



THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF UZBEK THEATRE

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Abstract

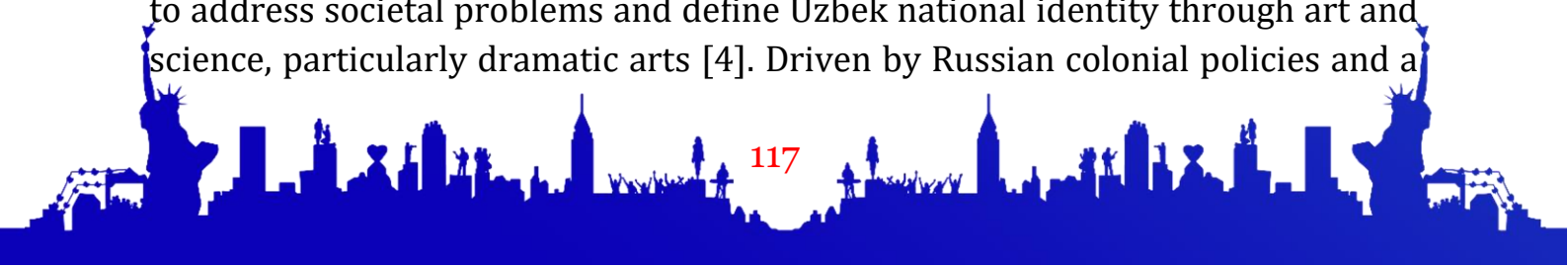
This article meticulously traces the historical trajectory and multifaceted development of Uzbek theatre, from its ancient roots in folk traditions and ritualistic performances to its contemporary manifestations. It examines the foundational influences that shaped early theatrical expressions, highlighting their evolution into more structured dramatic forms. The study further analyzes the profound impact of the Soviet era on Uzbek theatre, including the establishment of professional institutions and the emergence of new genres and artistic methodologies. Finally, it explores the post-independence period, emphasizing the theatre's crucial role in preserving national identity and adapting to modern global artistic currents.

Keywords: Uzbek Theatre, Performing Arts, Central Asian Culture, Folk Traditions, Soviet Influence, National Identity, Theatrical Development

Introduction

Uzbek theatre, a vibrant and historically rich performing art, represents a profound cultural legacy deeply embedded in Central Asian traditions. Its origins are remarkably ancient, with some historians tracing the roots of its sophisticated puppet theatre, considered the oldest and most studied in Central Asia, back to 500 BCE [1]. Beyond puppetry, encompassing both koul-kougirtchok (glove puppets) and tchodir khayol (string puppets), Uzbek theatrical expression includes a broader spectrum of "spectacular art" known as "oyin" [1, 2]. This encompasses diverse professional folk performances by maskharaboz (clowns), qiziqchi (actors), and dorboz (rope walkers) who historically entertained large audiences in public squares and at festivals [2]. These traditions, characterized by their communal nature and the Usto-Shogird (Master-Apprentice) method, reflect and embody themes central to Uzbek folk life [2].

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a pivotal transformation with the emergence of modern Uzbek theatre, largely catalyzed by the Jadid movement. These Muslim modernist intellectuals, active from the 1880s to the 1920s, sought to address societal problems and define Uzbek national identity through art and science, particularly dramatic arts [4]. Driven by Russian colonial policies and a

