A LIFE DEDICATED TO THE STAGE: MANNON HAMIDOV AND THE EARLY STEPS OF THE ANDIJAN YOUTH THEATRE

Saidaxon Dadamirzayeva
Independent Researcher at the Institute of Art Studies

Abstract: This article discusses the formation and development of the Andijan Youth Theatre, tracing its evolution from its origins as a theatre-studio in the late 1980s and 1990s to its eventual establishment as a professional theatre.

Keywords: Andijan Youth Theatre, Uzbek theatre, theatre studio, Mannon Hamidov, stage art, directing, Uzbek dramaturgy, Cho‘lpon’s character, psychological drama, historical-philosophical drama, youth education, theatre repertoire, theatre during the independence period.

Director Mannon Hamidov, having gained experience and expertise at the Andijan Regional Musical Drama Theatre, gathered like-minded creative individuals around him to form a cohesive team united by a common vision and goal; thus, the Andijan Youth Theatre took shape as a studio in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Through the collaborative efforts of the young members of this theatre-studio, a number of plays—spanning various genres and covering both historical and contemporary themes—were brought to the stage. In 1988–1989, the theatre’s creative team staged M. Asatullayev’s *Baloyi Nafs* ("The Affliction of Desire") and Sh. Boshbekov’s *Temir Xotin* ("The Iron Woman").

During this period, the emergence of Sh. Boshbekov’s comedy *Temir Xotin* fundamentally transformed prevailing perceptions regarding the nature of the comedic protagonist. In the 1988 stage adaptation of this work, directed by M. Hamidov at the Andijan Youth Theater, the core idea put forward by the playwright was fully preserved, and the character of an ordinary person—dreaming of a beautiful life—was brought to the stage.

A small brochure published to mark the founding of the Andijan Youth Theater notes: “The studio members’ debut production, the comedy *Temir Xotin* (The Iron Wife), was warmly received by theater enthusiasts in our city and region. Each performance transformed into a lively dialogue, and, inspired by these interactions, the studio members seemed to catch a glimpse of their own future.”[1]. In this production, the director draws upon the characteristics of traditional Uzbek performance art, aiming to express the inner workings of the human heart through humor. Rather than mocking the protagonist’s dreams and aspirations, the director uses the sharp edge of comedy to tell the story of Qochqor—and others like him—whose lives are defined by a certain naive simplicity.

The play *Baloyi Nafs* ("The Affliction of Desire"), written by journalist M. Asatullayev, was staged in 1989 at the Andijan Youth Theater by director T. Hamidov. The protagonist, Sultonmurod Ota, submits an application to the *mahalla* (neighborhood) committee to divide his property among his children; through this process, he discovers the true nature of the relationships his three sons and one daughter have with one another—and with him, their father. Although all his children are adults with families of their own, they live entirely devoid of harmony or mutual respect. The sisters-in-law, who share the same roof, cannot even stand the sight of one another. Sultonmurod Ota is left bewildered, unable to understand why his children do not prioritize kindness and familial affection. He reproaches his sons—one a struggling entrepreneur, another a taxi driver—for failing to follow in his own footsteps and

[1]Andijon shahar A.Bakirov nomidagi yoshlar drama teatri. – Andijon: Andijon nashriyoti, 1992. – B.6.

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pursue the family trade: pottery. After all, it was through this very craft that he raised his children, ensuring they lacked nothing, and built a home. The audience perceives that Sultonmurod Ota is concerned not only because his children have failed to master a specific trade, but also because the ancestral craft—a legacy passed down through generations—is at risk of dying out, thereby breaking a long-standing family tradition.

For this reason, Sultonmurod Ota urges his sons to act with conscience and choose the right path; he genuinely desires a bright future for them. In his old age, he longs to live to see his children and grandchildren enjoying a life of comfort and well-being. Through his efforts, his sons come to understand the value of truth, integrity, and mutual care. They realize that they cannot find their place in society without the counsel, wisdom, and guidance of their elders; consequently, they turn to their father, embrace the craft, and master the trade.

Naturally, this play stands out due to the director's skill and the accomplished performances of the cast. However, the character of Sultonmurod Ota (Father Sultonmurod) took on a majestic stature through the lifelike, poignant, and spirited performance of actor M. Kholdorov; this portrayal contributed significantly to an evocative expression of the enduring, timeless theme.

While in works from foreign drama—such as *King Lear* or *The Outcasts*—the father figure often appears frail, humble, and destitute, the father in the play *Baloyi Nafs* (The Affliction of Desire) is presented on stage as a man of sharp, intense character—furious and quick to flare up at even the slightest impropriety.

