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SECTION 16. Music. Theatre.

JEWISH THEATRE IN BAKU

Abstract: This article is dedicated to theatrical life of Baku, Azerbaijan in the beginning of the XX century. The focus is on tours of Italian opera and Jewish theatre in Baku. The article is written on the basis of Russian speaking newspapers extracted from archives. Theatrical criticism ascertains the high professional level of opera singers from Italy, musical beauty of operas by Giuseppe Verdi "Aida", "Rigoletto" and his many other operas. On the occasion of Jewish theatre the media noted its high ethnic level. Overall, there is accentuated "sold out" notice and the interest of Azerbaijani audience in this overview.

Key words: culture, theatre, actor, tours, opera.

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Introduction

This article is to provide the readers with an overview of theatrical life of Baku in early 1900s. More specifically, during this period performance arts in Azerbaijan gain critical importance, mostly because the first professional opera in the Middle East – Uzeyir Hajybayli's opera "Leyli and Majnun" was staged for the first time in 1908. As such, it is important to understand the undermining conditions and overall "life" of Azerbaijani theatre at the eve of this event – the birth of the first oriental opera.

The autumn of 1907 was rich with theatrical performances arousing interest in the audience and mass media. Between September 2nd and 10th, in the course of ten nights the Italian company of Gonsalez brothers presented well-known works of West European art in the theatre-circus of Nikitin brothers. "Troubadour", "Traviata", "Ernani", "Aida", "Rigoletto" by Verdi, "Rustic Chivalry" by Pietro Mascagni, "Clowns" by Leoncavallo, "Faust" by Gounod, "Huguenots" by Meyerbeer, "The Barber of Seville" by Rossini, "Carmen" by Bizet were demonstrated to Baku audience by "kids of art country".

Judging from newspaper reviews, the actors of this company could be honoured to any opera stage. Beautiful singing and outstanding performance in the style of the old Italian music alone was an invariable success in almost every town was required of actors. But in Baku the audience was notable for high level of culture. The audience's expectations were high,

the reason why authentic Italian singers were sometimes "booed" or their performance was criticized. Indeed, the audience did not hesitate to discover "defects" in staging of performances, rendering of Italian singers found the reflection on the reaction of the auditorium. For example, staging of "Aida" with nice singing and performance was "poor in accompaniment", the absence of proportional collaboration of the orchestra and chorus. This circumstance permitted the reviewer of the newspaper "Bakinetz" to call the performance of the opera "a concert", as there were broken traditional correlations of main components of the opera performance. Let's refer to the full text of the review.

Italian Opera

On Saturday, Italians produced "Aida" or rather sang some arias from "Aida". They sang plainly, beautifully, with enthusiasm but the accompaniment was absolutely poor even for solos. The conductor was beside himself, in emotional places pressed out maximum energy from the orchestra, but ...even the most beautiful girl in the world cannot give more than she has – that's why we listened not to the opera, but a concert. Those who got accustomed to perceive the motif certainly together with the accompaniment must agree with this impression. But there is an ocean of sounds, deep chords and musical effects demanding proportional collaboration of the orchestra and chorus in the opera "Aida". In that case when the proportion is broken – this proportion is



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settled by certain laws – the opera stops to be the opera and it becomes a concert. The laws of “proportion” were so evidently broken in “Aida” that we dare flatly to call the current evening – a concert, not an opera. As in previous performances Mr. Procachi was a great success. With extraordinary lightness, without noticeable effort he embraced unclouded space between the upper and the lower registers accessible to tenor. His acting beared all traces of the old Italian school.

Mrs. Massachesi was also a success in the part of Aida carried out without sufficient expression. The actress’ voice was dull, that’s why it weakens the force of impression.

Mr. Mori, Mr. Marri and Mr. Ditzkhulio have perfectly managed their solos.

The chorus left much to be desired.

Box-office got good.

After the departure of opera company of Gonzalez brothers newspapers provided detailed review and analysis of their performances on Baku stage.

EXPRESS [1]

Italian Opera

Tours of Italian opera company under the management of Gonzalez brothers came to end on the 12th of September. In spite of shortcomings which were referenced in the newspapers, performances of our guests as a whole left an advantageous impression. For the fans of the old Italian music and nice singing – *bel canto* – there was enough to listen and admire. Such singers as Mrs. Massachesi, Mrs. Procachi, Belboni, Mori and Marri could be honoured to any opera stage.

