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"ESKI MACHIT": A SPACE WHERE TRADITION AND THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES COME TOGETHER

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Abstract:

This article examines the changes in the art of theater at the end of the 20th century, as well as the structure, activities, and international presence of the "Eski Machit" theater studio. It also discusses the staged productions, creative collaborations with Tajik and Turkmen directors, the essence of the theatrical works, and the ideas conveyed to the audience through them.

Keywords: "Eski Machit", "Mehribonginam", Isoq To'rayev, director from Tajikistan, performance, "The Tale of Mother Naiman", "Navro'z-99", "Yerqorg'on"

INTRODUCTION. From the early years of Uzbekistan's independence, a period of fundamental renewal began in national theatrical art not only in terms of content but also in terms of organizational structure. These reforms were not limited to the capital but were also clearly reflected in the cultural life of the regions, including the theatrical environment of Kashkadarya. Independence contributed to the formation of new creative groups in the regions and expanded their activities. A clear example of this process is the establishment of non-traditional theatre studios such as "Muloqot" and later "Eski Machit" on the basis of the Kashkadarya Regional Musical Drama Theatre.

The emergence of such alternative and experimental creative platforms not only revitalized the local cultural environment but also opened new opportunities for free artistic expression and creative exploration for regional artists. In other words, while traditional theatres often operated based on large academic buildings, established stages, and classical curtain systems, "Eski Machit," according to its name and status, chose a free and chamber environment that did not fit into conventional frameworks and was based on close interaction with the audience.

Such studios that appeared in Uzbekistan sought to move beyond the strict framework of state theatres and stage productions enriched with innovative directorial approaches, physical expression, metaphorical interpretation, and philosophical reflection. Creative groups such as "Muloqot" and "Eski Machit" became representatives of this new theatrical wave. In these theatres, the traditional boundaries between walls, stage, and auditorium disappeared, while establishing direct and live spiritual communication between actors and spectators became the main priority.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY. The study effectively employs methods such as chronological analysis, comparative analysis, the principle of historicism, a systematic approach, oral history, and the principle of objectivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION. One of the places that occupies a unique position in the history of Uzbekistan's theatrical art and embodies innovation and national identity is the "Eski Machit" theatre studio. In the early 1990s, this theatre studio introduced a new spirit, distinctive directing methods, and unique aesthetic approaches into the Uzbek theatrical space. Through unconventional interpretations of national and world drama, as well as by transforming the audience into direct participants of stage events, the theatre soon gained recognition not only within the country but also on the international stage.

The "Eski Machit" Theatre began its independent activity in 1992 as a result of separating from the "Muloqot" theatre studio in Karshi. The foundation of the troupe consisted of 11 devoted theatre artists, including actors Abdunabi Bobojonov, Isoq To'rayev, Oygul Xalilova, Botir Qurbonov, Gulnoza Rahmatova, as well as amateur musicians and singers. They began to refer to themselves informally as the "Eski Machit" collective. The theatre studio received this name because it was established on the basis of an old mosque building, a historical architectural monument located in the city of Karshi [1].

The talented actor Isoq To'rayev served as the artistic director and chief stage director of this creative group [2]. Regarding the naming of the "Eski Machit" theatre studio and its philosophical and spiritual meaning, the artistic director of the theatre and Honored Artist of Uzbekistan Isoq To'rayev recalled this process as follows:

"A mosque has always been considered a sacred place for every person. A person who enters this blessed place crosses its threshold after spiritual purification and feels

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a sense of inner cleansing when leaving it. Indeed, the name of our theatre carries a great and profound meaning. There is also a symbolic idea behind calling ourselves 'Eski Machit'. We wanted the theatre to become a sacred place for actors, just like a mosque, and we wished that spectators would leave the theatre with enlightened hearts." [3]

The "Eski Machit" theatre studio was able to reflect the creative approaches and artistic potential of such experienced and talented directors as the famous Tajik directors Borzu Abdurazzoqov and Farrukh Qosimov, as well as Avliyoquli Khojaquliyev, who previously worked in Turkmenistan and later continued his creative activities in London. This cooperation quickly contributed to the theatre studio gaining its own place in world theatrical art, while also significantly influencing the creative development of the aforementioned directors.

The theatre's first major stage production was Shadiman Shomanadze's play *"Mehribonginam"* (*"My Dear One"*). The performance was staged by Tajik director Borzu Abdurazzoqov. The production clearly demonstrated the troupe's aspiration to portray complex social issues through a new artistic style, with deep meaning and emotional impact. This debut performance won first place at the republican theatre festival "Navroʻz-95". The production revealed the troupe's efforts to present complex social problems through innovative methods and expressive acting, which brought it significant recognition at the festival.

The main distinctive feature of the "Eski Machit" theatre was its rejection of traditional frameworks and its active involvement of innovative directors in creative cooperation.