In recognition of the theater-studio's creative maturation, its staging of productions rich in both substance and form, the professional expertise of its artistic ensemble, and—most importantly—the ambitious goals it set for itself, the Andijan Youth Theater was established in 1991, evolving from this very theater-studio.

During the same period, the current Uzbekistan State Youth Theater was formed in Tashkent (based on the "Dard" theater-studio), while the "Eski Machit" theater-studio was established in Karshi. These developments reflect the aspirations of theater practitioners to fundamentally transform the landscape and their dedicated efforts to elevate Uzbek theater to new heights"[2].

During the first decade of the independence era, as creative exploration continued at the Andijan Youth Theater, the play "Zanjirband she'r" ("The Shackled Poem") by Z. Najmiy was staged in 1997. This work explores the bitter fate of the Uzbek enlightener, poet, writer, and translator Cho'lpon through a profound philosophical and psychological lens. The plot centers on Cho'lpon—who was unjustly imprisoned during the 1937 purges of the Uzbek intelligentsia under the Soviet regime—as he reflects on the various blows dealt by fate while contemplating his life from within his prison cell. The play delves into the deep anguish, intense internal conflicts, and suffering experienced by Cho'lpon—brought on by the slanders and schemes of colleagues and protégés, as well as the betrayal by his wife, Soliha—through philosophical observation and reflection.

It is well known that Cho'lpon was the first to translate Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet" into the Uzbek language. In "The Shackled Poem," Z. Najmiy seeks to highlight a distinct resonance between the fates of Cho'lpon and Hamlet. Like Hamlet, Cho'lpon finds himself caught in a vortex of deception and betrayal by those close to him; consequently—much like Shakespeare's protagonist—he is profoundly alone at heart and yearns for justice. In the play, Hamlet emerges precisely during moments of

[2]Туляходжаева М. Режиссура узбекского драматического театра. Тенденсии развития и современние проблеми. – Ташкент: Изд-во литературы и искусства им.Г.Гуляма, 1995. – С.67.

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Cho‘lpon’s intense anguish, urging him to reflect and untangle the knots he faces. The work eschews external, dynamic action, focusing instead on internal conflicts and the clash of ideas.

This psychological state, central to the drama *Zanjirband she’r* ("The Shackled Poem"), is fully captured in the stage production of the same name, directed by M. Hamidov. The performance is enriched by a profound psychological approach and a lyrical quality, with the director placing primary emphasis on the protagonist’s philosophical contemplations and reflections. As a result, the portrayal of this historical figure is rendered through the lens of psychological drama. Throughout the play, Cho‘lpon—depicted in captivity and dressed entirely in black—reflects upon the events of his life; in this process, he encounters not only the individuals who caused him such deep suffering, but also, in his imagination, the figures of Hamlet and Navoi. Each of these characters serves to gradually reveal not only the bitter fate of the protagonist but also the essence of his character and inner self. In collaboration with artist V. Ligay, director M. Hamidov created a two-layered stage design. The first layer—the forestage (avanscena)—serves as the setting for the play’s primary plot and the conflict-ridden events surrounding the protagonist’s fate. The second layer—comprising the mid-stage and the background—is partitioned by a sheer curtain and a set of sliding doors. This space hosts scenes that illuminate Cholpon’s inner nature and express his pure, sincere emotions. The opening scene of the play establishes a striking contrast between these two layers. On the forestage, four figures—the protagonist’s adversaries—appear wearing cloaks in cold, stark colors and black masks, effectively “smearing mud” upon Cholpon’s character and poetry. The struggle between Cholpon and these symbolic figures—collectively termed “The Detractors” (*Ko‘rolmaslar*) by the playwright, and representing a Poet, a Writer, a Critic, and a Young Creator—is elevated to the level of a broader social conflict ”[3]. Then, behind a sheer curtained doorway, Cholpon himself appears, surrounded by ethereal figures in white—muses circling him. The serene dances and fluid, expressive movements—staged by choreographer Z. Qodirova and performed by the theater’s ballet troupe—imbue this scene with a lyrical quality.

There is another moment in the play where a similar lyrical atmosphere is evoked: when the young Cholpon (played by V. Turdiyev) returns from a trip abroad and reunites with Soliha (played by D. Jorayeva). In this scene, the pure emotions stirring in the hearts of the two young lovers—and, in particular, the protagonist’s ardent devotion to his beloved—are expressed through Cholpon’s own beautiful, love-themed poetry. Actor V. Turdiyev delivers these verses with intense emotion and palpable, breathless longing, heightening the passionate feelings burning within his character’s heart.

