

2.16. THEATRE

The presence of ancient monumental theatres in Illyrian sites such as Apollonia, Butrint, Bylis (Hekal), Nikoia (Klos), Orik, Phoinike (Finiq), Sofratikë (near Gjirokastër) and Durrahachium (Durrës) attest to the existence of theatrical activities during antiquity. Theatrical activity in this period evolved under the influence of ancient Greek theatre with which these centres kept links for a long time. Apollonia is one of the most renowned centres of the time. In the tiers of its theatre, 7,000 people could be seated. Also, in Apollonia's odeum, literary and musical shows were performed (2nd century BC).



Byllis Theatre, 3rd century B.C.

During the Middle Ages there is evidence of theatrical activities of a folklore character.

The drama and theatrical movement was revived in the framework of the National Renaissance of the 19th century. In 1874, Koto Hoxhi organized the first theatrical performance with the theme from the wedding ceremony in Lunxhëria engaging students of the Normal School "Ta Zografia" of Qesarat. In 1899, a group of school students in Korça performed Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*. In 1875, Sami Frashëri (1850-1904) published the drama *The Faith* in Turkish, but with an Albanian theme (and was published in Albania in 1901). In 1880, Leonard de Martino (1830-1923) wrote *The Christmas Night*; in 1882, Pashk Babi wrote *The Son of the Jew*, Françesk Anton wrote Santori *Emira*; and Gjergj Fishta wrote *St. Francis of Assisi* in 1909. Again in the framework of the struggle for independence, Fan S. Noli wrote *Israelites and Philistines* in 1902, and Kristo Floqi wrote *Religion and Nationalism* in 1912. Shtjefën Gjeçovi and Mihal Grameno also wrote dramas, but dramatic literature of this period culminates with Andon Z. Çajupi who wrote the tragedy *Man of the World* and comedies *A 14-year Old Bridegroom* and *After Death* (1902, 1910).



"Oath" drama play by Sami Frashëri, Korça, 1909

In the first years of the 19th century, societies and clubs were set up, such as "Labëria" club (September 2, 1902), "Bashkimi" club in Delvinë (1909) and Women's Society "Ylli i Mëngjesit", which performed theatrical activities. Afterwards, other authors would appear such as Haki Stërmilli with his works *Love and Faithfulness*, *Beatific Dawn*, *The Wretched Dibrania* in 1921; Foqion Postoli with *The Flower of Remembrance*; Kristo Floqi with *Karl Topia*, among others.



Alexander Moissi (Moisiu) the world famous Albanian actor (Durrës, 1979-1935, Vienna)

The activity of the Aleksandër Moisiu (1879-1935), known as the genius of European stages, merits special emphasis. Although



Theatre group of Ethem Haxhiademi, Tirana, 1931

his theatrical activity belongs mostly to German stages, the undeniable fact is that his rare virtues had been inherited from his Albanian origin, such as the force of his temperament, golden voice, intelligence, and marvelous plasticity. Among his most conspicuous interpretations are *Hamlet*, *The Living Corpse*, the character of Franz Mor at Schiller's *The Robbers*, Goethe's *Faust*, *Oedipus Rex*, etc.

In the field of stage production during these years, the first protagonist director Sokrat Miho, who was educated at the Musical Dramatic Academy in Paris, stands out. Also, such actors as Loro Kovaçi, Pjetër Gjoka, Zef Jubani, Mihal Popi, Vangjel Grabocka, Dhorka Sheri, Dhimitër Trajçe, Gaqi Vishi, etc. began their activity on the stage and eventually would be the first pioneers of professional theatres in Tirana, Shkodra, Korça, Vlora and elsewhere.

Its beginnings



Posters of theatre shows of the winter season 2002-2003

Although performances and theatrical groups in Albania date widely to the end of the 19th century, which coincides with the period of the National Renaissance, stirrings of an amateur movement in various types of theater can be encountered in Tirana as well. At the same time, we shouldn't lose sight of that valuable wealth of Tirana's folk culture that encompasses the well-known corpus by the name of "Folk Theater" that includes various games, ceremonials, songs, dances, wedding rituals, funerals and hospitalities, comic mimics and merry pantomimes, carnivals, shadows' theater, puppets' theater, masked shows, etc. In this respect we can rightly claim that although Tirana is not among the ancient towns in Albania, the threads of the theater there originate from their primary forms found in the folk culture. On the basis of historical sources, it is interesting to emphasize that the matter composed for the theatrical shows of the time has been diverse in its nature, whether organized in forms properly dramatic, scenarios and librettos in which many theatrical elements were entangled and arranged within one single theme, or in other forms suitable for the stage.

