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## **THEATRE PERFORMANCES IN NON-THEATRE SPACES (BASED ON GURAM MATSKHONASHVILI'S THREE PERFORMANCES)**

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**Abstract.** Analyzing theatrical activity in extra-theatrical spaces based on the work of Guram Matkhonashvili, the author drew our attention to three performances of the talented theatre actor: “Countdown” by T. Melashvili, “Antimedeia” by L. Bugadze and Shakespeare’s version of “Hamlet”.

For which the director has found a solution in the extra-theatrical spaces: the buildings restored for the first performance, Malta beach in the Black Sea for the second, the environment in one of the most important spaces of Tbilisi’s informal culture – Mktvartse nightclub.

**Key words:** non-theatrical spaces, contemporary Georgian theatre, new sensitive theatre, Royal District Theatre, V. Gunia Poti Drama Theatre, Poti International Festival of Regional Theatres, Black Sea Arena.

### **Problem statement**

Theatre art of Georgia is popular in the world but theatrical activity in extra-theatrical spaces when innovative directors seek solutions to the performances in line with syncretism in architecture – unfinished homes, the natural environment, other buildings and structures have not been completely elucidated.

### **Analysis of recent research and publications**

The publication is based on the practical theatrical and cultural experience of the author, which she gained through her active working in the Young Theater Actors Union and the National OISTAT Center of Georgia.

### **Objective of the article**

The objective of the article is to highlight the achievements of avant-garde performances and their directors, actors, theatrical figures in non-theatre spaces, in which their environment – natural and man-made is syncretic with set design and action – based on the example of three plays by Guram Matkhonashvili.

### **Results and discussions**

At the end of the 2010s cultural context of Georgia went through a process of transformation when we found ourselves face to face with the situation when we may have become witnesses of emergence of a new cultural paradigm.

In the case of applying the concept of Papern’s famous “Culture 2” as a module or tool of analysis of these changes, we can consider architecture to be a metaphor of the essence of the society and its state.

Architecture expresses the soul of the epoch. The Theatre directly reflects the existing policy and encompasses global generalizing as well as journalistic specific details. Therefore the society and ongoing processes can also be analyzed in the scope of non-theatre spaces that are used for avant-garde or marginal performances. The narratives of architectural theatrical spaces can be used as the metaphor of development of contemporary Georgian culture.

In Georgia of 1990s during the period of wars, dissociation, power shortcuts and cold the young directors created new small scale intimate platforms – so-called “cellars”, which had a much more sensitive and adequate audience and repertoire than academic theatres. However, after the revolution of 2003 when the innovator directors left the walls of these cellars and settled down in large theatres intimate and authentic character of their activities started to fade...

During the first decade of the 21st century development of theatrical architecture took two directions: a. restoration and modernization of the outstanding monuments of cultural heritage and historically important theatres and b. construction of new buildings. Such as the Drama Theater for 800 spectators in the city of Telavi, the composition of which includes such architectural landmark as the Basilica of the seventeenth century. In the interior courtyards of the entrance of the theatre motifs of ancient Georgian architecture with typical construction techniques were used (Gnedovskiy S., Bokov A., 1983, s. 33–34) (Fig. 1).



a



b

**Fig. 1.** Drama Theater in Telavi; a – General view; b – Basilica of the XVII century, in the lobby.  
(Gnedovskiy S., Bokov A., 1983, s. 33–34)

The futuristic building of inadequate scale in the historic centre of Tbilisi has been completed; in Poti (the town at the shore of the Black Sea) newly built V. Gunia Drama Theatre requires permanent restoration (*Georgian State Drama Theatre named after Valerian Gunia.*) (Fig. 2). From the newly constructed spaces, it is only the Black Sea Arena which was designed by the German architects and built by Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili that functions in accordance to its concept (Opened on July 31, 2016).

This indoor arena is located on the coast of the Black Sea in Shekvetili, Guria, some 45 km north of Batumi, the country's second-largest city. The venue, designed by the architects from the German company Drei Architekten, is the largest open concert hall in the Caucasus. The auditorium has a capacity of 10,000 seats in circular grandstands (Reinis Fischer, 2019. *Black Sea Arena Georgia.*). Various entertainment events are held at the arena, including rock bands concerts: Aerosmith and Scorpion's, Elton John, and others. There are also numerous concerts of Georgian stars (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2.** General view V. Gunia Poti Drama Theatre.  
(Photo by Nino Gunia-Kuznetsova).



