



AN ARCHITECTURAL CONCEPT
OF THE KAMAL THEATRE
OPEN COMPETITION

THEATER SPACE AND DECOLONIZA- TION OF CULTURE



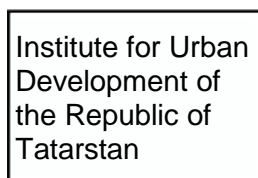




Government of
the Republic of
Tatarstan



Ministry of Culture
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Tatarstan



THEATER SPACE AND DECOLONIZATION OF CULTURE

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The conversation about the new theater space is part of a big conversation about the destiny of post-Soviet cultures, their semantic, genre and institutional content. Before talking about a new vision in all these parameters, it makes sense to outline several layers in the historical development of the Tatar theater:

- premodern layer of the 17th-19th centuries;
- layer of Tatar modernism at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries;
- layer of Soviet Tatar nationalism;
- post-national layer.

When creating a new theater space, it is important to take into account this multi-layered nature, not to go into folklorization and exoticization of national culture and create spaces for acquiring new meanings based on a wide range of one's own and others' experience.

I.

The premodern layer is represented by two interconnected traditions - these are Sufi practices, as well as folk poetic and musical traditions. Throughout the history of the development of Sufism in the Russian Empire, loud zikr, often accompanied by dancing and music, was practiced regardless of gender and degree of education.¹ For example, texts from the 1830s denounced Sufis who attended meetings with the rich who did not pay annual alms. At these meetings, they played musical instruments

¹ Further reading: Bustanov A.K. Book culture of Siberian Muslims. M.: ID Mardzhani, 2013. P. 77-83 / Бустанов А.К. Книжная культура сибирских мусульман. М.: ИД Марджани, 2013. С. 77-83; Ibid. Sufi texts and documents in the Volga region // Alikberov A.K., Bobrovnikov V.O., Bustanov A.K., Kemper M. Russian Islam: essays on history and culture. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Strategic Vision Group "Russia - Islamic World", 2018. P. 269-278 / Он же. Суфийские тексты и документы в Поволжье // Аликберов А.К., Бобровников В.О., Бустанов А.К., Кемпер М. Российский ислам: очерки истории и культуры. М.: Институт востоковедения РАН, Группа стратегического видения «Россия – исламский мир», 2018. С. 269-278; Daulatshah allspidjabi. Burkhan az-zakirin. Proof for the Remembrancers. M.: Sadra, 2020 / Даулатшах алИспиджаби. Бурхан аз-закирин. Доказательство для поминающих. М.: Садра, 2020; Collection of fatwas on the substantiation of dhikr jahr and sama'. Almaty, Tashkent: Daik-Press, 2008 / Собрание фетв по обоснованию зикра джахр и сама'. Алматы, Ташкент: Дайк-Пресс, 2008.

and drank alcohol.² Such practices often took place in the open air, in the garden. They were accompanied by recitation of poetry and sermons. Over time, by the 20th century, Sufi practices become part of the daily rituals of the community, researchers call this process "a profanation of the sacred" or the popularization of Sufism³, its transition from elite to popular forms. Folk traditions included Sufi symbolism and terminology and served as both a factor of communal identity and a form of articulation of personal experiences: autobiographical poetry in a melancholic style (моң-zar) exemplifies this⁴. The premodern layer of performative practices refers to pre- and non-national forms of identity served by literary works in poetry and prose. Bulgar identity (non-national community of Muslims of the Ural-Volga region under Russian domination)⁵ fits completely into this chronological block. At first, the sources of inspiration were the texts and practices of the Arab-Muslim and Ottoman circle, on this basis, over time, their own original tradition was formed.⁶

When designing a new building, it is important to consider this pre-modern layer, its aesthetics, language, and its own spatial accents. The importance of poetry, internal reflection, the obligatory presence of a place for immersion in oneself (the garden was just a paradigm place in this sense) - these aspects suggest themselves for restoration and articulation, especially as an alternative to later modern projects. This layer can be reflected in ornament, soundscape, or performance space, including a garden and a water source.

II.

The cultural layer, largely associated with Bukhara prestige and the Persian-speaking culture of the past⁷, becomes the subject of criticism in the second half of the 19th- the first half of the 20th centuries. Bulgar identity, tied to the cult of holy places and the legend of Islamization, is replaced by national identity - the concept of the Tatar confessional nation (millet)⁸. From now on, the Ural-Volga region was not a single space of Muslims, but was divided into national groups. Despite the reliance of the national narrative on Muslim identity, the Tatar modernism of the time was stimulated by the colonial experience and European models. The Muslim modern project was an attempt to integrate into a single civilizational path by copying modern genres and institutions. This is how a professional theater appeared in the Tatar culture. Although its partici-

² A manuscript from the mosque collection of the village of Srednyaya Tereshka, Ulyanovsk Region (surveyed by the author in July 2021). / Рукопись из примечетского собрания д. Средняя Терешка Ульяновской области (обследовано автором в июле 2021 г.).

