev's studio could not be revived, as director left the city, and actors were employed elsewhere. Weil reiterated his point that Party organizations did not forcibly close the studio, just no measures were taken in order to support its development.

In another provincial theater in the city of Karshi, a group of young actors split from the regional theater and initiated an independent studio (Studio Theatre *Mullokat*, with theater

¹²⁵ Kaz'mina, "Istoriia odnoi studii," p. 106.

¹²⁶ Mark Weil, "Metsenaty I Chinovniki: Pochemu Ne Rozhdautsia Novye Teatry?" *Pravda Vostoka* N222, September 24, 1989

director Abdunazarov), successfully completing its first season. Continuity of generations and the expression of new ideas was put forward by the Moscow Art Theater, and there were numerous examples of successful studios in Russia (Vakhtangov, Mikhail Chekhov, Zavadsky). However, a newly emerged studio in Karshi, which led to a split in the troupe of the regional theater, was met with hostility and distrust by authorities. There were telegrams sent to the Central Committee, to the Ministry of Culture, and to the Union of Theatre Workers. The complexity of the issues that Weil described were echoing the same idea that he was expressing in his later productions: “Previously created theatres are unable to proceed in the old way and do not know how to modernize the repertoire at the same time”. Weil concluded the review of local theatres by referencing the newly created Tashkent-based studio *Dard* (director Nabi Abdurakhmanov), and highlighting that several more studios were initiated in 1987 with the support from Union of Soviet Theaters and Youth Department of the Ministry of Culture of Uzbek SSR. Important to note that studio *Dard* became a state youth theater in 4 years after its creation in 1987. Most of the studios created in late 1980s in Uzbek SSR, had either ceased to exist with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, being unable to fit into new economic circumstances, or changed their status to state theatres.

Another notable feature of theatre studios emerging during Brezhnev era, and up till Gorbachev’s perestroika in Uzbek SSR, is that studios in capital city of Tashkent were predominantly Russian-speaking, even though all of them were named in Uzbek. *Dard* is translated as “affliction”, *Mullokot* as “interaction”, and *Ilkhom* holds a meaning of “inspiration”. It is difficult to trace the precise reasons for this phenomena, presumably it was due to expressing a reverence to indigenous culture while registering a studio with local Komsomol organization. However, besides the Uzbek origins of their names, there was almost no other appeals to Uzbek culture, therefore it is difficult to state that cultural hybridization processes were actively underway in theatre studios. Evaluation of *Ilkhom*’s repertoire of late

1980s also follows this pattern, with reliance on Russian language throughout performances, and use of ragtime, jazz and classical music pieces, as the use of Russian language was considered to be a sign of progress.

“13 years passed since creation of Ilkhom, and until 1987, it remained the only theater-studio in Uzbek SSR. Despite its continuous success, the studio is still located in the basement of the youth club, sharing a space with a restaurant, as if in a communal apartment with a kitchen smell”¹²⁷, lamented Weil. Despite the lack of financing through funds allocated by Komsomol Youth League, Ilkhom remained under its patronage until 1989, actively promoting a sense of “non-conformism” to the official culture. It is evident that prior to *perestroika* the management of Ilkhom did not emphasize the fact of staging of “not recommended” plays, while after 1986 it had been embraced as a manifestation of courage and commitment to the ideals of the theater. Ilkhom started to make use of the details which sounded more like an anecdote, as a nostalgic symbol of passing era. The recollections of studio actors about late night performances, when they were able to get home only using street sweepers or other service vehicles contributed to the creation of image of “performing a forbidden art”.

Progressively, Ilkhom was getting famous beyond Soviet boundaries, by the means of Soviet measures. Sister cities project, being one of such initiatives, indirectly affected Ilkhom as well. The modern concept of town twinning, conceived after WWII in 1947, was intended to foster friendship and understanding between different cultures and between former foes as an act of peace and reconciliation.¹²⁸ The Seattle-Tashkent Association, established in 1973, was the first US-Soviet sister city affiliation.¹²⁹ Tashkent Park in Capitol Hill in Seattle was

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Based on information from Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association

¹²⁹ The official Seattle-Tashkent sister city relationship was established in 1973 but was preceded by book exchanges and other ties that began in 1961 between the University of Washington and academic institutions in Tashkent. Professor Ilse Cirtautas of the University of Washington Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization has taught the Uzbek language at the University of Washington since 1968 and has made annual visits to Tashkent, developing a variety of academic exchanges.

dedicated in 1974, followed by the construction of Seattle Peace Park in Tashkent in 1988. Tashkent Mayor Mirsaidov visited Seattle in 1985 with the largest Soviet sister city delegation ever to come to the United States. The visit set off an explosion of exchanges, including classical folk dance and music exchanges, a Jewish community exchange, etc. “A twin-city theater project between Seattle and Tashkent first took Mark Weil to Seattle in 1988, followed by tour in New York and Philadelphia in 1990.”¹³⁰

