

# THE CAUCASUS THEATER

## Overview

Theater is a performing art that is staged by live performers to present the audience a real or imagined event. It is a live show combined with gesture, music, dance and a stage. The purpose of theater is not only entertainment, it can also serve as a means of education. Theater is a way to present societal problems in a new light to a wide audience. Theater is also another way to learn about the history of a nation, since theater helps us to understand people, their history and their cultures.

In Caucasus, the theater was a very important element of society. The appearance of the theater was closely connected with pagan rituals, traditional holidays, religious festivals, dances and ceremonies. Different types of theater forms began to appear under the influence of Westernization and Christianization and secular dramas from Europe were translated into the languages of the Caucasus.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, theater became particularly important as part of feasts and festivals that were held at the royal court. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theater played an important role in the formation of the collective consciousness of the people in the Caucasus. It was a place where writers were able to reflect their critical views and anti-Russian feelings through their satire.

With the establishment of Bolshevik rule, all theaters were nationalized and they went under control of the government and the artists had to follow the state's theater guidelines. Due to heavy censorship, theater plays shifted their focus on the life of peasants, workers, and revolutionaries in the 1930s. During World War II, theaters mostly staged works by European authors such as Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Richard II*, and Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex* as well as many others. In the 1960s–1980s, theaters began to part ways with realism and staged experimental performances. However, in 1982, theaters were targeted for not reflecting the spirit of the Party's basic Leninist principles and for being outside of politics. The state control of arts continued till the end of the Soviet Union.

## ANCIENT

### South Caucasus

**Georgia:** Traces of an ancient Georgian theater, which dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE have been found in Uplistsikhe.

**Sakhioba:** Georgia has the oldest theater in the Caucasus, called the *Sakhioba*, which dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. It lasted until the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the courts of Georgian kings. The *sakhioba* performances consisted of singing, dancing, and recitations.

**Armenia:** The theater in Armenia began as a religious ritual, with *gusans* (troubadours) singing songs praising the nobleman's ancestors. There were also *voghbergus* (tragedians), and *katakagusan* (comedians).



The first Armenian theater was built during the reign of Tigran the Great in Tigranakert in 69 BCE. Tigran's son, Artavazd II built the second theater in the old capital of Artashat and personally performed. He became the first Armenian playwright with his numerous tragedies and orations in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.

*Tigran the Great*

**Azerbaijan:** In Azerbaijan, the appearance of the theater was closely linked with ancient holidays and traditional dances. Ancient traditional ceremonies, like *Sayachy*, *Novruz*, and *Gevsech* all carried some theatrical features by having choirs, dancers, and dialogues in dramatic plays. For example, in *Novruz*, there is a game called *Kosa-Kosa* that has a plot, dramatic scenes and actors wearing masks and special clothes.

### North Caucasus

**Chechnya:** Theatrical features were attested in religious festivals, in wartime, at youth parties, and during music and dancing contests.

### Discussion / Questions:

1- In addition to religious rituals, what other types of performances existed in the ancient Caucasus?

### Readings:

- 1- Roudik, P.L., *Culture and the Customs of the Caucasus*, Greenwood Press, 2009.
- 2- Khachikyan, A., *History of Armenia, A Brief Review*, Edit Print, 2010.
- 3- Jaimoukha, A., *Chechens A Handbook*, Routledge, 2005.
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- 5- Mikaberidze A., *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, The Scarecrow Press, 2007.

## POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

### South Caucasus

#### Georgia:

**Berikaoba:** In the Middle Ages, theatrical festivals of pagan origin like *Berikaoba* were performed with masks to protest against conquerors or feudal oppression.

**King Teimuraz I:** Georgian culture has been under the influence of both the Christian and Muslim (Sufi) religions since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. King Teimuraz I gave Georgian poetry new direction with his translations of verses from Persian literature. He also enriched Georgian theater with his verse dialogues used by masked actors to entertain the Russian envoys in Kutaisi.