In the 1930s Tirana becomes one of the main musical theatri-

cal loci with a wide amateur movement that promised evolvement and progress. The “Tirana” theatrical society headed by Mihal Popi was an established and committed group that put on several plays — adaptations by Xhevat Serezi, dramas by F. Postoli, comedies by Molière, Kristo Floqi, plays by Kerner and Schiller, etc. At the same time, many amateur theatrical high school groups were active in Tirana.

In April 1929, the intellectual elite of the country put forward the idea of creating an Albanian national theater, but it did not come to materialize. In 1930, a philodramatic contest was organized for the first time in Tirana in which many theatrical groups of the country took part. Gradually the establishment of a national theater was becoming a necessity. This is why the Ministry of Education opened the first Dramatic School in Albania in 1932, in which 16 boys and 12 girls participated, and which was to train the would-be artists for the theater. The “Federation of the Albanian Boyhood” that was interested in organizing theatrical activities across the country was also created with this Ministry.

Large-scale theatrical movements in the 1920s and 1930s attests to the love of Albanian people for art and, in a broader sense, for cultural identity, emancipation and progress. The cultivation of an Albanian dramaturgy that begins to take shape side by side with the growing quality and artistic demands that would spring from the literary genre proper as such, the creation of an institutional infrastructure through setting up various theatrical societies, the organization of contests, the training of would-be artists — all of these together created the grounds for a significant progress of theatrical activities in Tirana, by now a national cultural phenomenon with its own voice in the processes of the psychological development and the emancipation of the country. Among theatrical societies of the city, many talented actors stand out such as Mihal Popi, Loro Kovaçi, Mihal Stefa, Pjetër Gjoka, etc. We must also mention the great actor of Albanian origin Aleksandër Moisiu who had expressed his sympathy and willingness to help found a national theater.

With the country’s occupation by the Fascist Italy, even though the national art and culture in general saw a gradual decline, in some towns, especially in Tirana, many artistic activities were held including the remaining theatrical groups, especially vocal and concert performances, entertainment shows, etc. Meanwhile, several theatrical groups put on works by native authors that purposely aroused patriotic feelings; there were also works from the foreign drama repertoire that echoed the resistance to the invasion such as, for instance, the drama *Wilhelm Tell* by Schiller.

The more the resistance and struggle for the liberation of the



Refurbished front view of the building of National Theatre located in the centre of Tirana

country were extended and strengthened, the more the intention of developing an artistic stage movement was taking a clear shape with new ideas reflecting the frame of mind of the people that were revolted against the occupation and had already risen in a Liberating War. Various artistic genres and kinds such as songs, partisan marches, sketches, short theatrical plays, epic and humorous folk dances spread with great speed and many of them became widely known. This movement is known as the "partisan theater" (1941-1945). From the standpoint of locations, this artistic activity took place in 1) the mountains, where the units of the National Liberation Army were, 2) the city, and 3) the prisons.

Between the artistic works of a massive character that were performed in the partisan units and those performed underground in Tirana city there existed a similarity that found expression in their democratic traits, the anti-fascist spirit they conveyed, and the simple forms of communication.



Theatre Show "Prefekti"
Comedy of Besim Levonja,
played in the years '50.
Main role played by actor
Mihal Popi

On May 15, 1945, on the basis of this theater, the first *Professional Public Theater* was founded in the history of Albania from which, in 1947, the Popular Theater originated, that is the present-day National Theater. In order for the actors to be trained, the Dramatic School was opened at the Central Theater in 1944 and a contest was announced for professional actors. The school was attended by many of the first actors of the Theater that would later become its distinguished artists such as Mihal Popi, Kadri Roshi, Naim Frashëri, Besim Levonja, Drita Pelinku, Prokop Mima, etc. The theater and the school was directed by the well-known stage producer Sokrat Mio. During the first two years of the Dramatic School, but also later on, from the amateur movement across the towns other talented actors were recruited such as Sandër Prosi, Pjetër Gjoka, Sulejman Pitarka, Violeta Manushi, Maria Logoreci, Loro Kovaçi, etc.