Moreover, self-representation of Ilkhom as a non-conformist theater was equally linked to the new openness, put forward by *glasnost*. If during early 1980s, prior to perestroika, studio administration was not stressing the importance and timeliness of such productions as *Drakon: Skazka 1943 goda*. This production, staged in 1981 in Ilkhom, was based on Evgeny Shvarts’ Stalin era play, which was describing the horrors of gulag labor camps systems. After *glasnost*, Ilkhom was highlighting their bold representation of great purges, as a support for claiming the title of an open, non-conformist theatre.

All-Union creative workshop "Theater and Time" held in Tashkent in 1988 assisted in popularizing Ilkhom further: “Its new performances are frequented by theatre elite from Moscow and Leningrad. While problems of theatrical life in Uzbekistan are becoming more evident, Ilkhom allows to keep faith in revival of theatre traditions.”¹³¹ *Perestroika* was gradually expanding the boundaries of progressive theater in Uzbekistan, and Ilkhom was looking further for the inspiration: choice of repertoire was shifting away from the Russian contemporary drama of Vampilov, Petrushevskaya, Razumovskaya, Sergiyenko. The new direction was predetermined by the nationalist sentiments that were evoked by *glasnost* in Uzbekistan, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Although the precursors for the rise of

¹³⁰ Anna Kisselgoff, Mark Weil, Tashkent Theater Director, Dies at 55, *the New York Times* (September 8, 2007)

¹³¹ M. Rubantseva, “Pered Glavnoi Roliu”, *Uchitel’skaia Gazeta*, February 2, 1988

nationalism are provided within Chapter 2, the cultural outcomes of nationalist turn are part of the discussion of the post-Soviet repertoire choice in Chapter 3.

2.5 Initial rise of nationalism in Uzbek SSR as a result of *glasnost*'

Considering that *glasnost*' made public discussion and criticism possible, it exposed some negative consequences of Soviet policies.¹³² These conditions enhanced interest in religion in almost any part of the Soviet Union. Moscow's intelligentsia rushed to spend their vacations in villages instead of fashionable resorts and to collect vintage icons. Discussions on the "people's roots" and "orthodox rebirth" became popular, as "the cultural code was changing."

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, *glasnost*' has evoked nationalist demonstrations throughout Central Asia. It has also led to a certain amount of political activity with a clear nationalist bent.¹³³ Policy of *glasnost*' had been applied selectively within the Soviet state, with relatively late arrival of "openness" towards Islam in comparison to more positive attitude to moderation of religious practices in Russia, the Baltic States, and other parts of the Soviet Union. The first two years of *glasnost*', on the contrary, Uzbek Communist Party leaders were engaged in leading the harsh ideological campaigns against practicing Islam¹³⁴ (the first party secretary Usmankhadzhaev's campaign on elimination of traditional rituals and holidays, in particular).¹³⁵

Moreover, for Uzbek SSR, Gorbachev's reforms brought the aftermath of the "cotton scandal" in the form of the resentment towards Moscow, that locals being blamed unfairly for

¹³² Central Asia: Aspects of Transition p.147

¹³³ Yaacov Roi, Nationalism in Central Asia in The Context of Glasnost' and Perestroika in *Politics of Nationality and the Erosion of the USSR* (ed. Zvi Y. Gitelman), p.50

¹³⁴ Religion, State & Society, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2001 Repression as Reform: Islam in Uzbekistan during the Early Glasnost' Period, REUELHANKS, p.228

¹³⁵ G. Khamidova, 'Bez ustupok - zametki ob ateisticheskom vospitanii molodezhi', Pravda Vostoka, 24 July 1986, p. 4; 'S'yezd ateistov', Komsomolets Uzbekistana, 8 January 1986, p. 4; Emin Usmon, "Eres' zamaskirovannaya pod religiu" in O'zbekiston adabiyoti va sana'ti, 12 September 1986, p. 7.

what was the end result of center's unrealistic cotton procurement policies. Only during glasnost' it became widely known that in the years 1976-1983, the leadership of Uzbek SSR under Sharaf Rashidov falsified the reporting of cotton yields, which discredited political elite of Uzbekistan.¹³⁶ The investigation of the Cotton Scandal adversely impacted Uzbek national consciousness, establishing "us vs them" type of mentality.¹³⁷ Passing a law on the state language of Uzbek SSR on October 21, 1989, encouraging use of Uzbek language across all domains, particularly education,¹³⁸ had exacerbated the relations between representatives of different nationalities. Friendship of the Peoples notion was significantly challenged during that time, causing the first wave of emigration from Uzbek SSR.

