

DANCING BALLET IN BAKU

What does it mean to perform ballet? The implications of the endeavor vary greatly over time and place. In the eighteenth century, performing this learned form of dancing, the *danse d'école*, implied nobility, or at least proximity to a royal court. By the middle of the nineteenth, as Europe's autocracies and Empires crumbled, ballet headed East, surviving at full strength only in Copenhagen and St. Petersburg. Yet by middle of the twentieth century, ballet had taken refuge among the superpowers. New York and Moscow became ballet capitals, with the Leningrad ballet, once the world's greatest, functioning mostly as the latter's farm team.

Ballet in the Caucasus experienced similar turnabouts, but over a much shorter period of time. Ballet and opera came to Tbilisi much earlier than to Baku, and its development was more organic. The city's opera theater opened in 1851, with a small ballet troupe led by a Moscow balletmaster, but quickly became a popular touring destination for larger troupes: the ballets of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw performed in Tbilisi in the imperial period; Isadora Duncan was among the era's dance stars to appear there (Gvaramadze 12). Georgia could even boast an Italian ballerina, Maria Perini, who remained there after her retirement and trained the next generation of Georgian dancers, including Vakhtang Chabukiani (Elyash 41). The Moscow dancer Mikhail Mordkin

(later a driving force in the formation of what is now American Ballet Theatre), worked in Tbilisi from 1919 to 1922. The repertory of the Tbilisi ballet in those years rivaled that of Moscow, including classic, nineteenth-century works (*Giselle*, *La Fille mal gardée*) and contemporary works inspired by the Diaghilev repertory (ibid). In short, by the time of the Tbilisi theater's nationalization in 1921, the Georgian ballet possessed an enviable tradition and repertory, unmatched elsewhere in the new Soviet empire.

Ballet in Baku developed later, and necessarily faster, than in Tbilisi. The opera house opened only in 1911, and the training of dancers was fraught with considerably more peril than in Georgia. Muslim prohibitions on public appearances – and performances – by women meant that at the première of the first Azerbaijani opera, Uzeyir Hajibeyov's *Leili and Majnun*, (1908), the female lead was performed by a man, and the women in attendance watched the performance through holes in the heavy draperies they sat behind, just as Russian women had witnessed the first local theatrical spectacles in the seventeenth century. Thus, the story of Gamar Alamaszade, the nation's first female star dancer, continues to be told as a heroic narrative: Gamar secretly studying ballet in Baku in the 1920s, her father's death threats, her marriage to the director of the theater to save face.

Ballet in the Caucasus has long been at the nexus of a variety of tensions, most concerning the way the ballet links Caucasian nations to the outside world. In the 1930s and 1950s, the ballet was meant to strengthen ties, both cultural, and by extension, political, to the Soviet capital, to showcase Caucasian

participation in a Western system. (As always, the road to Paris passed through Moscow.) Still, an unwanted presence lurks wherever attempts are made to install ballet in a new location: the more developed are the local dances, the more they highlight the artificiality of the imported tradition. In Georgia, the local dances had already made the transition to the stage. One source notes that theatrical performances of traditional dances became popular in Tbilisi as early as the 1820s (Gvaramadze 8).¹ The process of transforming local dances for theatrical presentation, and for the ballet stage in particular, occurred later in Azerbaijan, and will be discussed here.

The Soviet project of the 1930s, to deploy 'academic' art forms throughout the empire, demanded more than mere copies of Swan Lake or Don Quixote replicated in the republics' capitals; however, it required local 'national' ballets. Essentially, and despite the famous dictum of the time, these were Muscovite in both form and content, though splashed with local color – nods to native traditions in music, dance, and design. The local dances that decked out the resulting spectacles may have been the most celebrated components of the resulting new works, but their place and function in these compositions did not differ significantly from the dances for various Spaniards, Hungarians, Turks, or Lithuanians that populated Marius Petipa's ballets for the Imperial St.

Petersburg Ballet in the nineteenth century. Nor was the adaptation of local

¹ My research focuses primarily on Azerbaijan, with some discussion of the situation in Georgia. Armenian dance has not figured as prominently in my research, or on the world scene, though in most cases, claims made about the general state of dance in the Caucasus would apply as well to Armenia.

dance practices for the ballet stage and ballet-trained body dissimilar from the problems associated in adapting local musical traditions to a tunable orchestra that plays composed music from printed scores.

