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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF AZERBAIJANI THEATER: KEY STAGES

**Abstract.** The article traces the development of Azerbaijani theater in chronological order, analyzing its historical formation and the unique social and cultural environment in which it emerged. The nineteenth century, a period marked by significant hardships in Azerbaijan's history, also witnessed notable advancements in various areas of cultural life. Recognizing the creation of national dramaturgy, media, and theater as a pivotal and complex cultural shift reflects an inherent historical progression. This framework supports the classification and periodization of theater's formation and growth. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century stands out as a distinct era in Azerbaijani theater, with special attention given to the early Soviet period when theater operated under ideological control. Additionally, the article addresses the activities of provincial theaters and the establishment of new theater studios in the years of independence, highlighting their contributions to the evolution of Azerbaijani theater.

**Key words:** Azerbaijani theater, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Soviet period, Independence period, periodization.

**Introduction.** The official history of Azerbaijani theater begins on March 23, 1873, but its roots extend much further back. Traditional ceremonies and rituals from daily life, celebrations, and religious observances incorporated theatrical elements like movement, chorus, and dialogue, which were essential in shaping folk theater. Over time, these individual rites evolved into collective performances, enhancing their

theatrical nature. Ancient Turkic terms such as “oyun” (play) and “ayin” (ceremony) reflect the ceremonial origins of theater. Examples include rituals like “Godu-Godu,” aimed at ending damaging rains, and “Kavas,” celebrating the end of winter.

Despite their rudimentary nature, these theatrical elements were crucial to the development of Azerbaijani folk theater. Scholars have noted that the *ashiq*-minstrel tradition embodies fully developed theatrical characteristics. Mammad Arif highlighted that *ashiq* art integrates singing, instrumental performance, and dance, fulfilling the role of folk theater [1, p. 336].

In ancient Greece, often viewed as the cradle of art and culture, theatrical performances were linked to the god Dionysus. Symbolizing the cycles of nature—particularly through grapes and wine—Dionysus represented the rebirth of life after winter [1, p. 346].

The genre of tragedy evolved from dithyrambs dedicated to Dionysus, marking the transition from solo monologues (by what we now recognize as an actor) to dialogues and group performances, illustrating the ancient origins of theater.

Theater is a synthesis of various elements, deeply rooted in religious beliefs, mystical concepts, rituals, and ceremonies. It transcends a simple process, intertwining the complex truths of life with stagecraft, movement, and the gestures of the actor. As a uniquely creative and syncretic art form, theater captures human characters and their reflections on life and time, serving as a medium that embodies and reflects the entire world.

**The interpretation of the main material.** The evolution of professional theater in Azerbaijan was a multifaceted process influenced by the social, historical, and cultural contexts of the era. The 19th century was particularly difficult for the Azerbaijani people, marked by tragedies, territorial losses, and fragmentation. The occupation of Azerbaijan by tsarist Russia left lasting scars in the nation’s collective memory. Professor Tahira Mammad, in her textbook “19<sup>th</sup> Century Azerbaijani Literature,” emphasizes the diverse independent movements in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, contrasting it with the more cohesive literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which integrated new styles and Western influences. This period was characterized by attempts to preserve tradition amid these independent movements [2, p. 8].

Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh, a key figure in Azerbaijani dramaturgy, wrote six comedies between 1850 and 1855. His 1871 article outlined the role of theater in public education, emphasizing its accessibility to all societal

classes. The premiere of his comedy “Adventure of the Vizier of the Khan of Lankaran” on March 23, 1873, in Baku, organized by Hasanbey Zardabi and Najafbey Vazirov, marked the official beginning of Azerbaijani theater. Founded on realistic principles, this theater embraced high ideals and became a medium for human expression, achieving stylistic and methodological excellence [3, p. 7].

Despite facing threats and challenges, Zardabi remained committed to promoting theater and education, believing in their eventual societal value. The absence of female actors led to men playing female roles, raising questions about authenticity. By the 19th century, intellectuals like Nariman Narimanov advocated for the educational role of theater, viewing it as a means of personal growth [3, p. 5].

Prominent intellectuals like E. Sultanov, M. Sidgi, J. Mammadguluzade, M. Safaralibeyov, A. Hagverdiyev, and B. Badalbeyov played vital roles in the theater’s advancement, extending its influence beyond Baku to provincial cities such as Guba, Shaki, Nakhchivan, Shusha, and Lankaran. Actors like M. Zulalov, M. S. Seyidov, H. Namazov, and M. Guliyev contributed to the growth of the Tbilisi Azerbaijan Theater. Zardabi emphasized cultural advancement through the “Akinchi” newspaper and facilitated the first staging of Akhundzade’s “Haji Gara” in Azerbaijani.