All of the above adversely affected theater as well. As a response to the initial emigration, when Ilkhom started to lose cadres, Weil in collaboration with the Tashkent State Theater and Art Institute recruited students for training in order to form a new troupe.¹³⁹ A short period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union was marked by nostalgia¹⁴⁰ towards recent Soviet past, but it was replaced shortly by attempts to construct a new national identity by mythologizing the past national space.¹⁴¹ Weil, being of Jewish origin, but the person already born Soviet Uzbekistan, suddenly turned to exploration of pre-Soviet Central Asian past. However, if the local population has tended to glorify the national past, Weil addressed some of the topics that, as it turned out, the local population did not want to recall.

¹³⁶ "V Verkhovnom Sude USSR" in *Pravda*, May 20, 1989, p. 3

¹³⁷ Yaacov Ro'i, *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, (London: F. Cass, 1995), p. 117

¹³⁸ Jacob Landau, *Language Politics in Contemporary Central Asia: National and Ethnic Identity*, p.50

¹³⁹ "Ilkhom: Plany i Problemy", *Vechernyy Tashkent*, N31, February 7, 1989

¹⁴⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.76-80

Chapter 3 – Dissolution of the Soviet Union as a start of new era

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ilkhom's status as an independent, non-governmental theater was undergoing further changes. Staging of *My White Mercedes* based on Shipenko's play was a manifestation of a short-lived nostalgia towards the Soviet past, especially noticeable by the audience's response to the Soviet anthem which was played in the finale of the performance. Ilkhom started to rehearse the play prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with a premiere following after it.

After 1991, Ilkhom's repertoires shifted towards representing Russian history of Turkestan. Being a small number, this group was active in the cultural sense, which largely shaped the appearance of culture of the Russian intelligentsia in Central Asia. Since 1991, when Uzbekistan became independent of the Soviet Union, the first manifestation of change affected the subway system in Tashkent. The Lenin station has been renamed the Independence Square. The Komsomol station was turned into Yoshlik, Uzbek for "youth."¹⁴² These were the first routine steps towards nation-building.

3.1 Happy Beggars and Monterrey Paisanos in Uzbek Representation (1992-1995)

The idea of staging *Tortilla Flat* by John Steinbeck's novel as a musical was proposed by Ilkhom studio's students in the early 1990s. The story was a depiction of lives of ordinary people from the heartland of California, Monterrey. However, the director was unsure how to relate the worldview of Spanish-Mexican residents of California, depicted in Steinbeck's novel to the mentality of population of the early post-Soviet Uzbekistan. After some time, he was able to identify linguistic similarities in the way natives of Monterrey referred to each other,

¹⁴² Charles Kurzman, "Uzbekistan: The Invention of Nationalism in an Invented Nation" *Critique*, No. 15, Fall

and the way assimilated Uzbek-Tadjik population spoke in Tashkent. The heroes of Steinbeck's novel spoke in mixture of Spanish and English, and addressed each other by using the terms "amigo", and "paisano" (meaning compatriot, or brother). In the vernacular of assimilated Uzbeks, who spoke the mixture of Russian and local dialects, words "birodar" and "aka" held exactly the same meaning. This idea helped Weil in understanding what will the heroes of his productions be like.¹⁴³ Thus the life of Steinbeck's heroes from Monterrey quarter was shown by analogy with the life of the Uzbek *mahalla* (district in an old part of Tashkent).

Another Ilkhom's technique of artistic expression was the combination of two street theater traditions – Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and Uzbek *maskharaboz*. This combined technique was fully employed in *Happy Beggars* by Carlo Gozzi, where traditional characters of Italian *commedia dell'arte* were superimposed to diversity of local cultures and languages. The location of the play was identified as Samarkand's railway station,¹⁴⁴ as a direct allusion to the waves of emigration that characterized Uzbekistan of the early 1990s. The ancient Central Asian city of Samarkand was a representation of Babylon, with a mix of Asian and European cultures, where the diversity of languages, accents and intonations became a natural playground for Ilkhom. Even though the performance was mostly rendered in Russian, there were dialogues in Uzbek, interspersed with Yiddish and Italian, and as a typical reception of *commedia dell'arte*, the text was paralleled to pantomime.¹⁴⁵

In Weil's production, the common characters of *commedia dell'arte* - Brighella, Truffaldino, Tartaglia, and Pantalone, were represented by actors of Jewish, Korean, Uzbek, Tajik and Russian nationalities. In an attempt to connect eastern and western theatre features in one composition, Weil introduced new characters such as King Uzbek and Vizier Mudzafer. Thus, the art of improvisation, a typical feature of Gozzi's plays, was combined with Uzbek

