

Northern Caucasus Drama & Performing Arts

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19TH CENTURY : Russian Empire

During the early decades of the 19th century, before most parts of the North Caucasus had been fully exposed to European literary norms, public performances comprised dances, such as the *adyge jegu* (Circassian festival), or the dance practiced in different versions by many Caucasus peoples, called the *lezginka*, and songs, including *illi* for Chechens or and Nart sagas for other cultures, performed with ancient musical instruments, such as the *ponder* and *dechig* in Chechnya, and harps such as the *duuudæstænon fændyr* (in Ossetian), *pshyne-dukuakue* (in Kabardian), and the *kyngyr-kobuz* (in Balkar). Such performance practices belonged to highly developed and sophisticated indigenous traditions, and they were quite unlike from the norms of European drama. The influence of European drama became evident in the last decades of the 19th century, when indigenous writers who had been educated in Russian schools began to compose plays that applied European dramatic norms to local histories and contexts. Even when their exposure to a foreign curriculum and to new pedagogical methods gave these writers contact with a new literary culture, they continued to write creatively in their native languages, and most plays by indigenous pre-revolutionary North Caucasus writers were staged in local vernaculars rather than in Russian.

Ossetian Drama

Among the peoples of the northern Caucasus, Ossetians had the most exposure to Russians and to Russian rule. Perhaps for this reason, Ossetian playwrights played a pioneering role in introducing European-style drama to the northern Caucasus. An early example of such a play by an Ossetian author who also wrote in Russian is the unfinished *Late Dawn*, composed from 1881-1885 by Ossetian poet Kosta Khetagurov (1859-1906). Another important Ossetian playwright is Batyrbek Tuganov (1866-1921), who became close friends with Khetagurov while he was studying law in Vladikavkaz. Tuganov began his writing career while he was a practicing lawyer, with the short story "Hanifa." In 1904, he wrote the play *Parallels (Parallel)*, which deals with the difficult working conditions in a factory where the workers experience exploitation. The play could not be published before the revolution due to government censorship.

From 1905, Tuganov translated Marx into Ossetian and set up an underground printing house for printing anti-government leaflets. Tuganov was arrested in 1905 for revolutionary activities. He was released from prison in 1907, and moved to Moscow, where he was nominated as a delegate to the Second State Duma. Following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, Tuganov worked for the newly-formed Soviet People's Commissariat for Nationalities Affairs prior. He died in Daghestan of cholera a few years later, before he managed to complete two plays he wrote during the 1910s: *Batanoko tembot*, a play centered on the hero Digor-Khaban, who led an uprising of the Ossetian peasantry during the 16th-17th centuries, and *Play without a Name*.

Elbazduko Britayev (1881-1917), known as the founder of Ossetian dramaturgy, began his literary activities after graduating from St. Petersburg University's Law Faculty. Britayev's earlier plays, such as *Having Been to Russia* (1904) mocked and derided the traditional customs of the Ossetian peoples. However, his later plays drew heavily on traditional Ossetian literature and helped to revive it. A case in point is the tragedy *Amran* (1913), which is a modern rewriting of the tales of the Ossetian narrative cycle of the heroes of the Daredzan family. As with much other North Caucasus literary production, this work is also linked to the figure of Prometheus. The origins of these tales, which are separate from and less widespread than the Nart sagas, are diverse, and include Mose Khoneli's Georgian-language *Amiran-Darejaniani* (dating to the 12th century), elements of the Persian *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi (or perhaps the oral traditions that found their way into Ferdowsi's text), and Nart sagas. In this way, we see Ossetia's ancient multilingual situation stimulating new literary forms in the 20th century.

