

ILKHOM THEATRE

Press Kit Table of Contents

1. "The Ilkhom Theatre Performs a Masterpiece with Ecstasy With the Pomegranate" (review) SEATTLEST, April 10, 2008 page 2
2. " Ecstasy With the Pomegranate a sprawling, exotic work" (review) SEATTLE TIMES, April 11, 2008 page 5
3. "Pain of forbidden love in Ilkhom Theatre's White White Black Stork" (review) SEATTLE TIMES, March 21, 2008 page 7
4. "Ilkhom Theatre" The realization of a dream, clouded by tragedy" (feature) SEATTLE TIMES, March 9, 2008 page 9
5. "Uzbek theatre's acts of defiance" (feature) BBC NEWS, April 3, 2008 page 13
6. "Renowned Uzbek troupe tells tales of repression and the search for identity" (feature) SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, March 14, 2008 page 16
7. "Death and Life in Tashkent" AMERICAN THEATRE (feature), March 2008 page 18
8. "Hearts of the new silk roads" SAUDI ARAMCO WORLD (feature), Jan-Feb, 2008 page 19
9. "The Poetry of Stork Talk" (review) EVENING STANDARD, June 8, 2006 page 31
10. "From Tashkent with love, sorrow and accomplishment" (review) REVIEWS GATE, June 7, 2006 page 32
11. "White White Black Stork" (review) FINANCIAL TIMES, June 7, 2006 page 33
12. "Ilkhom Theatre Celebrates 20 Years of Perestroika" (feature) MOSCOW TRIBUNE February 1, 1995 page 34
13. "Ilkhom Theatre" (review) NEW YORK TIMES, June 24, 1991 page 35
14. "Topeng Balinese Clowns at MTI Festival" (review) PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, June 28, 1991 page 36
15. "Mayhem of a Slapstick Genius That Defies Words (review) SUNDAY TRIBUNE May 26, 1991 page 37
16. "Clomadeus at Andrew's Lane Theatre" IRISH TIMES, May 24, 1991 page 38

April 10, 2008

The Ilkhom Theatre Performs a Masterpiece With *Ecstasy With the Pomegranate*

The Ilkhom Theatre Festival at ACT Theatre closes this Sunday; tickets for Ecstasy With the Pomegranate are still available [here](#).

Heading into ACT Theatre last night for the opening of the Ilkhom Theatre's *Ecstasy With the Pomegranate*, we were for some reason under the impression that this show--running for one week only, and following a four-week run of *White White Black Stork*--would be a shorter, perhaps more experimental work, intended for hardcore audiences. Turns out, the reverse was true. At three hours and fifteen minutes (including one intermission), *Ecstasy With the Pomegranate* is, in terms of both ambition and execution, far superior. We left ACT Theatre last night deeply moved and emotionally and intellectually excited to have *finally* seen a play which uses the vast and wondrous tools of the theatre to tell a complex and multi-layered story, demonstrating this theatre company's stunning grasp of movement, design, and acting to create something dynamic and challenging and, ultimately, revelatory.

The plot follows the semi-fictionalized life of the Russian-born painter Alexander Nikolaev/Usto Mumin, whose paintings feature prominently in the play. (This is actually a point we're not clear on: In the play, the painter's Russian name is *not* Alexander Nikolaev, rather Aleksandr Nezhdanov, but by the end he *has* adopted the pseudonym Usto Mumin; given the scarcity of information in English on this subject, we may well be mistaken somehow.)



Nezhdanov (marvelously performed by Anton Pakhomov) arrives in Tashkent in 1917, employed by the Imperial Russian army to document the culture and history of the region. His commander, Col. Valerian Byaltsev (Boris Gafurov), the military governor in Tashkent, has a relatively liberal outlook and is charged with formalizing Russian control with a light hand, in order to prevent violent opposition. As the play opens, Nezhdanov, having already converted to Islam, is helping the colonel and his staff arrange an art exhibition celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the "New Tashkent," or the Russification of the city. Nezhdanov's work, with its Modernist whimsy and clear infatuation with Uzbek culture, is a poor fit amongst the tired Romanticist

renderings of conquest and culture. He soon effectively goes AWOL, moving out of the barracks and taking a small guesthouse in the Old Town owned by Takhir (Farukh Khaldjigitov). Takhir is also the operator of a tea-house nightclub and the manager of the city's most popular bacha dancers, himself having been one as a child.

All the materials we'd read before the show didn't fully prepare us to understand the tradition of the bacha boy dancers; essentially, within the sexually repressive Islamic culture where women were virtually invisible in public life, the prepubescent boy dancers became hypersexualized objects in a form of socially sanctioned pedo-eroticism. While the bacha dances themselves seem only obliquely sexual by Western standards (*sensual* would be a better description), the boys are celebrities in Tashkent by virtue of being the only means of sexual expression in public, their favor passionately pursued by well-off patrons.

Insofar as this is the case, these boys' plight is recognizable to American viewers familiar with lurid tales of showgirls or winsome Midwestern transplants in search of Hollywood fame on the silver screen and instead find themselves in the blue movies. The boys' talent is both a blessing and a curse; blessing because these otherwise socially marginalized children (either orphans or castaways) have both social prestige and a means of self-expression that would otherwise be denied them, and a curse because, for all their notoriety, they lack any independence, the lavish gifts bestowed upon them by their suitors enriching Takhir, himself ambivalent about their fate once puberty robs them of their child-like--and therefore profitable--lustre.

For Nezhdanov, the bacha boys become an object of fascination precisely because of this. The boys' dances, and the erotic fixation the public has on them, makes them a window into the private lives of a closed society that Nezhdanov seeks to enter. And if this were where the play left off, it wouldn't be much more than *White White Black Stork*. But whereas that work was content to wind its way through a series of poetic images and symbolism as an expression of the tumultuous inner world of characters longing to break free from the constraints of their conformist society, in the second half of *Ecstasy*, history intrudes, casting aside centuries of culture in pursuit of Modernity, and theatre-goers are left not with a pitiable tale of sexual repression (as in *Stork*), but rather deeply ambivalent about the nature of social and cultural transformation.

The historical injunction is that of the Bolshevik Revolution. Takhir, murdered by angry patrons of the bacha boys, has left his troupe leaderless; Byaltsev, pressured by protesting wives whose households are being lost to bacha-obsession, seeks to repress the tradition as an opportunity to establish Russian control by meeting the needs of women; and Nezhdanov finds himself jailed for several months on charges of committing Takhir's murder.

At this point, it's impossible not to take a step back and discuss the production itself. Compared even to the design of *Stork*, *Ecstasy* is minimalist in the do-more-with-less sense. The sole setting piece is a large three-part scrim flat pivoted in the center. Capable of folding down, rotating, containing various moving panels, with lighting, projections and animation, Ilkhom gets more out of this single polymorphic set piece than Romeo Castellucci could with a bevy of special effects in *Hey Girl!*, the Societas Raffaello Sanzio production that [toured here](#) in February. As for the performers, the movement in this piece is incredible; the boys' dances, evocative and precise, reveal Ilkhom's remarkable physical and movement training. The only thing like it we've ever seen is the work of Lecoqian performers at Portland's [Imago Theatre](#).

All of which serves to reinforce how much was lost with the company's founder, Mark Weil (see [here](#) if you don't know the story of his murder). *Stork* simply didn't do justice to Weil's genius, though it's possible *Ecstasy* was just a more personal show for him. It's hard to avoid the suspicion that Weil--a Russian of German extraction who moved to Tashkent to form Ilkhom in the 1970s--saw something of himself in the character of Usto Mumin. Mumin is a liminal figure, trapped halfway between two cultures, ever pursuing the one, ever remaining the other. There's a great irony that by the end of the play, it's Nezhdanov who's trying to preserve the traditional culture while the Uzbeks themselves--at least the bacha boys he befriended and protected after Takhim's death--are embracing Bolshevism, promoting a radical form of modernization intent on stamping out the very things that Nezhdanov fell in love with in Tashkent. Nodira (Nargis Abdullaeva), a young girl intent on breaking the gender barrier and dancing bacha, marries one of the bacha boys and begins proselytizing radical feminism, only to come to a sorry end, stoned to death by backwards countryfolk. This twists the themes of *White White Black Stork*, with its simple story of sexual freedom versus repression, into something more complex and difficult, demanding we consider what's *lost* with the transformation of culture and revolt against contemporary mores. The answer is not simple, and the artists at Ilkhom wisely intuit that great art's purpose is to pose the question rather than supply the answer.

Image: The Ilkhom Theatre Company's production of Ecstasy With The Pomegranate at ACT – A Contemporary Theatre. Photo: Timur Karpov.

Friday, April 11, 2008

Theater Review

"Ecstasy with the Pomegranate" a sprawling, exotic work

By **Misha Berson**
Seattle Times theater critic



VITALY EVDOKIMOV

A scene from The Ilkhom Theatre Company's production. The play is loosely based on a real-life painter, Aleksandr Nikolaev, who was posted with the Russian military in Tashkent during the 1917 Communist revolution in Russia.

By M. Weil and D. Tikhomirov, plays Thursday through Sunday only, at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle; \$10-\$55 (206-292-7676 or www.acttheatre.org).

"Ecstasy with the Pomegranate," the second offering in ACT Theatre's Ilkhom Theatre Festival, is a sprawling work: part erotic-exotic pipe dream, part tragic Russian novella and part Uzbeki historical excavation.

A detailed yet elusive, swirling brief on the confluence of art, sexual ambiguity and colonial politics in a crossroads Central Asian outpost, the production is not half as compact and distilled as "White White Black Stork," the first piece performed at ACT by the visiting Ilkhom performing troupe of Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Here, "Ecstasy with the Pomegranate" plays a much shorter engagement than "Stork" — through this weekend only. And it demands much more time, concentration and commitment from an audience. If one can agree to that, and be prepared for a sometimes slow-moving epic that requires at least the patience it takes to scoop out and eat the tiny beads of scarlet fruit inside a pomegranate, the Ilkhom piece is rewarding on several levels.

Co-written and staged by Ilkhom's late director, Mark Weil (a part-time Seattle resident who was murdered in Tashkent last year), and choreographed by the American dance maker David Rousève, "Ecstasy" gazes behind the veil at a fascinating subculture, its habitués and some characters on the fringes of it.

Our guide, after a fashion, is loosely based on a real-life painter: the diffident, keenly observant artist Aleksandr Nikolaev, who was posted with the Russian military in Tashkent during the 1917 Communist revolution in Russia.

Captivated by the city's hybrid East-West culture (he soon converted to Islam), Nikolaev was also drawn to the Bacha — a venerable Uzbeki folk dance, similar to Sufi dancing, performed by young men in the guise of women, in semi-illicit tea houses.