¹⁴³ Mark Weil, "Kvartal Tortilla Flat: Vzgl'yad Rezhissyora" in *Neizvestnyy Izvestnyy Ilkhom*, p.106

¹⁴⁴ Irina Myagkova, "Venetsiansky Karnaval v Samarkande", *Ekran I Stsena*, July 16-23, 1992 (Moscow)

¹⁴⁵ Elena Levinskaia, "Ilkhom I Kritiki", *Teatr* N2, 2002 (Moscow)

askia improvisation technique.¹⁴⁶ Thus, a craftsman from Bergamo, Brighella, in this production was turned to a vibrant and complex character of Jewish ancestry, with a fixed idea of emigration (throughout the play, he continuously requested Vizier to grant him an exit visa to Israel). According to original text of the play, Brighella spoke a mixture of Italian dialects, while in Weil's production he was represented as a Russian-speaking Jew, who was occasionally switching to Yiddish (played by actors Mark Sorsky, Oleg Lugovskoi, and Rustam Esanov). Uzbek language was a sign of palace intrigues by usurper Vizier Mudzafer, who spoke in a mixture of Uzbek and Russian slang (brilliantly portrayed by Muhammad-Iso Abdulkhairov, Bakhram Matchanov, and Javad Abidov). Barely noticeable Uzbek accent in Russian speech of this character was reminiscent of the genre scenes of street performances, or the Oriental bazaar. Tartaglia, which means "stutterer" in Italian, a rich Venetian merchant and one of the oldest characters of *commedia dell'arte*, was portrayed by Mikhail Kaminsky, one of the best troupe actors, and spoke with an Odessan accent. And lastly, Pantalone, another principal character of Italian *commedia*, was identified as a representative of Russian intelligentsia (Evgeny Dmitriev). The idea behind the variety of languages was to demonstrate that regardless of language differences, everyone could easily understand each other.

Chukhovich compared *The Happy Beggars* to Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, in reference to inextricable connection between the theatre and the social strata that created it.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, by staging Gozzi, Ilkhom reflected on the ongoing processes of the self-destruction of existing multinational community in early post-Soviet Uzbekistan. *The Happy Beggars* and *The Cherry Orchard* are similar not only due to the overall nostalgic feeling of resentment from the fact that the old world order is falling apart, but due to similar farewell scenes with the suitcases on the railway station. Staging of *The Happy Beggars* was a farewell to a nostalgic image of

¹⁴⁶ Mark Weil, "Schastlivie Nischie: Vzgl'yad Rejissiora", *Neizvestnyy Izvestnyy Ilkhom*, p.87

¹⁴⁷ Boris Chukhovich, Teatr 'Ilkhom' i Tashkentskii underground, original text published in *Kul'turnye Tsennosti*, Bibliotheca Turkmennica Yearbook, 1999, pp. 109-118

ending era, which used to represent a variety of languages and cultures, where members of different ethnical groups lived in a close proximity from each other. Nevertheless, *The Happy Beggars* represented the last nostalgic note over the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the subsequent performances were more didactic and aimed at redefining the pre-Soviet period, starting from the conquest of Turkestan by the Russian Empire.

3.2 Remembering Jadids: White White Black Stork (1998)

The play was based on the early stories of Abdullah Qadiri, who was one of the Muslim modernist reformers, the Jadid.¹⁴⁸ He wrote poetry and the first Uzbek novel, *O'tgan Kunlar* (*The Days Gone By*) in addition to plays on revolutionary themes, was subsequently arrested and executed during Stalin's great purges. Weil, instead of using the most renown novels of Qadiri, referred to his least known early works. The screenplay had been adapted for staging by Iolkin Toichiev and Mark Weil based on the short stories *From Kalvak Mahzum's Diary* and *The Poor Groom*.¹⁴⁹

Despite its title, the play was certainly about people, not the birds, even though the voices of storks in the musical accompaniment became a leitmotif of the performance."¹⁵⁰ The storyline was very simple, following the childhood of the bedridden Muslim boy, Makhzum, son of the madrassa teacher. Being deprived of the opportunity to play like other children, Makhzum fantasized himself to be a flying stork, which was free of human afflictions and prejudices.¹⁵¹ The years passed, the boy grew up, recovered, and was able to walk again. However, his life has become exactly as dull as the lives of other people around him – he was

¹⁴⁸ Muslim intellectuals in Central Asia, in the late 19th and early 20th century. It took its name from *o'sul-e jadid* (new method), which was applied to the modern schools that the reformers advocated in place of the "old" (*qadim*) schools: the traditional *maktabs* and *madrasas*. "*Jadid*" became a synonym for reformer.