Not going into details, generally speaking, as it was expected, “pure” Italian operas performed by our guests went off best of all. The specimens of that opera style which dominated almost till the last quarter of the past century and the brightest and the most brilliant representative of which was unforgettable Verdi in that period of this creative activity which preceded the creation of “Aida” and “Requiem”. Only decent vocal performance is required here; no need in fancy decorations or a big orchestra; there are a few chorus most of which are in unison. This kind of operas are more popular in Italy up to present and are successfully staged in almost each provincial town.

It is clear that our guests paid more attention to the works of their great compatriot Verdi. “Troubadour”, “Traviata”, “Rigoletto”, “Masquerade” and at last “Aida” were interpreted, as they say, *can amore*.

Among the works of the luminaries of the new Italian opera music, “Rustic chivalry” and “Clowns” claimed the greatest success – these “two Ajaxes” of contemporary Italian opera. This performance was almost the most successful one among a series of

performances played by the kids of “the country of fine arts” who were on a visit in our city.

Concluding this short note we venture to express desire that attractive singers when returning to our *mazut* capital (expected at the beginning of October) will meet once more cordial and hearty welcome, fully deserved by them.

LA [2]

As we can see, overall the Italian operas have a tremendous success. Productions of Verdi’s operas interpreted by reviewer’s words “*can amore*” as well as performances of modern Italian operas by Mascagni and Leoncavallo had the major impact and were retained in the minds of the audience. At the same time, the author wrote that the artists deserved more cordial and hearty welcome.

As we reviewed the performance of Italian opera in Azerbaijan, let’s now have a brief look at the Jewish Theatre: background, undermining conditions and development.

Following media reviews of a Jewish performing arts company, readers learned about serious issues of Jewish theatre related to language, repertoire, and creative arts in general.

One of the most interesting and precise reviews of the Jewish theatre of early 1900s can be found in “Bakinetz” newspaper of September 3, 1907. Here is an extract from the article.

Jewish Troupe

Jewish life in the course of the last “twenty five years of pogroms” (1882-1907) continually boils, suffers and cries; it indefatigably and vigorously searches the way out of that damned labyrinth of humiliations, injuries, abasements and beatings where this nation-in-exile is stuck so deeply. New parties come into life, new people, new ideas, new desires and new aspirations, new wishes appear. The Jews which thirty years ago knew only two political parties – “Chsidim” and “Misnagdim”, now are divided into Bundists, Zionists, territorialists, etc. New birds, new songs.

Show us these people from the stage, explain them to us, tell us about them!

Although we should not be expecting too much from the Jewish theatre that was freed from the bureaucratic prohibition only 2 years ago, we still have a right to demand that they shouldn’t feed us with Shoumer and Leytaner while we have Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholom Ash, L.Peretz, D.Pinskiy, Sholom-Aleykhem – great talents of whom there won’t be ashamed any Jewish literature. Though in the works of above-mentioned writers there is nothing what could meet requirements of the present time, they are talented writers on matters of everyday Jewish life, real Jewish life with its griefs and joys. We are sure that if the management of the visiting troupe considers our opinion, they will not be complaining about the absence of the audience. By the way, about the Jewish audience. Among Baku



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audience the Jews hold a considerable share. You can find them in the performances of malorussians, "Neva Farces", "Japanese Geishas", musical comedies. But you will vainly look for Jewish bourgeoisie in the performances of Jewish company. It doesn't favour them... But you see, the Jewish company could tell their heart and sense more than Simonov's farce, Japanese beauties and celebrities from "Palais de crystal". No mention that a moral obligation towards the Jewish stage should be forcing them to visit the Jewish theatre. Who will keep them up if you don't? But how is it possible to show to the whole world that they still remember the Jewish language?

Di Kodl

The author, obviously, takes into account relatively recent release of Jewish theatre from the bureaucratic ban of 1905.