During this period, in 1950, in order to further the musical and choreographic activity, the *Public Philharmonic* was founded in Tirana which included the Radio Tirana Orchestra, the Public Chorus, the Dance Group (Ballet Group) and some lyrical singers. Previously, various groups had performed their concert activities in the premises of the Popular Theater, but with the founding of the Philharmonic, the professional nucleus was created which would later serve as a basis for the *Opera and Ballet Theater* that was founded in 1953. The Philharmonic paved the way for higher artistic demands and for establishing a policy of securing a continuous repertoire. In the first years of its existence, apart from songs and dances, the Philharmonic per-

formed opuses of great symphonic and vocal genres by Albanian authors and especially by distinguished world authors. Most artists that made up the Philharmonic troupe came from the ranks of the amateur movement and were selected among the most talented. But these troupes also included artists that had studied in higher artistic schools abroad such as M. Kraja, K. Antoniu, J. Truja, M. Ciko, L. Gjoka, K. Trako, M. Krantja, etc. Year after year the crew was enlarged to include other new artists trained chiefly in Eastern countries.



Theatre Show "Arturo Ui" of B. Brecht, played in the year 1971

In 1952, the first Variety Theater was founded (the *Public Variety Theater*) which was later followed by the *Soldier's Variety Theatre*. In the meantime, the need to further develop the national ballet made it necessary to open the first *choreographic school in Tirana (1957)* at the Opera and Ballet Theater. In the same year, the *Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances* was set up as a central professional institution both for performing the folk art and refining it. The expansion of stage performance institutions with the addition of the dramatic and the variety theatres made it necessary to open the first higher arts school in Albania, the "A. Moisiu" Higher School for **Actors**.



Theatre Show "Revisor" of Russian N.V. Gogol, played in the years '50

Towards Consolidation

During the first 10-15 years, the repertoire of professional troupes was dominated by the works of Russian-Soviet and classical authors. At the same time, more and more efforts were being put up to bring original national works on the stage. As a result, several such works during this period were accomplished such as the dramas *Halil and Hajria*, *Our Land (1954)* *The Fisherman's Family (1955)*, some comedy, etc. By this time, the theater is increasingly aiming at establishing a national repertoire featuring important themes generally treated with a realistic language, though the influence of schematic perspectives, sometimes even of melodramatic manifestations is felt. In the meantime, in the repertoire of Albanian theatre outstanding works from a selected repertoire of world dramaturgy, such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Comptroller*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Miser*, *Intrigue and Love* had been picked up and performed.

As concerns musical pieces, the *Symphony No.1* by Çesk

Zadeja was composed (1956) during this time, being the first opus in this genre that was also executed with a high artistic level. Likewise, *Mrika* by P. Jakova, the first Albanian operetta, was composed and performed in 1958.

Following 1960, in the circumstances of self-isolation from the world art, the activity of professional theatrical troupes marked a significant growth, and the public interest in stage performance grew by the same extent. Thus, for example, in 1961 the Popular Theatre accomplished 137 performances with 58 thousand spectators. High figures in the number of shows and spectators also apply to the Opera and Ballet Theater, especially the Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances, the Ensemble of the Army, the Public Variety Theatre, the Soldier's Theatre, etc. What is striking about them is a great interest in national works. For this reason, but also for ideological motives, slowly, but steadily, the repertoire of national works began to take precedence. In 1963, the Popular Theatre would rely on native authors for its repertoire with such plays as *The Prefect*, *Our Land*, *The Fisherman's Family*, *The House on the Boulevard*, *The Carnivals of Korça*, *Dr. Aleksi*, *Halili and Hajria*, etc. This latter was shown for the public 212 times until 1962. During that year only, in the repertoire of theatrical troupes 13 plays were by classical authors, among them Shakespeare, Gogol, Molière, Schiller, Lorca, etc., with such plays as *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The Moral of Mrs. Dulaska*, *The Hostess of the Inn*, *Montserrat*, *The Kremlin Chimes*, etc. Whereas the Opera and Ballet Theatre, apart from some instrumental pieces, relied for its repertoire on the operettas *Mrika* and *The Springtime*, the opera *The Remembrance Flower*, and the ballets *Halili and Hajria*, and *Delina*.

In the sphere of the stage performance, the composer P. Jakova created the opera *Skënderbeu*.