**Armenia:** In Armenia great advances in theatrical activities were made in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Even though from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the 9<sup>th</sup> century these advances were slowed down by Arab invasions, the theater was able to survive.

The 11<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries marked the recovery period of the Armenian theater. Different types of dramas (tragic, erotic, love, mime, comic, epic) began to be performed in the Armenian Cilicia area.

**Azerbaijan:** In the Middle Ages, religious dramas like *Shabih* spectacles that were performed in the month of Muharram were the most common theatrical performances. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, under the rule of the Safavids, *Shabih* was widely used. Folk performances played a great role in the development of the professional theater of Azerbaijan. Besides *Shabih*, the artists performed *godu-godu*, *kosa kosa*, *kavsaj*, *yel baba*, *gudul*, *yugh*, *lal oyunu*, *garavelli*, *laghlaghi* in open spaces. Such open air performances continued until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



*Kosa kosa*

## North Caucasus

**Chechnya:** The main sources of the medieval Chechen theater were the ancient pagan rituals and folk culture. For example, worshippers prayed the Mother of Cold, who symbolized evil, not to bring bad frost and not to destroy their livestock. After children ate treats presented on an oak branch, fire was placed on a log that had been kept from the old year. An adult would pray to the embodiment of good, the Father of Winter. Afterwards, embers from this sacred fire were taken home by the worshippers.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, these rituals turned into humorous theatrical acts. One of the best examples of this ritual is *Belkhi*, a collective effort to help a resident to built a house or to help him in harvesting his crops. This ritual was accompanied by music, singing, dancing and jokes. Boys and girls performed comic plays with a dialogue sung by a male solo and choir on the one side, and a female solo and choir on the other side.

### Discussion / Questions:

1- Why was there no formal, organized theater in the Caucasus until the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

### Readings:

- 1- Roudik, P.L., *Culture and the Customs of the Caucasus*, Greenwood Press, 2009.
- 2- Khachikyan, A., *History of Armenia, A Brief Review*, Edit Print, 2010.
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## 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS:

**GEORGIA:** In Georgia, among the performing arts, theater became particularly important as part of feasts and festivals that were held at the royal court.

The first professional Georgian theater was established by Giorgi Avalishvili and Gabriel Maiori at Erekle II's court in 1790. They translated the plays of some Russian and European authors into Georgian, but also created original dramas.

**Giorgi Avalishvili:** Giorgi Avalishvili, a diplomat, writer and dramatist, was the forefather of the first *Georgian National Theater* founded in Tiflis in 1791. He was also the writer of the first Georgian drama called *King Teimuraz*.

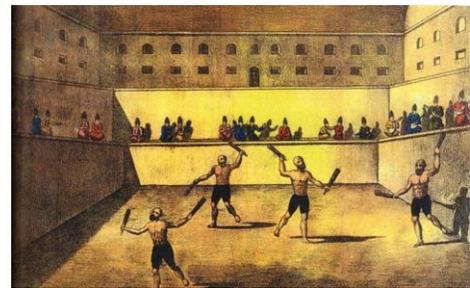
## ARMENIA:

**Mekhitarists:** In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the secular dramas from Europe were translated into the Classical Armenian language. These plays were not performed frequently at theaters, but mostly used at schools in teaching Classical Armenian. Plays were written by the *Mekhitarists* clergy who contributed to the development of the Western Armenian Theater and were performed by the students. The Mekhitarists played a major role in the development of the Western Armenian Theater by writing original plays and translating European plays into Classical Armenian. For example, the Mekhitarists published Homer's *The Iliad*.



**Minstrel School:** Minstrel school was established by Naghash Hovnatan. The famous mistrels were Savat Nova and Naghash Hovnatan.

*Naghash Hovnatan*



**AZERBAIJAN:** In *Zorxana*, performers accompanied by music and dance play the Mil (the instrument used during Zorxana).

*Zorxana*

## Questions:

1- In what ways were the performing arts of the Caucasus influenced, both positively and negatively, by outside cultures?

