



# BALLET - A WORTHY COMPONENT OF AZERBAIJANI CULTURE

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THE OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS OF AZERBAIJANI CULTURE ARE CLEARLY SEEN ON THE EXAMPLE OF SUCH ELITE ART AS CLASSICAL BALLET. IN OUR COUNTRY, IT ORIGINATED IN THE 1920s, BUT IT IS CERTAINLY INDEBTED FOR ITS SUCCESS TO THE NATIONAL ROOTS AND TRADITIONS ORIGINATING FROM THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE - MUSICAL, EMOTIONAL, HOSPITABLE AND WELCOMING TO THE CORE.



*Scene from F. Amirov's "A Thousand and One Nights"*

**T**here is something crucial in the fact that the carefully preserved specimens of the folk culture of the Azerbaijani people – a canonical dance with its exquisitely erotic choreography performed only by women, as well as temperamental mass dances without which no celebration was held - were included in the repertoire of professional ensembles and acquired the form of modern stage action.

When at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a kind of theatrical organism emerged in Baku through the efforts of progressive-minded patrons and supporters of national culture, amateur and private troupes increasingly began to include fiery folk dances in concert programs and special numbers in their performances. Very popular, refined and diverse in emotions

and movements, they decorated opera and drama performances, while **tours of ballet masters aroused a lively interest in classical dances in the Baku audience. This interest led to the creation of dance groups that became professional little by little.**

How could it be otherwise, if already in 1910, the oil magnates, the Mayilov brothers, had built a 2,000-seat Opera and Ballet Theater in Baku following the example of European capitals, and it was always filled by the local intelligentsia who already knew a lot about art thanks to guest performers - world-famous vocalists and instrumentalists, outstanding masters of the Russian choreographic school!

A ballet troupe formed in the theater, where well-known choreographers M. F. Moiseyev, I. S. Novikov,

I. I. Arbatov and V. I. Virskiy occasionally worked and staged classical plays such as «Coppelia», «Giselle», «Swan Lake», «Sleeping Beauty», «La Bayadere» and others. The ballet troupe had about forty members - mostly actors who came from Russia for one or more seasons, which naturally affected the quality of productions. However, **the active participation of the outstanding masters of the Russian stage, Y. Geltser, Y. Lyukom, K. Makletsova, M. Semenova, M. Mordkin, B. Shavrov, V. Semenov and others literally infected others, especially young people** not only with the desire to watch it all, but also to try themselves in the role of ballerinas and dancers.

That is why in the early 1920's, there appeared ballet studios in Baku, of which the two most famous ones



offered initial training on elements of dance and attracted with the opportunity to participate in numerous performances, stories and shows, instilling hope of becoming actors in the studio members. Many of those who went there became professionals in the course of time. Having undergone many changes, one of the ballet studios that existed under the tutelage of education authorities from 1923, invited professional lecturers and worked closely with the theater of opera and ballet **was transformed into the Baku Choreographic School (BCS)**

**in 1930. It assumed an important mission to train members of the troupe** whose aims did not go beyond an imitation of Russian theater. But time was taking its toll: improving, Azerbaijani ballet proved to be an independent unit of culture, and by the 1950s, it became an object of pilgrimage for Bakuivians, who watched their favorite shows over and over again and enthusiastically welcomed premieres.

***I clearly remember the first shock from the theater, when acclaimed Gamar Almaszadeh - touching, light-***

***hearted and weightless as a young Pani Maria in «The Fountain of Bakhchisarai» - appeared as a drama actress in the next scene, being a prisoner in the harem of Khan Giray. Her emotion was enough to excite the audience and make everyone in it feel like a prisoner of the show called theater ... a ballet theater!***

In any case, Maria is not the first and certainly not the only brilliant role of Gamar Khanum Almaszadeh on the Baku stage. After meeting with her in the 1950s, we only became successors of the audience who had long loved theater and derived many, many artistic impressions from meetings with its luminaries.

