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Universidad del Zulia
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas
Maracaibo - Venezuela

Transformation of ritual and folklore traditions in acting art

Boldykov Z.

Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts the Republic of Kazakhstan, 050000, Almaty, 127 Panfilov STR.

Boldykov@ac.ru

Zhaxylykova M.

Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts the Republic of Kazakhstan, 050000, Almaty, 127 Panfilov STR.

Zhaxylykova@ac.ru

Khalykov K.

Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts the Republic of Kazakhstan, 050000, Almaty, 127 Panfilov STR.

Khalykov@ac.com

Sabirova A.

Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts Republic of Kazakhstan, 050000, Almaty 86 Ablai Khan ave

Sabirova@ac.ru

Abstract

The objective of the research is to define the meaning and application area of ritual and folklore elements in modern performances. In the study of this phenomenon, we applied methods of cultural, art criticism and theatre criticism analysis. As a result, traditional Kazakh culture was characterized by high continuity related to the moral education of the younger generation, the spiritual improvement of an individual. In conclusion, in modern Kazakh theatre, acting continues to be a dominant artistic device which is instrumental in realizing the director's vision for the production.

Keywords: Kazakh, acting, folklore-ritual tradition.

Transformación de las tradiciones rituales y folklóricas en el arte de actuación

Resumen

El objetivo de la investigación es definir el significado y el área de aplicación de los elementos rituales y folklóricos en las actuaciones modernas. En el estudio de este fenómeno, aplicamos métodos de análisis de crítica cultural, artística y crítica teatral. Como resultado, la cultura tradicional kazaja se caracterizó por una alta continuidad relacionada con la educación moral de la generación más joven, el mejoramiento espiritual de un individuo. En conclusión, en el teatro moderno de Kazajstán, la actuación sigue siendo un dispositivo artístico dominante que es fundamental para realizar la visión del director para la producción.

Palabras clave: kazajo, actuación, folklore-tradición ritual.

1. INTRODUCTION

To find its own special means of expression, modern theatre opts for experiments with new forms of art. As a result of new innovative technologies being widespread applied there takes place a synthesis of various arts, such as cinema, visual arts, installation art, literature, computer graphics, design, ritual and folklore elements; their close interaction leads not only to the appearance of new theatrical forms but also to new content and new perception of performances. Play activities create alternative worlds, meaning that participants imagine a world that is different from the mundane one in which they normally exist. Experimentation and transformation occur in this alternative world, as people become characters, objects, or even ideas

in ways that may be limited or even impossible in ordinary life (Gabbert, 2018).

Being an integral part of the world theatre, Kazakhstani theatrical art has been looking for its identity for a quarter of a century that passed since the country ceased to be a member of the Soviet Union. The country, being on the path of political and economic development, is now undergoing a cultural renaissance. Active government support is provided to the field of literature and art, which encourages cultural development and gives new opportunities to artists and creative intellectuals. Therefore, the search for new content and form is underway in all art forms.

The evolution of the Kazakh theater scenography has appeared to reflect the complexity and versatility of the whole world theatrical process. The difference is that the main stages of its development were passed in a shorter time period. On the Kazakh land, the centuries-old history of theatrical art was compressed into several decades, and it is quite natural that the course of its evolution did not coincide with the main direction and features of the evolution of the scenography art of the world theater (Karzhaubayeva, 2011). Modern Kazakh scenography develops against the background of the constant need to penetrate through the visible shell of the real world, into its essence and meaning. The idea of breathing and spirit, as though inhaled by the creator into own creation, linked in the majority of religions and mythologies together with the beginning of the human life, is

insistently emphasized in today's Kazakh scenography (Karzhaubayeva, 2010).