David Grigorievich Koroev (1890-1924) was another important pre-revolutionary Ossetian playwright. Born in the village of Ermen, Koroev moved while still a child to the city of Alagir, where he finished school. After a period of study in Vladikavkaz, Koroev completed his training as an accountant in Tiflis. Koroev's most famous play is the widely-staged *I wasn't there, it was the cat* (*Æз нæ уыдтæн, ææды уыди*, 1910). Two years after publishing this play, Koroev published the play *The Fortune Teller* (*Dusny*, 1912). He was also a poet, and played a role in the founding of the Ossetian publisher "Ir" (*Ir* being the ethnonym through which Ossetians refer to themselves) in 1906. Although the publisher lasted only from 1911 to 1917, its founding was a turning point in Ossetian literature, and played a significant role in making available works such as Kosta Khetagurov's *Ossetian lyre* (*Iron fundyr*, 1899), Blashka Gurzhibekov, Georgy Tsagolov, Sek Gadiev, Alexander Kubalov, Rosa Kochisova, the journalism of Alikhan Ardasenov, as well as the aforementioned Tuganov, Britaev, Koroev.

Plays were also authored in the Ossetian language by women writers such as Lena Afakoevna Kotsoeva (1885-1923). Kotsoeva was born in rural Ossetia, to the family of one of the leaders of the peasant uprising of Afako Kotsoev in 1901. Kotsoeva's mother died when she only five years old, and she was raised in the Vladikavkaz orphanage for girls, after which she returned to Gizel and worked as a teacher. In 1911, Kotsoeva graduated from the Transcaucasian Obstetric School in Tiflis. Kotsoeva's play, *The First Day of a Young Teacher at School* (*Nog ahuyrgunadzhy fystsag bon skolayy*) was published in Vladikavkaz in 1908. One of the first Ossetian comedies, this play depicts the experience of teaching in a typical Ossetian rural school in the pre-revolutionary period. Through her protagonist Akso, who opposes corporal punishment, loves children, and embraces the newest pedagogical methods, Kotsoeva promotes the philosophy of education that she developed while teaching in her native town.

Further reading:

G. Dzagurov, "Zabytaia osetinskaia pisatel'nitsa Kotsoeva Lena," *Izvestiia YuONIII XI* (1962).

D. M. Lang and G. M. Meredith-Owens, "Amiran-Darejaniani: A Georgian Romance and Its English Rendering," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22.1/3 (1959): 454-490 (p. 467 for background on the Ossetian narrative cycle of the Daredzan family).

A. Khadartseva, *Istoriia osetinskoï dramy*. 2 vols. (Ordzhonikidze [Vladikavaz]: Izd-vo "Ir" 1983).

Batyrbek Tuganov, *Batanoko tembot : poviest' iz vremen geroicheskoi bor'by kavkazskikh gortsev i drugie rasskazy*, ed. O É Tuganova (Moscow: Izd. kn-stva "Vostok", 1913).

Sufian Zhemukhov and Charles King, "Dancing the Nation in the North Caucasus," *Slavic Review* 72.2 (2017): 287–305.

Discussion Questions:

How did North Caucasus playwrights incorporate the folkloric traditions and performance practices of their people into modern dramatic productions?

What role did European dramaturgy play in the development of drama in the North Caucasus?

20TH CENTURY : the Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods

Of the major genres and media discussed in this study guide, drama was among the last to develop in the North Caucasus. For most of the history of North Caucasus literature, drama in the modern sense of the term—involving indoor theatres, professional actors, and rehearsals—is a 20th century invention, although precedents for this art, such as the polemical debate in the 17th century Daghestani *Treatise on Djinn*, have been discussed in the previous articles for this study guide.