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Today, stories about the little girl Gamar, who, following the example of her neighbor and daughter of a theater orchestra member, Shura Stepanova, went to a paid ballet studio clutching in her fist a «five» given by dad «for sports», seem to be a legend... Biographical facts about Gamar Khanum, who became Azerbaijan's first ballerina, pass from one person to another, and it is so natural and notable. For she, who literally felt her responsibility for this art form and did everything with enthusiasm and gusto to make it shine in the sky of spirituality, made the main contribution to the formation of Azerbaijani ballet.

Again, something fateful is seen in the fact that after barely graduating from the Baku School of Choreography, Gamar, who loved ballet with all her heart, went to Moscow, and after a while, to the Leningrad Choreographic School in order to comprehend the subtleties of her chosen profession. Fortunately, she was already married to a young composer, Afrasiyab Badalbayli, at the time, and her parents did not prevent her from venturing into such an activity.

It is known that **Gamar Almaszadeh attended the class of Maria**

*First Azerbaijani ballet dancer Gamar Almaszadeh teaching a class*



**Romanova, a wonderful teacher and mother of the great Galina Ulanova**, but somehow to this day, no one has paid attention to the fact that in the school with world traditions, she felt like a man who was fated not only to become a ballerina, but to bring to her native Baku stage the reverent atmosphere prevailing there, and at the same time, responsible attitude to classical dance, and the creative spirit, without which Its Majesty Ballet cannot happen. And she did it - once and for all.

No, it took many years and was a complex and gradual job, but it is no accident that I pronounce the word «immediately»; Gamar Khanum and her husband returned to Baku with an amazing idea and an almost ready show - **«The Maiden's Tower» to music by Afrasiyab Badalbayli was destined to go down in history as the first national ballet co-authored by the first Azerbaijani ballet dancer Gamar Almaszadeh.**

Libretto, the national spirit, the inclusion of parts for folk musical instruments in the score and popular folk dances in the choreographic image of dance parts - all of it was warmed by the heart and fed on the knowledge of a talented master and professional, her stronger belief in her own



*Gamar Almaszadeh staging a performance*



strength and the ability to implement the most ambitious plans.

The birth of the ballet «The Maiden's Tower», which premiered at the State Opera and Ballet Theater in 1940, was indeed a momentous breakthrough for the ballet stage of Azerbaijan. **The personal qualities of Gamar Khanum - good education, relations with the choreographic elite of Russia in the years of study, participation in the process of creating a large national fabric and many other circumstances - allowed her to become for many years head of the troupe of the Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theatre, which followed the trends of the world choreographic school.**

By 1940, Gamar Khanum brilliantly acted together with partners in the lead roles of plays, which were considered peaks of world theater - «Swan Lake», «Raymonda», «Red Poppy», «Don Quixote» and other ballets. As head of the troupe of the Azerbaijan Opera and Ballet Theatre and principal choreographer, she determined the way of development for the troupe for 37 years ahead. The fact that it still lives an active creative life is due to all the best things which she founded and which will remain forever.

Reinforced from year to year with graduates of the Baku School of Choreography, where Gamar Khanum also enthusiastically worked as artistic director, by the 1950s the theater troupe had every opportunity to expand the repertoire so much that premieres were held one after another. Gradually, **the traditional elements of the repertoire were supplemented with the brilliant «Walpurgis Night» and «Polovtsian Dances» which adorn the opera «Faust» by Gounod and «Prince Igor» by Borodin. The staging of all three Tchaikovsky ballets - «Swan Lake», «Nutcracker» and «Sleeping Beauty» with a lot of complicated parts, the nice «Harlequinade» by Drigo, and finally, the world masterpiece «Giselle» by Adan, which had a 100-year-old history by that time, were a great event.**

At the same time, the professional growth of dancers was under way – anyone who had the necessary qualities had an opportunity to try themselves in the difficult parts. This created a creative environment that allowed the most talented ones to grow. And if the load on the best increased, it is because the level of the performance of soloists who «led» the performances definitely had to meet

international standards. For example, in parallel with Gamar Almaszadeh, many performances were «led» by the gifted dancer and graduate of the BCS, Irina Mikhaylichenko, and Leyla Vakilova who became a people's artist of the Soviet Union later. After completing her education in Moscow, she burst onto the stage like a whirlwind in order to literally overwhelm everyone with her virtuoso techniques. Leyla Vakilova became famous as a performer of all complex parts for decades, at the same time preparing all new high-class ballerinas and dancers at the BCS, succeeding Gamar Khanum in the post of artistic director of the school.