Nikolaev's enchanting paintings of the dancing Bacha boys have the vivid gouache coloring and timeless beauty of Turkish and Indian miniatures. They are an important aspect of the show's design, which makes use of Nikolaev's canvases and vintage photographs, back-projected onto a folding, rolling screen ingeniously throughout the three-hour show.

But this is a complex, often ambiguous tale, and not only the story of Nikolaev (renamed Nezhdanov, in this "fantasia"). Rippling through the text by Weil and D. Tikhomirov (in Russian and Uzbeki, with English supertitles) are profiles of other foreigners and misfits mingling in "old" and "new" Tashkent.

Among them is an ambitious Russian colonel, curious about and repelled by the homoerotic allure of the Bacha milieu. Another is his junior Russian officer, a clandestine homosexual and furtive devotee of the Bacha.

A vivacious, paternal teahouse-owner offers another perspective. So do several of the boy dancers, driven into their strange sanctuary by poverty and abandonment.

Also spotlighted is a sole, aspiring girl dancer, another misfit in a society where women covered up every inch of their being when on the street — and faced stoning if they broke the orthodox Muslim rules about female "propriety."

Roussève's simple, recurring dance motifs here are effective, if limited: undulating belly dance moves, Russian boot-stomps, tender lifts and holds. More varied is Artyom Kim's music score, a pastiche of martial melodies, clustered marimba sounds, Turkish-Uzbeki folk rhythms.

"Pomegranate" can slow to a crawl at times, and could be more palatable if half an hour shorter. But as in "White White Black Stork," Ilkhom's ensemble acting is admirably fluid, nimble and unshowy throughout. Among those players making strong impressions: Boris Gafurov as the imperious colonel, Denis Boyko as one of the more beautiful, sought-after Bacha dancers and, as the painter Nezhdanov, Anton Pakhomov.

Pakhomov's pale, haunted face quietly registers the strange jolts of politics and history that will alter the fates of all the play's characters. He is the witness whose art ensures that even as a pipe dream is shattered, it will not be obliterated.

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Pain of forbidden love in Ilkhom Theatre's "White White Black Stork"

By Misha Berson
Seattle Times theater critic
Theater review

The Ilkhom Theatre Company of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, has come a long distance from Central Asia to perform at Seattle's ACT Theatre. Judging from "White White Black Stork," which is having its West Coast premiere at ACT, local theater-lovers can be grateful the Ilkhom arrived.

The first of two productions the respected troupe will offer at ACT (the other, "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," plays April 9-13 only), "White White Black Stork" was co-written and directed by Ilkhom's revered late artistic leader, Mark Weil.

This archetypal fable is performed with (sometimes distracting) supertitle English translations of the Uzbek dialogue. But much of the work's potency and poignancy are due to a theatrical sensibility that is foreign yet accessible, elegant and visceral, and largely nonverbal.

On a stage bathed in hot white light, and anchored by a single tree with a canopy of bare branches, the show sweeps us into an orthodox Muslim community in Tashkent — sometime in the 20th century.

There Makhzum, a dreamy-eyed boy of 16, gazes at high-flying storks and imagines them to be angels. His imagination, and lack of machismo, renders him an outcast. Makhzum repulses even his own schoolmaster father, especially when the boy is naively open about his infatuation with a male schoolmate.

Meanwhile, in a garden nearby, lovely young Makhichehra is another dreamer. She becomes smitten with a handsome (but poor) cloth-seller as he hawks his wares. Her overbearing father has other plans for Makhichehra, however. He wants to marry her off quickly, to the highest bidder.

Deviance from the norm, and defiance of parental authority, defines centuries of legends about star-crossed



VITALY EVDOKIMOV

The Ilkhom Theatre Company's production of "White White Black Stork" makes its West Coast premiere at Seattle's ACT Theatre.

Now playing "White White Black Stork"

Ilkhom Theatre Company, Tuesdays-Sundays through April 6, at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle; \$10-\$55 (206-292-7676 or www.acttheatre.org).

young love. In the repressive patriarchal culture depicted in "White White Black Stork," taboo erotic desires destroy two families, plunging them into a downward spiral of litigation, anguish and grief.

But first the piece evokes the exhilaration of innocent young love. It does so with a fluid physicality and vivid stage images, as performers run and chase, roughhouse and swing from a pair of trapezes strung from tree branches.

The inevitable tragic collision of innocence and authority is dramatized with a heavier hand, as the focus shifts from the attractive, compelling younger characters to their scheming, warring relations.

"White White Black Stork" is based on a novel by 19th-century Tashkent author Abdullah Kadiri. It told an extremely daring story for its time, given Kadiri's poetic, unveiled treatment of homosexual yearning.

In modern-day Uzbekistan, the subject of homosexuality remains controversial, culturally and politically. So by our own culture's standard, what may seem like a tame evocation of same-sex attraction was actually a risky endeavor for Ilkhom artistic head and part-time Seattle resident Weil. (Weil was murdered in Tashkent last fall, by as-yet-unidentified assailants.)

Consider too that the play's forced marriage of Makhzum and Makhichehra, and the enraged reactions of family members to adolescent nonconformity, is still in force in many tradition-bound communities around the world — and not just those steeped in Muslim orthodoxy.

"White White Black Stork" is not a polemic, but rather a piece of theater with a refined and sophisticated aesthetic. Such enhancements as the simple white costuming and the beguiling original music of piping flutes and brooding chords are impressive.

And the Ilkhom acting ensemble is near-seamless. The cast's fine-tuned gestures, facial expressions and more-subtle emotional dynamics are perfected, but not studied or gimmicky.

Most striking are the ethereal beauty and naked vulnerability of the dazzling performers portraying the story's young protagonists: Said Khudaibergenov (as Makhzum) and Nigora Karimbaeva (Makhichehra). Long before the show ends, you ache with them. And long afterward, their faces haunt you.

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Ilkhom Theatre: The realization of a dream, clouded by tragedy

By Misha Berson
Seattle Times theater critic

The Ilkhom Theatre of Uzbekistan makes its Seattle debut at ACT Theatre next week, a long-in-the-works dream on two continents.

Many have pitched in to import two productions, 31 actors and other personnel from this celebrated troupe, which is based in Seattle's sister city, Tashkent, and has close ties to this community.

But last autumn, the excitement of the venture was suddenly tempered by grief.

On Sept. 7, 2007, Mark Weil, the dynamic artistic leader of the Ilkhom and a part-time Seattle resident, was returning home from a rehearsal of Ilkhom's new version of "The Oresteia" in Tashkent when the tall, gray-haired director, 55, was struck on the head and fatally stabbed by two attackers.

Six months later, Weil's killing remains an internationally decried incident wrapped in mystery. Some of his allies — in Tashkent, London, Seattle — fear the killing was politically motivated. If Ilkhom Theatre Company's shows are not literally critical of the regime of strong-arm Uzbek leader Islam Karimov, they have alluded to provocative subjects.

In 2005, reports the journal Eurasia Insight, Ilkhom's poetic work "Flights of Mashrab" contained "a not-so-subtle anti-authoritarian message" after the infamous shooting of hundreds of demonstrators by government security forces in the Uzbek city of Andijan.

Notes Ilkhom actor Maxim Tumenev, by e-mail, "Everything ... the Ilkhom is producing can be considered as controversial — homosexual themes, reflection to political situation and government position. But we never had ... a goal to make these visible parallels on purpose. People see what they see and make their own decisions."

After Weil's death, police questioned his Ilkhom co-workers. "Almost all members of the company went



TIMUR KARPOV

The Ilkhom Theatre Company will perform "Ecstasy With The Pomegranate" April 9-13 at A Contemporary Theatre.



Part-time Seattle resident and Ilkhom Theatre artistic leader Mark Weil was killed in 2007. Some speculate his attack was politically motivated.

through tough interrogations," writes Tumenev, who was questioned four times. "I can tell you it's not pleasant. One of the actors was put in jail for 10 days."

Since then, there has been scant official news about the homicide, and no apparent arrests. Says Alain Délétroz, who befriended Weil while working in Tashkent with the Open Democracy Institute (George Soros' public-policy organization): "I do not think we will ever know what happened to Mark. I would not trust an Uzbek investigation in a case like this. And like many places with a dictator in power, Tashkent is a place of many, many rumors."

This much is clear: Weil was a bold, charismatic cultural figure in a Central Asian Republic still in the shadow of Soviet Communism. And he would be mourned by many in an American city some 6,000 miles away from the theater he ran for more than 30 years.

International ties

Seattle has forged a bond with Tashkent, a storied city of 2 million — the largest, and one of the oldest, in Central Asia.

Tashkent dates back to at least 1 B.C., and over its history has been a multiethnic, cosmopolitan trade and cultural center under (at various times) Arabian, Mongol and Turkish rule. In the 1860s, Uzbekistan was colonized by Russia. And in the 20th century, under Soviet control, the country grew more politically oppressive and isolated.

Mark Weil was born into a Jewish family in Tashkent. Ambitious and creative, he started his own youth drama troupe at age 17. Then in 1976, after studying at the Tashkent Theatre and Arts Institute, Weil cofounded an upstart theater, later baptized the Ilkhom (Uzbek for "inspiration").

Remarkably, the Ilkhom has endured and flourished outside the "official" system of state-subsidized, government-endorsed Uzbek culture — surviving on ticket sales, grants and touring revenues.

Weil's link to the Northwest begins back in 1973, when Seattle became the sister city of Tashkent. Seven years earlier, Tashkent endured a devastating earthquake. By the late 1980s, when Seattle actress Michelle Blackmon joined a cultural exchange mission to the city, it had been extensively rebuilt. And the Ilkhom had become a hub for the Uzbek artistic intelligentsia — as one admirer called it, "a tiny, bright and incredibly unlikely beacon of light" in the region.

"It was an amazing experience being there," recalls Blackmon, now a Seattle Center administrator. "We were a group of 30 people [from Seattle], sponsored by the performers' union in Tashkent.

"I worked on a show with Mark at Ilkhom, and found him to be an extremely magnanimous man who knew how to negotiate difficult situations with people from different backgrounds. We all loved him."



PAVEL SOLODKIY

"White White Black Stork" plays at ACT Friday-April 6. The shows are performed in Uzbek and Russian, with English supertitles.

Coming up

ACT's Ilkhom Theatre Festival includes runs of "White White Black Stork" (Friday-April 6) and "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate" (April 9-13), at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle; \$10-\$55 per show. Tickets and special programs: 206-292-7676 or www.acttheatre.org.

Note: The shows are performed in Uzbek and Russian, with English supertitles.

In 1991, Uzbekistan broke away from the U.S.S.R., but Karimov, the formerly Communist Uzbek leader, retained power as president of the new "democracy" in elections the U.S. called "neither free nor fair."

Also in 1991, Weil visited Seattle for the first time. Warmly greeted by friends, and impressed with the city, he urged his wife, Tatyana, and daughters Julia and Aleksandra to settle here.