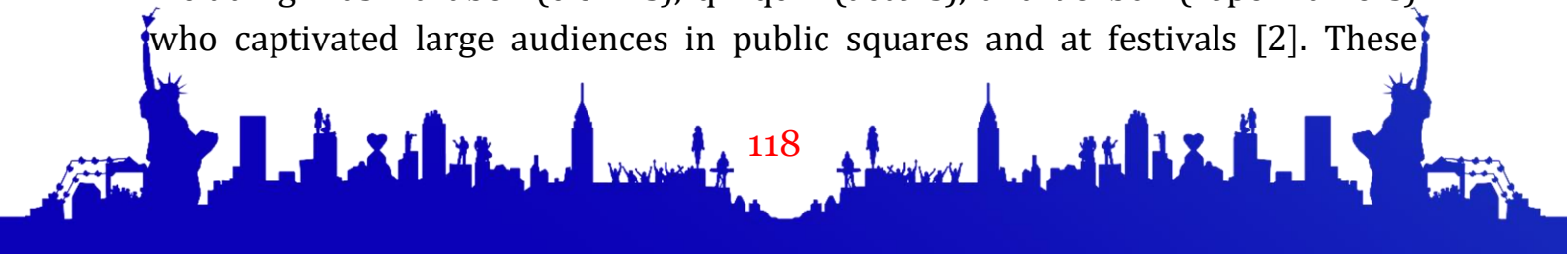




desire for national awakening, the Jadids utilized theatre, exemplified by works like Mahmud Khoja Behbudiy's "Padarkush," to spread enlightenment and foster social consciousness [3, 6]. Their reformist activities laid crucial foundations for modern literature, press, and education, profoundly shaping the intellectual and social landscape of the region and serving as a spiritual root for future independence [3, 6]. Celebrated figures like Sara Eshonturaeva symbolized this movement's power in shaping a nascent civil society [4].

This article traces the historical trajectory of Uzbek theatre from its ancient folk roots and the transformative Jadid era through the Soviet period, shaped by state patronage and ideological control, to the post-independence era, marked by identity reclamation and new realities. By examining key figures, enduring institutions, and cultural, political, and social forces, this study offers a critical synthesis of Uzbek theatre's evolution, highlighting its resilience, adaptability, and profound significance in articulating national identity and cultural heritage.

The scholarly discourse on Uzbek theatre consistently emphasizes its deep historical roots, tracing its origins to ancient Central Asian traditions and identifying it as a profound cultural legacy. A significant body of research has focused on Uzbek puppet theatre, widely acknowledged as the oldest and most extensively studied in the region, with some historians positing its emergence as early as 500 BCE [1]. Early literary sources, including the works of Omar Khayyam and Alisher Navoi, provide historical references to both string and glove puppet performances, indicating a long-standing tradition. Systematic scholarly descriptions, however, primarily began in the late 19th century with anthropologists and traders like Pyotr Romanov, whose meticulous documentation included puppet collection and the recording of guild charters (risola) codifying puppetry as a hereditary profession [1]. This research illuminates the specialized communities of puppeteers (kougirtchokboza) who transmitted skills across generations, often through the Usto-Shogird (Master-Apprentice) method [1, 2]. Scholarship distinguishes between koul-kougirtchok (glove puppets), often featuring the comic character Palvan Katchal, and the more technically complex tchodir khayol (string puppets), which involved multiple manipulators and lengthy performances, such as the documented play "Sarkardaral" [1]. Beyond puppetry, academic inquiry into Uzbek "spectacular art," or "oyin," reveals a broader spectrum of professional folk performances. This term, meaning "game" or "dance," encompasses a diverse array of entertainers including maskharaboz (clowns), qiziqchi (actors), and dorboz (rope walkers) who captivated large audiences in public squares and at festivals [2]. These





studies underscore the cultural and aesthetic importance of "oyin" in Uzbek traditional culture, highlighting its role in folk festivals and its transmission through both traditional apprenticeship and formal education [2].

The transition to modern Uzbek theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is a central theme in contemporary scholarship, largely attributed to the transformative influence of the Jadid movement. Academic analyses portray the Jadids as Muslim modernist intellectuals who, from the 1880s to the 1920s, utilized dramatic arts to address pressing societal issues and articulate a nascent Uzbek national identity [4]. Research meticulously details the Jadids' foundational educational ideas and extensive reformist activities, emphasizing their substantial contributions to the development of the press, literature, and education modernization [3]. Scholars argue that the movement's efforts were crucial in stimulating broader social consciousness, fostering modern thought, and actively contributing to the formation of a nascent civil society within Uzbekistan [3, 6]. Works like Mahmud Khoja Behbudiy's "Padarkush" are frequently cited as prime examples of how theatre was employed as a didactic tool to spread enlightenment and national awareness [6]. Furthermore, scholarly articles examine the Jadidists' advocacy for a modern educational system, highlighting their establishment of "New Method" schools as a prerequisite for social and cultural revitalization, despite significant opposition [5]. The enduring legacy of the Jadids, despite their systematic repression during the Soviet era and subsequent erasure from official historiography, has gained renewed scholarly attention since Uzbekistan's independence, with researchers actively working to reclaim their continuous influence and reconcile this historical rupture [4, 6].

