

“Avant-Garde” of Georgian Theater

Theater set design of the 1920's was shaped by new “aesthetic discoveries”. Application of specific visual methods and techniques of Avant-garde (Cubism; Cubo Futurism; Constructivism) on the stage was brought about through the direct connection between theatrical-decorative art and existing fine art tendencies.

In searching of new forms better fitting to mechanized, industrial epoch of 1920s a group of artist-constructivists, replacing “passive reality reflection” by an active forms of Constructivism. Oriented to basic changes of the traditional stage Constructivism removed all set design out of its space and introduced completely new stage decorating and organizing methods. Theater Constructivism idea, which intended “a reasonable organizing” of the material elements conditioned by “functional necessity”, suggested a new model of the acting space for characters - a whole construction. An “Object” constructed by a designer didn't not depict anything in its static form and only after an actor touched this transformational “construction” it used “to come to life.”

Following the Russian, German, Czech and Polish theater set designers, in the early 1920s Georgian designers applied new methods of stage constructing. They introduced innovative principles of stage space planning. Constructivism was never much visibly expressed on Georgian stage. Fearless experiments, stage designing Avant-garde methods underwent a transformation within a new environment - Georgian theatrical atmosphere and resulted in basic changes in the principles of the traditional set designing. And on account of the abovementioned processes from stage decorating the emphases shifted to scenic performance designing.

The process of Georgian theater reorganization is directly associated with the name of Kote Marjanishvili. In the early 1920s after the Soviet Regime was established Georgian theater found itself being in crisis. Having returned from Russia Kote Marjanishvili first invited Irakli Gamrekeli to the theater, later he called Petre Otskheli, David Kakabadze, Elene Akhvlediani and other artists to work in a newly open Kutaisi-Batumi Theater. On Georgian theater stage pictorial settings created according perspective principles and depicting particular performing area, were shifted by geometric form and plane based simultaneous setting constructions. Multifunctional platforms turned out to be the main, invariable components of a composition.

In the early 1920s Irakli Gamrekeli made a design for the plays of several modern playwrights: *Londa*, *Mass Man* (with Zdanovich) and *Mallstem*, which the critics regarded “harmful” for the Soviet theater. In the performances *Londa* (1923) and *Mass Man* (1923) the

stage space was organized within three-dimensional forms and planes. Set design compositions were constructed by means of colorful patches very similar to geometrical symbols. No time and locality was determined. The laconic construction in *Londa* was replaced by a large variety of architectural details and impressions (collage of skyscrapers, cafes, dancers) in *Mallstem* (1924). Conditional constructions and stair steps became the basic elements for set design, the complex of which made an expressive-dynamic image of a particular performing environment in the play.

In 1926 an intensive cooperation of Irakli Gamrekeli and Sandro Akhmeteli began and an interesting process of their joint “project”, “rhythm and tempo” theater creation started. In the performance *Breakdown* staged in 1925 the disposition of the director towards massive scenes is apparent. The scenes of I and III acts taking place in the interior were replaced by massive scenes. The coziness of family atmosphere was perceived as a kind of psychological pause contrasted with the scenes in II and IV acts where the action took place on the armor ship designed by the artist. The actors moved rhythmically within a huge iron construction of stairs, platforms and bridges. Along with Tairov Theater the setting constructed for the performance *Breakdown* was the sample of “Constructivist design” created on Georgian stage. This work of Irakli Gamrekeli was followed by other performances created according to Constructivism principles: *The Town of Winds*, *Buisness Man*. In Kirshon’s play *The Town of Winds*, by means of one whole construction the artist offered the spectators a common image of an industrial city, which is composed of the elements characteristic to it - pipes, tanks and many other “interiors” of different purposes; In the performance *Business Man* acting space (café, tennis court, stairs, elevator etc) in the whole construction separated by performing sections was specified by the designer with the help of moving mechanisms and lighting.

The best demonstration of the artist and director creative unity was the performance *Anzor* (1928) and *Lamara* (1930). Sandro Akhmeteli described Irakli Gamrekeli’s designing as “Architectural Constructivism.” The construction of eleven platforms and six stairs was composed of moving steps and sites rhythmically replacing each other. Architectonics of mise en scene was also based on interchange of rhythms calculated with mathematical precision. The complex of the sites arranged like tiers depicted an aul (a type of fortified village found throughout the Caucasus mountains, especially in Dagestan). “The mechanism provoking associations” conquered the whole stage space and along with the acting actors used to undergo transformation like a living being. In the performance *Lamara* within one whole general construction the stage space was specified by means of single “scenographic” hints. The whole system of sites and steps made it possible for the director to put the action on