In the 1880s, Baku’s theater scene began to flourish, with new performances captivating audiences. The Irevan theater, established by Firudinbey Kocherli in 1886, faced opposition but thrived, showcasing vibrant theater life. The 1890s saw a surge of creativity in dramaturgy, with contributions from writers like N. Vazirov and S. M. Ganizadeh. Actors like K. Ahmadov, Y. Nuri, J. Ahmadov, and G. Jabbar brought vibrant theater life to the Irevan Azerbaijan Theater. Since the 1890s, a thriving creative atmosphere in dramaturgy has fostered the emergence of new repertoires and performances, with contributions from writers like N. Vazirov, A. Hagverdiyev, N. Narimanov, S. M. Ganizadeh, and S. S. Akhundov.

The lack of professional directors led playwrights to direct their own works, fostering a closer connection between dramaturgy and theater. This synergy contributed to a distinct Azerbaijani theater identity. The interplay between dramatic texts and stage representations engaged audiences, enhancing realism. M. F. Akhundzade’s “Haji Gara” remained a prominent work in the repertoire, followed by significant plays like “Monsieur Jordan and the Sorcerer-Dervish Mastali Shah”

and “Adventure of the Vizier of the Khan of Lankaran”. Other plays, including N. Vazirov’s “Out of the Rain Shower, Into the Rain Downpour” and “Tragedy-Fakhreddin”, N. Narimanov’s “The Scourge of the Tongue” and A. Hagverdiyev’s “The Collapsed Alliance” enriched the theater’s offerings and garnered audience acclaim.

Azerbaijani Theater at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought socio-political upheavals that significantly impacted literature and art. Artists such as H. Arablinski and H. Sarabski as well as actors like M. Aliyev and S. Ruhulla revitalized the theater, while the “Hamiyat” troupe, founded in 1906, and the “Company of Muslim Drama Artists” marked important advancements. The “Safa” cultural society, established in 1912, further contributed to theater’s growth.

The “Hamiyat” troupe, founded in 1906 at the “Takamul” newspaper office, marked a significant step in the development of theater. That same year, the “Company of Muslim Drama Artists” was established under the direction of Jahangir Zeynalaov, along with the creation of the “Nicat” charity society, which launched initiatives closely linked to theater. Furthermore, the founding of the “Safa” cultural and educational society in 1912 was pivotal in advancing theater by forming a troupe, representing a notable cultural milestone.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theater experienced significant growth, expanding beyond the traditional roles of playwright, director, and actor. The shifting social and political environment ensured that theater remained a vital medium for diverse artistic expressions. Key figures with revolutionary ideas, including N. Narimanov, D. Bunyadzade, M. Azizbayov, H. Sultanov, I. Abilov, M. Mammadyarov, and A. Yuzbashov, regarded theater as a means to subtly promote proletarian ideology. They delved into Russian, European, and global classics, offering distinctive interpretations and creating a wide range of characters. Concurrently, there were notable advancements in the development of realist national drama, building on the foundations laid by M. F. Akhundzade. Productions such as “Nadir Shah”, “Demirchi Gava”, “Gazavat”, “Nymph Magic”, “The Dead”, “The Robbers” and “Inspector” became essential parts of the theater repertoire, highlighting the field’s achievements. The commitment and skill of artists like M. Aliyev, S. Ruhulla, H. Abbasov, and A. M. Sharifzade propelled Azerbaijani theater to new levels of professionalism. Stage masters such as K. Ziya, I. Hidayatzade, R. Tahmasib, A. Garaybeyli,

A. Suheyli, R. Darabli, and M. Valikhanli infused the art form with fresh energy and creativity.

After the 1917 Socialist Revolution, theater faced increased scrutiny, but talented actors continued to thrive. The establishment of a professional theater institute marked a significant milestone, while the involvement of non-national actresses helped address the underrepresentation of female characters. Azerbaijani actresses in the 1920s brought authenticity to the stage. Starting in the 1920s, Azerbaijani actresses like S. Hajiyeva, A. Mammadova, F. Gadiri, and M. Davudova brought authenticity and conviction to the theater scene. They were succeeded by a new generation of talented actresses, including B. Shekinskaya, H. Gurbanova, L. Badirbeyli, S. Basirzadeh, M. Novruzova, and M. Sadygova, who further enhanced the professionalism of Azerbaijani theater. The contributions of Russian directors and actors, such as S. Valentinov, A. A. Tuganov, V. Ivanov, S. A. Mayarov, G. V. Cornelli, S. M. Efimenko, A. Olenskaya, Y. Olenskaya, Makhfura Khanum, Yermakova, and G. Topuria also played a vital role in the development of theater in Baku.