The remaining scenes of the play are saturated with various conflicts and the profound anguish experienced by Cholpon. Even in the music—composed by I. Lebedev and H. Oxunov—a spirit of tension and inner conflict resonates in every single note. In these scenes, the lead role is played by actor S. Ulug‘ov, who portrays Chulpon as a composed, thoughtful man, not prone to excessive displays of emotion. However, upon discovering his wife Soliha’s infidelity with her *dutar* instructor, Chulpon’s inner anguish and torment are expressed with striking authenticity: his eyes widen, his body trembles slightly, and his voice grows strained. This moment stands as one of the play’s most emotionally charged sequences. On one side, we see Chulpon, whose love and trust have been shattered; on the other, Soliha, who attempts to dismiss the accusations as mere slander. The actors succeed in conveying the profound turmoil within their characters. In particular, one can sense Chulpon’s (S. Ulug‘ov’s) utter bewilderment—he is caught between disbelief and the painful reality of his beloved wife’s actions. His

[3]Axmetjanova M. O‘zbekiston yoshlar teatrlari mustaqillik yillarida (yangi davr va uning sahnaviy yechimi). San.f.n. ilmiy darajasini olish uchun yozilgan diss. – Toshkent, 2009. – B.69.

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heart refuses to accept the truth, yet the evidence in his hands forces his mind to confront it. Soliha (played by D. Jo‘rayeva) attempts to prove—through wailing sobs and anguished cries—that her love was genuine and that she had, in fact, fallen victim to deceit and slander. It is difficult to understand why the scene involving his wife’s alleged infidelity was included in the work, given that history confirms Soliha was, in reality, a deeply devoted partner to Cho‘lpon.

The appearance of the character Hamlet within Cho‘lpon’s imagination—triggered by suspicions of betrayal by those close to him—lends a unique, theatrical quality to both the play and the performance. Having translated the work himself, Cho‘lpon possesses a profound understanding of Hamlet’s torment; this connection deepens further when he finds himself enduring hardships that mirror those of the classic Shakespearean figure. In any case, the stage production makes explicit reference to this. At the very moment when Cho‘lpon (played by S. Ulug‘ov) is consumed by these various suspicions, Hamlet (played by Q. Madaminov) enters from different corners of the stage—moving restlessly like a phantom, dwelling in his own private world, and reciting fragments of monologues from Shakespeare’s tragedy as if speaking to himself. These monologues prompt Chulpon (portrayed by S. Ulugov) to reflect and seek solutions to the knots in his life, as he strives to grasp the true essence of existence and destiny.

In the play, the character of Alisher Navoi encourages Chulpon to accept life as it is—with all its obstacles, contradictions, and even injustices. Through his conversations with Navoi (played by A. Asqarov), Chulpon comes to realize the importance of preserving one’s humanity under any circumstances, and he finds answers to many of the questions that have been troubling him. It should be noted, however, that the character of Navoi feels somewhat superfluous, as the play fails to imbue him with any significant social weight or purpose.

Cholpon—portrayed by S. Ulugov—strives to maintain composure and restraint even in the face of conflict. During the play’s climactic rally scene, he remains composed, despite witnessing his former associates, friends, and students—driven by a misguided, fervent zeal—leveling unjust accusations against him and calling for his condemnation. He accepts his fate, resigning himself to it, while harboring the firm belief that, one day, he will inevitably be exonerated. Thus, Cholpon’s unique and exquisite poetry remains shackled. Figures who appeared in the play’s opening scene wearing black masks now take part in the rally, delivering impassioned speeches; they trample upon the beautiful verses penned by Cholpon—dismissing his poetry as a "relic of the past" and a "corrupting influence" on the people—while reciting their own hollow, meaningless verses that glorify the proletariat. These contrived poems, devoid of any genuine sincerity, are met with applause from the crowd gathered at the rally. The events depicted in this scene evoke a sense of revulsion in the audience toward the former Soviet regime. In the final scene, the restless and erratic movements of the Muse—visible behind a sheer curtain on the second level of the stage—take on a symbolic meaning, suggesting that Cholpon has become separated from his Muse, and, conversely, that the Muse has been severed from the poet.

The play *Zanjirband she’r* ("The Shackled Poem"), written by Z. Najmiy and directed by M. Hamidov, holds a distinct place in the repertoire of the Andijan Youth Theatre; it is a historical-philosophical drama that explores the complex fate of Cholpon and other enlightened intellectuals of his era. This production portrays the figure and creative legacy of Cholpon—who was exonerated following the advent of independence—in all their inherent complexity and contradiction. The character of Cholpon—a pivotal figure in the development of 20th-century Uzbek literature and culture, who bequeathed a profound spiritual heritage to future generations through his poetry, short stories, and translations—is rendered on stage with gravitas, psychological intensity, and great expressiveness.