³ Babadzhanov B.M. Zikr Jahr and sama: sacralization of the profane or profanation of the sacred? // Devotees of Islam. The Cult of Saints and Sufism in Central Asia and the Caucasus, ed. S.N. Abashin and V.O. Bobrovnikov. Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 2003. P. 237-250 / Бабджанов Б. М. Зикр джахр и сама: сакрализация профанного или профанация сакрального? // Подвижники ислама. Культ святых и суфизм в Средней Азии и на Кавказе, под ред. С.Н. Абашина и В.О. Бобровникова. М.: Восточная литература, 2003. С. 237-250; Devin DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57 (2014), 326-363

⁴ For example, manuscript No. 91 of the mid-20th century from the collection of the Samara historical mosque.

⁵ Allen Frank, *Islamic Historiography and 'Bulghar' Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1998).

⁶ Michael Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien, 1789 - 1889: der islamische Diskurs unter russischer Herrschaft* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1998).

⁷ Alfrid Bustanov, "Speaking 'Bukharan': The Circulation of Persian Texts in Imperial Russia," *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, ed. by Nile Green (University of California, 2019), 193-206.

⁸ Christian Noack, *Muslimischer Nationalismus im Russischen Reich: Nationsbildung und Nationalbewegung bei Tataren und Baschkiren, 1861/1917* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000).

pants had a traditional education, they were fascinated by European cultural models, the idea of progress and secularism. The nation became their main value, and the European theater became an instrument of national discourse for the Muslims of Russia. The same discourse was served by the periodicals, a reformed education system, and a cultural reorientation from Central Asia to the Middle East.

When designing a new space, it is important to take into account the actual Tatar experience of modernization - the first Tatar theater was part of this process, an appeal to the idea of Western progress to be included in the category of "civilized peoples". The theater in this model is part of a Tatar imperial project that exported theatrical models to Central Asia along with the idea of social reformation. This layer can be conceptually reflected in its openness to borrowings from the global market of ideas, spatially - in ornament, visual memorialization of the symbols of the pre-revolutionary Tatar theater.

III.

The pre-modern models were developing quite autonomously from imperial structures, and the concept of a Muslim nation was a mirror image of European colonialism. But since the 1920s and the 1930s the discourse on national culture has been subordinated to Soviet state policy. During these years, much of the former infrastructure, which supported various variations of Muslim culture, was destroyed. Along with this, the physical reprisal against the cultural elite led to a significant reformatting of the cultural landscape. Another reorientation is taking place, now from Mecca and Istanbul to Moscow. Getting an education in secular institutions in Russian has become not only a source of prestige, but also a necessary condition for living in a new reality. The planned construction of Soviet nations began, strongly connected to the building of communism. Instead of the old cultural infrastructure, new centers of culture were built. Complexes of Sufi monasteries, city madrasahs and mosques were spatially and semantically replaced by the buildings of clubs, libraries, drama, music, opera and ballet theaters. It is not surprising that the time of construction of many of the iconic symbols of Soviet culture coincides with the time of repression, the restructuring of the alphabet and the destruction of the former centers. Universities are beginning to play a special role; education in Moscow and Leningrad was considered especially prestigious for the national province. Much attention was paid to "national human resources", because they should have been the conductors of a new aesthetic language open to the masses.

The relationship of the Soviet model of the national theater with the previous forms turned out to be ambiguous. Everything related to religion was definitely rejected - the Bolsheviks were well aware that high Islamic culture was their main enemy in the region. At the same time, throughout the Soviet era and up to the present day, the pre-revolutionary theater was rhetorically legitimized and included in the genealogy of the national theater. How did this become possible? The fact is that with all the differences between the Muslim Tatars, who perceived the empire as their own, and the Soviet Tatar nation, fostered within the TASSR, theater as a phenomenon in both projects has a common modern basis and a common genealogy with European models. The Bolsheviks turned the criticism of the Bukhara models of culture by reformers into atheistic propaganda.

The strengthening and normalization of the Soviet national project took place in the post-war years. The first generations of Soviet schoolchildren received a completely secular education, entered the theater

schools, where European aesthetics was the only measure of success. The general emphasis on the folklorization of culture ("folk" melodies, "folk" clothing, "folk" ornament, etc.) gave the new project authenticity. The new city dwellers who came to the theater, easily recognized the life of their native village, cut off from the high Islamic culture, in the theatrical "packaging". In the conditions of Soviet Kazan, where the Tatar language was marginalized as much as possible by the 1980s, the national theater served as a place of compensation for the villagers who migrated to the city.

The Soviet national theater worked in conjunction with other elements of culture - whether it was science and education (the late Soviet national intellectuals considered theater to be the space of the national), music, fiction (it was not for nothing that the Writers' Union of the TASSR was created)⁹ and, of course, other national theaters in the national republics, operating on exactly the same semantic basis.