Chechen Drama

Aslanbek Sheripov's brother Nazarbek Sheripov (1883-1920), who published under the Chechen name Nazar-Bek Gatten-Kalinsky, was Chechnya's first playwright and director, Nazarbek Sheripov played a leading role in the formation of Chechen dramaturgy. Beginning in 1905, he directed his own troupe of actors in the performance of the first Chechen-language plays. In 1912, he produced and directed his two best-known plays: *The Bear* and *At a Party* (*Синкьерамехь*). Both works are concerned with Chechnya's premodern past.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s Said Baduev (1904-1943), often regarded as the founder of modern Chechen literature, composed a number of plays that were to prove influential on Chechen dramaturgy. The most famous of these is *Not Every Mullah has a Bayram* (1930). Other significant plays by Baduev include *Red Fortress*, on World War II, *The Marriage of Tsaeba*, about speculators, *Golden Lake*, and *Political Department*.

Comic theatre is also an important genre in north Caucasus dramaturgy. In this domain, among the Chechens, Abdul Khamid Khamidovich Khamidov reigns supreme. Khamidov began his literary career as a translator of the classics of Russian and foreign theater into Chechen, including Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1939) and Shakespeare's *Othello* (1940). During World War II, Khamidov was employed by the Chechen-Ingush State Drama Theater as actor and director. In 1943, he was awarded the title of Honored Artist of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.

Like all Chechen and Ingush residing in the Checheno-Ingush Republic, Khamidov was deported to Central Asia in 1944. He first ended up in the Jambul Region of Kazakhstan, where he became the artistic director of the Palace of Culture of the sugar factory where he worked. He moved soon after to Kyrgyzstan, where he worked as a literary consultant and journalist on theatrical topics. In 1957, he returned with the rest of the Chechen and Ingush people to Chechnya, where he reestablished the Chechen-Ingush State Song and Dance Ensemble. He served as chairman of the Writers' Union of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR from 1959-1961.

Khamidov's best known play is *The Fall of Bozh-Ali* (1965), a comedy about the failed attempts of the protagonist Bozh-Ali to find a bride. The premiere of this play is widely regarded as among the most successful ever in the history of Chechen dramaturgy, and has subsequently been staged at the Chechen State Drama Theater on a yearly basis. The Fall of Bozh-Ali has been translated into many languages of the Caucasus, including the Daghestani languages Kumyk and Lak, Ossetian, Kabardian, and world literatures such as Turkish and Arabic. It has also been staged around the world, including in Bashkortostan (Tatarstan), Turkey, Jordan, and Syria.

In war-torn Chechnya, theatres were bombed and literary production in the realm of drama came to a halt. Chechen plays composed before the war include Arbi Usmanov's "The Mystery of the Cave" and Musa Akhmadov "The Adventures of Chervig." As throughout the North Caucasus, European and Russian classics such as Gogol, Schiller, Moliere were regularly performed.

Abkhaz Drama

Samson Kuagu-ipa Chanba (1886–1937)'s *Amkhadzyr* (1920), is the first play written in the Abkhaz language. In 1937 Chanba was arrested and subsequently shot during the Stalinist purge that affected so many of the best writers of the Caucasus. Later, Denis Kirshalovich Chachkhalia's drama *The Lonely Alder's Ford* appeared on the Abkhaz stage.

On the Global Stage

By the end of the 20th century, with many north Caucasus writers and playwrights living abroad and in the diaspora, North Caucasus drama acquired an international profile. In 2000, the three-act operatic musical *The Resurrection of Satanay* by Jordanian Circassian playwright M. I. Quandour was performed at the Kabardino-Balkarian State Musical Theatre. The musical was based on the poem "Satanay" by the composer's wife, Lyuba Balagova. The poem rehearses the entire history of the Circassian people, chronicling their migrations over the course of the previous two centuries. Mythic in scope as well as historical in orientation, the poem includes such figures as

Waschhemaxwe from the Nart sagas. This we come full circle, with contemporary North Caucasus drama giving new life to its rich oral traditions from times past.

Further reading:

Magomed Mamkaev, "Певец народной думы," *Грозненский рабочий* (4 September 1964).

Said Bauev, *Красная крепость* (1933).

Discussion Questions:

How did North Caucasus from the Soviet period and after shape their indigenous traditions to modern dramatic practice?