The Soviet era represents another critical juncture in the historiography of Uzbek theatre, characterized by a complex interplay of state patronage, ideological control, and artistic development. Scholarship on this period often explores how traditional Uzbek theatrical forms were adapted and transformed under Soviet influence. For instance, studies note the incorporation of social comedies into folk puppetry and the establishment of European-style theatrical institutions, such as the Republican Puppet Theatre founded in Tashkent in 1939 [1]. This period saw theatre's institutionalization, providing new infrastructure and training opportunities, yet simultaneously imposing strict ideological constraints. Academic works document the severe repression faced by the Jadids and other intellectuals, many executed or exiled, leading to a deliberate suppression of their contributions to Uzbek national identity and culture [4, 6]. Despite these challenges, Uzbek theatre artists navigated the demands of socialist



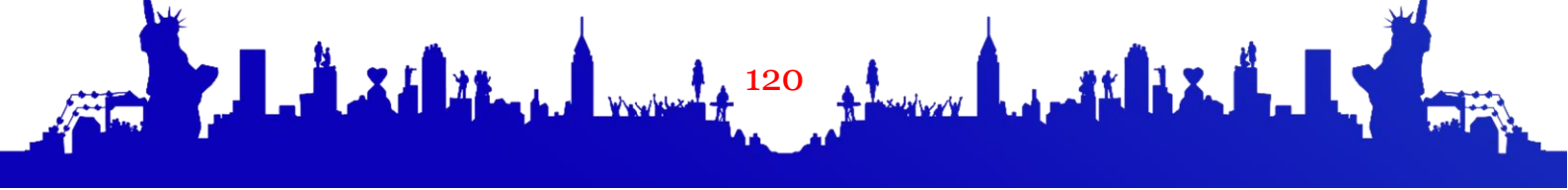


realism, often subtly embedding national themes and cultural nuances within ideologically approved narratives, a phenomenon that continues to be a subject of critical analysis.

In the post-independence era, scholarly inquiry has shifted towards understanding the reclamation of Uzbek identity and the navigation of new cultural realities. Contemporary research frequently revisits the Jadid legacy, re-evaluating its profound connection to Uzbek nationhood amidst renewed national self-determination and ongoing reforms [4]. This period is marked by academic efforts to explore how Uzbek theatre has sought to revive traditional forms, engage with global theatrical trends, and articulate a distinct national identity in a rapidly changing world. Scholars are examining the resilience and adaptability of Uzbek theatre, highlighting its ongoing significance in preserving and articulating cultural heritage. The study of key figures and enduring institutions from all historical periods remains a vibrant area of academic interest, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of Uzbek theatre's evolution and its profound role in shaping the nation's cultural narrative.

This study employs a qualitative, historical, and interpretive research design to trace the evolution of Uzbek theatre across distinct historical epochs. Adopting a diachronic approach, the methodology focuses on understanding the complex interplay of cultural, political, and social forces shaping theatrical expression from its ancient roots to contemporary forms. The core objective is to provide a critical synthesis of existing scholarship and primary source materials, illuminating the resilience, adaptability, and profound significance of Uzbek theatre in articulating national identity and cultural heritage. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how theatrical forms have been preserved and transformed in response to varying socio-political landscapes.

Data collection for this article draws upon a diverse array of primary and secondary sources. For ancient and folk theatre, primary sources include early literary references and systematic descriptions from late 19th-century anthropologists and traders, such as Pyotr Romanov's documentation of guild charters (*risola*) and puppet collections, providing insights into the hereditary profession of puppetry (*kougirtchokboza*) [1]. Secondary sources comprise archaeological reports, ethnographic studies, and academic monographs detailing the "oyin" tradition, encompassing various professional folk performances [2]. For the Jadid era, primary data involves textual analysis of dramatic works, such as Mahmud Khoja Behbudiy's "Padarkush," alongside archival materials related to Jadidist publications and reformist activities [3, 6]. Secondary sources include





scholarly articles and historical analyses examining the Jadid movement's intellectual contributions and its role in fostering national consciousness and modern civil society [3, 4, 5, 6]. The Soviet period necessitates an examination of state decrees, cultural policies, performance reviews, and institutional records from establishments like the Republican Puppet Theatre [1]. Post-independence analysis integrates contemporary critical discourse, performance analyses, and scholarly re-evaluations of previously suppressed narratives, particularly concerning the Jadid legacy [4].