¹⁴⁹ Stanislav Altunians, "Sud Molvy", *Pravda Vostoka*, September 29, 1998, p.4

¹⁵⁰ Elena Filimonova, "Krylia Aista Mezhu Nebom I Zemlioi", *Nashe Vremia*, October 8, 1998

¹⁵¹ Elena Filimonova, "Skazka, Pohojaia na byl'. Byl', nepohozjaia na skazku", *Delovoi Partnior Uzbekistana*, October 15, 1998

required to get married at the behest of his parents, and to live as befits the son of a respected person, following the Muslim traditions. Life was no longer colorful for Makhzum, it became black and white. Hence the name of the performance – it allowed the audience to decide for themselves, what was right and wrong.

The actors performed on the rotating scenes, which were representations of the confusion of Makhzum, and his fiancé, Makhichekhra. Weil invited Shukhrat Abdumalikov, a young Uzbek graduate of the Art Institute to work on the set design, despite the fact that Vasily Iuriev was a successful designer of Ilkhom's previous productions. According to Abdumalikov's recollection,¹⁵² he was unable to determine the overall style and the main color of scenography on his own, therefore, he brought few reproduction of Usto Mumin's (Alexandr Nikolayev's)¹⁵³ paintings to discuss it with production director. Weil was amazed by paintings, and he selected the one titled "Son Pastuha", *The Shepherd's Dream*. Thus the design was decided to be in white color, in accord with the painting's palette, so were the clothes of the actors.

Makhzum, as provided in the play, was also an artist. The crisis of the hero coincided with night of *Lailat al-Qadr*, "The Night of Destiny" during the holy month of Ramadan, when, according to Muslim religious beliefs, the blessings and mercy of Allah were abundant and sins were forgiven. Thus, every Muslim was supposed to pray, but Makhzum was busy with painting a picture of his sleeping friend. Consequently, he broke two religious laws at once – he evaded prescribed prayer, while painting a picture of a human, which was forbidden by *sharia*. An actual painting by Usto Mumin, *The Shephard's Dream*, was depicted as the drawing done by Makhzum in the play. The father, who found his son drawing instead of

¹⁵² Svetlana Seredina, *Mark Weil: Teatral'noe Issledovanie Tashkenta Nachala XXI Veka*, GITIS, 2014

¹⁵³ Alexandr Nikolaev, a Russian painter, was sent to Tashkent by decree of the Turkestan Central Executive Committee in 1920s, where he was fascinated by the Orient and explored local culture and traditions. On his conversion to Islam, the artist received a new name, *Usto-Mumin*, which means Faithful Master. His paintings are most fully represented in the permanent exhibition of Savitsky Art Museum in Nukus, in Karakalpak Autonomous Republic (Uzbekistan)

praying, immediately burnt down the painting. The play was a depiction of how the aspirations of a young Muslim man were being sacrificed to the assertions of the conformist society.

According to the press reviews, *Ilkhom* invaded in the issues which were considered a taboo in the Muslim society, such as prevalence of the prejudice and traditions over the free will of each individual. The local press described a play as a naïve and straightforward depiction of life of the Muslim society, while international press mostly referred to it as a fable or fiction.¹⁵⁴ Just a few opinions expressed by Uzbek critics in the press highlighted the importance of the play due to the setting up the place for discussion of the humiliating features in the modern Muslim society (such as giving dowry for the bride and lack of individual choice).¹⁵⁵ All the same, the public opinion concluded that “Russian”¹⁵⁶ theater took too much responsibility in trying to understand a topic that is outside their jurisdiction.

The *Ilkhom* was only at the initial stage in search of understanding of modern Uzbekistan, as 70 years of the Soviet regime had significantly impacted lives and minds of the local population. A hostility of the local population towards the play once again showcased that the period of rapid transition from the traditional way of life of the Muslim population in the early 20th century to the Soviet period required to be reconsidered. In this light, the choice of Qadiri’s prose, who represented the early 20th century reformist national group, later supported the Soviet revolutionary movement, but perished during Stalin’s great purges, was all the more important and controversial. The issues raised by *Ilkhom* were controversial not only from a religious point of view, but from political as well, as the government of the post-Soviet Uzbekistan has not yet determined if Jadids had to be praised as the representatives of the local intelligentsia, or condemned as disloyal to the national idea, or declared martyrs, fallen victim of the totalitarian regime.

¹⁵⁴ O. Shlegel’, “Planeta *Ilkhom* Nad Grinвичem I Liaine” *Moskovskyy Komsomolets*, July 19, 2007

¹⁵⁵ A’lo Khodjaev, “Razmyshlenia Posle Spektaklia”, *Tashkentskaia Pravda*, October 21, 1998

¹⁵⁶ Even though most of the characters were played by the guest actors from Uzbek Drama theater and students of Theater Institute named after Mannon Uighur

3.3 Imitations of the Koran by Alexander Pushkin (2002)

A provocative title of the play represented nothing but improvisation on two poems by Alexander Pushkin – *The Prophet* and *Imitations of The Koran*.¹⁵⁷ According to Weil, rehearsals started in 2000, while the play premiered only in 2002. This was attempted to clarify the assertions made in international press, claiming that sudden interest in Koran may have been manifested after September 11, 2001 attacks.