During this period, several individuals pursued advanced studies in theater arts at the Moscow Higher Theater Institute, including M. Mardanov, M. Kirmanshahli, A. Tahirov, A. Nabi, and Y. Ulduz. This was followed by A. Iskanderov, M. Hashimov, and M. Mammadov. Upon completing their education, they returned to Azerbaijan to embark on professional careers, allowing them to explore the complexities and nuances of theatrical art. However, the desire for quick progression in an actor's career can pose significant risks. As noted by the distinguished theater practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski, "The most powerful obstacle to an artist's artistic development is to rush, to force his strength, which has not yet hardened, to always strive to play the first roles, the roles of tragic heroes" [4, p.137].

Additionally, a unique "theater within theater" tradition began to emerge in Azerbaijan. On November 13, 1921, the "Tangid-Tablig" theater was founded in Baku, with a mission to critique and expose outdated customs and societal issues. Its purpose was to address obstacles to social progress through incisive commentary. From 1925 to 1928, the theater operated under the name "Baku worker-peasant theater," later evolving into the "Baku Workers' Theater" under the auspices of the Council of Labor Unions. This era also saw a division within the theater, leading to the separation of opera

and operetta performers from drama theater artists. In 1923, the Baku Theater Technical College was established, becoming the first institution of its kind in the Middle East. The following year, in 1924, the theater was officially designated as the Azerbaijan State Academic Drama Theater.

Moreover, a Javid theater emerged, featuring productions of the renowned playwright Huseyn Javid's works. His plays, such as "Sheikh Sanan", "Iblis", "Topal Teymur" and "Knyaz" were staged with unique interpretations that garnered wide acclaim from audiences. The work of notable dramatists like Jafar Jabbarli also significantly influenced the development of realism by introducing modern themes to theatrical life. He not only contributed as a playwright but also held key directing positions in the theater during the 1920s and 1930s. His plays "Aydin" and "Ogtay Eloglu" were performed at the Azerbaijan State Drama Theater (ASDT) between 1922 and 1923. The 1930s marked Jabbarli's most productive period in dramaturgy and theater direction, during which he served as art director and director of the ASDT, presenting works such as "Sevil" (1929), "Almas" (1930), "In 1905" (1931), "The Return" (1932), and "Yashar" (1932). Between 1933 and 1934, he worked across the drama theater, opera theater, and film studio [5, p. 653].

His legacy continued through emerging literary talents who honorably enriched the Azerbaijani stage repertoire after his passing [3, p. 18].

Significant contributions to dramaturgy were also made by S. Vurgun, M. Huseyn, M. Ibrahimov, and later I. Efendiyev. Their works often addressed historical and contemporary themes, including moral and ethical questions. S. Vurgun's historical drama "Vagif" (1937) was acclaimed as an outstanding example of the genre on the Azerbaijani stage. His subsequent works, such as "Farhad and Shirin" (1942) and "Insan" (1945), reflect his engagement with pressing societal issues from a humanist perspective. Similarly, M. Huseyn's "Shohrat" (1939), along with M. Ibrahimov's "Hayat" (1935) and "Madrid" (1937), represent significant contributions from the 1930s. Although these early works by young authors exhibited some thematic and technical imperfections, they are considered essential milestones in the evolution of Azerbaijani dramaturgy.

I. Efendiyev's collaboration with M. Huseyn on the play "Intizar" marked the beginning of his influential journey in Azerbaijani theater. His numerous works, including "Bright roads", "Spring waters", "Atayev Family", "You are always with me", "Destroyed diaries", "In the Crystal Palace", "The Song

remained in the mountains” and others, highlight his significant contributions to dramaturgy. The works of other playwrights, such as I. Safarli, N. Khazri, B. Vahabzade, and A. Babayev, also enriched Azerbaijani theater. Their plays, staged at various times, collectively represent the artistic evolution of the period.

Since the establishment of the National Theater, Azerbaijani theater has experienced significant growth, with a variety of theaters exploring diverse creative avenues. In Baku, notable institutions include the Azerbaijan State Youth Audience Theater, the Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater named after M. F. Akhundzadeh, the Azerbaijan State Russian Drama Theater named after S. Vurgun, the Azerbaijan State Musical Comedy Theater named after Sh. Gurbanov, and the Azerbaijan State Puppet Theater named after A. Shaig. Other important local theaters comprise the Municipal Theater, Youth Theater, Teaching Theater, Yug Theater, Camera Theater and Pantomime Theater.

In addition to these theaters, music venues like the Rashid Behbudov Song Theater, Mugam Theater, and Shavkat Mammadova Opera Studio, as well as regional theaters, such as the Ganja State Nizami Poetry Theater, Ganja Gelincik Theater, Shusha Musical Drama Theater, Shaki Satira Theater, Nakhchivan Javid Poetry Theater, Nakhchivan Puppet Theater, Gusar Drama Theater, Fuzuli Drama Theater and Gazakh Drama Theater, collectively represent the vibrant theater culture across Azerbaijan.