several sites simultaneously. “To me *Lamara* seemed a wonderful performance...music, dancing, acting of the actors was in vivid harmony with set design, which at the same time was a canvas and a daring architecture. For one thing, the performance looked like a ballet, for another thing, it seemed to be a painting where the characters of the play were paints and for the third thing, it was an exciting symphony where the sounds and background were equally of great importance” (Hellie Flanagan). Along with *Anzor* the design of *Lamara* was an interesting combination of the stylized elements of abstract forms and national architecture. Such peculiarities were one of the main reasons of the campaign the Soviet government held against the director. The Soviet regime became greatly concerned about the fact that the cast had been invited to the USA. In spite of the great success the performance had, Sandro Akhmeteli was accused of “nationalism” and because of staging the play of a persecuted writer (Grigol Ronakidze) was blamed in anti - state activities.

In 1928 Kote Marjanishvili invited Petre Otskheli to a newly open Kutaisi-Batumi Theater. The “discovery” made by the director turned out to be a turning point in Georgian theatrical-decorative art development. Petre Otskheli’s works were based on the effective combinations of cubes, columns, arches and steps. For the performance *Uriel Acosta* (1929) the artist constructed on the stage a compact, laconic and at the same time very expressive scenographic model. Grayish-white dimensional forms and generalized geometric costumes were perceived as rhythmic emphasis, contrast patches against a black neutral background. In 1930 Otskheli made a design for the tragedy of Shelly *Beatrice Cenci* (1930). The whole decorating system here too was constructed by joining (montage of) conditional architectural elements and dimensional forms presenting to the spectator conditional, overall image of the acting space.

In the scenographic models created by Irakli Gamrekeli and Petre Otskheli particular scenery or interior were replaced by visual images of the main concepts of the play. They presented to the spectators the plastic version of the characters’ physical and spiritual “world”. The essence of the principle of constructing the abovementioned set design works was a radically new interdependence in space-time between the images, objects, or the scene as a whole. It represented a new approach of directors and set designers to space issues. By means of montage an artist tried to give the full meaning to the composition, thus subduing the space and making it absorb more.

In the 1910-1920s of the XX century montage principles reached almost every field of art: fine arts, literature, theater, etc. However, the most privileged sphere for montage remained cinema. Specific means of cinema actively emerged in the works of the innovative directors

and set designers of the 1920s. The montage principle coincided with the consciousness of the “new” generation of the spectators influenced by diverse information. They expected more frequent changes of means and forms of artistic influence as well as of visual and auidial impressions. New development of the world theatrical-decorative art soon was echoed in the Georgian theater too.

Kutaisi-Batumi State Drama Theatre was opened in 1928 with Ernst Toller’s *Hoopla, We Are Alive!* David Kakabadze integrated the movie projector into the set design. The film specially made for the performance was being shown on the screen. One and the same actor appeared on the stage, continued the action on the screen and vice-versa. It strengthened the dynamic development of the action. Different action locations like jail, minister’s office, hotel, restaurant, street, etc., were interchanging on the stage and screen at cinematic speed. In the first scene the screen showed Lenin’s speech and people’s uprising (from Eisenstein’s *October*). Other movie scenes (Carl Thomas in the street, entry to the ministry, quarrel with a courier, inspection in Eva Berge’s room, etc.) were directly linked with the events in the play and served for their expansion. In the play along with the movie some radio records were also included. They were as significant for the play as any other elements. (Screen script - Kote Marjanishvili; Director of photography - Sergei Zabolaev).

The core of Kakabadze’s design was a multistoried construction split into separate rectangular “interiors”. On some division walls there were mirrors making the space extended. Lighting divided the scene into separate movie frames. The lighting system was an effective way for rapid changing of the scenes and parallel development of the action. “During the play the whole construction stood unmoved. However, with very simple alterations it would change from a jail cell into a doctor’s office, later into a luxurious hotel or police station and jail cell again.” (D. Antadze, 1966).

Kakabadze’s set design for *Hoopla! We are Alive* was followed by Elene Akhvlediani’s interesting works for *How?*, *Khatije*, and *The Old Enthusiast*. In the play *How?* (1929) Akhvlediani adopted the principles of the shadow theater that became one of the most original and expressive means of set designing. The action developed against the background of the main character’s memories and established compositional peculiarities of the performance. The problem connected with often changes of locations in the play (from a factory into a village road, from a railway station into a room interior) was not easy to be solved for Georgian theater of that time. For making the design Elene Akhvlediani applied the projection method well fitting to the rest of the means used in the scenery. A black-framed canvas, a kind of a screen carrying an expressive meaning of the main idea, was the element organizing

the stage space. Behind it the artist arranged all the details necessary for acting (a bridge, a path, railway, a shelter etc.) Unreal shadows from behind the screen came to life on the stage and continued their action in real environment. Such original artistic method fitted well to the playwright's narrative style (of frequently changing scenes) and facilitated to rapid shifts of the acting. For example, "On the screen one could observe the silhouettes of workers, suddenly a dog's barking or a conversation from behind the screen was heard and two men wearing "nabadi" (a felt coat mostly for shepherds) appeared on the screen. They were escaping, then came shooting, moan and the stage got illuminated... the rebel farmers appeared on the stage. It was such an impression that they were the people chasing the shadows on the screen but were not able to catch them." (T. Vakhvakhishvili)