The opened window of media of the free world had an extraordinary impact on the public taste and artistic consciousness, a fact that in the late 1960s and early 1970s lead the Albanian art to seek new ways of expression, modern forms, and a more advanced insight into the sharpest aspects of creative forms. In music, several instrumental symphonic works were



Theatre Show "Our Land"
"Drama of Kole Jakova
played in the year 1974

accomplished, but the ballet *The Maiden of the Mountains* (1970) with the music by N. Zoraqi and choreography by A. Aliaj was considered the greatest achievement.

The organization of the 11th Song Festival on Radio and Television made deep impressions on the audience and was later capitalized on by the party organs as a pretext to unleash a wild drive of

control and to send the ideologism of art to the utmost extreme, which was profoundly felt in the 1970s onward.

In the period between the '60s and '80s, the bulk of the repertoire of all types of theaters in Tirana was met by national dramaturgical and musical works. In the mid-1980s, the repertoire policy saw a slight moderation, as a more appropriate balance was set between the national dramaturgy and creation (broadly) on the one hand, and the world repertoire works on the other hand, while keeping the precedence of the former to the latter. Just at this time the struggle to give the theatre a new qualitative status, with searches of new forms against the pressure of mediocrity, became sharper. The same tendency is also seen in the Opera and Ballet Theater, the Variety Theater in Tirana, etc.

The structure of the theatrical community in Tirana

Tirana has today a network of theatres with a stable repertoire of various genres, with their premises and professional crews that perform seasonal activities, in various halls and settings. Currently the structure of the theatrical community in Tirana is like this: the National Theatre, the Opera and Ballet Theater, the Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances, the Ensemble of the Army, the Circus, the Tirana Variety Theater, the Soldier's Variety Theater, the Puppet Theater of Tirana — all of them being theaters subsidized by the government. Along with them, a number of private theatrical companies, various orchestras, vocal groups etc., are active in the city and operate with independent projects by applying (for financial aid) to various foundations or institutions that function in Albania. To further the evaluation and motivation of the theatrical creation, theatre festivals, May Decades, etc., have been held periodically, and today there are a number of song, music and theater festivals, etc.

Artistic profiles

The National Theater

The National Theater cuts the most prominent artistic profile. It has served and continues to serve as a real school for the qualitative growth of other theaters, as an applicable, fruitful experience that promotes the achievements of Albanian theater in general. Following 1990, the National Theater tried a wide range of new contemporary schools and styles in acting, production and scene painting; it included the banned, "modernist" authors in its repertoire such as Ionesco, Beckett, and Mrozhak, by also trying to give new perspectives to the history, the social phenomena and the Albanian man. Such theatrical shows as *Richard III*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Fernando*

Kraft Has Written Me This Letter, The Great Magic, The People's Enemy, The Garden with Swallows, Quo Vadis, etc., attest to the qualitative growth and innovation of the means of expression.

The National Theater is the greatest drama theater in Albania. Until 1990, its crew included 55 actors, 4 producers, 3 scene painters and the assistance staff. Currently the actors' troupe is reduced to 30. After a grave crisis of identity and restructuring, the National Theatre continues to maintain its status as a theater of particular importance, as one of nationwide dimensions.

The Variety Theater of Tirana

The Variety Theater of Tirana is the greatest satirical and humorous vaudeville theater in Albania. Until 1990 it counted forty artists — actors, singers and instrumentalists. It has put on an average of 4-5 premieres a year with about 250 shows.

Its repertoire is based on a combination of short plays and the most diverse literary stage subtypes, dance and music, acting, painting and even projections, films, videotapes, etc. The Variety Theater of Tirana retains the same conspicuous folk character of humor and comic types. It is distinguished by a critical sense, contemporary spirit, the pressing topicality of the materials presented by so helping the moral perfection of society. It's not without reason that the Variety Theater has been nicknamed as "itinerant media", since it is extremely communicative and, through humor and satire, it attacks the weaknesses, vices and shortcomings of society by contributing to the promotion the society's morality.