As he told *The Seattle Times* in 2003, Weil feared "an explosion of Islamic fundamentalism" in Uzbekistan, and wanted his daughters to be educated. Both became UW graduates. (The Weil family supplied information for this article, but declined to be interviewed.)

Weil visited his family here several times a year. But his devotion to Ilkhom kept him in Tashkent and on tour most of the time.

A hot ticket in Eastern Europe, Japan, England and elsewhere, his troupe was hailed for its invigorated classics and its original theater pieces steeped in Uzbekistan's complex, turbulent history.

The two works in ACT's "Ilkhom Festival" reflect Ilkhom's range. "White White Black Stork" is a romantic tragedy that one London critic termed "a touching, gently sad piece from an important international company."

"Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," a collaboration with American choreographer David Rousseve, drew some fire for its homosexual content. The piece was inspired by the life of early 20th-century Russian artist Aleksandr Nikolaev and his paintings of the Bacha — a traditional Uzbek dance performed by men in female garb.

Intense direction

Often invited to direct and teach abroad, Weil staged the Russian play "The Suicide" at Seattle's University of Washington drama school in 2003.

UW drama professor Mark Jenkins recalls Weil as "a soulful visionary, natural leader, first-class director and smart entrepreneur.

"At first our students were pretty shocked by how he liked to work — not from the inside out, as they were used to, but the outside in. He'd give them very extreme physical directorial choices. They came to appreciate his approach."

Several UW students later went to Tashkent to study at the Ilkhom. In spring 2007, Jenkins visited, and saw the company's entire 14-play repertoire.

He was struck by the 200-seat venue's popularity in a city "that's very pleasant, superficially, with its wide boulevards and parks, but incredibly repressive politically."

In his own 2005 trek to Tashkent, ACT Theatre artistic director Kurt Beattie was also struck by the Ilkhom's sold-out houses, and its "amazing, beautifully trained actors, capable of anything... Chekhov, Goldoni, modern stuff. And 'White White Black Stork' — Wow! It was so exquisitely poetic. The staging was brilliant."

Bringing in Ilkhom

With Weil, Beattie began laying the groundwork for an Ilkhom run at ACT, enlisting help from supporters and such groups as the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association.

In September, the elaborate logistics, the housing and visa arrangements were all in place. ACT had raised \$400,000 for the project, from local patrons and national funders (the Ilkhom will also do a short tour to several other U.S. cities). Welcoming events hosted by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association were also set.

Then the shocking news of Weil's brutal, perplexing killing reached Seattle.

"Mark always felt very safe," says Jenkins. "I don't think anybody remotely anticipated this."

Writes Tumenev, "Mark never told us that he was getting threats. Probably he was, but I think he wasn't scared by them. He was a very strong and brave person."

Beattie says Weil's death adds poignancy and urgency to ACT's presentation of works he directed and co-wrote.

And the Ilkhom troupe has stayed passionately focused on carrying out their late "master's" artistic plans. With this visit, they're honoring the spirit of what were widely reported as Weil's final, defiant words: "I'm opening a season tomorrow, no matter what."

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Uzbek theatre's acts of defiance

By Natalia Antelava

Reporter, Crossing Continents

After the mysterious murder of its founder and director, the performances at Uzbekistan's Ilkhom independent theatre go on. But many questions are still unanswered.

Just off one of Tashkent's leafy boulevards, deep in the basement of a concrete Soviet-era building, hides a small theatre called Ilkhom, which in Uzbek means inspiration.

A fragile glass door is all that separates it from the harsh reality of one of central Asia's most repressive states.

But inside the spacious lobby and amid the dark corridors of its backstage none of the outside rules seem to apply.

For more than 30 years, Ilkhom, which was the Soviet Union's first independent theatre, produced a countless number of thought-provoking and controversial plays which forced people to question the reality that reigned beyond the theatre's door.

But last September its founder and director, Mark Weil, was killed while returning home from a rehearsal.



Mark Weil was stabbed to death in September 2007

"This country has lost the best ambassador of good things in Uzbekistan," says Peter Burkhard, the Swiss ambassador in Tashkent who - like many - believes that clues to Mark Weil's unsolved murder lie in his plays.

"Ilkhom theatre is the only place in Tashkent where some thinking is going on. The rest of the country is just affirming, stating, showing off, but there is no reflection."

A small act of defiance

In the predominantly Muslim Uzbekistan there are no opposition parties and no free media. Foreign journalists are not welcome and different opinion is rarely tolerated. The very existence of Mark Weil's theatre was a small act of defiance.

"Several years ago, for some reason, police banned Christmas trees from all theatres and everyone obeyed. But here we just hung it upside down from the ceiling," laughs Maxim Tumenev, one of Ilkhom's actors.

Maxim, like most in Ilkhom's 30 strong troupe, is a graduate of Mark Weil's drama school. Set up in the 1990s, its rigorously competitive three year programme quickly began drawing students from far away.

"The school of Mark Weil is not just a school for actors. It was a school for life. Here, he was developing very intelligent, very sensitive, very open individuals," says Tyler Polumsky, an

American from Seattle, who initially came to Uzbekistan for a three month course at Ilkhom.

Five years later he is still at the theatre, acting and coaching a new generation of students.

"Mark taught us we could not be afraid, we could not watch our backs, that everything that came to our minds had legitimacy and deserved to be tried out," adds Marina Turpisheva, who has been with the troupe for almost all of its 30 years.

Changing world

In the 1970s, when she first started rehearsing at Ilkhom, Tashkent - the Soviet Union's fourth largest city - was home to dozens of nationalities.

Being far away from Moscow's watchful eye gave Mark Weil a little more freedom to experiment and, although money was scarce and problems with the authorities were endless, Ilkhom survived and grew.

Independence sent Ilkhom travelling around the world. But it failed to bring freedom to Uzbekistan.

“ This is art and we reflect the reality around us ”

Maxim Tumenev, actor

Islam Karimov, the country's Soviet-era boss, became its president. The economy crumbled, political opponents were exiled or jailed, and thousands of people left the capital stripping Tashkent of its best and brightest.

Mark Weil watched as the cosmopolitan, vibrant place he loved shrank. As the city changed, so did his repertoire.

He started to focus more on Uzbek culture. In his plays he talked about Islam and homosexuality. He challenged convention and mocked the ridiculousness of those in power.

"This is art and we reflect the reality around us," says Maxim Tumenev.

"It was never Mark's goal to be political or to oppose anyone. He simply reflected the reality around us."

Mark Weil's murder is surrounded by mystery.

According to sources in Tashkent, shortly before his death Mark Weil was threatened by the security services and told to soften the content of one of his plays. He refused.

His murder coincided with the re-election of president Islam Karimov, who ran for office despite the fact that his last constitutional term had already expired.



Mark Weil's later productions started to focus on Uzbek society

Across the country security was on high alert and ready to prevent any sort of outburst of public discontent ahead of the vote.

The investigation into Mark's killing focused heavily on his personal life but the perpetrators of his murder have never been found.

Except for a short obituary, his death received no coverage in the state controlled media.

The Uzbek embassy in London did not reply to the BBC's request for comment.

The show goes on

At Ilkhom they are now learning to live without their director. A core group of actors are running the theatre, looking for money and guest directors from overseas to stage new plays. The shows are going on, as are lessons, rehearsals and tours.

But as busy and upbeat as they try to sound, the future looks neither bright nor certain.

Mark Weil's last production was his biggest project.

The Oresteia - a trilogy of Greek plays by Aeschylus - was a tale of death and blood in which a hugely creative fusion of verse, rock music, stunning costumes, and video art put across an unmistakable message. Blood can only generate more blood.

As they finished the last rehearsal of the Oresteia Mark Weil, tired and frustrated, told his actors "no matter what happens, we are opening the season tomorrow."



“ No matter what happens we are opening the season tomorrow ”

Mark Weil, director

That was 6 September and later that night he was stabbed to death outside his house.

On 7 September his defiant troupe opened the new season.

"I don't know how we played that night. And I don't have words to describe it" says Marina Turpisheva

"All throughout the rehearsals Mark kept telling us that we did not feel the depth of the tragedy of the Oresteia. Well, on the 7th, we felt the depth of the tragedy".

Crossing Continents reports on Ilkhom on BBC Radio 4 on Thursday 3 April at 1100 BST, repeated Monday 7 April at 2030 BST.

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/theater/354888_fanf14.html

Renowned Uzbek troupe tells tales of repression and the search for identity

Friday, March 14, 2008

Last updated March 18, 2008 11:01 a.m. PT

By **JOE ADCOCK**
P-I THEATER CRITIC

It cost theater artist Mark Weil his life -- in the opinion of his friend and colleague, Maxim Tumnenev.

The cost to the protagonists of two of Weil's plays is heartbreak.

COMING UP

"But you really can't say it's necessarily a Muslim thing," Tumnenev says. "Traditionally, some wealthy men in Tashkent and Samarqand would have two harems -- one for women and girls, the other for men and boys. But Islamic fundamentalists, now, are very anti-gay.

PLAYWRIGHTS: Mark Weil and Elkin Tuichev ("White White Black Stork") and D. Tikhomirov and Weil ("Ecstasy With the Pomegranate")

"And homosexual activity is still illegal in Uzbekistan. That goes back to a Soviet-era law signed by Stalin in 1921. Police use it for blackmail and extortion. When I was young and ignorant, I was caught in a sting. There are no gay bars or clubs. So you find dates on the Internet. But you have to be careful. The police use young men from the country who don't have permits to live in Tashkent as bait."

WHERE: ACT Theatre, 700 Union St.

Weil was artistic director of Tashkent's Ilkhom Theatre Company. He was murdered in September in front of his apartment house as he was returning from work. Tumnenev believes Weil's attackers were Muslim fundamentalists.

WHEN: "White" previews starting tonight, opens Thursday and runs through April 6. "Ecstasy" runs April 9 through 13

"In Uzbekistan it is very likely that such a crime will never be solved," Tumnenev said during an interview earlier this week at ACT Theatre. "The police investigation tried to interpret (the murder) as a homosexual thing. I was interrogated four times. It was very rude, all about alleged sexual orgies and lewd plays with naked people on stage and things like that.

TICKETS: \$55; \$10 for 25 and under; \$15 for students; pay what you can Sunday and March 27; discounts for groups; 206-292-7676 or acttheatre.org

An actor and administrator, Tumnenev, 30, is here in Seattle with Ilkhom. ACT is the first stop in a U.S. tour by the internationally renowned troupe. Ilkhom (which means "inspiration" in Uzbeki) will stage two of its works here, marking the beginning of ACT's 2008 season.

Performances of the first piece, "White White Black Stork," start tonight. The play is set at the beginning of the 20th century. The protagonist, Makhzum, 13, falls in love with another boy. His father discovers their secret. Believing that his son's nature can be changed by marriage, he arranges a match. The girl in question is in love with a cloth peddler she saw only once.

