

ON STAGE - COMEDY

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Abstract. The comedy “The Tricks of Maysara” by Hamza Hakim-zade Niyazi is examined as one of the key works that reflected the transition of Uzbek dramaturgy and theatre from amateur forms of stage activity to a professional level. The article analyzes the artistic and scenic specificity of the play, as well as its place and significance in the process of formation and development of Uzbek theatre.

Keywords: theatre, dramaturgy, oral folk art, performing arts, musical theatre actor, stage interpretation, comedy, repertoire, artistic image, stage mastery.

Аннотация. Мақолада Ҳамза Ҳакимзода Ниёзий қаламига мансуб “Майсаранинг иши” комедияси ўзбек драматургияси ва театрининг хаваскорлик босқичидан профессионаллик даражасига кўтарилишида муҳим аҳамият касб этган асарлардан бири эканлиги хусусида сўз юритилади.

Калит сўзлар: театр, драматургия, халқ оғзаки ижодиёти, томоша санъати, мусиқали театр актёри, сахнавий талқин, комедия, репертуар, бадиий образ, сахна маҳорати.

Аннотация. Комедия “Проделки Майсары” Хамзы Ҳаким-заде Ниязи рассматривается как одно из ключевых произведений, отразивших переход узбекской драматургии и театра от любительских форм сценической деятельности к профессиональному уровню. В статье анализируется художественно-сценическая специфика пьесы, а также её место и значение в процессе становления и развития узбекского театра.

Ключевые слова: театр, драматургия, устное народное творчество, зрелищное искусство, актёр музыкального театра, сценическая интерпретация, комедия, репертуар, художественный образ, сценическое мастерство.

The Uzbek Public Comedy Theatre founded on the 19th of March 1939 contributed meaningfully to the evolution of comedy art. Its emergence was quite legitimate as the culture of laughter has always been present in traditional theatre and the art of satire and humour always appreciated by the Uzbek people. However, in those days, making a theatre focus on a particular genre, especially comedy, was a challenge, for comedy pieces were few and it was also unsafe to create in this genre during the years of political repression. In November 1939, the Comedy Theatre became part of the newly founded Musical Drama and Comedy Theatre named for Mukimi.

A major event was the first production of “The Tricks of Maysara” based on the piece by Hamza Hakimzade Niyazi. The play he wrote back in 1926 had never been staged before and existed only as a manuscript. Drama director and actor Mirshahid Mirakilov discovered the manuscript and staged the play together with director Bobo Khojaev in the Musical Drama and Comedy Theatre. The show premiered on the 30th of November 1939 marking the start of the new theatre’s operation.

Social conflict in the comedy gets exposed through the opposition of characters that are portrayed in the play very realistically, both negative and positive. The fact that the positive heroine Aunt Maysara is the lead character in this satirical comedy does not contradict the genre specifics; on the contrary, it enhances the unmasking effect of the piece.

Writing a satirical comedy with a positive lead character requires great mastery from the playwright, because positive characters, while representing the ideals and ideas of the playwright, do not always fit the genre framework. Besides, Hamza does not forget to focus on the problem of women’s social status – after all, this is one of his favourite themes and he created many



female character types. His Maysara embodies a brave and kind-hearted woman, his dream type. The variety of character types, dramatic, funny and grotesque situations warranted the comedy a long life on stage.

'Maysara' was first played by Maria Kuznetsova, and later on – by Maryam Yakubova and Lutfikhanum Sarymsakova. The actresses' interpretation of the role was guided by the heroine's intelligence, enterprise and fighting spirit. Kuznetsova as 'Maysara' is a composed, intelligent and business-like woman. Yakubova's heroine was not without these traits either, but her performance was dominated by cheerfulness, sense of humour and resourcefulness. Sarymsakova made her Maysara combine dramatic and comedic features, thus creating a truly unique character. Each interpretation is remarkable in its own way.