The author demands a simple Jewish slang, folk language that can be easily understood by the audience. He calls for preservation of traditions, features, originality, and highly appreciates the actors distinguishing by the originality of the play and simplicity of speech. His appraisals are distinguished by excellent knowledge of repertoire of the Jewish troupe, and creative lines of artistic power. He highlights successful parts performed by a series of actors, venturing even some advices in their selection.

But at the same time he notes that to feed the audience with Shomer and Leytaner when there are such authors as Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholom Ash, L.Peretz, Sholom Aleykhem who create at the level of the best examples of European literature, is a sin.

Maybe just these losses in the selection of the repertoire has brought to the reduction of the number of spectators in the hall? The author of the review mercilessly criticizes the Jewish audience noting considerable majority of Jewish audience of Baku which invariably attend the performances of malorussians, "Neva farces", "Japanese geishas", musical comedies. However, Jewish bourgeoisie does not always attend Jewish performances. They do not "honour" the young Jewish theatre by their presence. This new forming Jewish stage does not touches their feelings, and even patriotic "debt" does not motivate the reach Jews to pay a visit to the Jewish theatre.

The arising Jewish stage says nothing to their soul and sense, at last, patriotic debt doesn't make them drop in Jewish theatre. They avoid their essence, they are ashamed of their language. By the way, to the stage where once upon a time there was heard intelligible speech, a medley of French with intricate German extravagances grating upon the ears, made its way.

It should be noted that criticism was not ignored at that time; critical reviews published in numerous

periodicals and newspapers were regarded very seriously. Here is another article. This one is from September 10, 1907 containing critical review.

Jewish Troupe

We are happy to notice that the Jewish troupe has finally decided to renounce the repertoire of notorious Shomers and Leytaners and start performing the plays of the best authors of modern European literature. A well known play by O.Dymov "Shema Israel" ("Listen, Israel!") will be on today, but tomorrow – the best play of modern repertoire "Last name Zvi" belonging to talented fiction writer D.Pinskiy. "Last name Zvi" was under censorial prohibition, and it was allowed to be performed in Russia only last year. At the time the play was banned, the author wrote in one of his letters:

"The censorship has hit me very hardly. "Last name Zvi" is a mountain Sinai of my soul where I wanted to call the entire Jewish nation".

In this remarkable play, the author gathered together the latest streams of the Jewish life. Characters in the play were: a representative of the old, orthodox Jewry (Rebe Moyshe), representatives of big and small bourgeoisie (Gevshman and Enef), the Zionist, Bundist and assimilator. We are confident that "Last name Zvi" will have a great success among the Baku Jewish audience, as it has everywhere.

On Saturday night specifically organized to commemorate Mr. Ratstein, the troupe's talented artist and director, they staged "Faivele Sharlatan" of Lerner. The author dedicated his play to Mr. Radstein. No doubt that this performance was the most successful for the Jewish troupe. The house was packed. We rarely witnessed such incredible ovations that the Jewish audience received their favourite. There were many gifts, and among others - an envelope with considerable contents.

It is necessary to admit: they did their best to please the audience by their performance on their director's birthday. And they made it. All artists were feeling at ease, and it's really hard to say who performed better than others.

In the upcoming days, there will be a commemorative event of Mr. Zhitomirsky.

Di Kodl [1]

The life of Jewry was presented in Prokhorovich's drama "Esther, apostate". "Bakinetz" newspaper edition of October 1, 1907 writes about it. The play narrates about Jewish woman Esther who adopted Christianity because of love. The author of the notice is comically laconic. Light, even playful exposition of Esther's tragic fate makes us smile even a century later.

"ESTHER, APOSTATE".

Prokhorovich's drama.



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On the 9th of September the spectators had a chance to see Mrs. Gurenko in a very dramatic part of the Jewish woman Esther who adopted Christianity because of love but was deceived by her lover. Esther doesn't endure this unfaithfulness and goes mad. Ms. Gurenko played her part very naturally and fully gripped the attention of the audience. Mr. Vasilenko in the part of the old man, Esther's father, the man with firm traditions of his religion is original and loyal to his tone. The actor

plays the stage of ecstasy with great expression under the influence of the news about his daughter's adoption of Christianity, as a result he commits suicide – hangs himself.

Conclusion

This concludes the review of the theatrical life in Azerbaijan in early 1900's, which appeared to be very rich, interesting and highly professional.

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