Much drama ensues.

The other work is "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," also set in the early 20th century. As Tumnenev explains it, the story centers on a Russian painter who comes to Tashkent to produce propagandistic

works extolling the czar's beneficent influence on his far-flung imperial subjects. The artist is entranced by Turkistan, as it was called then. He admires the culture, particularly the dancing boys in the tea houses of Tashkent.0

He converts to Islam. He eventually discovers the degradation of boy dancers who are sold by poor families into what amounts to prostitution. The coming of the Bolshevik revolution, with its "bourgeois decadent" take on homosexuality, adds dire complications.

Seattle theater artists have been having back-and-forth exchanges with Ilkhom for several years now. When ACT artistic director Kurt Beattie saw some of the company's productions in Tashkent three years ago, he was deeply impressed.

"The style and discipline of their work is astounding," Beattie says. "They develop their pieces very slowly. They can investigate every nuance in depth. They have a company of actors who are used to working together. And what dancers! A professional choreographer can ask them to do nearly anything, and they do it. The dancing in 'Ecstasy With the Pomegranate' is exquisite."

Ilkhom is performing two pieces from its varied 12-play repertoire; both center on themes of repression and oppression of homosexuality. But Beattie sees universality in "White White Black Stork" and "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate."

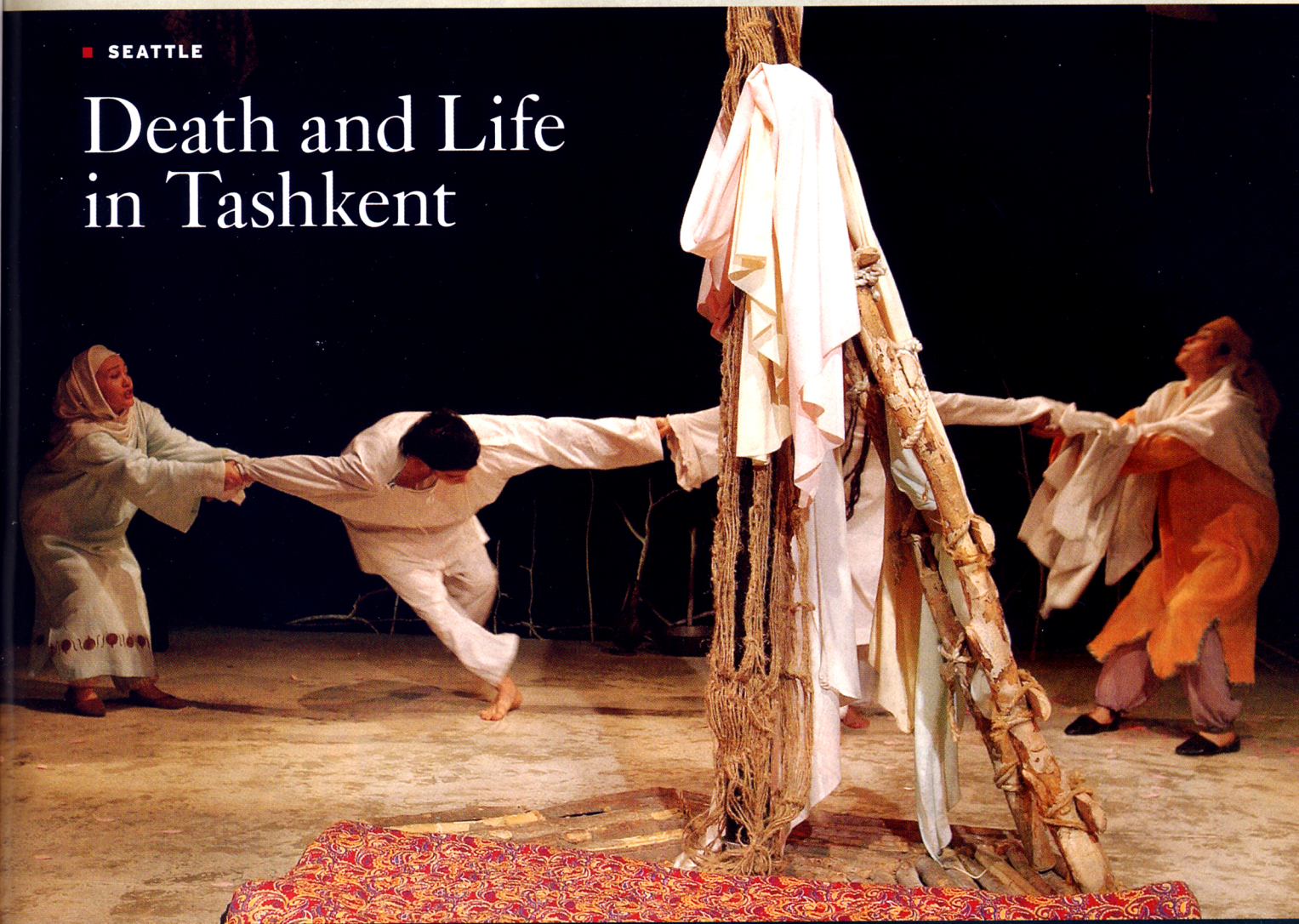
"The theme of finding your identity -- having to struggle to be who you really are," Beattie says, "that has universal resonance."

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FRONT & CENTER

■ SEATTLE

Death and Life in Tashkent



Ilkhom Theatre Company's *White White Black Stork*.

VITALY EVDOKIMOV

Mark Weil, the founding artistic director of **Ilkhom Theatre Company** in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, was on his way home from a rehearsal in September when he was stabbed by unknown assailants. His death was a blow not only to his loyal company of actors but to fellow Uzbeks, to whom the independent theatre he created has been an oasis of artistic experimentation since Soviet times. Under the scrutiny of Uzbekistan's current regime, Ilkhom has explored such touchy topics as sexuality, Islam and unemployment. While its productions—not to mention its stalwart existence—are rife with political implications, company member Maxim Tumenev emphasizes that “we never positioned ourselves as a company viewed through a political lens.” He explains, “We are more interested in unleashed creative work, in freedom of imagination and fantasy, in freedom of self-expression.”

The company has reacted to the loss of Weil with renewed dedication to his vision. The 2008 U.S. tour he planned kicks off this month with a long berth at **ACT Theatre** in Seattle (where Weil kept

a second home) March 14–April 13. The company will also make stops at **Dartmouth College** in Hanover, N.H., **Indiana University** in Bloomington, Ind., **Miami University** in Oxford, Ohio, and **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** in San Francisco.

The two touring plays bring audiences into the Tashkent of a century ago. *White White Black Stork* takes place in the district of Old Town, where Muslim precepts collide with the desire of one man for another—and with the interference of the Russian Empire's court in local affairs. The development of *Ecstasy with the Pomegranate* was an act of cultural anthropology supported by several U.S. funders—the National Dance Project, the NEA, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Ford Foundation. Its historical subject is a Russian painter fascinated by *Bacha*, a Uzbek dance performed by men in drag that was banned under Soviet rule. In counterpoint to *Stork*, *Ecstasy* evokes the mood of “New Tashkent” as it filled with emigrating Russian artists and engineers. The arrivals fell in love with the Central Asian culture of the city—“the smell of real Orient,” as Tumenev puts it—even as their presence altered it forever. —*Nicole Estvannik*



HEARTS OF THE NEW SILK ROADS

WRITTEN BY RICHARD COVINGTON
PHOTOGRAPHED BY KEVIN BUBRISKI

Once a compact trading oasis, Almaty now boasts a population of 2.7 million and growing.

From my seat in the dance studio, I watch as Valera props his trembling arms on a table and, with his back to the audience, struggles to raise his severely paralyzed 23-year-old body from the wheelchair. After great effort, he finally stands. Anton, a powerful, 30-year-old dancer, gently grasps his arms and pushes the wheelchair aside. Together, the pair begin slow, graceful, improvised movements. It is clear that, although Anton is supporting him, Valera is mastering his own fear, controlling involuntary spasms of his arms and legs to step in rhythm with the recorded music. The triumph of his spirit over his body is a near miracle, and Anton guiding him around the floor is a complementary vision

of compassion. I suddenly find myself in tears.

Visage Movement, a troupe of physically and mentally disabled dancers who perform together with professionals, was about the last thing I expected to stumble across in Tashkent. Artistic director Lilia Sevastyanova, an angular, intensely focused woman in her late 40's, founded a conventional modern dance group in 1982, but she started working with disabled students in 1996 after she choreographed a performance for a paraplegic girl in France.

"I asked her to raise her arms like an angel taking flight and noticed that the audience rose from their seats in unison," Sevastyanova recalls. "It was then that I realized how moving it would be to create dances for disabled people."

Dancers Anton and Valera of Visage Movement bring a 21st-century esthetic to 2400-year-old Tashkent.





With its panorama of Central Asia's emerging business hub, the park at Kk Tbe is popular for wedding photos.

The results are breathtaking. "I've had doctors tell me that it was impossible for one of my dancers to extend his arms, but when I told the boy to stretch out his arm and imagine he was blowing on a feather in his hand, he could do it," she marvels. "Improvisation made him go beyond his limitations."

The choreographer's mission to inspire both audiences and her dancers was just one of many new discoveries on my journey into the heart of the 21st-century Silk Roads. I had set myself the task of discovering cultural and social transformations along these old trade routes, and two places stood out: Almaty, the financial capital of Kazakhstan, the emerging economic engine of the region with immense reserves of oil and natural gas, and

Tashkent, the historic hub of Central Asia. Focusing on these urban centers was one way to gauge the tumultuous changes in arts, education, science and commerce that have swept across the region in the 16 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Russian language still links Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, but each country relies increasingly on its native tongue. And even this is changing: Throughout Central Asia, educated young people are trying to master English, and many of them do so using the World Wide Web, the Silk Roads of the new century.

In these two capitals, I encountered artists, film and theater directors, actors, historians, archeologists, economists, sociologists, preservationists,

scientists, hydrologists, museum curators, artisans, musicians, doctors, social workers, teachers, high-school and university students. I met many moonlighters.

I was told, more than half the adult males who own cars use them as taxis for extra income.) **The businessmen I found were modern Silk Road nomads, roaming by jet, train and SUV. I met not a single camel driver.**

But for some 1600 years—from the end of the second century BC to the middle of the 15th century—camel, horse and donkey caravans traversed Asia from China to the Mediterranean, following a network of routes across steppes and deserts, mountains and plains. Precious metals and stones,

Native son Mark Weil directed the Ilkhom, one of Tashkent's 20-plus theaters, from 1976 until his death last September.





Rooted in Turkic, the name "Almaty" refers to abundant apples; the city's huge Zelyony Bazaar is filled with local and imported produce.



with trade came exchanges in science, medicine, technology, ideas and religions. From India, Buddhism filtered to China and Japan; Islam, Judaism and Nestorian Christianity moved east from the Mediterranean; and Manicheism and Zoroastrianism spread eastward from Persia.