In the culmination the artist included movie shots to expand the stage space. The same actors were acting both on the screen and on the stage. The characters appeared on the stage straight from the screen and then returned to the shadow world again. Thus the action on the screen and on the stage fit together harmoniously. For instance let's take a train robbery scene: the noise of arriving train used to be heard along with the first shots on the screen. After the fight with the Whites the partisans stopped the train and checked it. Gocha robbed a passenger and took his golden cross. Then the action shifted to the stage and Beglar appeared. After Gocha had been revealed the action again shifted on the screen - Gocha was running along the railway and having jumped over the bar fell dead caught by Beglar's shot. As soon as the film was over the screen was covered with black velvet. According to the plot one of the scenes took place in the room interior. This problem was solved by the artist in a very original way as well. The corners of the room, the outlines of the doors, windows and stairs were marked out with white wooden slats against black velvet (the same method was used by Akhvlediani to depict the view of a modern factory). One of the interior details was directly involved in the action. Due to the noise and bustle around Karumidze managed to escape through a conventional window and along with the other characters disappeared in the dark night.

During the 1930-31 theatrical season Kote Marjanishvili staged *Khatije* in the Second Dramatic Theater. The play represented old traditions of Ajara in contrast to "a new way of life". For strengthening the contrast the screen showed the scenes that were impossible to be put on Georgian stage of that time – a power station, illuminated Tbilisi etc. Unlike the performance *How?* where the main goal of the director and designer was to demonstrate the movie scenes continuing and developing the action taking place on the stage, in the abovementioned performance the movie scenes were designed to strengthen the idea of the play and were chosen so that they could contrast the actions on the stage. The movie scenes on the screen were prompted by the plot and directly connected to the events given in a

particular play. From this standpoint the performances designed by the Russian and German set designers of 1920s with the help of cine projecting are very significant. Their analyses show the different approach of the directors and the designers to a play – the plot composed by a playwright, separate details of characters' life are regarded as inseparable part of the mankind history. From the point of view of propaganda particular facts described in the play are considered along with the world importance events (propagandistic slogans and phrases about the revolution and the civil war in Vsevolod Meyerhold's performances *The earth standing on the end* and *Giving Europe*). The screen was effectively used for political propaganda in the performances staged by the leadership of Ervin Piscator. It became the main component of acting on the stage, a figurative character, "the theater star" (Hartfield's photo montage for the performance *Russia's Day*; In the political review *In Spite of All* - a huge collage of newspaper articles, photos, texts, slogans and proclamations depicting the history of the revolution since Spartacus rebellion up to the revolution of 1917; In the performance *Hoopla! We are Alive* – a film-collage on the curtain hanging on T. Muller's construction, which depicted European reality for the released from prison character: inflation, queues, ballerinas, music halls, cars, refuges, tanks, election campaign etc).

In some cases the playwrights themselves decided in advance to involve movie in stage action design. Here, absolutely abstract visual images (in Brecht's performances – quotations, grotesque graphical works and short texts; In Bauhaus projects – illogical kaleidoscope of movie shots) were meant to be used on the screen in order to gain initiation, "alienation effect" (Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* and *This Soldier, or That*) of spectator's analytical approach or to approve innovative scenographic means (Francis Picabia's *Sigh*, Shavinski's *Game, Life and Illusion*).

In Kote Marjanishvili's joint works with Georgian set designers projection means carried different meanings and functions. Their goal was not to emphasize the propagandistic character of a play or to arouse public concern about political ideas. Instead of demonstrating abstract visual images, the shots on the screen were directly depicting the facts described in the play. They served as expressive and effective means to solve space problems, to specify important events of the plot and to expand or develop the accents and actions. Despite the fact that the abovementioned scenographic works didn't follow canonical collage principles completely, the "installations" constructed by Georgian artists on the stage were based on montage principles and instead of illustrating historical facts, depicted "a new reality" constructed according to the single fragments of the characters' acting environment.

The innovative means applied by the set designers who were inspired by Avant-garde art, introduced the principles of “visual producing”. The abovementioned processes taking place in Georgian theatrical-decorative art fundamentally changed the accepted idea of an artist-decorator as a passive illustrator of the events developed within conditional space and time. A set designer was assigned an important function of a co-director, co-author of the play.

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