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- 1- Jaimaukha, A., *Chechens A Handbook*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.
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- 3- Akhundova, N., *The History of Azerbaijan*, "Short course of lectures", Baku Business University, 2018.
- 4- Ismailov, D., *History of Azerbaijan*, AzMIU NPM, Baku, 2017.
- 5- <https://iamtbilisi.com/history-of-georgian-theater/>
- 6- [https://www.academia.edu/35126986/The\\_Real\\_Mekhitarist\\_Contribution\\_and\\_the\\_Nature\\_of\\_Armenian\\_Identity\\_1701](https://www.academia.edu/35126986/The_Real_Mekhitarist_Contribution_and_the_Nature_of_Armenian_Identity_1701)
- 7- Mikaberitze, A., *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007.
- 8- Roudik, P. L. *Culture and Customs in the Caucasus*, Greenwood Publishing, 2008.

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS

**GEORGIA:** The history of modern theater in Georgia began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The theater always played an important role in the formation of the collective consciousness of Georgians. It was a place where the writers reflected their critical views and anti-Russian feelings through their satire.

**Giorgi Eristavi:** Eristavi was the first Georgian dramatist, playwright, and the founder of a modern Georgian theater. In 1850, he opened his own theater, however, due to a lack of government funding the theater was shut down.

*Giorgi Eristavi*

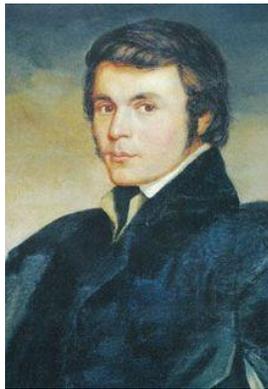


**Kote Marjanishvili:** Marjanishvili was a theater director and the founder of the first national theater.

**Rustaveli Theater:** The Rustaveli Theater was opened in 1879 by Iliā Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli, in Tbilisi and was named after Georgia's national poet. The theater began to stage plays based on European and Russian and traditional style.

Artists also performed Georgian satires and comedies, as well as Russian and European classics on the stage. One of these was Giorgi Eristavi's son, the dramaturg David Eristavi's play *The Homeland*.

**ARMENIA:** Armenian theater played an important role in recreating a common Armenian identity in the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Harutyun Alamdaryan:** Alamdaryan made a great contribution to Eastern Armenian Drama. He established an amateur theatrical group in Tiflis in 1834 and staged several European plays.

**Khachadour Abovian:** Abovian was Alamdaryan's student and wrote his first play *Aghchegan Sera* (The Girl's Love) in the Eastern Armenian dialect.

*Khachadour Abovian*

**Galoust Shermazarian:** The playwright Galoust Shermazarian produced his satirical play, *Karapet Episcoposi Ararknera* (The Deeds of Bishop Karapet) in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Gabriel Sundukian:** Sundukian was an Eastern Armenian playwright from the late 19th century. He was also the founder of Armenian Drama. In 1863, his first play, *Sneezing at Night's Good Luck* was staged in an Armenian theater in Tiflis. He also authored a play called *Pepo* in 1871.

## **AZERBAIJAN:**

The establishment of the Azerbaijani National theater dates back to the second half of the 19th century. Shusha became a major center for theater performances. There were writers, teachers and intellectuals that organized theater performances in clubs and theaters in Shusha.

**Mirza Fatali Akhundov:** The First Azerbaijani playwright was Mirza Fatali Akhundov. He produced the comedies *Serguzesti- Veziri- xani- Lenkeran* and *Hadji Gara* in 1873 which addressed the social problems that existed within conservative societies. The same year Hasan bey Zardabi, Necef Bey Vezirov and Esger Aga Gorani staged Akhundov's comedy *Hacı Gara* in Baku. His comedies *Khyrs-quldurbasan*, *Musyjo Jirdan* and *Dervish Mesteli shah* were performed in Shusha.

*Mirza Fatali Akhundov*



By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theater performances were staged in the Azerbaijani language. Najaf bey Vazirov, Hashim bey Vazirov, Nariman Narimanov, Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh and Suleyman Sani Akhundov followed Akhundov's footsteps and continued to organize theatrical performances.