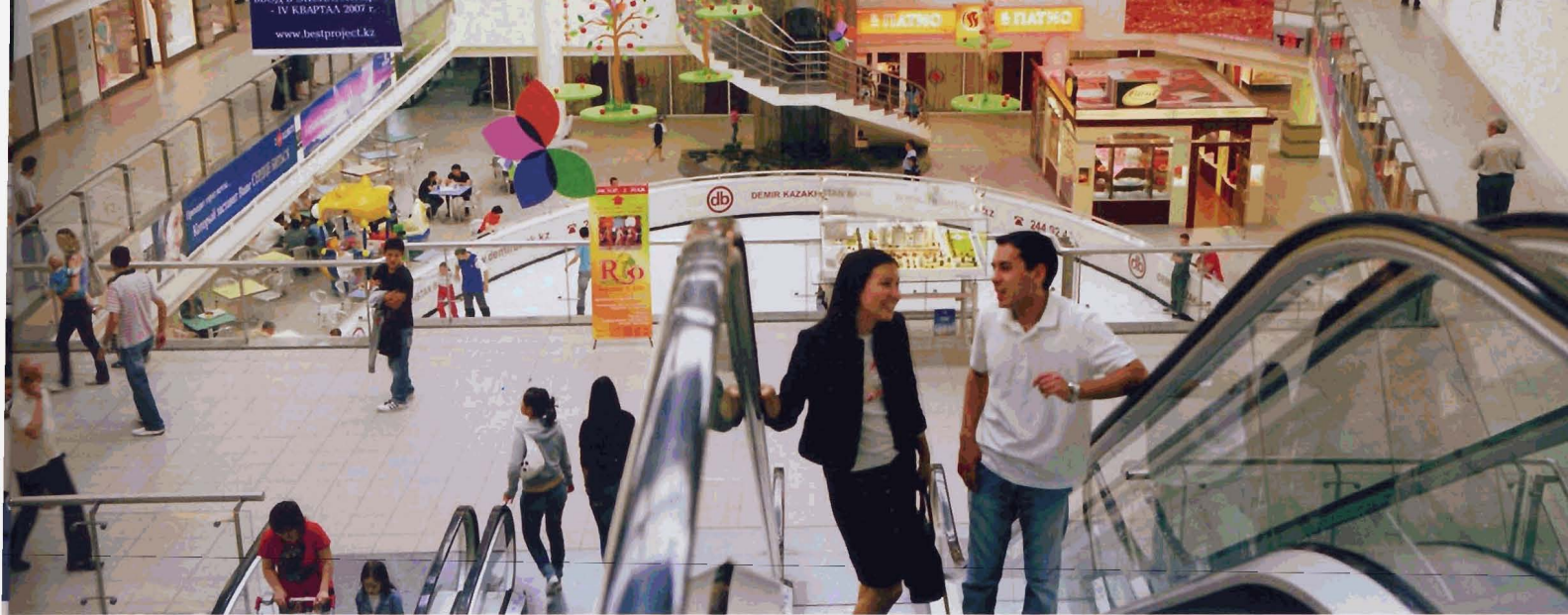
In the heyday of the Silk Roads, the site of present-day Almaty was a compact oasis of yurts at the northern foot of the 4000-meter (13,000') Zailiysky Alatau mountains. Destroyed by the Mongols in the 14th century, the settlement was rebuilt in the 1850's as a Russian frontier post, first called Vernyi, then Alma-Ata ("Father of Apples").

Today's city of 2.7 million inhabitants (in a country of 14.7 million) is the leafiest I've ever seen. "When I first arrived here 30 years ago from Ukraine, I wondered where all the buildings were," says Ivan Apanasevich, an architectural preservationist, laughing. "All I could see was trees." Apanasevich, a forthright, voluble man with close-cropped gray hair, works for USAID, but his passionate avocation is the uphill battle to rescue Almaty's dwindling stock of historic buildings, many built of plaster-covered wood to resist earthquakes after a massive tremor leveled much of the city in 1887. In today's overheated and largely unregulated real-estate market, developers are bulldozing swaths of Almaty's vernacular architecture.

ceramics, spices, paper, perfumes and, of course, Chinese silk traveled west in exchange for cotton and wool textiles, glass, amber, wine and carpets. Along

In Tashkent's Chorzu market, the largest in Uzbekistan, tradition comes in the form of warm, fresh flatbread.





With multilevel shops and a skating rink, Ramstor, Almaty's first of more than 20 modern malls, opened in 1999.

Apanasevich is foregoing lunch to give me a whirlwind tour of what remains of the city's czarist legacy.

"There's no zoning, no building classification, no historic preservation," Apanasevich laments as we admire the interlacing stucco flowers decorating a children's library. Its blend of Palladian columns and glittering blue mosaic glass, an echo of Samarkand, makes it one of the city's gems. A few blocks away, dozens of wood-frame homes that embody traditional Russian country architecture are being dismantled. Across the street, whitewashed buildings, embellished by green and blue shutters, pedimented windows and intricate decorative friezes, will soon make way for multi-family apartment blocks.

At the corner of Furmanova and Kurmangazy streets, we marvel over a superb 1906 mansion,

a neo-Baroque confection, painted an arresting aqua-blue pastel color and trimmed in white stucco, one of the best-preserved czarist-era buildings in the city. Further down Kurmangazy, we pass a brand new, high-rise office building faced in beige limestone. A Korean-Japanese restaurant on the ground floor has opened so recently that it doesn't yet have a sign. "No different from Singapore or Shanghai," sniffs Apanasevich deprecatingly.

These days, Almaty's ambitious pulse indeed seems to beat in rhythm with those cities. Mercedes convertibles and SUV's roar up its boulevards or idle in infernal traffic jams. More

than 500,000 vehicles clog urban arteries every day. Flush with oil and gas wealth and eager to flaunt it, the moneyed classes flood glitzy shopping malls and tony boutiques, snapping up luxury French jewelry and suitcases, Hungarian porcelain and \$2000 Italian suits. Next to an outdoor vendor doing brisk business in steaming plates of *plov* (rice with meat, carrots and onions) and *shashlyk* (skewered meat), one food emporium near the opera house stocks hundreds of French and Italian wines, Chinese pastries and Kenyan coffee.

Skateboarders clatter down the pavement in front of the old Parliament building, now home to the Kazakh-British Technical University. Up the street, prosperous businesspeople and

Korean refrigerators for sale on Navoi Street: Tashkent's population of some 4 million imports heavily from Turkey, Russia, China and Korea.





Multi-ethnic Kazakhs, united by the Russian language for 130 years, increasingly use Kazakh, a Turkic language—or English.

Biennale. Sorokina, a woman of irrepressible energy who trained in arts management in Vienna and Salzburg, remains optimistic. “People here are oriented to the West, so if we get attention abroad, they sit up and take notice,” Sorokina remarks. Earlier this year, she mounted a collaborative exhibition mingling Central Asian and British artists that showed in Manchester, London and Almaty.

Central Asian cinema is another reflection of changing tastes along the new Silk Roads. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, according to movie critic Gulnara Abikeyeva, “local directors are turning away from Russia and more toward Asia. Kazakh movies are close to Chinese cinema, Uzbekistan films are like India’s, and the few new

Tajik films look Iranian.” A tireless champion of regional cinema, Abikeyeva organized September’s Eurasian Festival in Almaty that showcased some 70 films in a weeklong program.

A recent spate of historical movies attempts to exalt the Kazakh national myths and heroes suppressed during the Soviet era. The \$37-million epic “Nomad,” released in 2005, was a glorification of Kazakh heritage that *The New York Times* compared to a John Ford western. Although Kazakh films—there are 22 currently in production—win festival prizes around the world, Abikeyeva complains that they’re almost never distributed inside the country, except for a few airing on television.

Televisions are much on my mind when I land in Tashkent after a two-hour flight from Almaty.

Passing through Uzbekistan customs, it seems as if every other passenger is pushing a large, flat-screen TV. A couple of days later, I discover why.

Walking down Navoi Street, a tree-shaded thoroughfare with a tramway running down the middle, I happen on a sprawling electronics and appliance market that stretches for a mile or more. It proves an eye-opening update on the latest trading patterns in this ancient Silk Roads city. Rows of shops are filled with televisions, home-theater systems, computers and office furniture. Outside, the street is lined with a bewildering array of Korean refrigerators, Chinese air conditioners, Russian

Popular paintings for sale in a Tashkent park romanticize Timurid history and the rugged spirit of pre-industrial, nomadic steppe life.





Replicas of the fifth-century BC "Golden Man," a 4000-piece suit of gold armor, have become symbols of Kazakh independence.

washing machines and Byelorussian ovens. Salesmen have set up computers at desks on the street, and they are playing music over loudspeakers. I stop in one electronics store and find that a Panasonic television with a 127-centimeter (52") screen sells for \$5000—far more than the price outside the country. No wonder customs was jammed with them. In Uzbekistan, where college professors earn \$100 a month and many people work one or two extra jobs to supplement \$50 monthly wages, I wonder who could afford such extravagances—much less the \$12,000 and \$24,000 automobiles manufactured inside Uzbekistan by Daewoo. I later learn from Kamal Asya, the Turkish ambassador, that individual Uzbeks annually import some

\$1 billion of goods from Turkey, mostly textiles, food and appliances—yet another lucrative link, by truck, air and rail, along the new Silk Roads.

Like Almaty, Tashkent too is minting a new bourgeoisie and not a few plutocrats. Lavish mansions, complete with crenellated walls and pointy-roofed turrets, sprout in some precincts. Even though these pleasure domes are modeled on the châteaux of the Loire and princely Czech residences, they are generically dubbed "Mickey palaces" after the castle at Disneyland.

Built on the second- or first-century BC site of Ming-Uruk ("A Thousand Apricot Trees"), Tashkent, whose 11th-century name means "City of Stone," is the most populous city in

Central Asia, with around 4.5 million inhabitants in a country of 27 million. A major caravan junction in AD 751, when it was conquered by Arab Muslims, Tashkent is now divided into two sections: a Russian one, with broad boulevards, grandiose marble government edifices, parks and fountains, built mostly after the 1966 earthquake, and the older Uzbek neighborhoods with one- and two-story courtyard homes and bazaars that survived the massive temblor, which registered 7.5 on the Richter scale.

During the communist era, Uzbekistan was known as the most progressive country in Central Asia, attracting immigrants from other Soviet republics to the relative freedom of its intellectual and cultural life, especially in

Newcomers to a national cuisine long influenced by trade, hot dogs are becoming as Uzbek as *plov*.





Driven by the oil and gas industry, Almaty's economy expands some 10 percent annually. Cars are the new top status symbols.