The analytical framework integrates historical-cultural analysis with elements of performance studies and postcolonial theory. Historical-cultural analysis contextualizes theatrical developments within broader societal shifts, examining how political ideologies, economic conditions, and cultural movements have influenced dramatic content, form, and reception. This includes scrutinizing the Usto-Shogird (Master-Apprentice) method for cultural transmission [2] and analyzing state patronage and ideological control during the Soviet era. Performance studies offer tools to interpret the aesthetic and social functions of various theatrical forms, from the communal nature of "oyin" to the didactic purpose of Jadidist plays and the institutionalization of European-style theatre [1, 2, 6]. A postcolonial lens is pertinent for understanding the Jadid movement's response to Russian colonial policies and its efforts to define Uzbek national identity [4, 6], as well as the post-independence reclamation of identity and re-evaluation of historical narratives [4]. This multi-faceted approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Uzbek theatre has served as a site for cultural expression, political commentary, and identity formation.

Specific methods for analysis include textual criticism of play scripts and literary references to identify recurring themes, character archetypes, and narrative structures reflecting Uzbek cultural values and societal concerns. Archival research uncovers historical documents, manifestos, and critical reviews, shedding light on the production, reception, and political context of theatrical works. Content analysis of scholarly discourse identifies dominant interpretations and research gaps, informing the critical synthesis. Institutional analysis examines the establishment and evolution of key theatrical organizations, their funding, training, and role in shaping artistic development. The study also considers biographies and artistic contributions of key figures, such as Sara Eshonturaeva [4], to illustrate human agency within broader historical movements.





This interdisciplinary methodology facilitates a holistic understanding of Uzbek theatre, moving beyond a chronological account to offer a nuanced interpretation of its enduring legacy. By synthesizing insights from history, cultural studies, and performance theory, the article aims to bridge historical ruptures, particularly the systematic repression of the Jadids during the Soviet era and their subsequent re-evaluation post-independence [4, 6]. The synthesis focuses on identifying continuities in thematic concerns, performance practices, and theatre's role in national identity formation amidst significant political and social transformations. This approach underscores the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity, local and global influences, and artistic autonomy and external control that has characterized Uzbek theatre's development.

While striving for a comprehensive overview, this study acknowledges limitations inherent in historical research, particularly concerning the reconstruction of ancient and early folk performances where primary documentation is scarce or fragmented. Reliance on secondary interpretations for these periods is thus unavoidable. The article's scope necessitates a focus on major trends and representative examples, meaning a detailed analysis of every regional variation or minor theatrical form may not be possible. The interpretation of historical events and artistic expressions is inherently subjective and influenced by contemporary perspectives, though efforts have been made to maintain academic objectivity and engage with diverse scholarly viewpoints.

Uzbek theatre has traversed a profound historical trajectory, evolving from ancient folk traditions, including sophisticated puppetry and diverse "oyin" performances, into a dynamic modern art form. The transformative Jadid movement was pivotal, utilizing drama to foster national identity and social consciousness, a legacy later suppressed but now reclaimed. During the Soviet era, theatre adapted to ideological constraints, institutionalizing while subtly preserving cultural nuances. Post-independence, it has actively re-evaluated its heritage, engaging with global trends and navigating new realities. This rich history underscores Uzbek theatre's enduring resilience and its profound significance in articulating the nation's evolving cultural identity.

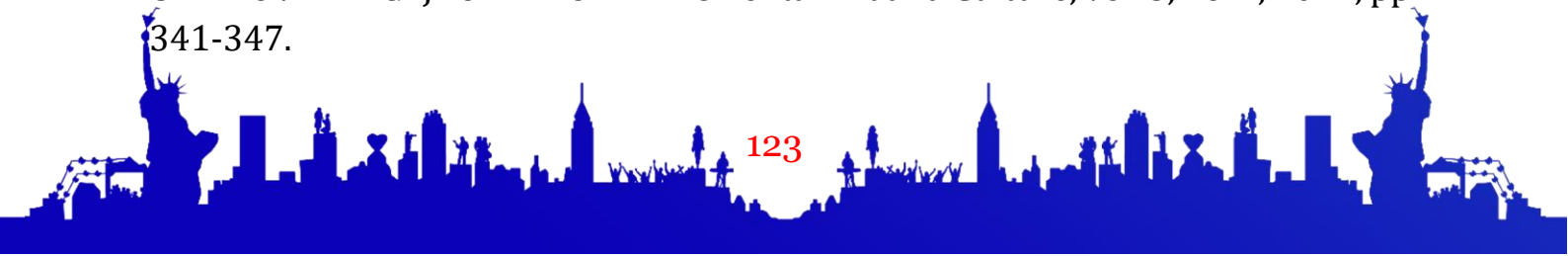
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