

Ilkhom Theatre Celebrates 20 Years of Perestroika

By Eric Walberg

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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.