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Furthermore, the performance demonstrates the high caliber of the Andijan Youth Theatre's creative team, revealing their exceptional capacity to portray historical figures with both authenticity and conviction. It is well known that works with contemporary themes play a significant role in offering solutions to the social problems of the era, addressing issues that concern today's younger generation, and exposing the existing vices and shortcomings within society. In this regard, since the attainment of independence, the Andijan Youth Theater has placed special emphasis on staging both domestic and foreign works that explore contemporary themes. In particular, works such as "Goodbye, Childhood" (author: T. Malik, director: M. Hamidov; 1995), "Life Beyond the Door" (author: S. Sirojiddinov, director: A. Asqarov; 1997), "Astag'firulloh" (translated from Bashkir into Uzbek; author: N. Gaitbayev, director: E. Yusupova; 1998), "The Mask" (author: N. Rahimov, director: M. Hamidov; 1999), "The Man Who Fell from the Sky" (author: S. Anvar, director: T. Hamidov; 2000), "An Imperfect World" (author: T. Yunus, director: T. Hamidov; 2002), "In the Abyss of Vice" (author: I. Tursunov, director: A. Asqarov; 2006), "Forgive Me, My Dear" (author: R. Muhammadjonov, director: K. Yo'ldoshev; 2010), "Street Children" (author: Sh. Boshbekov, director: D. Shayxov; 2015), "Kindness Endures" (author and director: M. Hamidov; 2019), "The Sorrows of Others" (author: N. Abbosxon, director: T. Hamidov; 2019), "The Teacher" (author: J. Mahmud, director: T. Hamidov; 2020), and "Hello or Goodbye" (author: N. Abbosxon, director: A. Turdaliyev; 2023), among others, [comprise] the theater's repertoire. served to enrich.

In the body of work by T. Malik—a writer who made a significant contribution to the development of modern Uzbek literature—the genres of crime drama and detective fiction hold a distinct place. His novels and novellas, including *Shaytanat*, *The Last Bullet* (*So'nggi o'q*), and *Goodbye, Childhood* (*Alvido, bolalik*), have been adapted for the stage and the screen, earning him the affection of both readers and audiences. Through these works, the author addresses various social and universal human issues, while championing humanism, authentic values, and genuine emotions. T. Malik's *Goodbye, Childhood* is particularly notable for its exploration of pressing social concerns; it recounts the fates and bitter destinies of several young people who have turned to a life of crime. The author crafted the narrative based on real-life events, drawing from personal conversations with these very individuals.

In 1995, the work was staged in a realistic style by director M. Hamidov at the Andijan Youth Theater. The play reflects the complex fates, inner thoughts, and worldviews of young men who—instead of spending their youth pursuing an education, learning a trade, laying the groundwork for a bright future, or striving toward their dreams—find themselves behind bars. In their youth, individuals are naturally prone to strong emotions and intense curiosity; they yearn to find their place in society and prove their identity to the world. Only if a young man or woman can rein in their impulses, channel their interests constructively, and seek to establish their standing in society through virtuous conduct, can they build a bright future and fully develop as an individual. Through the events and characters depicted on stage, director M. Hamidov puts forward precisely these reflections. Because the characters portrayed on stage allowed their emotions to override their reason—even if only for a few fleeting moments—they squandered the most vital period of their lives. Consequently, they are forced to bid farewell to their youth and spend their formative years confined within four walls, in a dark and damp environment. Through intense conflicts, the play illustrates the grave consequences stemming from negligence and shortcomings in the upbringing of children, using a single family as an example. While the director does not condone the actions of Akhbor—a member of this family—it is also clear that he has no intention of entirely condemning this young man, who now spends his life in prison, filled with remorse for his deeds.

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M. Hamidov emphasized that young people who have gone astray—much like the play's protagonist—are not born criminals. Rather, he suggests that the causes lie in the environment in which they live, the various social ills and flaws present in society, and the negligence of parents who—whether due to a lack of time, opportunity, or other factors—fail to provide proper upbringing at the right stage of a child's development.

The Andijan Youth Theatre has traversed a journey of over 35 years—from its inception as a theatre-studio to its professional maturation and subsequent development. Throughout this period, the theatre has passed through several distinct phases: achieving significant creative milestones, experiencing a creative decline—partly due to challenges in securing professional personnel—and eventually undergoing a revitalization, driven by targeted and effective reforms.

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