Weil claimed that he was interested in understanding the perception of Koran as a holy book for post-Soviet indigenous population of Central Asia, who were raised by atheistic slogans during the Soviet rule. Moreover, he attempted to interpret the perception of Pushkin as a representation of a Russian culture in the post-Soviet space. In his understandings, the contradictions were as follows: on the one hand, one of the world's oldest Korans¹⁵⁸ was kept in Tashkent, however, most of the Uzbeks were not only unable to read the holy book of Muslim religion in its original language (Arabic), but in general, considered Russian to be their main language of communication.¹⁵⁹

The second observation made by Weil was attributable to the fact that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost all of the monuments of Russian poets and writers were demolished,¹⁶⁰ however, Pushkin was left untouched. The complexity of these superimposed layers was attempted to be deconstructed in the play:

Our aim was not in refuting a popular assertion that the East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, but on the contrary, we made a conscious decision to synthesize national and cosmopolitan themes in one play.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ants Oras (trans) *Imitations of the Koran* [Poem], *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (Spring, 1972), pp. 276-283

¹⁵⁸ It is kept in an area of old Tashkent known as Hast-Imam, near the grave of a 10th century religious scholar, Kaffel-Shashi

¹⁵⁹ Mark Weil, "Vzgliad Rejissiora: Podrazhanie Koranu" in in *Neizvestnyy Izvestnyy Ilkhom*, p.138

¹⁶⁰ See Laura L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)

¹⁶¹ Mark Weil, "Vzgliad Rejissiora: Podrazhanie Koranu" in in *Neizvestnyy Izvestnyy Ilkhom*, p.140

And indeed, people belonging to various confessions, perceived the play differently, one of the local writers distinguished the biblical motives about Sodom and Gomorrah,¹⁶² the others grasped a new meaning of Pushkin's poem *Prophet* as the verses of it were reiterated by different actors throughout the play. Changing the intonation during recitation allowed to discover new layers of hidden meaning in the poem which was familiar to everyone from school years.¹⁶³ The verse from *The Prophet*, "Tormented by spiritual thirst // I dragged myself through a somber desert" were read by actors indifferently, enthusiastically, in all of the possible ways.¹⁶⁴ However, not all of the audience responses were positive, one of the critics stated that Pushkin's verses were altered beyond recognition,¹⁶⁵ or that the *surahs* from Koran were recited with errors in pronunciation and without the due respect.

Ilkhom was not attempting to alter neither of Pushkin's verses, nor the *surahs* of Koran, just like in previous decades, it reserved the right to stage the texts that were considered to be of the greater importance in the given circumstances.

3.4 Ecstasy with Pomegranate inspired by Usto Mumin's paintings (2006)

The original Russian title of this production was "Radenie s Granatom", where "radenie" did not have a direct translation to English. Radenie was supposed to mean "zeal" – a state of extreme joy, or ecstasy, approximating the human to the divine state, in the way that *Sufism*, a mystical Islamic belief would interpret it.

One of the mysterious and colorful painting of Usto Mumin (Alexandr Nikolaev) was called an "Ecstasy with Pomegranate" by the art critics. Ilkhom director was introduced to the

¹⁶² Sid Ianyshhev, "Pritcha vo Iazicah Aleksandra Sergeevicha Pushkina v Derzkom Izlozhenii Marka Weilia", *Zerkalo-XXI*, February 28, 2002

¹⁶³ Dmitry Povarov, "Lovushka Dlia Zritelja", *Vremia I My*, March 29, 2002

¹⁶⁴ Muiassar Maksudova, "Duhovnoi Li Tomimy Zhazhdoi?"// *Tashkentskaia Pravda*, April, 2002

¹⁶⁵ Alexandra Spiridonova, "Na Pereputie", *Vechernyy Tashkent*, March 13, 2002

paintings by Usto Mumin during the work on another production based on Abdulla Qadiri's writings, which was discussed earlier in the Chapter. Usto Mumin's paintings captured dozens of images and scenes associated with the life in Turkestan, with one of the main themes of his work being a portrayal of indigenous youth through images of *bacha* dancers.