Following Azerbaijan’s independence, the establishment of seven state theaters signaled a strategic initiative to modernize the cultural landscape. Among these, the “Uns” theater is particularly notable for its innovative approach and creative output. Its focus on exploring the aesthetics of theater highlights a commitment to understanding and presenting the complexities of this art form from theoretical perspectives. This theater serves as a hub where various art forms converge, allowing writers, playwrights, actors, directors, artists, and composers to collaborate on multifaceted productions [6, p. 115].

Furthermore, scholars of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, including J. Jafarov, I. Karimov, and Y. Garayev, along with distinguished theater researchers such as M. Mammadov, J. Safarov, M. Alizade, I. Rahimli, I. Israfilov, and A. Talibzade, have made substantial contributions to the study of Azerbaijani theater’s historical development and contemporary state. Their research highlights the unique cultural phenomenon of Azerbaijani theater, shedding light on its specific characteristics and evolution over time.

**Conclusion.** Azerbaijani theater developed from ancient folk traditions, such as oral storytelling and the art of *ashiqs*, and was shaped by the country's socio-political environment and the dedication of its intellectuals. During the 19th century, figures like Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh laid the groundwork for a national theater with a focus on realism, social critique, and education. Despite cultural challenges, such as resistance to performances and the absence of female actors, Azerbaijani theater gradually grew into a respected art form.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a wave of professionalization and innovation, even under Soviet influence, with Azerbaijani and Russian artists collaborating to advance theater's technical and artistic scope. By mid-century, Azerbaijani theater had become a cornerstone of national culture, known for its powerful storytelling and visual artistry.

Today, this unique blend of traditional and modern elements allows Azerbaijani theater to continue evolving, representing the nation's rich cultural history while embracing contemporary narratives and techniques.

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#### AZƏRBAYCAN TEATRİNİN İNKİŞAFI: ƏSAS MƏRHƏLƏLƏR

Məqalədə Azərbaycan teatrının keçmiş olduğu inkişaf mərhələləri xronoloji ardıcılıqla izlənilir, onun təşəkkül tarixi, yarandığı ictimai-mədəni mühitə məxsus səciyyəvi cəhətlər təhlil müstəvisinə çıxarılır. On doqquzuncu yüzillik məlum olduğu kimi, Azərbaycan tarixinin ən ağır məhrumiyyətlərlə müşayiət olunan bir dövrdür. Ancaq bununla belə bu dövrdə mədəni həyatın bir çox



sahələrində irəliləyişlərin baş verməsi diqqət mərkəzindən kənar qalmır. Milli dramaturgiyanın, mətbuatın və teatrın yaranması əslində mədəniyyət sahəsində baş verən əsaslı dönüş və kompleks hadisə kimi dəyərləndirilməsi təbii qanunauyğunluqdan irəli gəlir, təşəkkül və inkişafın dövr və mərhələlər üzrə təsnifat və bölgüsünün müəyyənləşdirilməsinə zəmin yaradır. Bu mənada XIX əsrin ikinci yarısı və XX yüzilliyin əvvəlləri teatr sahəsində xüsusi mərhələ kimi fərqləndirilmiş, həmçinin sovet hakimiyyətinin bərqərar olduğu ilk illərdə teatrın hakim ideologiyanın diktə və nəzarəti altında fəaliyyətinə də kifayət qədər yer ayrılmışdır. Məqalədə müstəqillik illərində əyalət teatrlarının fəaliyyəti və yeni teatr studiyalarının yaranması ilə bağlı mülahizələrə də yetərinə yer ayrılır.

**Açar sözlər:** Azərbaycan teatrları, XX əsrin əvvəlləri, Sovet dövrü, Müstəqillik dövrü, dövrləşmə.

**Рустам Мурсалоглу (Турция)**

### **РАЗВИТИЕ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСКОГО ТЕАТРА: ОСНОВНЫЕ ЭТАПЫ**

В статье в хронологическом порядке прослежены этапы развития азербайджанского театра, на уровень анализа выведены история его становления, характерные особенности социальной и культурной среды, в которой он создавался. Как известно, XIX век – период истории Азербайджана, сопровождавшийся жесточайшими лишениями, обездоленностью. Однако прогресс во многих областях культурной жизни в этот период не остается в стороне. Оценка возникновения национальной драматургии, печати и театра как коренного перелома и комплексного события в области культуры исходит из естественной закономерности и создает основу, фундамент для определения классификации и разделения становления и развития их по периодам и этапам. В этом смысле вторая половина XIX и начало XX века выделяются как особый этап в области театра, и в первые годы установления Советской власти достаточное место отводится и деятельности под диктатом и контролем правящей идеологии. В годы независимости в деятельности областных театров достаточно места уделяется взглядам, связанным с созданием новых театральных студий.

**Ключевые слова:** Азербайджанский театр, начало XX века, советский период, период независимости, периодизация.