This paper uses the national ballets of Georgia and Azerbaijan as examples of two quite different arenas of Eurasian identity.² The two nations' distinct religious and cultural traditions – especially Muslim prohibitions against public performance by women in Azerbaijan – would presuppose the dissimilar formations of the two traditions. In fact, both Georgia and Azerbaijan were regarded as primo inter pares among Soviet republics, at least where the dissemination of proper Soviet culture was concerned. The Caucasus, and especially Georgia, were thought to possess venerable and distinct high arts traditions, and therefore represented fertile ground for the sowing of a new Soviet culture.

To a casual observer, the librettos of the 'national' ballets created in Tbilisi and Baku in the 1930s and 1950s might seem depressingly similar, indistinguishable from the vast majority of ballets produced around the empire until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet there were key differences in the Georgian and Azerbaijanian approaches to the task of creating national works. What is more, as Marina Frolova-Walker reminds us, 'blandness, anonymity, and

² The names of the dance companies in Georgia cause some confusion. The company known in English as the National Ballet of Georgia is actually the folk-dance ensemble, founded by Iliko Sukhishvili and Nino Ramishvili in 1945. The Ballet company of the Paliashvili Opera is now known as the State Ballet of Georgia.

tedium were by no means vices' in the art of the Stalin era.³

In the current post-Soviet era of independence, the ballets of the two nations have traveled very separate paths, especially concerning the staging and performance of national identity. I believe that the diverging paths chosen by the two nations' state ballet companies reflect, in large part, the degree to which the two states have diverged from or adhered to left-over Soviet governmental structures. In fact, a backwards glance at the histories of the two nations' ballets suggests these tendencies were already visible at the height of the Stalin era.

Staging the nation

By the 1930s, Soviet policies toward national minorities had entered a new phase. Ethnic minorities would no longer be promoted as they had in the 1920s. Instead, Russian culture was meant to serve as a unifying force among an imagined 'friendship of peoples' (Martin 27). The Great Russian majority would function as a kind of first among equals among the new nation-states it had worked to foster, and in some cases, create. The folk-dance ensembles that sprang up around the Soviet Union in the 1930s were a logical by-product of this policy, as was a new type of ballet: local color and national folklore became

³ The author refers specifically to bona fide artifacts of Socialist Realism in her article 'Stalin and Art of Boredom': 'works that elude critical understanding if examined without regard to that context, generally because they are too bound up with the rituals of the Stalinist state.' By the 1960s, as this paper will show, Caucasian composers and Soviet choreographers had developed a style of choreography that approximated the epic blandness of the dominant Socialist Realist musical genre: the cantata.

as essential to the ballets of the 1930s as class conflict had been in the ballets of the previous decade. The need for national content to fill the vessel of socialist form led to new investigations of traditional dance around the Soviet Union, effectively bringing traditional dance into the fold of an increasingly systematized and centralized Soviet dance pedagogy. (Vaganova began to codify her method of teaching ballet in this period as well). With the establishment of ensembles and schools, traditional dance was brought into the fold of what was now termed 'professional' dance.⁴

The situation in Azerbaijan provides a useful starting point in an investigation of the national dance question, given that the problem of Sovietizing conflicted with a variety of religious and social mores, most obviously the place of women in the new society. Azerbaijan did not lack a dance tradition; it lacked a tradition that could be easily adapted to the ballet stage. The local dance tradition (whose dances closely resembled those of Armenia) featured two main types of dances: those for men, mostly in double rhythms, and those for women, usually in triple meters. These dances were performed in isolation: women danced for women or husbands; men danced for other men. Thus, the Soviet mission civilatrice in the Caucasus and Central Asian republics – and a viable national theatrical dance tradition – could only succeed once these cultural practices had been overcome. Ironically, the

⁴ The move to appropriate national dance should also be seen as a means of keeping the Western 'modern' dance at bay. 'Free' or 'expressionist' dance schools proliferated in Germany in the 1930s, for example, and their influence quickly spread to the Baltic nations.

situation was similar to the one Peter the Great faced in trying to modernize Russia, as was the solution: Peter's assemblies, or balls, were a means of forcing Russian women to socialize publicly. Theatrical dance would play an analogous role to the southern Soviet republics.