Tashkent. Today it's still the most culturally active city in Central Asia, with a lively arts scene in theater, music, painting, dance and design.

But its heavily state-controlled economy, which depends on cotton as its main export, is now considerably weaker than that of its oil-rich northern neighbor. "In terms of foreign markets, we're even behind Afghanistan—although our economy is much bigger overall," complains Erkin Makhmudov, Moscow-trained chairman of the economics department at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy.

Makhmudov admits that, 15 years ago, he knew little about western economies. "After the collapse of the Soviet Union, my colleagues and I bought marketing texts in the US and UK

and taught directly from them at first," he recalls. "Gradually, we started producing our own texts." Makhmudov also journeyed to the University of Oklahoma with a group of students to study western educational systems, and he has since welcomed Oklahoma professors and undergraduates to Tashkent, where he teaches them about Central Asian history and economy.

One of Makhmudov's former students later spent time in Europe with his father analyzing restaurant design and operation. After a few months, they returned to Tashkent and recently opened J. Smokers, which has become a wildly successful knock-off of a British pub.

"It's just one example of how a rising generation of entrepreneurs can

stay in Uzbekistan and create private businesses that work," Makhmudov maintains. In a far-flung expansion of the trade in ideas, it's also tangible proof of the way Central Asia can now reach far afield for a trendy marketing concept.

While new restaurants and cafés spring up across the city, Tashkent's 20 or so theaters—the number is equivalent to Moscow's—are among the region's busiest. One popular children's venue recently staged Molière's "Les Fourberies de Scapin" in Uzbek. Only one, however—the experimental Ilkhom Theater—boasts a truly international reputation, having toured London, Seattle, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Jerusalem and Moscow and earned plaudits that compared the troupe to

As the nations of Central Asia assert new identities, historian Edvard Rtveladze hopes they will also strengthen their common bonds.





Bubbles and pigeons make for a kid's day out in Almaty's Gorky Park, one of the city's largest.

the Maly Theater in St. Petersburg, Peter Brook's Bouffes du Nord in Paris and Berlin's Schaubühne. Founded in 1976 by the late Tashkent-born Mark Weil, the fiercely iconoclastic Ilkhom ("Inspirations" in Uzbek) is one of only a handful of private theaters in Central Asia. It refuses government subsidies on principle. Weil produced plays about political dissent and homosexuality, thinly veiled political attacks on Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, and works by Aeschylus, Chekhov and Albee.

"You know, I really was crazy," Weil reflected, smiling about defying the censors during the Soviet era. "Thank God, *perestroika* came and saved me."

I spoke with the director at the theater's café, where actors, audiences and

students at Ilkhom's acting school gather for animated discussions in a surrealist décor—small tables and chairs are attached upside down to the ceiling, with lamps, books, cups and ashtrays glued to the tabletops—a visual metaphor, perhaps, for the way Ilkhom seeks to upend convention and conventional perspectives. A compact, engaging character in his mid-50's, Weil flitted from table to table, greeting friends and playgoers with his elfin grin and offhand humor.

"People are always amazed to find an experimental theater in Tashkent, but there's an openness and tolerance in this city that runs very deep," Weil declared. Tragically, three months after our

interview, in early September, Weil was attacked and fatally stabbed by two men in the lobby of his apartment building. Despite much speculation that the attack was political, cultural or sectarian (Weil was Jewish), no suspects have been arrested. He died hours before the season premiere of "The Oresteia," and his last words were, "I open a new season tomorrow, and everything must happen."

Though with a heartbroken cast, the play did indeed open, and Ilkhom continued its season under deputy artistic director Boris Gafurov; a US tour in March and April of 2008 is still planned.

There are other culture creators in Tashkent, too: Among the most prolific organizations is the Swiss Agency for

Students wait for tickets outside the Ilkhom Theater, whose Uzbek name translates as "Inspirations."





A bridal party arrives by carriage in Republic Square, which commemorates Kazakhstan's 1991 independence, ...

Development and Cooperation, which produces art, music, dance, film, video installations, photographic exhibitions and books on a shoestring budget of around \$250,000 a year. One concert, later released on DVD, brought together Iranian musicians now living in Bukhara. In Tashkent, an annual documentary film festival and a separate laboratory workshop for theater and film directors draw participants from all over the region. A series of radio programs focuses on celebratory feasts by some of the country's 100 different ethnic groups.

"Our purpose is to help Uzbek culture survive without the level of government funding it had during Soviet times," explains Barno Turgonova, chief cultural officer for the Swiss

agency and a Tashkent native. "It's a long process to find our identity after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Through arts, we can help people cultivate their democratic conscience and pluralism."

The emphasis on nurturing national identity is all well and good, argues producer-director Ovlyakuli Khodjakuli. "But our writers end up focusing too much on Uzbek heroes like Amir Timur [Tamerlane] and Mirzo Ulugh Beg [Timurid astronomer-ruler] instead of contemporary issues that really engage them."

With wispy braids making punctuation marks on his chin and shaven head, the 48-year-old director spent a year developing Rap-Shee, a hyper-charged blend of local rap performers

singing and dancing with traditionalist *bakhshi*, singer-narrators of the *dastan*, the Central Asian historical epics told in poetry and music. Sponsored by the Swiss agency, Rap-Shee toured Uzbekistan in the spring of 2006.

Edvard Rtveldze, a renowned historian and archeologist, also questions the rush by independent Central Asian countries to assert separate identities. His concern is that it can foster what he terms "ethnic exceptionalism," falsely pitting one country against another. "Each population claims it's the most ancient, the most Asian, the most authentic," he argues, "but in reality it's impossible to separate them."

"My biggest fear is that the countries of Central Asia will dissolve into fierce competition economically and

Built in the late 16th century, the Timurid-style Kukeldash Madrasa still functions as a mosque and school.





... and there transfers to a far more fashionable conveyance, fueled by one of the country's leading exports.

politically," he warns. "We desperately need to generate more intensive cross-cultural contacts."

As in Kazakhstan, the Russian language is in retreat in Uzbekistan, its role as unifier of ethnic groups outweighed by the freight of its colonialist origins. The country has gone so far as to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet: The Uzbek language now appears in Roman characters. This linguistic curveball has had a chilling effect on literacy, because most older Uzbeks now find they cannot read current works in their own language, and there are few books or bookstores.

Yet with more than 150 years of shared linguistic, historic and cultural connections, Russia will remain an indelible influence on Uzbekistan, in

the view of many observers. "The current generation is very pragmatic," argues journalist Boris Golender. "They look to move to places where they can make the most money—Russia and Kazakhstan. They go away for one or two years, come back, then go away again."

"Russia will be an important economic and cultural partner for decades, far more than China or India," he insists. I reflect on Golender's comments as I listen to professors and students at the Tashkent Conservatory render a heartfelt musical homage to Mstislav Rostropovich, the Russian cellist and conductor who passed away in April 2007, and again later during three days of celebrations to honor the

19th-century Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. It's clear that Russian culture retains a tenacious hold on the local imagination, even in the face of an insistent push for Uzbekification.

But if there's one place in Tashkent where Uzbek tradition still reigns supreme, just as it did in the epoch of the livestock-powered Silk Roads, it's the bustling, seemingly timeless Chorzu bazaar. Under the massive turquoise dome covering the spice and food market, eager vendors proffer samples from mounds of chili powder, cumin, coriander, nutmeg, paprika and cardamom seeds. Women with sharp Mongolian features chat with one another behind heaps of dates, pistachios and raisins, thumb-sized balls of yoghurt and rock crystals of sugar that gleam

With the food shortages of the Soviet era now only a memory, today's trade patterns fill the shelves in a Tashkent grocery.





Post-independence youth may know "Silk Way" best as the name of an upscale mall, a new bazaar with global connections.

amber in the slanting sunlight. Next to stands groaning with small green and red apples, pears, bananas, carrots and cassava, a butcher in white skullcap straddles a stool, ready to carve from a slab of meat in a cloth-covered basket before him.

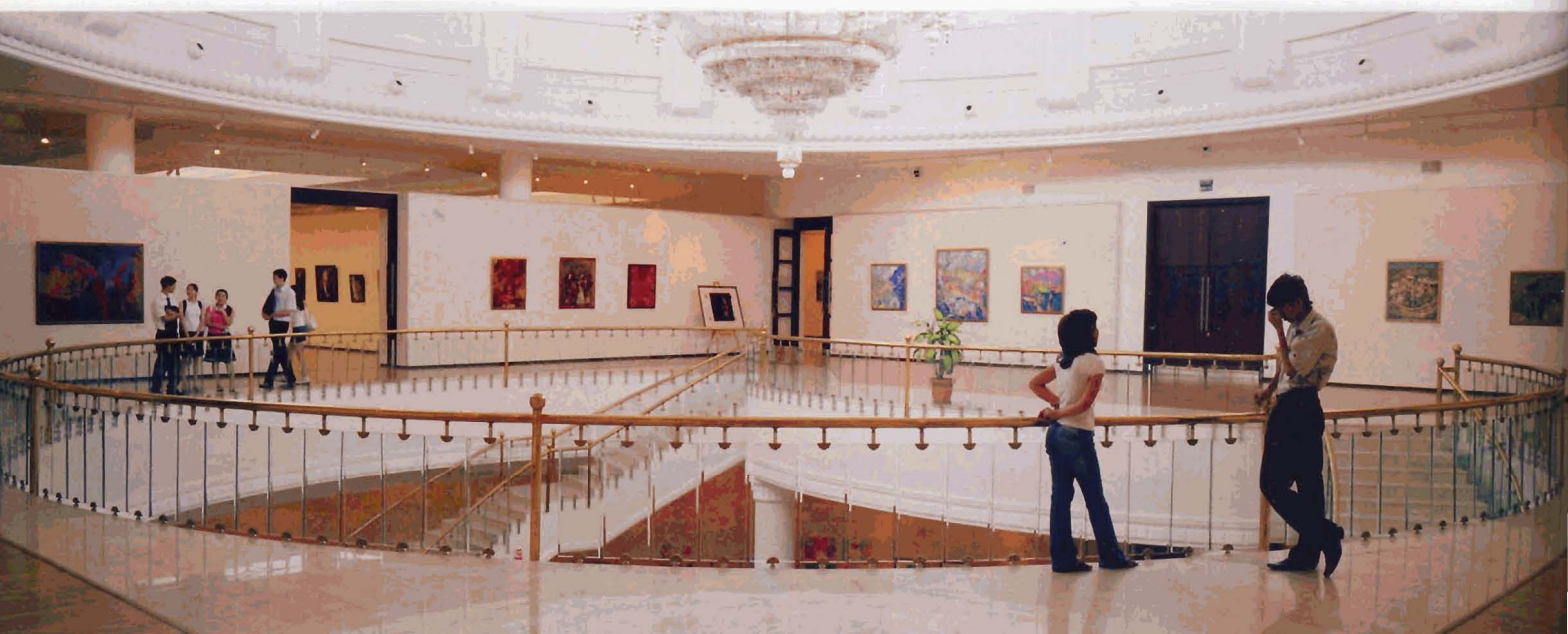
But even here in the bazaar, where merchants hawk produce as they have for more than a millennium, the 21st-century transformation is inescapable—especially the intrusion of factory goods from China. Down a flight of steps, closer to the Friday Mosque, tables and stalls overflow with the manufactured output of Shanghai and Shenzhen—shirts, leather sandals, knock-off sneakers, purses, jewelry, watches, giant stuffed pink bears

and stacks of mass-produced bowls festooned with ceramic grapes.