#### Questions:

1- What role did theater plays have in the creation of collective consciousness of the Caucasus nations?

#### Readings:

1- Roudik, P.L., *Culture and the Customs of the Caucasus*, Greenwood Press, 2009.

2- Jaimoukha, A., *Chechens A Handbook*, Routledge, 2005.

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5- Ilyasov, L., *The Diversity of the Chechen Culture: From Historical Roots to the Present*, UNESCO, 2009.

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## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS

#### GEORGIA:

**Batumi Drama Society:** In 1913, a Drama Society was established in Batumi, led by Ivane Meskhi. The management of the Drama Society formed a troupe of professional actors under the director Shalva Dadiani.

**Konstantine (Kote) Marjanishvili:** Marjanishvili was an actor and a theater director. He produced Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* in 1917, became the head of the Rustaveli Theater in Tbilisi in 1922, and opened a drama theater in Kutaisi in 1928. Later, the theater was named after him and moved to Tbilisi in 1930. He staged his first play Ernest Toler's *Popola, We Are Living, The End of the "Nadezhda"* (1909), Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (1910), Ibsen's *Per Gynt* (1912), Offenbach's *Die Schöne Helena* (1913), Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail* (1923), Eristavi's *Partition* (1823), Arakishvili's *The Tale of Shota Rustaveli* (1923), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1925), Kutateli's *Midnight Past* (1929), Rossini's *William Tell* (1931) and many more. Marjanishvili had close contact with the Russian directors Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. He skillfully blended the features of the Russian and European theatrical tradition with the Georgian traditional features and worked on romantic and heroic themes.



**Marjanishvili Theater:** The Marjanishvili Theater was founded in Kutaisi in 1928 by Kote Marjanishvili. The theater later moved to Tbilisi in 1930.

*Marjanishvili Theater*

**Alexander (Sandro) Akhmeteli:** Akhmeteli denounced Marjanishvili's support of Soviet realism in Georgian artistic traditions, and was against Stanislavski's system claiming that it was only suitable to Russian theater but not to Georgian theater. After Marjanishvili, Akhmeteli became a theater director of the Rustaveli Theater from 1926 to 1935. He also created his own artistic corporation called *Duruji*. Akhmeteli produced theater plays and operas such as Glebov's *Zagmuk* (1926), Shanshiashvili's *Anzor* (1928), Lavrenyov's *Break-up* (1928) Kirshon's *City of the Winds* (1929), Dadiani's *Tetnaldi* (1931), and Arakishvili's *The Tale of Shota Rustaveli*.

With the establishment of Bolshevik rule in Georgia, due to heavy censorship, theater plays shifted their focus to the life of peasants, workers, and revolutionaries in the 1930s. During World War II, Georgian theaters staged the plays that focused on the Georgian past and nationalism. In the 1950s, theaters mostly staged works of European authors such as Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Richard II*, Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex* and many others.

In the 1960s–1980s, theaters began to part ways with realism and staged experimental performances.



**Robert Sturua:** Sturua was Georgian theater director who became famous with his own interpretation of Shakespeare's plays *Richard III* (1979) and *King Lear* (1987), and Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1975). During the civil war in Georgia in the 1990s, the Rustaveli Theater staged the experimental plays such as *ABC*, *Macbeth*, *Lamara*, *Life Is a Dream*, *Irine's Happiness*, *Women-Snake* under the direction of Sturua.

*Robert Sturua*

**Tumanishvili Studio Theater of Film Actors:** This theater was opened by director Mikheil Tumanishvili in 1977. One of the most popular performances was *Chinchraka* that was based on actors' improvisations.

**State Pantomime Theater (Shalikashvili Theater):** It was established in Tbilisi in 1982 under the directives of Amiran Shalikashvili.

**Tbilisi Marionette Theater:** Marionette theater was a puppet theater established by Rezo Gabriadze in 1981.

*Marionette Theater*

**ARMENIA:** Armenian theater was based on the genre of psychological realism which emphasized the emotional environment of their personages.