Still, beyond the women question lurks the 'ballet question.' Why would Soviet leaders insist on such obvious remnants of aristocratic and bourgeois culture as opera and ballet in the 1930s? The very existence of the ballet continued to be questioned in the Soviet Union well into the 1920s, despite the huge successes émigré Russian dancers and choreographers continued to enjoy in Western Europe and North America. As Jukka Gronow and others have shown, the asceticism of the old Bolsheviks had given way to a new taste for luxury in the Kremlin by the 1930s (52). Luxury goods, anachronistic though they were, affirmed the new status of the young state's leaders. In a nation increasingly sealed off from the rest of the world, champagne, caviar, and the ballet were esteemed. (As Gronow points out, only lackeys, carriages, courtesans, and roulette were missing from the list). The ballet was now in vogue, and Swan Lake came to serve as a grand, national pageant of Great Russian identity.

It follows naturally that the union republics would be asked to produce similar cultural monuments, and they were created, often with direct aid from Moscow. With a centuries-old traditions of music and dance, Azerbaijan had no need for cultural imports, yet these local traditions would not have been comprehensible to the Soviet spectator beyond Azerbaijan, and were unsuited

to the new political realities, in which Great Russian culture would serve as a model and local culture would produce derivative works that could then be shown and consumed across the Soviet Union.

As in Georgia, Azerbaijani dance made its first stage appearances in opera and drama productions, though those came to Baku considerably later than to Tbilisi. Operas and plays began to include local dances late in the nineteenth century, usually in scenes depicting court entertainments. These dances were performed by men or Russian women (Shikhliinskaya, 27, 28). Konstantin Stanislavsky, who saw national dances performed in an opera, noted that the female dancer 'little resembled a Turkish or a Spanish woman, as is usually the case in the balleticized versions of national dances.' (29)

Gamar Almaszade was the first Azerbaijani woman to enter the ballet school, in 1924, four years after the local theaters and ballet studios were nationalized. Her exceptional promise led to study in Moscow and Leningrad, at Hajibeyov's urging. The composer created the Azerbaijani Folk Dance Ensemble under the auspices of the State Philharmonic in 1934, three years before the Moiseyev group received its charter in Moscow. Hajibeyov put Almaszade in charge of the group in 1937. She held the position for two years and traversed the country with a cameraman, a composer, and musicians, recording the folk dances of the regions (Almaszade, 56-7). Almaszade recalled

'Hajibeyov assigned this ensemble the task of collecting folk dances from all of the regions of Azerbaijan and then introducing them onstage. We organized special expeditions of musicians, composers, and cameramen, and then sent them to various regions of Azerbaijan, where they collected

folk dances. Those dances were later included in the repertoire of the ensemble and thus performed on a professional level' (58).

Leila Shikhlinskaya's history of the Azerbaijani ballet views those events as central to the dancer's as a choreographer and performer. 'This journey became a new school of folk dance for Almazade. It enriched her interpretative mastery and influenced her future creative work not only as a ballerina, but also as a future choreographer' (45). More to the point, 'A master of the classical dance, Almazade brought a more refined and exquisite manner of performance to the dance folklore of the republic, lending it a new artistic coloring' (ibid). The same writer enumerates the resulting 'improvements' to the local dances: they became more difficult technically and gained plots. Both innovations speak to the major concerns of Soviet dance in the 1930s, the professionalization of approved dance forms (ballet and folk) and the preoccupation with narrative – the 'dramatic' element of the new drambalet, a new ballet genre that attempted to approximate the scale of Marius Petipa's nineteenth-century classics as it explored new means of narrative the works' often complex storyline. Although based on literary monuments (Pushkin, Balzac), the drambalet eschewed the usual means of conveying the narrative to the audience: pantomime was deemed bourgeois, old-fashioned, and incomprehensible to the Soviet spectator.