In theatre, which is considered an elite art, the search for form and content is now especially evident. Alongside with state-owned theatres, a lot of private ones are opening in Kazakhstan. So, competition over spectators makes the rivals work twice as hard as they did before. Competing for the audience and trying to create unique, innovative productions, theatres explore new experimental directions, boldly use new technical achievements, multimedia and computer technologies. Struggle for spectators stimulates rapid development of Kazakhstani theatres' repertoire policy and encourages the proliferation of not only traditional pure genres such as historical tragedy, comedy, and drama but also of hybrid genres such as a stage version of a novel, musical performance and family drama.

While some theatres are trying to find new form and content copying or imitating the best productions of Western theatre, the other, on the contrary, are attempting to attract spectators staging plays and literary works and addressing problems that can be found in the old literary text that have not lost their topicality. In the last few years, the popularity of the *apsana* genre on stage has increased significantly. Mounting *apsana* productions, the directors make full use of Kazakh rituals, folklore elements and special theatre language, relying on the means of creating a stage show.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Although the practice of using rituals and folklore elements is not new for Kazakh theatre, modern directors are seeking to revitalize this tradition and to show the rituals that have not been staged before. In the study of this phenomenon, we applied methods of cultural, art criticism and theatre criticism analysis. Ritual and folklore scenes in traditional performances of the Soviet era were presented unchanged and in full length. We believe, that if the philosophical and religious analysis is suitable for understanding the nature of ritual, then the use of folkloric elements in the theatre requires semantic-semiological methods, decoding symbols and meanings. However, now directors prefer using stylized versions of rituals and folklore elements.

Modern directors are trying to transpose to Central Asian and Kazakh stage the experiments of Eugenio Barba in the field of theatre anthropology and those of Jerzy Grotowski relating to paratheater that was popular in the last quarter of the 20th century. The study of creative search and the application by directors of the complex study of facets of being and consciousness do not exclude the applied methods of stylization and interpretation, sometimes even application of the theory of transcendence, psychology and anthropology. The overwhelming majority of these experiments are presented in the ‘apsana’ genre, which can be considered a cultural trend in the region.

In the Soviet Republics, ‘apsana’ (legend), as a folklore form, appeared not to be valued, whereas nowadays, it is one of the most

popular theatre genres in the countries of Central Asia which strive to highlight national uniqueness. In the study, these phenomena required the processing of scientific data, the application of methods of critical analysis in the adaptation of empirical material into an allegorical theatrical form. Apsana narrates the events that happened in the remote antiquity or focuses on religious subjects related to the miracles of prophets and saints; it also lacks historical accuracy, does not rely on book sources; it is perceived as a product of imagination and is a good example of folklore prose with its distinguishing characteristics (Kaskabasov, 1998).

3. RESULTS

The interest in folklore, and, specifically, in rites and rituals, started in European theatre at the beginning of the 20th century. Careful attention to Eastern culture, which was hidden from the eyes of Europeans before that time period, has resulted in the search for new modes of theatrical expression. Leading theatrical figures of the 20th century, such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Gordon Craig, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, etc., found different ways of introducing folklore and rituals into their theatre practice. Among other things, they were attracted to features of mystic rituals characteristic of Eastern culture. The world theatre of the 20th century took a special interest in the folkloric and ethnic, pre-theatrical art, in the transformation and partial recreation of this cultural layer in modern theatre aesthetics. The use of

rituals as a ludic form has developed from ad hoc experiments into one of the major trends in directing in the 20th century. The essential ideas concerning the influence of rituals not on the literary basis of a theatre performance, but on the active, ludic part of it, were formulated in theatre manifestos and used in productions by the theatre practitioners of the 20th century.