New theaters were opened in Yerevan and other cities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Theater of A. Mravyan was opened in Leninakan in 1928 and the Yerevan State Azerbaijan Theater of J. Jabbarly was opened in 1928. Many theaters performed European dramas from Shakespeare, Schiller, Brecht and Ibsen.

**Gabriel Sundukyan:** Playwright Sundukyan was the founder of Armenian drama. He wrote his play *Love and Freedom* in 1910.



**Gabriel Sundukyan State Academic Theater:** The theater was founded in 1922 in Yerevan and named after Gabriel Sundukyan. The theater staged European (Camus's *Caligula*, Brecht's *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*), Russian (Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*) and national plays (Sundukyan's *Testament*), and many others.

*Gabriel Sundukyan State Academic Theater*

**Alexander Movsisian (Shirvanzade):** Movsisian was an playwright who adopted the pen-name Shirvanzade. He was the author of drama *Namus* (1911).



**Vardan Ajemyan:** Ajemyan was a director in the Soviet Armenia. He opened the Second Armenian State Theater (Gyumri State Theater).

*Gyumri State Theater*

He became a director of Yerevan Sundukian Theater in 1939 and directed Alexander Shirvanzade's *For the Honour* (1939), Papazian's *Rock* (1944), Nairi Zarian's *Ara Geghetskik* (1946), William Saroyan's *My Heart is in the Mountains* (1961) and

Aramashot Papayan's *The World, Yes, Turned Upside Down* (1967).

**Paronyan Musical Comedy Theater:** The Paronyan Theater was founded in 1941 in Yerevan and it was named after Hakob Paronyan. Directors and actors Vardan Mkrtchi Ajemian and Karp Khachvankyan worked in this theater and opened the theater to a wide audience.

*Paronyan Theater*



**Yerevan State Institute of Theatrical Arts:** In 1944, the Institute was established by the Armenian director Vavik Vardanyan in Yerevan. The Institute was merged with the State Academy of Fine Arts of Armenia in 1953. In 1953, this Institute was named the Yerevan State Institute of Art and Theater. In 1994, it was divided into two separate institutions: the State Academy of Fine Arts of Armenia and the Yerevan State Institute of Theater.

**Derenik Demirchian:** Demirchian was a playwright who wrote *Nazar the Brave* (Kaj Nazar, 1923).

## AZERBAIJAN:

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Azerbaijani writers N.Vezirov, A. Hagverdiyev, J. Mamedgulizade and S.S. Akhundov played an active role in the development of Azerbaijani theater, and the actors and producers such as N. Narimanov, U. Hadjybeyov, M. Magomayev and J. Jabbarly made valuable contributions to the continued existence of national theater. Akhundov was the author of the first Azerbaijani play *Vizier of Lankaran khanate*. He also wrote satirical plays and comedies.

**Taghiyev Theater and Nijat Troupe:** During the first Russian Revolution of 1905, a realist drama troupe was formed under *Tekamul* newspaper. The *Nijat Charity Union* established a united drama troupe in 1908 which performed plays such as A. Hagverdiyev's *Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar* (1907), S. Sami's *Blacksmith Gave* (1908), Mammadguluzade's *Robbers* (1907) and *Deadmen* (1916) in the Taghiyev Theater. When the *Shafa Society* was established in 1912, they created a theatrical troupe. The Society invited actors from Nijat's troupe to take part in their theatrical performances.



*Taghiyev Theater*

**Azerbaijan State Russian Drama Theater (Baku Labor Theater):** Theater was established in Baku in 1919. All theaters were nationalized and came under the control of the government. In 1920, a *United State Theater* was created which included Azerbaijani, Russian and Armenian drama and opera theaters.