Almazade chose a suitable subject for her first attempt at choreography – an ancient legend of the people rising up against a despotic Khan – but Shikhlinskaya's history lays the blame for its failure on the institution: 'The

Azerbaijani ballet theater had still not found the synthesis of musical and dance forms that would lead to the birth of an original national choreography' (48). In fact, Almaszade's ballet was too short to qualify as a legitimate choreographic work in the 1930s. Tarlan (1939) had only one act, and although Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had established the supremacy of the single-act work in ballet composition some three decades before Almaszade began to choreograph, one-act effusions scarcely suited the scale of Stalin-era monumentalism.⁵

Almaszade might have also misjudged her audience, or the assignment itself. Were the Azerbaijani dances to be incorporated into multi-act classical ballets for the benefit of Baku audiences, or those in Moscow or Kiev? How often would the Baku public desire to see their folk epics performed as ballets anyway? And how many national ballets would a nation need? In truth, these works were designed for export – to Moscow, first, then to foster socialist brotherhood in other republics. Discussions of the national ballet produced in the Stalin era rarely mention their effect on local audiences.⁶

As Marina Frolova-Walker demonstrates in 'Stalin and the Art of Boredom,' success in the composition of socialist realist works required a thorough knowledge of the latest innovations in one's field. (Myaskovsky understood this and succeeded as a Soviet composer; Prokofiev ignored the signals, and endured frequent failures.) Still, Almaszade was at the forefront of

⁵ One-act works are still termed 'ballet miniatures' in post-Soviet Russia.

⁶ Once cultural-exchange agreements were in place in the 1950s, the works were exported to Western nations as well.

the latest fashion in Soviet choreography. The pioneering work in this field, Heart of the Hills, with choreography by Vakhtang Chabukiani and music by Andria Balanchivadze,⁷ premièred in Tbilisi the year before Almaszade made her first attempt at national choreography.

Fortunately, Soviet arts bureaucrats devised a stunningly efficient system to exhibit, assess, and fine-tune the republics' creative outputs. Arts festivals, called 'dekady'⁸ were designed to showcase the achievements of individual republics. These typically involved herding the artistic and creative elites of each nation onto a train bound for Moscow. The likes of Dmitry Shostakovich or Galina Ulanova would be among those meeting the delegation at the station with flowers, speeches, and brass bands. Pravda articles, ostensibly written by leading Moscow artists (Ulanova and Shotakovich again) punctuated the week of performances, art exhibits, and poetry readings. Once the artists had gone home, the real assessment of their achievement began. Eventually, large volumes were produced documenting each step of the process, including the hosts' ultimate evaluation of the visiting nation's achievements.

⁷ Balanchivadze was the son of Meliton Balanchivadze, the pioneer in the development of Georgian art music, and the brother of George Balanchine, the choreographer and founder of the New York City Ballet.

⁸ 'Dekada' denotes a ten-year period in Russian, but the name for these festivals indicated a ten-day festival of the arts. The Soviet theater encyclopedia of 1963 gives their official title as 'Dekada of Art and Literature in Moscow' and explains their function: 'Moscow showings of the artistic achievements of the union and autonomous republics of the USSR.' The first dekada was devoted to the Ukrainian arts, in 1936. Georgia staged its Moscow dekada in 1937, Azerbaijan in 1938, and Armenia in 1939.

A fragment of Heart of the Hills, still unfinished, was performed to great acclaim during the first Georgian dekada in 1937. The fragment featured a choreographed version of the traditional Georgian khorumi, a dance for warriors that remains a repertory staple of the Georgian national folk-dance ensemble.⁹ Shikhlinskaya's books claims that this dance demonstrated that folk dance could be 'an organic part of professional choreography' (51). The Armenian ballet took note: Aram Khachaturian's ballet Happiness, with choreography by I. Arbatov,¹⁰ premièred in Yerevan in 1939, the same year as Almaszade's Tarlan.

Naroditskaya's schema of Azerbaijani musical dynasties places Afrasiab Baldalbeyli among the second generation; his father had been among the first mugham singers to appear in the opera (129). It was he who married Alamaszade when he directed the opera and ballet theater and she was still a promising dancer. Almaszade left Baku for study in Moscow in 1932, at the urging of Uzeryir Hajibeyov, and continued her studies in Leningrad the following year; Badalbeyli studied at the the Leningrad Conservatory from 1934-38.

The couple would certainly have known musicologist/composer Boris Asafiev's hit ballets, The Flames of Paris and Fountain of Bakchisaray; both premièred in Leningrad in the years of their study there. The first ballet, allegedly

⁹ Local newspapers record that this dance was staged in Georgia as early as 1882, during Georgia's first fascination with its traditional culture (Gvaramadze 84).