Exiting, I take the number eight tram to the end of the line and emerge into a quiet, leafy suburb of low, pastel-colored houses surrounding enclosed courtyards. Kids play ball in the well-kept but rutted lanes lined with apple, plum and birch trees. After wandering a few of the streets, I catch the tram back into the city. On the way, I notice a woman fastidiously sweeping the ground beneath the high portal that marks the entrance to the Oq Masjid *mahallah*, one of the many distinct neighborhoods that make up the Muslim part of Tashkent. Civic pride in one's mahallah, the focus of family and religious life, is a constant that knits Uzbek society together.

The tram rumbles past a column of cherry trees so close that the branches slap the windows. Although the outbound trip slipped by quickly, we're returning at a crawl, for some reason, lumbering forward so deliberately I can count the orange carnations growing along the rails. The car grinds along at about the speed of a fully laden camel, and it occurs to me how quickly you can leave the teeming urban center behind, both physically and mentally. Souped-up Almaty may be supercharged for the Silk Roads of the future, but Tashkent, like this tram, is taking its own sweet time. ☉

The Art Gallery of Uzbekistan, opened in 2004, is a showcase for 20th- and 21st-century national art, as well as a regional numismatic collection.





Today, Almaty's only camels are sculptures, each decorated by a different artist and placed whimsically about the city.



Paris-based author **Richard Covington** writes about culture, history and science for *Smithsonian*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *U.S. News & World Report* and the *London Sunday Times*. His e-mail is richardpeacecovington@gmail.com.



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Silk Roads (theme issue): J/A 88
 Silk Roads (historic map): J/A 88
 Kazakhstan: M/J 03
 Uzbekistan history: J/A 84, N/D 80



Kevin Bubriski (www.kevinbubriski.com) is a documentary photographer who lives in southern Vermont. His solo exhibition "Nepal Photographs: 1975–2005" recently showed at the Rubin Museum in New York City.



To learn more about another "Heart of the New Silk Roads," read "Graduation in Kyrgyzstan" in this issue at www.saudiaramcoworld.com; you can also find a map of the historic Silk Roads archived in our July/August 1988 issue.

Remembering Mark Weil

I only spoke with him a couple of times, but like many, I felt an immediate and deep rapport with



Mark Weil. Later, while writing this article, he and I exchanged a few e-mails about bringing Ilkhom to perform in France, where I live. He had a marvelous wit and an uncanny knack for putting people at ease—social skills exceeded only by his commitment to world-class theater in Tashkent, thousands of kilometers from better-established theater capitals. Both of these qualities inspired immense loyalty and respect from his actors and audiences alike. The extended professional family of Ilkhom is determined to honor Weil's legacy by continuing Ilkhom's courage on stage. ① www.remembermark.com

—R.C.

Upscale shopping at the Oloy ("Supreme") Bazaar is now one more stop along the the region's new Silk Roads.





WHITE WHITE BLACK STORK

THE POETRY OF STORK TALK

Robert Shore, Metro 08.06.06



White White Black Stork

Makhzum, a young Muslim from Tashkent who spends his time writing poems and dreaming of storks, is sent to an Islamic college to study.

When he is caught trying to kiss another boy, his scandal-fearing father decides to marry him off in a hastily arranged ceremony to a girl who is herself already in love with someone else. Strong religious and social traditions ensure that, despite the repeated refrain that they 'have entered the 20th century', grievances between the two families compound themselves and tragedy follows.

The Ilkhom Theatre's adaptation of this story by cult Uzbek writer Abdullah Kadyri is given in Russian and Uzbek, with surtitles in flickering text on an electronic board above the stage.

Although this is distracting, especially sitting at the front of The Pit's auditorium, the action is so slowmoving that you are in little danger of not being able to keep up.

Director Mark Weil tells his tale with elegant poetic simplicity, strongly assisted by Aziza Sadykova's evocative score. The playing area is dominated by gourdlike containers filled with water, feathers and - ominously - ashes, and a huge tree hung with swings.

The actors perhaps spend too much time jogging around the tree pursuing one another but that doesn't stop the performance from accruing a solemn intensity all the same.

Details are correct at the time of publication - please check with venue before booking.

Reviews Gate

Posted by : TimothyRamsden on Jun 07, 2006
WHITE WHITE BLACK STORK
by Yolkin Tuichiev from stories by Abdullah Kadyri

Barbican (Pit) To June 2006
Mon-Sat 7.45pm
Runs 1hr 35min No interval

TICKETS: 0845 120 7554
www.barbican.org.uk (reduced booking fee online)
Review: Timothy Ramsden 6 June

From Tashkent with love, sorrow and accomplishment.

I recall an hilarious 1950s account of an attempt to introduce *Macbeth* to an African village. The listeners understood everything in terms of their own culture, re-inventing Shakespeare wildly. I might be doing the same for this piece, based on stories a century old from Tashkent. Mention of Islam, Sharia'a law and the Russian Empire might import all kinds of misunderstandings through ignorance or from other connections.

Yet it seems that the frustration of love and the demands of orthodoxy in destroying young lives here could come from any tight, authority-bound community. The bones of the story and characters might have been written by Thomas Hardy about rural Wessex only a few years before Abdullah Kadyri's action is set.

Despite the piece starting with births, the titular storks seem more to do with emotional longing. Yet the story, set round a revolving tree with swings attached (one broke at Tuesday's performance, possibly inhibiting their later use), shows recognisable circumstances. Young Makhzum is undertaking spiritual learning in the Madrased where his mild-mannered father Okhund teaches.

Makhzum's attachment to impoverished pupil Karim leads to allegations of homosexuality. Karim's expelled while Okhund tries to stifle rumours about his son through a hasty marriage. Prospective father-in-law is the forceful Said, who bargains hard for his daughter then uses the law, both village justice and the Russian District Court, when he believes she's been dishonoured.

She meanwhile dreams of a young cloth-seller who dashes in and out, a magical creature like the storks. He, like Karim, is rarely seen and their romantic impact on the young villagers contrasts the trouble and inability to help they respectively bring.

The heart of this piece, seen under unremitting white light, is the suffering of Makhzum and his forced bride Makhichekhra; the tragedy is, when not forced on each other, they are mutually sympathetic. Around them lie the hard-bargaining and anger of parents who look out for themselves or fear loss of honour, plus the inevitable chattering gossips.

The acting is lithe and clearly-characterised, only the thundering musical interpolations interrupting an action which has its own intensity and focus.

White White Black Stork, The Pit, Barbican, London

By Chris Wilkinson

Published: June 7 2006 17:47 | Last updated: June 7 2006 17:47

Adolescence can be hell anywhere. But for 16-year-old Makhzum, growing up in Uzbekistan at the turn of the 19th century, it virtually destroys his life. He is a gentle lad, content to sit in his garden writing poetry, surrounded by the white storks that nest there. Worried about this seemingly aimless existence, his parents pack him off to the local madrasa to study and pray in the hope it will turn him into a man. But when he falls in love with another male pupil, he is forced into an arranged marriage to avert the shame this would bring on his family. This collision between his emerging identity and the expectations of family and society creates a shock wave that threatens to tear apart everything around him.

At a first glance, this show appears to be little more than a simple fable told in a direct and uncomplicated manner. Yet the challenge the story poses to the binding and oppressive traditions that are suffocating Makhzum and his family is far more subversive than this. It is presented by the Ilkhom Theatre from Tashkent, a company formed when Uzbekistan was part of the USSR. Under the direction of Mark Weill, they have spent 30 years presenting work that seeks to probe and challenge the country's successive dictatorial regimes from within. Tyranny fears spontaneity, so the story of the emergence and destruction of an illicit love becomes a potent allegory for the corrosive effects that overbearing power can have on the human spirit.

Shukrat Abdumalikov's beautifully arid set – a dusty stage dominated by an ancient, dying tree – is ideal for Weill's unfussy production. Unfortunately, however, there are far more mundane factors than state oppression hampering the show. The play is performed in Uzbek and Russian, but the surtitles are slow and often make it hard to tell who is saying what and to whom. And the recorded musical score is needlessly melodramatic. Nonetheless, this is a touching, gently sad piece from an important international company.

Ilkhom Theatre Celebrates 20 Years of Perestroika

By Eric Walberg

Special to The Moscow Tribune

TASHKENT — Imagine Tashkent in 1976 — a physical and cultural desert thousands of miles from Moscow at the height of the era of stagnation. But a brave theatre director unfurled his own red flag to start a quiet cultural revolution here in this pokey provincial centre and helped pave the way for Gorbachev's reforms 10 years later.

"I never gave it a second thought," Mark Weil told me. "I knew I had only one life and that I was born to be a director. There was no conspiracy. We cleared out a basement storeroom and began our theatre." But what Weil did was at that time unimaginable: create a completely independent studio theatre, which he named after the Uzbek word for inspiration, *ilkhom*.

Ilkhom is celebrating its 20th season this year, and though the Soviet Union is no longer, the theatre still breathes much-needed life into this far-flung corner of the former giant.

How did Weil manage what was impossible elsewhere? "We didn't realise how dangerous it was," he told me. "We just opened. We had no money, and actors performed free at 10 p.m. after their regular performances. They didn't dare close us down because it was so popular."

It was only when they staged the first production of Alexander Vampilov's *Duck Hunting* in 1977 that the authorities stepped in to put a stop to "anti-Soviet propaganda." Vampilov's plays have no positive heroes, which was anathema to Soviet culture, and were never performed during his lifetime. He drowned in Lake Baikal in 1975.

"They tried to buy us off by offering to let us form a Young Creators' Club, where we would of course put on the plays they chose," said Weil with a wry smile.

For all its Asian traditions of conservatism, Tashkent has been a haven for outcasts of Soviet rule. There are



Photo by Olga Gubanova

Boris Gafuov (L) performing in Camus' *Caligula* produced by the Ilkhom theatre. From the time of its brave beginning in 1976 the Tashkent-based theatre continues to battle the odds to survive.

and Russians who were either deported here or fled here as enemies of the people from the 1930s on. "It's kind of 'live and let live' here," I was told by Ima, a Tatar woman whose family fled Stalin's anti-Catholic campaign

and explains the clink Weil was able to make in the system.