The theatre turned to Sufi literature, classical Eastern philosophy, and examples of world drama, enriching them with contemporary stage languages. The theatre was not merely a place for entertainment but rather a living philosophical space that engaged in dialogue about human spirituality, social issues, and national identity. The creators of the theatre paid particular attention to reducing the distance between the audience and actors and conveying profound spiritual ideas through symbolic means such as physical expression, musical rhythm, and work with light and space.

From this period onward, the "Eski Machit" theatre studio participated in prestigious international theatre festivals in Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, the Arab Republic of Egypt, and Commonwealth countries with its performances and received high recognition [4].

In 1995, the performances "Sheikh Sanan" and "Tarso Dukhtor", based on the works of the famous Tajik poet Fariduddin Attar and staged by the renowned Tajik director Farrukh Qosimov, made a great impression on audiences and theatre specialists. In 1998, at the international theatre festival "Orient Express" held in Kharkiv, Ukraine, the performance "The Female Demon or the Feverish Bear" won first place. In 1999, a production based on Chingiz Aitmatov's work "The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years" was staged.

During this period, the performance "The Legend of Naiman Mother" received a special award at the republican festival "Navroʻz-99" and won the highest award — the Grand Prix — at the international festival "Chingiz Aitmatov and Theatre" held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In addition, performances such as "Qobil and Hobil" and "Raqsu Samo" were also awarded various prizes.

The staging of "Qobil and Hobil" by Avliyoquli Khojaquliyev, based on John Byron's drama "Cain", can be considered a unique innovation in Uzbek theatrical art. The legend about people killing one another is widespread in both Christian and Muslim cultures. The director interpreted this work based on the Eastern version of the legend. This approach was reflected in the musical structure of the performance, stage scenery, and costumes. Although the work has a religious foundation, the director presented it before the audience as a social and spiritual problem. Cain's repentance sounded as a call against fratricide and mutual destruction.

Furthermore, theatrical performances such as "A Story at Chiyali Bazaar," "The Miraculous Tree," and "Do Not Give the World to the Mankurts" also achieved great success.

In 2001, the play "Towards Saffron" by the Indian writer Khorshan was staged by Avliyoquli Khojaquliyev [5], a renowned director and Honored Artist of Turkmenistan. The production told a tragic story about a family destroyed by immorality and the suffering caused by untimely love. The main roles were performed by Honored Artist of the Republic of Uzbekistan I. Toʻrayev, as well as artists O. Khalilova, B. Qurbonov, and N. Turgʻunova. The stage design and costumes were created by Maria Soshina, an artist of the Abror Hidoyatov Uzbek State Drama Theatre.

In 2005, the head of the "Eski Machit" theatre studio, Isoq Toʻrayev, together with Turkmen director Avliyoquli Khojaquliyev, staged a new performance based on the epic poem "Erqoʻrgʻon" by poet Ismoil Toʻxtamishev, dedicated to the 2700th anniversary of the city of Karshi [6]. The central idea of the work was

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the boundless love for the homeland, expressed through historical events, ancient myths, and legends. The performance artistically and skillfully depicted one of the ancient centers of antiquity — the glory and historical significance of Yerqo'rg'on, as well as the proud spirit and determination of ancestors.

Starting from the 2000s, a decline also began in the creative activity of the theatre studio. Initially, the studio's opportunities to invite foreign directors and finance major international projects became increasingly limited. In addition, the theatre building was not under the studio's own management but was controlled by the regional council of the Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party. Artists who went months without receiving salaries eventually moved to other theatres or completely changed their professional fields. In 2004–2005, the Ministry of Culture began a process of optimizing theatre activities, regulating staff structures, and centralizing the material and technical resources of theatres [7]. As a result, the "Eski Machit" studio was dissolved as an independent creative structure, and all of its resources and employees were fully transferred to the balance of the Kashkadarya Regional Musical Drama Theatre. The "Eski Machit" theatre studio ceased to function as an independent system and became fully integrated into the structure of the regional theatre.

CONCLUSION. In conclusion, the "Eski Machit" theatre studio became a distinctive stage and a remarkable phenomenon in the history of Uzbekistan's theatrical art. Despite being established under the challenging conditions of the early years of independence, the collective succeeded in bringing a new spirit, creative freedom, and profound directorial approaches to the traditional theatrical scene. The main achievement of the theatre lies in its ability to harmoniously combine the national Sufi heritage with the experimental dramaturgy of world theatre within a single artistic space. The troupe's successes not only at the national level but also at prestigious international festivals demonstrated that Uzbek theatre holds a worthy place in the global artistic arena. Today, the experience of "Eski Machit" shows that the development of national theatre is inseparably connected with continuous artistic exploration, courageous experiments, and a deep understanding of cultural identity. The creative legacy and aesthetic principles left by this studio continue to serve as a valuable source of experience and inspiration for contemporary generations of directors and actors.

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