¹⁰According to Atiga Izmailova, a Baku ethnographer, Arbatov was a balletmaster who staged 'folk' dances around the region, always careful to represent the nearly identical dances he staged as authentic to the region in which he staged them. (personal conversation, Baku, June 2003).

based on melodies from the time of the French Revolution, featured swashbuckling dances, masses in revolt, and Vakhtang Chabukiani, the famed Georgian dancer, who also worked in Leningrad, from 1929-1941. Fountain of Bakchisaray, based on Pushkin's epic poem, imitated the plot of one of Marius Petipa's last great ballets: Raymonda (1898). The eponymous Hungarian heroine of that ballet is wooed by a Saracen chief while her betrothed, Jean de Brienne, is away fighting the Crusades. Raymonda holds out; de Brienne returns just in time to save her from the infidel's advances.¹¹ Pushkin's (and Asafiev's) Fountain has a Polish heroine, a boyfriend, and a Crimean Khan. Maria is not so lucky as Raymonda, nor is her sweetheart: the Tartar horde sacks the house, the khan stabs Vatslav, and Maria finds herself in a harem, where she, too, is eventually stabbed, by the khan's slinky Georgian harem favorite.

Despite the lip-service paid to the notion of harmony among Soviet peoples, Raymonda and Fountain, and the ethnic tensions at the heart of their plots, served as a kind of master plot for new Soviet drambalet. Leeches of the usual means of ballet storytelling (problematic pantomime), authors of the drambalet resorted to quite visceral, and easily-understood conflicts, including the familiar staging of north/south conflict as the usual metaphor for Great Russian Enlightenment opposing Oriental barbarism. Zarema, the harem favorite, is a 'B' movie temptress and walking orientalist cliché. Her entrance across the front of the stage is preceded by a cory moving backwards: Zarema

¹¹ The plot of Raymonda reveals its own debt to the rescue-opera formula of an earlier time.

minces and preens into the mirror her lackey holds. The solipsism that gesture implies has been ascribed to women of most ethnic persuasions for centuries, but the long walk across the stage transforms the characterization into a fetish. We see an archetypal Oriental, consumed by vanity, jewels, and her own beauty. Even worse, Zarema's movement is bestial. She moves like a snake and lashes out at her former lover with the speed and fury of one

The Maiden's Tower, the most prominent architectural feature of Baku, had been the subject of many literary and artistic monuments, and represented a natural topic for a first (successful) national ballet. The tower was the subject of a narrative poem in traditional style that appeared in 1922. The legend became a film scenario in 1923, and like the ballet based on the same legend, represents the start of the local tradition in each art forms. The poem adapted the legend of a Khan who falls hopelessly in love with his daughter after the death of his wife. His daughter finally agrees to marry the father, but on the condition that he build the famous tower that stands in Baku. When it is finally completed, the daughter jumps from it.

The authorship of this ballet is not at all clear. In an article she wrote for Azerbaijan International, Almaszade says that she 'worked out the choreography' and that she and her husband 'worked on the ballet at home between 1938 and 1940. You could say that Afrasiyab and I were the driving forces behind the creation of this Azerbaijani ballet.' Shikhliinskaya's history (a

book whose authorship is also highly contested)¹² identifies Ismail Idayat-zade, an actor and director from the dramatic theater, and, from 1938, the artistic director of the opera and ballet theater, as the 'postanovshchik,' a Russian word that could be interpreted variously as 'producer,' 'stager,' or 'director.' The preceding paragraph of text describes the role as 'conception of the production, its style, and also in the placing of the necessary accents and in the resolution of the ballet's mise-en-scène' (72). From this description, Idayat-zade would seem to have operated as the ballet's librettist, or director. His role in the composition of Maiden's Tower is likened to his work on other important 'national' productions, including Hajibeyov's pivotal Keroglu (1937): 'He introduced ethnographic and national details, showing scenes from folk life, and the contrasting pompousness of the shah's court' (72-3). In short, he functioned as the ballet's 'Eastern' expert ('znatok Vostoka,' 73). The current, undated souvenir program on sale at the Azerbaijan State Theater of Opera and Ballet lists Almaszade as the ballet's producer.