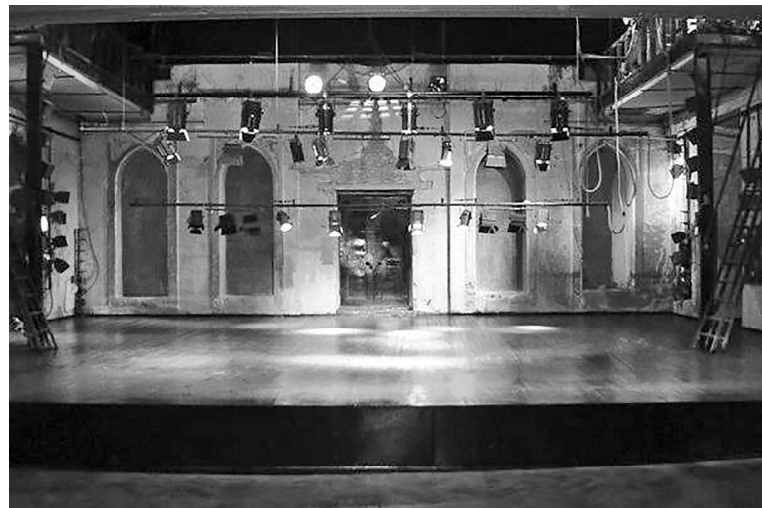
**Fig. 3.** Stage and amphitheatre space. Black Sea Arena in Shekvetili.  
(Photo by Nino Gunia-Kuznetsova).

Realization of creative architectural concepts still faces numerous challenges.

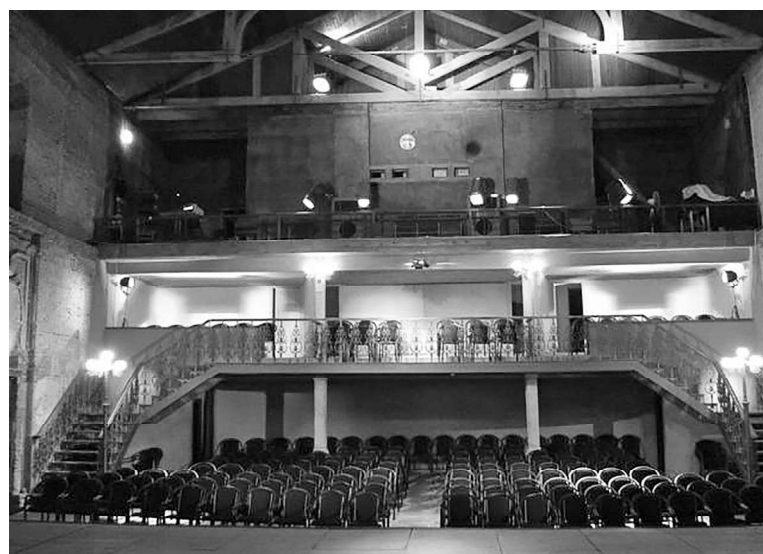
Georgian theatre critic and theoretician Tamar Bokuchava talked in one of her last essays about the death of Georgian logocentric theatre and establishment of “the new sensitive theatre”. This “new sensitive theatre” emerged during the first decade of the 21st century at the Royal District Theatre with the staging of “The Women of Troy” (2013, director and stage designer David Tavadze). The performance introduced Georgian theatre to new expressive language which was of semi-documentary, painful, simple, strict, non-compromising and at the same time lyrical character. The authenticity of documentary narratives is even more emphasized by non-decorated, dilapidated walls of the Royal District Theatre.

The story of the Royal District Theatre resembles the history of independent Georgia. Since its establishment in 1997, Royal District Theatre has been supporting innovative and free theatrical thinking, encouraging the new writing and experimental theatre. Since 2008 a young group led by award-winning director Data Tavadze made RDT internationally successful and turned it into one of the most important performing platforms in the region (*Royal District Theatre. (Tbilisi, Georgia).*).

Generations of theatre workers advocated for the use of the non-theatrical space since the 1990s. Today it is exactly the theatre that produces the needed results and enables avant-post of contemporary Georgian theatre. It becomes a competitor of large famous national theatres and offers a space where the young generation of directors from 1989 started to experiment with new forms (Fig. 4).



a



b

**Fig. 4.** Wall and hall (a), Royal District Theatre (b).  
(Photo by Nino Gunia-Kuznetsova)

The Georgian directors who are indulged with an abundance of classical theatre buildings seemingly do not need to look for new non-standard spaces. However new narratives prompt the rebellious youth with a nonstandard way of thinking to discover different forms. Their investigation is not limited to a finding of new theatrical tools and extends to the suggestion of new platforms for the staging of their production and use of non-theatre spaces. This is for example how an “open space” – an interdisciplinary laboratory for artists of visual and performing fields was established in one of the suburbs of Tbilisi.