Another type of "exotization" of oriental traditions and rituals was demonstrated in painting series by Alexander Volkov, another Russian painter who lived in Turkestan. He got inspired by the aesthetic hedonism of traditional meditative oriental music and dance plastics.¹⁶⁶ The "Pomegranate Teahouse" (1924) was one of the most famous paintings by Volkov, characterized by the fantastic spectrum of red color. Paintings of both Usto Mumin and Alexander Volkov were demonstrated throughout the play by projecting them to a media screen in the middle of the stage, with a rich red color of Volkov's paintings as an allusion to oriental heat, richness of colors, as well as representing the red color of the Soviet banner.

The play was based on the archival research,¹⁶⁷ carried out by Mark Weil and Oksana Khripun, with adaptation by Tikhomirov and concluded in three story lines: of a Russian soldier who took part in conquering of Turkestan and got fascinated with local culture in the process, and the life of Uzbek tea-house demonstrated through the life of its owner, Takhir and four bacha-dancer (dancing boys who dress in girls clothes), and a painter Alexandr Nezhdanov (prototype of Usto Mumin). The action of the play took place in 1915-17, which did not coincide with the real course of events in the life of Usto Mumin, which was done on purpose to distinguish between the history and its interpretation.

¹⁶⁶ Since 1930s the fine art of Uzbekistan has been monopolized by socialist realism, and the monopoly lasted until mid-1980s, when the new policy of *perestroika* changed the style and content of the entire soviet art. Over this entire nearly 60-year period hedonistic subjects basically never appeared in the Uzbek painting. Moreover, in the 1970s, due to intensified ideological pressure during Brezhnev's time, the art style gets even more ascetic, being symptomatically labelled as "austere style".

¹⁶⁷ In Central State Archive of Republic of Uzbekistan

According to one of the actors, Boris Gafurov, Weil was interested in the aesthetics of lost culture of bacha dance (choreographer David Rousseau) The first working title of the play was "The Disappearance", as a reflection upon the forgotten cultural pattern.

Gafurov recalled that many ethnical Uzbeks were insulted by the depiction of this long forgotten tradition, so that some of those theatergoers left during the intermission, unable to watch the performance further.¹⁶⁸ Thus, Ilkhom's experiments formulated an aesthetics of post-colonial, post-exotic concept, mixing different cultural patterns.

¹⁶⁸ Svetlana Seredina, *Mark Weil: Teatral'noe Issledovanie Tashkenta Nachala XXI Veka*, GITIS, 2014, p.56

Conclusion

The creation of Ilkhom in the midst of Brezhnev's stagnation epoch symbolized the social transformation that were underway. Widening of ideological gaps, as well as shortcomings in Komsomol administration processes, allowed the studio to be relatively independent in the choice of repertoire and interpretation of the text. The very concept of youth experimental amateur studio provided Ilkhom with an opportunity to go beyond the standard socialist thinking, allowing the theater from the periphery to go ahead of time. Furthermore, the absence of direct submission to the Ministry of Culture helped to avoid the negative consequences of staging ideologically incorrect productions.

Perestroika and glasnost allowed studio to strengthen their positions, and to develop further as an independent professional theater. Ilkhom, which gained flexibility in interplay with the Soviet regime, could quite easily fit in the newly emerging regime after the collapse of the USSR. Even the wave of emigration that swept Uzbekistan in late 1980s – early 1990s, was quite surmountable obstacle, as the theater was able to recover its capacity by opening an artistic studio of its own. While prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the cast were not representatives of local nationalities, after 1991, it became a multi-ethnic composition. Theatre benefited from this as well, by creating a new technique for staging performances, mixing local theater traditions and foundations of Russian dramatic art.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ilkhom theater productions from 1976 to 1984

Productions are in Russian, if not otherwise noted

1976-1977:

Maskharaboz-76 (improvised street performances for the workers of Nechernozemie and the Novgorod region), directed by Mark Weil

Staging Strindberg (based on Durrenmatt), directed by Evgeny Kaminer

Mayakovski - a musical version (performed by Tashkent State Conservatory graduates), directed by K. Gusakov

1977-1978:

The Duck Hunting by Alexander Vampilov, directed by Mark Weil

The Songs Do Not Die (based on Federico Garcia Lorca), directed by Alexandr Kuzin

Puppet Show (satirical miniatures), directed by Vladimir Iogelsen

1978-1979:

The Respectable Wedding by Berthold Brecht, directed by Mark Weil

Public Opinion by Aurel Baranga, directed by E. Masafaev

1979-1980:

Mohamed, Mamed, Mamish** by Chinghiz Guseinov, directed by Mark Weil

Echelon by M. Roschin, directed by Mark Weil

1980-1981:

The Scenes by The Fountain by Semyon Zlotnikov, directed by Mark Weil

Monument by Enn Vatemaa, directed by Musakov

The Hedgehogs Without Thorns* by Sharof Boshbekov, directed by Umarov, Nazarov

1981-1982:

The Dragon: A Tale of 1943 by Evgenyy Shvarts, directed by Mark Weil

1982-1983:

Dear Elena Sergeevna by Lyudmila Razumovskaya, directed by Vladimir Salikhov

The Waltz for the White Horses* by Sharof Boshbekov, directed by Vali Umarov

1983-1984:

Farewell, Ravine by Konstantin Sergiyenko, directed by Vlad Fesenko

Alpine Ballad* by V. Bykov, directed by T. Israilov

The Bench by Alexander Gelman, directed by F. Zainutdinov

* in Uzbek

** in Russian and Uzbek, bilingual

Appendix 2: Ilkhom theater productions from 1985 to 1990

1985-1986:

Ragtime for Clowns, mime show of clown troupe *Ptitsy s Iuga* (Birds from South), directed by Mark Weil

The House That Swift Built by Grigory Gorin, directed by Mark Weil

1986-1987:

Petrushka, based on Stravinsky, directed by Djanik (Djakhangir) Faiziev

1987-1988:

We, the Sparrows by Iordan Radichkov, directed by V. Vihareva

1988-1989:

Clomadeus, directed by Mark Weil

The Red Diskette (original title **The Iron Woman**) by Sharof Boshbekov, directed by Vali Umarov

1989-1990:

200 Years Passed by Anatoly Kim, directed by Mark Weil

A Wonderful Woman by Nina Sadur, directed by Mark Weil (in collaboration with Seattle Theatre)

Hamlet by William Shakespeare, directed by Mark Weil (in collaboration with Narodni Theater Bitola actors, Yugoslavia)

1990-1991:

People Are Living There by Athol Fugard, directed by A. Mel'nikova

Appendix 3: Ilkhom theater productions from 1991 to 2006

1991-1992:

My White Mercedes by Alexei Shipenko, directed by Mark Weil

Happy Beggars by Carlo Gozzi, directed by Mark Weil

Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov, directed by Mark Weil (student theater production)

The Vampire Ball, based on Alexei Tolstoy's novella, directed by V. Grakovsky

The Bible Stories, directed by Mark Weil

Il Drago Nella Fumana by Giuseppe Pederali (tour of theater La Baracca from Italy)

1992-1993:

Final performances of Ilkhom student studio I graduates:

Idiot by Fyodor Dostoevsky, directed by Mark Weil

Caligula by Albert Camus, directed by Mark Weil

Loco-motif, solo performance of Oleg Lugovskoy

1993-1994:

International Theater Festival "East-West"

Performance based on **The Blue Bird** by Maurice Maeterlinck and rock opera **Jesus Christ Superstar** by Andrew Lloyd Webber

1994-1995:

Toybele and Her Demon by Isaac Bashevis Singer, directed by Piotr Krotenko

1995-1996:

Tortilla Flat, a musical based on the novel by John Steinbeck, directed by Mark Weil

Ilkhom-XX, the First International Music Festival:

Come and Go by Samuel Beckett, music by Dmitry Janov-Janovsky, directed by Mark Weil

1996-1997:

Giselle by O. Mikhailova, directed by Karina Arutyunian

Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco (in collaboration with Carroll College Theatre students), directed by Mark Weil

1997-1998:

Final performances of Ilkhom student studio II graduates:

Salome by Oscar Wilde, directed by Ovliakuli Khodjakuli

Adventure by Marina Tsvetaeva, directed by Karina Arutyunian

Hotel Babylon, directed by Weil (Ilkhom), Smith and Shapiro (Shapiro&Smith dance), in collaboration with NYU Tisch School of Art students

1998-1999:

White White Black Stork based on short stories of Abdulla Qadiri, adaptation by Iolkin Tuichiev and Mark Weil, directed by Mark Weil

Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry, directed by Mark Weil

1999-2000:

Romance Unleashed, based on Evgeny Onegin and Gavriilidis by Alexandr Pushkin, directed by Mark Weil

Medea by Euripides (in collaboration with Theatre Vidy-Lausanne, Switzerland) and Theaterformen, Recklinghausen), directed by Haime

Brothers and Lisa by Alexei Kazantsev, directed by Mark Weil

Preview of Imitations of Koran by Alexander Pushkin, directed by Mark Weil

2000-2001:

Final performances of Ilkhom student studio III graduates:

Portrait of Mademoiselle Tarzhi by Elagin, directed by Mark Weil

Love's Labor's Lost by William Shakespeare, directed by Mark Weil

2001-2002:

Imitations of the Koran, based on Alexander Pushkin's poems "Prophet" and "Imitations of the Koran", directed by Mark Weil

2002-2003:

ART by Jasmin Reza, directed by Mark Weil

2005-2006:

Ecstasy with Pomegranate, inspired by paintings of Usto Mumin, based on archival materials, directed by Mark Weil