S. Kevorkov, the most established balletmaster in Baku, who had staged a number of repertory staples in the theater, composed the dances with V. Vronsky. The two balletmasters were aided by the ubiquitous I. Arbatov, the soi-disant expert on Eurasian folk dances. The blend of balletic and native

¹² A Moscow historian assured me that Shikhlinskaya, who studied dance history in Moscow at one time, but is now better known as the proprietor of a successful chain of cosmetic surgery clinics in the Caucasus and Central Asia, is incapable of writing such a book, and that the book was ghost-written (personal conversation, Moscow, January 2004).

movement they concocted included ritual dances performed on pointe (which made them more fluid and graceful, according to Shikhliinskaya's history, 76), and folk hand gestures grafted onto the classical port de bras.

The main narrative contours of the ballet closely follow those of the film, but with interpolated numbers featuring Azerbaijani, Georgian, Armenian, Iranian, and Uzbek dances. 'The librettist introduced national divertissements into the ballet. These were necessary to give the ballet more color, showiness, and add interest to the dancing' – as well as 'real' folklore (76). The ballet featured a 'purely classical' act – a dream sequence in the second act, exactly where Petipa might have placed it, and true to Imperial Ballet style, the national dances were part of the usual third-act wedding scene.

The confusion over the authorship of Azerbaijan's first 'national' ballet is quite typical of Stalin-era ballets. In part, this reflects the relatively low status of choreographers at the time, especially vis-à-vis composers. Yet the situation also reflects the one described in detail by Frolova-Walker, who discusses the working of this quite unique new system of patronage:

By the 1930s, the State was the sole patron of the arts: it commission works from artists (through the artists' Unions), evaluated them, bought the approved works, and arranged for performance, exhibition or publication. . . The ideological apparatus of high art, with its notions of genius, transcendence, and artistic autonomy was, of course, alien to the new environment (104).

Frolova-Walker goes on to explain how that the market for musical compositions, as traditionally understood, no longer existed. The State, as sole arts patron, selected appropriate works, arranged for their publication and

performance, leaving composers to function effectively as white-collar workers whose reputations depended on peer review and Party approval. Frolova-Walker compares the dekada system in music to military parades: 'the composers demonstrated their consciousness and discipline, the officials assessed their loyalty' (104).

With authorship,¹³ in its usually accepted sense, now relegated to the realm of bourgeois subjectivity, a production technique from industry came to be venerated in the production of art as well: the 'brigadny metod,' usually translated as 'collective work,' was used to varying degrees of success in the Soviet arts. But as the confusion over the authorship of Maiden's Tower suggests, collective authorship became an important model for the Azerbaijani ballet. The choreography of that ballet may, or may not have been, the work of its ballerina, the two balletmasters, or a hired hand brought in to invest the classical dances with folk material. Most likely it involved all four to varying degrees. Almaszade had herself collected, or at least supervised the collection of folk material for future use in future ballets, an activity analogous to the collection of tunes used in socialist realist and national operas (106).

The hybrid qualities of the resulting work – not quite a ballet, but certainly not a folk dance, a work designed to represent Azerbaijan, though perhaps not to the Azerbaijanis; a work based on ancient local legend, with a touch of

¹³ At least since Romantic-era fidelity to the sanctity of a composition became the norm.

melodrama thrown in (the incest) – all speak to the inherent eclecticism of Socialist Realism, as Svetlana Boym notes:

The unified Socialist Realist culture did not have a unity of grand style. It was rather a kind of monstrous hybrid of various inconsistent elements from right and left: aristocratic and proletarian culture, radical avant-garde rhetoric and chaste Victorian morals of nineteenth-century realism; happy endings and stormy weather, from popular fiction of the turn of the century: and 'positive heroes' from the Russian classics and Slavic hagiographies (105).

The work of the Azerbaijani ballet over the next decades involved the refining of this formula, mostly following musical composition along a path of steady and certain progress that would elevate dance, including folk dance, to the pantheon of Soviet arts. 'Symphonism,' whatever meaning it had for dance,¹⁴ became the mantra of Soviet ballet and of Soviet music.

The Azerbaijani ballet's next important contributions to Soviet dance were mostly musical ones. The composer Gara Garayev's ballet Seven Beauties premièred in Baku in 1952 with an even larger cast of contributors: the Leningrad ballet historian Yuri Slonimsky aided Idayat-zade in the construction of the libretto; another Kirov hand, Petipa expert Pyotr Gusev, was credited with the choreography, but aided by Almaszade in the composition of the ballet's folk-inspired dances. Garayev was a pupil of Hajibeyov, and followed his teacher's lead in blending the compositional structures of East and West to

¹⁴ In Sleeping Beauty, a Legend in Progress, I discuss the notion of symphonism, as applied to the ballet, as a floating signifier, leached of any possible meaning relatively early in its usage (82-84).

produce a workable hybrid form so convincing that the Grove dictionary describes the ballet's development as 'truly symphonic.'