**The first Azerbaijani to become a professional classical dancer in the 1950s was Magsud Mammadov. Unique natural qualities and hard work allowed him to become the premier of his troupe and to successfully perform abroad and paired with famous Russian ballerinas.**

The 1950-70s were the time of the unprecedented prosperity of Azerbaijani ballet, when G. Almaszadeh, L. Vakilova, I. Mikhaylichenko, Rafiga Akhundova, Yeleba Butunina, Varvara Ryzhova, Viktoria Dankevich, Valentina Vigant, Tamilla Mammadova, Raya Ismayilova, Valentina Lenskaya, Ella Almazova, Lyudmila Pavliy, Sima Feyzullayeva, Yulana Alikishizadeh, Larisa Yegorova, Svetlana Burlakova, as well as men Konstantin Batashov, Yuriy Kuznetsov, Nikolay Kuznetsov, Magsud Mammadov, Donmaz Hajiyev, Anatoliy Urvantsev, Mikhail Gavrikov, Tofiq Mammadov, Khayyam Kalantarov, Vladimir Bezrukov, Karl Ryumin, Sergey Bogdanov and many others shone on the stage of Baku.

Due to the increased number of actors at the time, there was an opportunity to stage refined, time-consuming classical works. Each new show became a holiday for thousands of Bakuvians, who always filled the



*A lesson in men's class conducted by G. Yazvinsky*

hall not only on weekends but on weekdays. Interest and worship by the audience was largely the motivation that gave rise to actors' increasing exactingness towards themselves.

By historical standards, it was only the beginning of flowering. Ballet became such a prominent phenomenon in Azerbaijani culture that it drew the attention of the best composers, and **there appeared Azerbaijan's own ballet works that eventually received recognition from abroad.**

It is difficult to enumerate the stage performances that poured into the Azerbaijani state in an endless stream. **Not just bright and beautiful, but philosophically wise, romantically elevated «Seven Beauties» and «Path of Thunder» by Gara Garayev, «Gulshan» by Soltan Hajibayov, and «Legend of Love» by Arif Malikov ...** As a tribute to fashion, there appeared the one-act «Cas-

pian Ballad» by T. Bakikhanov, «Shadows of Kobystan» and «Kaleidoscope» by F. Garayev, «Layla and Majnun» to the music of a symphonic poem under the same name by G. Garayev, «Chitra» by Niazi, «Nasimi», «Shur», «Mugam», «Thousand and One Night» by F. Amirov, «Dark Girl» by A. Abbasov, «Golden Key» by B. Zeydman, «Inspiration» by L. Vaynshteyn, «Babak» by A. Alizadeh...

These productions, which represented a kaleidoscope of movements, sounds, characters, thoughts and feelings, gave fellow countrymen access to the world of the beautiful and encouraged them to be cleaner, kinder and more subtle, appeared onstage one after another in the 1950-80s.

By the mid-1960s, our ballet had its own stars. With the arrival of talented college graduates Chimnaz Babayeva, Tamilla Shiraliyeva, Olga Motyakova, Irina Nizametdinova, Lyudmila Letya-

gina, Vladimir Pletnev, Rufat Zeynalov, Ramazan Arifullin, Gulam Polatkhanova, Vitaliy Akhundov and others, the troupe was able to stage such ballets as «Les Sylphides», «The Classical Symphony», «The Lady and the Hooligan» and finally, «Spartacus». In them, Azerbaijani masters perfectly coped with technical difficulties and acting tasks, without lagging behind their foreign counterparts.

The tours and individual performances of Azerbaijani ballet in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, Tbilisi, Tashkent, Gorkiy, Rostov and Saratov were marked with a real triumph. Azerbaijani ballet has exhibited its works in France twice, taken part in the Paris forum and has been awarded a diploma of the Paris Academy of Dancing... ❖