The attempts of the theatrical innovators to introduce the ludic principle of rituals into the theatre art were aimed at reawakening spirituality in theatre. Also, as states Cosmin (2015) when we cannot appeal to something else, play/ritual is the best chance we have to overcome the situations from physical life. Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities provided by rituals and play appear as endless deposits of meaning and vast ways of experience without the danger lived in the unknown course of physical life, and consciousness always returns to the paramount reality as from a dream. European and American scholars have produced many studies addressing the role of ritual in culture (Anarina, 1989). However, when exploring ritual in Eastern cultures, the focus has been mainly on the traditions of ancient Japan, China, India, Thailand. Fewer researches have been focused on the cultures of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

According to historical records, Eastern culture spread to the cultures of Central Asia along the Silk Road. The Silk Road is a network of trade routes linking the West with the East of Eurasia, the most extensive parts of which stretched across and connected China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan,

and reached east to Korea and Japan, west to Russia, south-west to the Near and Middle East and Europe. It was a road with two-way traffic of civilizations, ideas, cultural values, religions, and commodities. It was an important way of disseminating information through the network of travelers and diplomats, and it fast enough for that time, as wrote the archeologist and researcher (Baipakov, 2007). According to Baipakov (2007), the countries of Central and East Asia built not only economic, but also strong cultural relationships with their neighbors.

The cultures of Central and Eastern Asia have not broken away from long-standing rites and rituals, customs and traditions. Unlike cultures of the West, Asian cultures regard rites and rituals as an inherent part of their everyday life. Therefore, since Eastern culture is partly based on traditions, customs, and rituals, which have remained unchanged for centuries, those rituals are manifested in theatre art, which tends to reflect national psychology and world view. The dramaturgy of ritual simultaneously employs the elements of role play and dialogue, music, song, and dance. All of these aspects are oriented towards the same means, though none of them acts in the same way as another, nor would any of them make the same sense if performed individually (Berberović, 2015).

As believes Lee (2009), both ritual and performance lead people to experience the taboo, the excessive, and the risky. In other words, they give people the opportunity to experience a second reality. We can say that both ritual and performance transform people into other selves from their daily selves either permanently or temporarily. They

play a role in the recovery of human relationships or alliances which is rarely achieved in ordinary life. The function of a shared group ritual is to allow an individual to participate fully in the social world by affiliating with fellow group members, reaffirming one's position in the group, and sharing in important social conventions and cultural knowledge (Hobson, 2017).

The uniqueness and identity of every populace are characterized by the national folklore, proverbs and traditions, which rooted deep in history. Family traditions of Kazakh people can be considered not only as a relic we received from the previous generations, but also as a continuously developing phenomenon that presents itself both in folk culture and in professional art penetrating into the culture process. The traditional Kazakh worldview is a single system of stable views, values, customs and ideas about the world picture of a certain national community. Its basic principles, developed as a result of a specific historical destiny, geographical environment and the specifics of the native nature, the psychological set of the ethnic group, the characteristics of the nomadic lifestyle, rooted in a single social context, and today constitute the spiritual core of national culture.

Traditional Kazakh culture was characterized by high continuity related to the moral education of the younger generation, spiritual improvement of an individual. Oral folk art was the means of communication between the generations, it comprised the function of an institute of spirituality and morality, and it was a means of national education (Abdigaliyeva, 2011). When discussing the modern art of

any nation, we discover that it is coming from the national code of the folklore (mythology, oral literature) and rituals.

For every nation, it is very important to save oral literature and rituals and to pass them to the next generations. The reason is that rituals and folklore, which significantly influence the development of art, are now widely used by directors in the modern theater, and this is precisely what lies in it. The theoretical and practical value of the analyze of acting art in modern Kazakhstan is that results may be the basis for researches made by cultural study scholars, art historians and contribute to the implementation of interdisciplinary scientific applied projects. In addition, it is expected that the results of the research will become the theoretical basis for the creativity of contemporary directors and actors, their experimental experience (Rasooli & Abedini, 2017).

4. DISCUSSION

The popularity of apsana among people can be explained, first of all, by the surviving Turkic customs and traditions based on Islamic beliefs such as neke kiyu (conclusion of marriage), sert beru (making a vow), bata surau (asking for elders' blessing), salem salu (making a bow), kuda tusu (acting as a matchmaker), syrga salu (putting earrings on the bride by female matchmakers), etc., these are still widespread among the Kazakhs practicing Islam. Second, the penchant for allegories, philosophical thinking, ability to perceive fragile ties

between the past and the present that are intrinsic to Eastern mind lead to spectators' preference for productions relying on allusions and subtext as against those based on open conflict.