The fantastic, lyrical and psychological images are fused and intermingled with folkdance scenes in an impetuous and colourful movement. Furthermore, the free use of rhythmic formulae from national dances and the melodic and harmonic support given by folk modality reveal the composer's integral aesthetic involvement with folklore. (Kara Karayev)

Garayev would later symphonize the melodies of South African blacks in his anti-apartheid work Path of Thunder (1957), a hit in Leningrad's Kirov Theater, which choreography ostensibly by the director of that theater, Konstantin Sergeyev. Contemporary reviews of the work describe his achievement in avoiding the cliché of forbidden jazz in symphonizing Black music. The Grove dictionary quotes Garayev's assurance that 'the contemporary music of blacks and coloured people contains the principles of symphonic development in the same way that the music of other nations contains them' (ibid).

The success of Azerbaijan's contribution to the art of Soviet ballet may be judged by its quick appropriation by Great Russians. The Russians who contributed to the choreography of Maiden's Tower were mostly residents of the Caucasian region. Pyotr Gusev retained Almaszade as the 'Eastern expert' in the choreography of Seven Beauties (she replaced Arbatov in this role). But Path of Thunder used the compositional strategies pioneered by Azerbaijani composers to move beyond the local, applying the formula to the music of South Africa.

Yet the most enduring of the 'Azerbaijani' ballets in the Soviet repertory remains Arif Melkov's Legend of Love, which premièred in Leningrad's Kirov Theater in 1961 with choreography by the Soviet Union's most successful court choreographer, Yuri Grigorovich. The ballet quickly took its place alongside the three or four masterpieces of Soviet choreography (essentially, those that could successfully be shown outside the USSR).¹⁵ Performed in bright body stockings, the work aped the latest developments in Western ballet (Balanchine's use of practice clothing, nearly empty stages, and dancers extended fully in unusual positions, especially for the pas de deux). The work is recognized as Melikov's finest; it also pioneers, and virtually defines, a peculiarly Soviet style in the ballet: the tedious ballet (with a running time of three and one-half hours). The Grove Music Dictionary describes the ballet's subject 'one of the eternal subjects of Eastern poetry: pure and tragic love' as well as its organizing principle, 'moments of extreme action alternate with portrait scenes of a psychological character.'

In short, Legend of Love 'solved' many of the fundamental problems the Soviet ballet faced by the 1960s: the appearances of the Ballet of the Paris Opera in 1958 and Ballet Theatre in 1960 (now known as American Ballet Theatre) revealed many of the Soviet ballet's shortcomings, especially its backwardness vis-à-vis the Western companies, which showed plotless works

¹⁵ This short list would include the Prokofiev/Leonid Lavrovsky Romeo and Juliet (1940), Asafiev and Rostislav Zakharov's Fountain of Bakchisarai (1934), and Grigorovich's Spartacus (1968), to music by another Caucasian composer, Aram Khachaturian.

(Balanchine's Symphony in C and Theme and Variations), highly successful Americana (Agnes de Milles' Rodeo, Jerome Robbins Fancy Free) as well as Anthony Tudor's subtle psychological exploration of human relationships, Jardin aux lilas. The Grigorovich/Melikov ballet should be seen as an answer to many of the challenges posed by these masterpieces of twentieth-century ballet repertory: it instantly scaled back the once-dominant, grandiose productions, invested its invention in psychological characterization, and relied on local color to carry the theme.

The choreography is also very boring, relying on a quite limited vocabulary of movement, and the viewer's investment in the fates of relatively exotic characters: an Oriental Queen, Princess, and a painter, who is asked to cut through a mountain to bring water to the kingdom.