'Mulladost' was played by actor Saeed Khodjaev. His hero is aged yet still smart and agile. Unhappy about his status in the household of the Kazi [judge], he demonstrates it in everything he says or does, exposing all the treacheries of the Kazi and his cronies. Academician Mamajan Rakhmanov wrote about the character: "With great love did Hamza create his Mulladost. Saeed Khodjaev, the gifted comedian, worked on the role with the same passion and dedication. He shaped a figure truly typical of the time, masterfully exposing the inner world of his verisimilar character. Saeed Khodjaev as 'Mulladost' was winning the audience by his mere appearance on stage" (1, pp. 298–299).

The actor emphatically creates the character without focusing much on outward effects that trigger laughter. There is a smart and sneaky look in his eyes. This is how the press of that time described his interpretation of the role: "The reason why actor Saeed Khodjaev deserves applause is that he knows how to play sincerely, freely and realistically. Khodjaev truly understands what Mulladost is going through... and himself becomes Mulladost. The audience laughs at the words of Mulladost, but at the same time, they and Mulladost are angry at the fanatical clerics and the rich. The lines of Mulladost, transformed from humour into biting, revelatory satire, make the audience hate the system and the dominant classes" (2).

Hamza devises negative characters building on the folk art and the experience of kizikchi [maskharaboz and kizikchi are professional performers/comedians of the Uzbek oral tradition drama]. Usually, in traditional shows, negative characters such as rent-seeking officials and fanatical clergy praise themselves to be then exposed and eventually punished for their misdeeds. In the oral tradition drama, good always triumphs over evil. The comedy by Hamza is different from traditional shows in that the playwright seeks to expose the true essence of his characters.

The comedic aspect of the piece comes forth in the character and actions of Aunty Maysara, demonstrating the skill of Hamza as a satirical dramatist. The playwright can take credit for the characters' figurative language, personalized speech, well-considered actions and humorous situations. Little funny episodes are often exaggerated to create memorable satirical scenes and characters.

Negative characters in the play, being individual and social types at the same time, were created at the level of generalization. The role of 'Kazi' was played by Abdurauf Baltaev, 'Khidoyatkhon' – by Sabir Rakhmanov, and 'Aglam' – by Umar Abdullaev. This acting ensemble was not accidental. When portraying their characters, the actors gave free rein to improvisation and grotesquery, they used music and seemed to be competing with each other. They extensively employed dramatic techniques and expressive means of oral traditional performance.

Enters Khidoyatkhon, the Kazi's only heir. "In Rakhmanov's interpretation, he is a short young man, dressed in the manner of Bai [rich man] children, with a small turban on his head; he speaks in a cheesy, squeaky voice, he is cowardly, sometimes talks nonsense, with only women on his mind. These character features get exposed in peppery comic situations" (3, p.294). Describing his characters, the playwright made note of their personality and physical appearance.



The show ran for forty consecutive days. Its directors, skilfully using traditional performing arts and music, produced a socially relevant comedy. The play demonstrates that evil and villains shall be punished while justice and good shall triumph. The comedy by Hamza and its renditions became a source of inspiration for the next generation of playwrights, actors and directors.

Later, any experimentation on stage and enthusiasm for folklore, ethnographic elements and traditional entertaining performance were suspended as contrary to the then dominant socialist realism. This prohibition and stereotypes were dispelled by the show staged by renowned director Bakhodir Yuldashev. His production of "The Tricks of Maysara" in 1986 became a big event in the world of drama. The director offered a completely different interpretation: everything in the play, from set design to acting, was conventional.

The show starts as a performance of travelling maskharaboz and kizikchi actors. There is a cart on the stage, the actors put on costumes in front of the audience, turning into the show characters. One after another, they introduce themselves to the audience. There is clatter and chatter on the stage, one can hear the sound of doira tambourine and loud voices of the actors. Women burning incense come up the stage. Yuldashev noted: "In the show, we were guided by the ancient traditions and customs of our people. We sought to remove the curtain between the audience and the actors. In other words, we invited actors and spectators to communicate" (cit. ex: 4, p. 5).

For this performance, director Bakhodir Yuldashev, in collaboration with artist Georgy Brim, recreated the expressive means of traditional folk performance, combining them with stage techniques of modern-day drama. As a result, the play looked like a real street show where performance skills, improvisation and convention are quite important as a rule. The actors on stage perform freely and get so carried away by the play that they start to gradually engage the audience. Such ease does not compromise the performance quality: each actor creates an integral character on stage.