The festival of theatres from Central Asia takes place in Kazakhstan biennially. Having studied the performances included in the festival program, the authors have come to the conclusion set out below. Kazakhstani theatre critics Kabdiyeva (2006) etc., in their research articles, made a comprehensive analysis of rituals and folklore elements found in theatrical productions and of their semiotic meaning. These articles study in depth the influence of rituals and folklore elements on the development of Kazakh theatrical art. The authors in this article examine the impact of rituals and folklore elements used in modern productions on acting.

The play staged by the M. Auezov Kazakh Academic Drama Theatre Korkyttin Kori, written by the notable Kazakh poet and playwright Iran Gayip, was a staging of 'apsana' rich in rituals. The director Jonas Vaitkus brings into the foreground the unique ritual features of Eastern cultures, telling the story of the life and creative work of Korkyt – a historical figure known in all countries of Central Asia, who is said to have been a philosopher, a qobyz player, kui performer (kui is a Kazakh or Kyrgyz instrumental musical composition performed with national plucked, bowed or wind instruments), improvising poet and singer, zhyr performer (zhyr is a genre of Kazakh folk poetry with seven-eight syllables per line), shaman, and visionary. Belief in spirits as a Kazakh traditional

worldview determine an abundance of space in musical compositions. Its testament is a tradition of improvisation. In a demonstration of art, the improvisational nature of the music in Kazakh song lyrics is associated with wind, flow, flood, windstorm, and according to Southern Siberian Turks' view, they are the world disorder, natural disasters – a wind, fierce snowstorm, uncontrollable flood.

In the review of another staging play, we can find the example directed by Kazakh Academical Youth Theatre in 2002. The poetic drama by Iran-Gaip, titled *Korkyt's Grave* (stage director Z. Khadzhiev), has been at the Youth Theater already during several seasons. In this performance, Korkyt's personality (who, according to folk legends, was a great shaman fighting until death without giving up) is sacredly meaningful for Turkic peoples and has an interesting dramaturgical and scenic interpretation. The performance does not aim at the reproduction of historical reality of the seventh century; it is rather a reflection of the artistic perception of the present life of people with all the collisions: interpersonal, social, and daily ones, as well as a search for human spiritual values. In this play, Korkyt is not displayed as a traditional folk character. The legend about Korkyt, the founding father of Kazakh music, has a deep philosophical content.

Korkyt is a legend about a man who produced a sound evoking nature's lament and wailing voices of human beings that recognized the tragedy of their fate; the sound which is heard nowadays in the tone of a unique musical instrument called qobyz. The sonorous sound, with its low notes, which the qobyz produces, is meant to touch the heart of

the performer and listeners. The sound is reflected as an echo and evokes moaning, crying nature and earth, and roaring water, all symbolic things created by the Almighty God, the Universe immersed in philosophical contemplation of the world. “The whole Kazakh culture is filled with ideas, images, and symbols, which, to some extent, are connected with the rites, plays, and ethnic groups” (Khalykov & Karzhaubaeva 2013: 17). The performance provides a retelling of the story of Korkyt, who deeply understands the idea that “life and death are twins” Orazbayev (2013: 18) from the play by Iran Gayip. According to a legend, Korkyt was searching for a way to become immortal because he eminently valued life (Koskenoja, 2019).

In the article *Theater Semiotics: Semantic Formation of Scenography in the Kazakh Drama Theater* we examined the problem of interpretation of the text in the theater and scenography as the semantic beginning of plastic and visual arts. Philosophical paradigm on the issues of the unconscious, which were developed by contemporary culture researchers in relation to art was given as an example. Considering the history of theatrical reform and qualitative changes, our attempt was made to conduct a semiotic analysis in Kazakh Theater. Peculiar difficulties in the perception of established essential concepts and categories of our society appear in the methodology for the understanding of artistic processes of an unconventional theater. Thus, the relevance of these differences and the study of the theory of global aesthetic features befalls.