Frolova-Walker maintains that this 'boring' style (that characterized most Soviet Socialist Realist music) was meant to provide 'a suitably dignified backdrop to state ritual' (101). She discusses the usefulness of repetitive propaganda, whether by the Soviet state, or by Coca-Cola, to instill simple, nearly ignorable messages, that essentially sedate their audiences:

The Stalinist state killed two birds with one stone: first, it prevented a class of discontented and underemployed artists from coming back into existence, artists who could readily turn their work towards critical or subversive purposes: and second, the output of these contented artists provided a sedative backdrop to the lives of Soviet citizens (122).

This explanation describes the Melikov ballet ideally: the Oriental spectacle ballet, developed in Azerbaijan over the course of twenty years, honed in Gara Garayev's 1952 ballet Seven Beauties, was now entrusted to the leading

choreographer of the realm. The Soviet ballet's house designer, the Georgian Simon Virsaladze, reduced the usual harem costumes and garish sets to a respectable stylization. Here, the boredom lay not in the praises to great leaders, but to great ideals: pure and tragic love.

The lassitude that Legend of Love (particularly in its solo dances and pas de deux) inspires speaks as well to the actual role of the Soviet ballet, one that Frolova-Walker's article on boredom elucidates. Largely incapable of conveying political messages without unintended irony, the ballet became, in poet Joseph Brodsky's words, 'beauty's keep' ('zamok krasoty'). The slumber inspired by paeans to Lenin or a particular five-year plan was not unlike Melikov's three and one-half hour meditation on impossible love. By the 1960s, the Soviet ballet could sidestep overt political meanings in favor of human ones, and found its inspiration in the type of work pioneered in the Caucasus. The poetry of Nazim Khikmet, the music of Melikov, and the designs of Virsaladze mixed a cocktail sufficiently substantive, exotically melodious, and visually arresting to wash down Grigorovich's sedative choreography.

What did it mean to dance ballet in Baku? The ballet of Azerbaijan, a creation, mostly, of Baku intellectuals, who imaged the possibility of creating high-art hybrid forms, worked dutifully over the course of several decades to produce works that met state expectations. From the postcard depiction of Maiden's Tower, through Almaszade's second ballet, Gyulshen (1950), with its cotton-picking Stakhanovites, to the obvious Orientalisms of Garayev's Seven

Beauties (and the many similar works that followed), the Azerbaijani ballet worked through the usual stages, from the collection folklore, to its proper symphonization in the works of Garayev and Melikov. Yet in the post-Soviet period, many of these works were revisited by the next generation of Baku intellectuals and artists.

A headline in the Winter, 1999 issue of Azerbaijan International ‘Maiden’s Tower Ballet: New Plot Rids Soviet Propaganda.’ The teaser for the article summarizes:

Along with rewriting history, Azerbaijani intellectuals are rewriting the nation’s folklore, operas and ballets to get rid of Soviet-era propaganda. In a recent restaging of the ‘Maiden’s Tower’ ballet, the tragic myth surrounding Baku’s most prominent landmark is retold – this time with the heavy-handed Communist ideology (5).

In this case, ideology turns out to be the incest that drives the old ballet’s plot: the khan’s transgressive desire for his daughter. Farhad Badalbeyli, Rector of the Conservatory and nephew of the composer, rewrote the libretto. Now, the love object is no relation to the khan, but a mere passerby, with similar adjustments made to the rest of the ballet’s plot. Referring to the original version, Badalbeyli writes ‘It’s a typical Soviet story line that reflects conflict between classes – a war between proletariat, khans and beys’ (55). The article concludes with a round-up of the works subject to revision: Fikrat Amirov’s opera Sevil, which dealt with the unveiling of Muslim women, was rewritten to depict domestic strife. The libretto of Hajibeyov’s classic opera Keroglu had not yet undergone rewriting, but contained similar, newly objectionable vestiges of Soviet class-struggle propaganda in its plot (55).

The surprise of this latest development in the history of ballet in Baku is that the works created in the 1940s and 1950s, part of a Sovietizing mission, are now considered sufficiently local – and significant – to once again attract the attention of Baku’s intellectual and creative elite. The situation speaks to the degree to which the goals of that elite and the goals of Soviet arts bureaucrats coincided. Both were interested in a creating a hybrid, Westernized version of local culture. Hajibeyov may never have imagined that the ballets of his pupils would function as postcards of Azerbaijani culture, but the Soviet ballet well understood the value of a competently mixed cocktail of Eastern and Western cultures that could be used to display the vast nation’s purported inclusiveness and cultural vibrancy to best effect.

—Tim Scholl

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