The Opera and Ballet Theater



Posters of the recent shows in the Academy of Arts

It was created in November 1953 on the basis of the Philharmonic (1950). In its first years, a series of works from the periodic world literature as well as some ballets were put on the stage. These had an impact on the professional training of artists. By the late 1950s, the creativity of Albanian composers was encouraged and as a result the first national works of the great genre were put on stage. Opera *Mrika* (1959) by Prenk Jakova is the first Albanian opera. It is distinguished

by a national lyricism and coloring, motives and themes inspired by the folk music, and it paved the way for other works of more complex structures such as the opera *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu* (1968) by the same author, which features instead a strong monumentality and heroic spirit, massive chorals, pictorial scenographic solutions and a more expressive performance of singers. In later opuses such as the

opera *The Awakening* (1976) by Tonin Harapi, *The Commissar* (1974) by Nikolla Zoraqi, *The Daughter of Kaçanik* by Rauf Dhomi, etc., the way of organizing the musical, literary and choreographic matter undergoes changes and is structurally enriched by assuming a new dynamics and a contemporary language. The 1970s and 1980s mark qualitative strides forward for this troupe in creating its own national repertoire. It is worth to mention the ballets *Halili and Hajria* (1963), *The Maiden of the Mountains* (1972), *The Tenth Wound of Gjergj Elez Alia* (1963) etc. Following the 1990s, a strong drive emerges in the Opera and Ballet Theater to cope with major world opera, to cooperate with well-known conductors and musicians from various countries, to integrate into European cultural market, etc. Today the Opera and Ballet Theater is the largest Albanian theater. Until 1990 it counted over 400 singers, instrumentalists, dancers, stage workers, etc. Today their number is reduced and many artists have emigrated to European countries.



Opera house

The Puppet Theater

On October 27, 1950, the first professional puppet theater began its work in Tirana. The first play performed on its stage was *Fatbardha*, a national piece. In its beginnings the repertoire was met with foreign works, but as domestic literature for children developed, national plays were dominant. In its shows of the 1980s, particularly in the 1990s, a revival of fantastic and wondrous elements was noticed, which came as a result of a better exploitation of the subjects of folk fairy-tales and legends. Until the mid-1950s, the backdrops were static, but later they became more mobile and functional and, accordingly, more expressive. Sculptural elements were also used, which helped to highlight the stage plasticity. From the fingered puppets, a shift took place in 1955 to the wired ones, a technique which today appears to be more perfect. In the 1960s, the musical accompaniment began to be performed with an accordion, not with a record player as before. Later it was replaced by a more sophisticated radio technique and recently by the superimposition of songs and words.

Schools

In 1959, within the National Theater the higher dramatic school was opened which was named after the great actor of Albanian descent Aleksandër Moisiu. In 1966 it merged with two other art branches, the music and fine arts, to create the High Institute of Arts that is the present-day Academy of Fine Arts. The Academy has served and is serving as a nursing ground for new artists; it includes three faculties (stage performance, music and fine arts). The teach-



"The swallow garden",
drama of
B.Cikliropoulos, 1988

ers of this school have been selected among the best artists of Albanian art. Its main focus is concentrated on mastering the stage skills by aiming at both the national experience and style and the known experience and styles of the world art. This school relies on a rich instructive source, scientific training programs, textbooks of theoretical and historical subjects, lectures, scientific studies and monographs, appropriate working conditions, a rich stock of books, graduate courses, sound and photograph libraries, archives, etc.

Critique and publications

In the first decades of the Albanian modern art, critical thinking mostly featured a reviewing character by dealing with sociological treatments. The critique today is characterized by polemical tones and a tendency to authoritative analyses of artistic components as of the theater, music, visual arts, etc.

Various authors have published monographs on outstanding authors such as A. Moisiu, Zef Jubani, Naim Frashëri, Mihal Popi, Kadri Roshi, Loro Kovaçi, Pirro Mani, Tefta Tashko Koço, Vaçe Zela, etc.

Other authors have written history textbooks on Albanian arts (about the theater, fine arts, music), studies of traditions and current artistic mainstream and tendencies, folklore, etc. Since 1961, some periodical bulletins (bimonthly) such as "Theater" and "Music" have been publishing dramas, comedies, musical works, theoretical and instructive materials; in 1980 the quarterly magazine "Stage and Screen" was founded, which used to publish articles on theoretical problems and the creative practice in theaters, film-making, opera, variety theater, etc. Critical thinking has found broad expression across the columns of the newspaper "Drita" and the magazine "Nëntori" that were organs of the Writers and Artists' League, and other press organs as well.

Following the 1990s, along with a cultural page in numerous partisan or independent papers, the critical thought has found space in other press organs such as the newspapers "Drita", "Aks" and "Ars", and periodicals such as "Studime për Artin", "Pamorart", etc.

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