As the action unfolds, Korkyt, played by D. Akmolda, encounters the Cliff (T. Aralbai) who says to him, you will not be equal with God. These words are repeated by the Tree which Korkyt meets on his way. The image of the Tree (Zh. Baisalbekov) is depicted in the style of folktales. The Tree is portrayed as a speaking creature with the body of a log; its brown color is reminiscent of bark. It has a peculiar headdress adorned by a pair of horns and a piece of dangling rope. There is a glittering metal ax with a wooden handle stuck into the log's back. Korkyt stumbles upon the Tree when he tries to get rid of an evil spirit performing a shamanic ritual. Korkyt draws the ax from the tree and strikes the trunk with all his force. The tree makes an unusual sound that Korkyt has never heard before.

Enchanted by the wonderful sound, Korkyt starts hitting the Tree, causing it to hum various beautiful tunes. So, the artist and composer Korkyt creates the qobyz from the tree stump. As Korkyt starts singing a lullaby to the qobyz, as if it were a new-born baby, the audience understands that wonderful music has come into existence. Listening to different melodies, the spectators experience the legend taking shape in front of their eyes. The meaning of the phrase Korkyt, the creator of the kui is conveyed to the audience in the language of theatre. The invention of the qobyz, which has become the theme to many legends, finds a vivid portrayal in the performance.

In another scene, Korkyt, possessed by an evil spirit, tries to exorcize it with the help of a shamanic ritual. Shamanism was widespread in pagan societies practicing polytheism. To show the

splendour of a shamanic ritual, the director staged this scene as a kind of shamanic mystery play. Korkyt and his assistants perform the ritual. Holding dangaras (dangara is a Kazakh musical instrument resembling a drum), wearing masks and weird bright-colored costumes, the actors perform a shamanic dance. Taking center stage, Korkyt covers the blade of his ax with blood, according to the custom, and observes all other rules of the ritual. The director has found an effective way to display folkloric customs, which can be seen only in legends and apsanas.

One of the most profound and spectacular scenes of the play is the bird's scene. Allegorical characters evoking the image of female swans dance around Korkyt, making him believe in happiness and eternal love. These birds tell Korkyt about Lady Saryn (saryn in Kazakh means melody), whose beauty equals her intellect. This scene, heightening the poetic atmosphere of the play, is followed by Korkyt's meeting with Lady Saryn. Like the qobyz, Lady Saryn turns into Korkyt's music. This scene is tinged with subtle lyricism. Portrayed by Madina Kelgenbai, Lady Saryn is gentle and energetic at the same time. As one scene follows another, Korkyt experiences everything that is in his destiny. He finds his only true love, Lady Saryn, and creates the qobyz bestowing music upon the world. Happiness and sadness become familiar to him (Ingavale, 2013).

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, the authors reviewed the trends in the Kazakh theatrical art and more specifically such phenomena, as the use of folklore and ritual traditions in drama performances, which is largely

presented in the genre of apsana. The theatrical art of such countries as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan was not studied thoroughly enough, therefore the results of this study have a significant practical value for further researches in this area. In Kazakhstan and countries of Central Asia, folklore traditions have an impact on the cultural life of the people. The archetypes of modern flourishing culture are age-long customs and traditions. In the 21st century, they remain an integral part of the Kazakhs' life.

Therefore, customs and traditions are important for understanding the Kazakhstani culture. A lot of them tend to change reflecting the zeitgeist, while some lose their meaning and are being forgotten. Their cultural significance is also being lost. Those directors who understand that one solution to popularizing rituals and folklore is to make them a part of a theatrical performance are trying to find new ways of retaining national cultural code. In their turn, new forms of performance affect actors' existence on stage. In modern Kazakh theatre, acting continues to be a dominant artistic device which is instrumental in realizing the director's vision for the production.

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