When designing a new theater space, it is important to rethink the Soviet experience. Firstly, to realize the existence of alternatives (in all respects, from language and aesthetics to the arrangement of space). Secondly, to find a way to integrate the Soviet experience into the new theatrical culture. Here it is important to avoid exoticization, self-orientalization (presenting oneself as carriers of a mystical "oriental culture") and striving for restrictions on the genre and stylistic order, characteristic of the Soviet project. It is important to keep the Soviet theater as one of the options not seeking to dominate. Spatially, perhaps, this is a clear division between the auditorium and the stage, elements of decor and decoration (curtain, portraits of predecessors).

IV.

The post-Soviet situation in the national cultures of the former Union is in many ways reminiscent of the state of coloniality - the active phase of the construction of the external system has been completed, the new language has been successfully mastered by the "natives" and they defend it as their own, even in the absence of control or external pressure¹⁰. Even with the return of religiosity and the formation of new Islamic infrastructure, the Soviet concept of national culture turned out to be the only one important for our contemporaries. It is interesting that attempts to go beyond the Soviet canon in theatrical art still revolve around the idea of a European standard and are dependent on education in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The natural departure into the oblivion of the late Soviet and post-Soviet generations from among cultural workers and its consumers leads to the formation of a different, post-national culture

⁹ Cf, for example: Dzhambul Dzhabayev: The Adventures of the Kazakh Akyn in the Soviet Country: Articles and Materials / ed. K. Bogdanov et al. M.: NLO, 2013 / Джембул Джабаев: Приключения казахского акына в советской стране: Статьи и материалы / под ред. К. Богданова и др. М.: НЛО, 2013; I.V. Narskiy How the party taught people to dance. How choreographers helped, and what came of it. Cultural history of Soviet dance amateur performances. Moscow: NLO, 2018 / Нарский И.В. Как партия народ танцевать учила. Как балетмейстеры ей помогали, и что из этого вышло. Культурная история советской танцевальной самодеятельности. М.: НЛО, 2018.

¹⁰ Cf: Tlostanova M.V. Decoloniality of being, knowledge and sensation: a collection of articles. Almaty: Center for Contemporary Culture, 2020. P. 15-34. / Тлостанова М.В. Деколониальность бытия, знания и ощущения: сборник статей. Алматы: Центр современной культуры, 2020. С. 15-34.

which is a Russian-speaking culture that is placed in a post-secular context¹¹. Postnation brings commercialization and extra-territorial digital globality along¹². The task of deprovincialization of culture, work with space and meanings in these conditions is poorly articulated. This applies not only to Tatar culture at the present stage, but also to all national cultures in the post-Soviet space.

Spatially, this new stage in the development of culture can be associated with the high-tech style, detachment from national forms, and the integration of secular and religious elements. This stage is characterized by digitalization, the interaction of the local and the global, including attempts at new globalization of Tatar culture. In this sense, the new theater space has great prospects as a key platform for the articulation of a new global project that supports the dialogue with the world and with their own experience.

V.

Such a multi-layered history of Tatar culture, despite all the drama of the changes that have taken place, is a great advantage in cultural policy: if we have a sufficient understanding of each of the layers and do not give preference to any of them, we will get access to a wide range of cultural repertoire over a long period of time. Thus, the task of deprovincialization of culture is solved through creative interaction with all available models with the simultaneous marginalization of colonial models. European / Soviet theater needs semantic and spatial deconstruction to form a new creative environment.

The modern building of the Kamal Theater on Tatarstan Street is a spatial symbol of the Soviet Tatar nation. Before the pandemic, events of the World Congress of Tatars, as well as farewells to prominent figures of science and culture, were traditionally held here.

When designing a new building, it is important to take into account the plurality of cultural experiences and the significance of the theater at the same time as a creative laboratory for self-reflection and a showcase for the presentation of contemporary Tatar culture. Religion and secularity, solitude and unity, alternatives to national development may well be reflected spatially through planning, ornament, decoration, the material world inside the building, as well as through the sound. The new building should generate emotions in employees and visitors and be conducive to emotional work.

The construction of a new building for the Kamal Theater is a chance to rethink their own cultural history and to form a deprovincializing space that stimulates the search and that is not narrowed down to the prescriptive narratives of Western / modern exclusivity.

¹¹ Uzlaner D. Postsecular turn. How to think about religion in the 21st century. M.: Publishing house of the Gaidar Institute, 2020. / Узланер Д. Постсекулярный поворот. Как мыслить о религии в XXI веке. М.: Изд-во Института Гайдара, 2020.

¹² An example of the analysis of modern Muslim fashion: Anna-Mari Almila, *Veiling in Fashion: Space and the Hijab in Minority Communities* (London, New York: IB Tauris, 2019), Introduction.



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