The team's work on the production built a strong acting ensemble and a theatre company striving for the same goal. Everyone puts their heart and soul to what is happening on stage and not a single person involved in the show stays indifferent.

Dilorom Kasymova as 'Maysara' is smart, resourceful and determined. Without contradicting the performance style suggested by the director, the actress puts an emphasis on humour, sarcasm and catchphrases. Maysara resolves to punish Kazi, Aglam and Khidoyatkhon. In this opposition Maysara is supported by her surrounding and she will not be alone at the crucial moment of the confrontation. Standing by her side are people young and old who are happy with her decision.

One after another, men "in love" come to the house of Maysara to see Oykhon. Enters Kazi (Farkhod Abdullaev), a short man, dressed in a chapan coat, wearing a large turban on his head and a white bushy beard. He is looking for Oikhon and keeps whispering her name. He is so impatient that he is ready to embrace Maysara, mistaking her for Oykhon. The more courteous Maysara is to him, the more exasperated he gets. This rendition resembles a street performance where a false beard or a pillow attached to the stomach make the traditional theatre actors instantly turn into a judge, a cleric, or a rich man.

Following the director's instruction, Farkhod Abdullaev, using the techniques of conventional acting and contrasts (the character's short stature), demonstrates the womanizing and baseness of his character, although he holds high office. According to the story, Maysara has to lull Kazi to sleep and put him in a beshik baby cradle. The actor uses improvisation and exaggeration measuredly, avoiding caricature. Unlike traditional theatre acting, he shows not only the character's appearance, but seeks to expose his inner world, eventually succeeding in portraying the character of a typical personality and worldview.

Here comes the last guest, the beloved son of Kazi Kalon, played by actor Hashim Arslanov. Tall man, he is wearing a colourful robe, a small white turban and box calf boots. As beardless



‘Khidoyatkhon’ he is girlishly cutesy, wary of being heard as he enters. He is infatuated with Oykhon and came to see her. When Maysara (Dilorom Kasymova) praises him, he melts with joy from the compliment but then remembers the reason he is here and demands that Oykhon be brought before him. This worthless man knows very well that he can get away with anything because his father is a judge and he is surrounded by corrupt officials who stop at nothing for money. The man with money is always right. Nevertheless, Maysara and her allies prove that even such fraudsters can be exposed and punished.

Surely, the director could have shown the characters of Kazi, Aglam and Khidoyatkhon who do their fraudulent business under the guise of religion, in a serious manner, in which case he would have followed suit of mediocre drama productions about money-grubbing and dishonesty. “Yuldashev has contributed in a special way to the enrichment of Uzbek theatrical culture, introducing new genre and style colours, as well as daring stage metaphors. Aspiring to go beyond the usual plain narrative, he paves the way to the stage for the elements of folklore, ethnography, the traditional maskharaboz theatre and the entire traditional artistic culture; he boldly combines the material and spiritual heritage of the East and West. Generously, even wastefully sometimes, without “saving” for the future, he builds his new productions maximizing the use of expressive means” (5, p.34).

Bakhodir Yuldashev invested a lot of effort in using the expressive means of traditional theatre in modern Uzbek drama. This work started with his play called “Daughters-in-Law Revolt” and continued in “The Tricks of Maysara”, setting the foundation for a new vector in Uzbek drama.

His interpretation of the comedy was badly criticized by some theatre experts and advocates of the traditional staging. They were unhappy about innovations in performing arts, the dialogue between stage and audience, the removal of the “fourth wall” and the curtain and, finally, about the action moved to a square near the theatre – as it happened at the “Navruz” theatre festival in Almaty in 1988. The production was blamed for disrespect to the dramaturgy of Hamza, for its liberal interpretation of the text and the characters.

The show, nevertheless, was a success. It appealed not only to the local audiences, but also to people in other countries, taking the first place at the aforementioned theatre festival in Almaty. Theatrical personalities and spectators – all noted the unusual staging style of the show reflecting the spirit of the nation and local flavour. The stylistic vector discovered by Bakhodir Yuldashev highlighted this distinctive feature in contemporary Uzbek drama.

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