Weil and his company lived on nervous energy, never giving up. In 1979, they were invited to a Russian theatre festival in Moscow. Despite

Russian premiere of *Duck Hunting*, the Ministry of Culture officials would only allow them to perform a Garcia Lorca pastiche. "From then on, there was a constant pilgrimage from Moscow to Tashkent by theatre people. We got press in Moscow but couldn't perform there — maybe that's why we could get the press," said Weil thoughtfully.

Finally in 1982, they made their first tour to Moscow which was "an absolute triumph. All the intelligentsia came — Radzinsky, Rozov, Shatrov, Arbutov. We performed at Mossovet."

Did his persistence help create more clinks in the Soviet monolith? "No doubt about it. We proved it was possible for David to take on Goliath," Weil said proudly.

The next year, they gambled again with a production of Razumovskii's *Dear Yelena Sergeevna*, and the theatre was closed for a month. "They insisted there were no such teachers or students in the Soviet Union," Uzbek actress Svetlana Norbaeva, who joined Ilkhom at that time, told me. (Eldar Ryzanov made a film based on the play in 1987).

By contrast, Moscow's first studio theatre, created by Tabakov in 1979, had to be officially sponsored by the regional Komsomol, and even then Tabakov was blacklisted and the theatre closed in 1982, to be reopened only after Gorbachev came to power.

As the Soviet Union wound down, Ilkhom blossomed, touring Russia, Europe, and eventually America, working with actors from Seattle, Tashkent's twin city. However, now that Moscow is free of its cultural taskmasters, the seminal role Ilkhom played in the past has been eclipsed.

What of the future? Norbaeva speaks of the hemorrhage of Tashkent's intelligentsia. "Two of our best actors

left for Israel last spring, and another leaves for Volgograd in January."

And then there's the problem: of financial independence, which, ironically, is more costly in the insecure environment of a capitalist economy than it was during the years of stagnation. "But then Nemirovich-Danchenko once said that a good theatre can only last 20 years," she said with resignation.

Their main sponsor is Airos, the service company for Uzbek Airways, "but the National Bank now refuses to let Airos give us the money," said Weil, though he insisted there is no political interference involved. "What we need are good laws, so we know where we stand and can plan within the constraints."

The real problem according to Weil is not Uzbek politics, but the fact that the breakup of the USSR means the loss of their all-union audience. "There's no longer any Uzbek cinema, and no opportunities for my actors on TV or radio. Of course they have to leave. Actors must have recognition. And without a constant flow of new talent, no theatre can survive," Weil said with quiet resignation.

However, he's not a quitter, as his remarkable career proves. The other side of independence is the constant flow of foreigners. Ilkhom has plans for a Japanese tour in May and while we were speaking, European theatre director, Roberto Ciulli, arrived to discuss a tour to Germany in the spring.

Incidentally, it turns out that Ciulli was not allowed to mount his own version of one of Ilkhom's more successful productions, Brecht's little-known *A Bourgeois Wedding*. Weil never thought to ask the Brecht estate for permission to put on this satire on manners, and it has been in their repertoire 16 years... Being at the end of the world sometimes has its advantages.



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That's Fit to Print

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C11

Ilkhom

Triplex Theater

One virtue of the New York Inter-

national Festival of the Arts this year was its organizers' willingness to cut across conventional boundaries. If the definition of dance was stretched to include wordless drama or a mixture of folk genres, a festival program like "Ragtime for Clowns" by Ilkhom, an experimental theater company from the Soviet Union, also defied stereotyped labels.

On the surface, the morning performance presented on June 16 was a mime show for four clownlike figures coping with one another and life around them. Beating the system might have been the production's leit-motif but under Mark Weil's direction, the four very different characters danced around rapidly changing predicaments with the dexterity of silent-film comics.

Ilkhom, which means inspiration in Uzbek, was founded by Mr. Weil in 1976 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, when seeking a fresh approach to staging familiar plays and giving exposure to young playwrights was often consid-

ered a deviation from the political norm.

"Ragtime for Clowns" is an outgrowth of experiments in improvisation as is an expanded version, "Clomadeus," which is to be performed on Wednesday night at the Movement Theater International festival in Philadelphia.

There was nothing startling about "Ragtime for Clowns." But its little-man images, keyed to personality transformations, were fresh and able to communicate on several levels.

The cast was made up of types. Mikhail Kaminsky's brilliant grace as a popeyed quick-moving huge fall guy, often played victim to Mukhammad Iso Abdulkairov's lithe trickster. Georgi Korshunov's boyishness did not conceal his dramatic expressiveness: his mimed oration (as a party functionary?) had superb gestural power. Bakhram Matchanov was a picture of refinement as the esthete in the group.

ANNA KISSELGOFF

Topeng Balinese Clowns at MTI festival

By Nancy Goldner
Inquirer Dance Critic

Start out with an ancient classical dance form and a 16th-century story, add some stock characters out of vaudeville, sprinkle references to today's newspaper headlines — and you've got the delightfully wild caserole presented by the Topeng Balinese Clowns on Wednesday at the

THEATER REVIEW

MTI Tabernacle Theater, as part of the current clown festival.

The occasional Balinese program that turns up in the United States is usually a serious and an impenetrably foreign experience.

In keeping with the clown theme

of this year's Movement Theater International festival, however, this presentation was full of buffoonery, much of it deriving from a crazy mix of language.

The cast included five Balinese and one American, all of whom could switch from Balinese to English to a host of pidgin variations on each with all due regard for the comical effect of sometimes missing a beat.

I confess that at first I was startled by the slapstick, but was quickly charmed by it. Although the performers were not especially good dancers, the integrity of the Balinese dance style — with its stimulating contrasts between fluttery and grounded movement and between staccato and languorous rhythms — sustained the piece through its many digressions.

The dance-drama was preceded by two pure-dance solos, one by a man wearing a mask whose expression was that of utter astonishment and one by a man whose mask epitomized smugness. Was it the mask that made his gestures look smug, or was it his gestures that gave such vivid life to his mask?

The piece, presented by the Ikhom Theater-Studio from Tashkent in the Soviet Union, also posed an interesting question. Pervading the serio-comic tenor of *Clomadeus* was a sense of the actors living in a vacuum, under the threat of annihilation by another, larger vacuum. Is this air of cosmic desolation an inevitable response to — and commentary on — life in the Soviet Union? Perhaps. But I suspect that Beckett is as large an influence. What contemporary forms of theater are not influenced by him?

Soviet contemporary theater is a fascinating phenomenon in itself, but more to the point of *Clomadeus* were the superb actors, whose characters seemed such natural extensions of their off-stage selves as to render the work of director Mark Weil, a noted new-wave Soviet director, all but invisible.

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 actors are Mikhail Kaminsky, Bakhran Matchanov, Ilya Limansky and Georgi Lorchunov. The distinctions sustained by each actor through the 90-minute piece kept it throbbingly and often hilariously alive.

As is true of much movement theater, *Clomadeus* hangs on the suggestive qualities of ordinary props and activities. They lead the actors into fantastical enactments of human behavior — most often its baser forms. The play moves from vignette to vignette with seemingly free-fall randomness, but the actors' responses to the situations and each other are marvelously predictable.

In one of the show's most enchanting moments, the intellectual and the innocent are in rapture as they tinkle pure-sounding bells close to their ears. But wouldn't you know, in lumbers the bully with an out-of-tune bass fiddle, and there goes paradise.

Mayhem of a slapstick genius that defies words

By Helen Lucy Burke

SEEING genius on stage is like getting a high-voltage charge of electricity. The group — playing *Clonades* at Andrews Lane had one genius, one near genius, and two others who would sweep the stage clean of competition in any other company. By the time you read this, the Russian Ikhom Theatre Studio has finished in Dublin.

Do everything humanly possible to get them back. The genius was egg-shaped, thinning on top, with the face of a decadent Roman Emperor. The near-genius was a dark Harpo Marx — but funnier — and the remaining pair were distinguished respectively by a long thin neck surmounted by a spectacled face, and by a rubber-flexible body and Mongolian

Marxist features: Karl Marxist, not Harpo Marxist. Message was there none. They held the stage for an hour and a half of mayhem.

My favourite bit was when the set was bitten off and returned casually. My companion's favourite bit was the courtship of the two balloons. But that omitted the kissing of members of the

audience, and the bit where the young chap stripped — it was my second naked man of the week — and the pop-art sequence. And hold it! The statue. This is cult stuff. The audience emerged doubled up and holding its collective stomach where the muscles had got sore with laughing. And all done almost speechlessly, for what this marvellous group did was understandable wherever the Muse of Comedy dwells. I vote it Best of the Mayday to Bloomsday Festival.

from the Army; location, the sitting room of a small flat.

Enter tall good-looking Max in a red dressing-gown, crying "God!" in the grip of a hangover. Fey bespectacled dancer Rudi follows. The two men kiss.

A sibilant inhalation whistles through the audience at Garter Lane in Waterford. The men, an airy-fairy pair, chit-chat. Enter Wolf, a casual pick-up from the night before, who is the boyfriend of

is a man in drag, by the by — Max and Rudi go on the run. I must say I liked Greta's wig and hairstyle, and would like to get the name of her couturier. There is little shocking or surprising in the atmosphere of epinephrine sleaze; we have seen it all before in *I Am A Camera* or *Cobaret*. We were in fact being manipulated by the author, who is showing us that queers (the word used in the play) are no finer, nobler, or indeed less vile and noble, than the rest of us. We were being set up for the contrast of the Second Act, set in Dachau. The set here was spectacular. A

THE BIRSHIMMES

DUBLIN, FRIDAY, MAY 24, 1991

"Clomadeus" at Andrew's Lane Theatre

By Victoria White

"CLOMADEUS", presented by Theatre Ilkhom from Tashkent in Soviet Asia, at Andrew's Lane Theatre, is for anyone who's ever wanted to take all his clothes off on a station platform and just sit there... And see what happens. For the crack.

The production leaps off from the mundanity of four men standing on a platform and goes where you've always wanted to go if you had the nerve. To death and back, in and out of big hats and little hats, in and out of drag and silly suits.

Unadulterate clowning is the order of the night, from four wonderfully skilled actors: the corpulent Mikhail Kaminsky, the weedy Ilya Ljaminsky, the intellectual Bakhram Matchanov, the mad little fool, Georgy Korshunov. The show is obviously the result of long and loving improvisation, under the sure direction of Mark Weil, and it is obvious that the performances come from the heart of the actors, who have no technical limitations to hamper their expression. They can turn a cartwheel or turn their faces inside out with an ease that denotes years of training.

The political message is plain, as the performers try out words like a baby does, just for their sound — "Stalin", "Siberia", silly little words like any others. The show brings us right back to the joyous clown hidden somewhere in us, as obstinate as the little tails at the tip of our spines.