Troupes were closed, and the Azerbaijani drama troupe was turned into the *Azerbaijan State Academic Drama Theater*. In 1923, this theater was renamed the *Baku Labor Theater*. The theater staged Azerbaijani and Russian parodies and stage versions of Russian literature like N.V. Gogol's *The Overcoat*, A.S. Pushkin's *The little house in Kolomna*, *The Tale of the Priest and of His Workman Balda*, F.M. Dostoyevski's *The Grand Inquisitor* and many more. The *Azerbaijan State Theater of Young Spectators* opened in 1928 in Baku and the *Azerbaijan State Theater of Musical Comedy* was established in 1938.

Uzeir Hadjibeyov laid the foundation of Musical theater by staging *Leyli and Majnun* in 1908. Hadjibeyov's musical comedies *Sheikh Senan*, *No matter this or that*, and *Arshyn Mal Alan*, Muslum Magomayev's *Shah Ismayil* and many others were performed in this theater.

**Puppet Theater:** Puppet theater was founded in 1931 by Jafar Jabbarly. The theater's first play, *Circus*, was staged in 1932. Puppet theater was performed at the *Azerbaijan State Theater of Young Spectators* in 1941-1946 and *Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall* in 1950.



There were no women-actress in Azerbaijan, therefore the female roles were played by men. Ahmed Agdamski was one of the actors who played the female character *Leyli* in *Leyli and Majnun*, the role of *Asli* in *Asli and Karam*, the role of *Minnat khanim* in *Husband and wife* and the role of *Tahmina* in *Rustam and Zohrab*.

*Ahmed Agdamski*

Professional theaters were established during the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s, new playwrights like G. Garayev took an experimental approach to theater with his play Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In the 70s, the works of young playwrights such as Nabi Khazri's play *Echo*, and Anar's play *The Last Night of the Last Year* brought success to the development of the Azerbaijan State Theater of Young Spectators.

Bakhtiyar Vahabzade made valuable contribution to the repertoire of the theater with his plays *The Sword on Our Way-Göktürk Tribe* (1998), *Where is the World Going* (1991), *The Second Sound* (1991).

## **NORTH CAUCASUS**

**CHECHNYA:** The beginnings of Chechen theater were associated with Mahomet Mahomaev, Muslim Mahomaev and Nazarbek Sheripov. The writer Said Baduev was considered the founder of the Chechen national theater. He was the author of the plays *The Red Fortress* (1930), *The Golden Lake*, and *Political Division* (1934).

Professional theater did not exist in Chechnya before 1917. The first Chechen professional theater companies were established in the 1920s performing Sultan Shadiev's and Magomed Gaisanov's *The Murid*, Danilbek Sheripov's *Alibek-Hajji of Zandak* and many others.

The first Chechen playwrights Said Baduyev, Arbi Mamakayev, Bilal Saidov and Khalid Oshayev were considered as the vanguards of the Chechen theater.



**Khanpasha Nuradilov Chechen Drama Theater:** In 1931, the *Khanpasha Nuradilov Chechen Drama Theater* was opened with the contributions of the stage directors Vladimir Shatov, Alexander Tuganov and Archil Chkhartishvili. The repertoire of the theater included plays written in the Chechen language.

#### *Nuradilov Chechen Drama Theater*

A Puppet Theater in Grozny was opened in 1935 under the directors Bilal Saidov, Garun Batukaev, and Khasan Shaipov performing the play *The Miraculous Rubber Shoes* and the first Chechen production *The Grey-Winged Dove*.

The *Zhukhurg Theater* included comedies, dancing, pantomime performed during folk festivals and weddings by the actors wearing animal masks, animal skins or fur coats. Zhukhurg performances take their inspiration from everyday life or from fairy tales.

The *Chechen State Theater of the Young Spectator* was established in 1937 in Chechnya. During the Chechen deportation in 1944, stage performances were stopped. It was not until 1958 the theaters began to open their stages in Chechnya.

In the 1980s, the playwrights dedicated their works to Chechen folklore and history as in the plays *The Black Plait* by Lechi Yakhiyev and *God Alone* by Said Hamzat Nunuyev.

#### **Questions:**

1- What happened to theaters that failed to follow the party's strict guidelines for theatrical performances?

#### **Readings:**

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