Director Guram Matskhonashvili, who comes from a background of journalism, is one of the most interesting representatives of the generation of 1989s. His last three performances are produced in a form of “theatre out of a scenic box” and are close to the idea of a “site specific” production. His work is marked by a strong focus on the social issues of war, trauma, femicide, ecology, refuge, migration, gender and intolerance.

I would like to concentrate on three of his performances.

In 2017 Matskhonashvili staged Tamta Melashvili's novel “Counting Out”. It was an experimental work which introduced the actors of the state puppet theatre to the front stage and invited them to participate in the performance of a dramatic theatre. The performance took place in different spaces of construction that was under restoration. Actors and spectators moved between the floors and different rooms. Ruins of the building represented the acting field of the play: a village in a war zone and a neutral line that was frozen in time and space. Place where two teenage girls – the protagonists of the play exist, dream, die and continue to live. Scenography (the design is produced by Guram Matskhonashvili as well) is extremely grotesque and finds itself on the verge on kitsch allowing the non-theatre environment to create a feeling of documentary happening and frankness.

Lasha Bughadze's “Antimedeia” was presented during the Poti International Festival of Regional Theatres in 2018. It has to be noted that the location at the Maltakva beach of the Black Sea was selected by the organizers of the festival because the newly built Poti theatre is not safe for the actors and spectators. This tragicomic fact gave Matskhonashvili a chance to use a very advantageous, dramatic and naturally changing sea landscape for creation of the background for an ancient story which he transformed into a tale of a migrant woman from Kolchis. The drama that takes place in an abandoned Soviet construction and the change of the lights create a special atmosphere. Director and scenographer Guram Matskhonashvili masterly used the effects of sunset and twilight to emphasize the natural change of scenographic images. Vast surface of the sea created an association with the ancient tragedy and enhanced the scale of the tragedy of modern refugees.

Matskhonashvili's version of Shakespeare's “Hamlet” that was staged in spring of 2019 made a shocking effect on the Georgian Theatre as it presents Hamlet as a transgender woman. It was staged at a night club “Mtkvarze” – one of the most important spaces of non-formal culture in Tbilisi.

The choice was influenced by the police raids in the night clubs, the following mass protest actions and “rave” in front of the parliament building in 2018.

Matskhonashvili was very firm in his choice of a club format, which he explained in an interview the following way: “In case of Georgia the club was a space, where renewal of the way of thinking and its convergence with the European consciousness took place in the first place. “Bassiani”, “Mtkvarze”, “Gallery” managed to achieve the results Georgian theatre never managed to do. I like that theatre was the one to approach the club that found a key to European and in general, human ideology as a phenomenon. This is a very important gesture and from a certain point of view, acknowledgement of a fiasco as well. We entered the space that appeared to be stronger than us.”

Format of the play was tailored to the environment of the club itself. Spectators had to stand during the whole performance and go to the balcony when Ophelia's body passed by floating on the river Mtkvari on a raft. Space of a club limited Matskhonashvili's chances to conduct scenographic experiments and the play did not have the anticipated effect. However, it created an interesting precedent of theatrical intervention into the clubbing subculture.

## **Conclusions**

In Georgia performances in non-theatre spaces remain a rarity. This may be connected to faithfulness to traditional theatrical forms and lack of experiments in performing arts compared to the visual genres. Therefore,

independently from their artistic value Matskhonashvili's experiments still should be seen as positive experience as they undoubtedly introduce new direction into the life of the Georgian theatre.

Matkshonashvili and his performances are presented at the Georgian national pavilion next to the works of his colleagues as he is the representative of the three generations of directors and scenographers who step by step disrupt cliché of the logocentric action, undergo a transformation on the quest for new expressive tools and create the artistic narrative of Georgia of the first decade of the 21st century.

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## ТЕАТРАЛЬНІ ВИСТАВИ В НЕТЕАТРАЛЬНИХ ПРОСТОРАХ (ЗА МОТИВАМИ ТРЬОХ ВИСТУПІВ ГУРАМА МАЦХОНАШВІЛІ)

**Анотація.** Автор статті на початках висвітлює і аналізує стан театрального мистецтва наприкінці ХХ початку ХХІ століття в Грузії. Свій аналіз автор розпочинає від усвідомлення важливості театральної архітектури, яка, на її погляд, виражає “душу епохи” і яку можна вважати метафорою єдності суспільства і його держави. Автор наголошує, що у Грузії в 1990 роках, в період війн і інших впливів молоді режисери працювали на “інтимних” майданчиках і мали набагато чутливішу та адекватнішу аудиторію і репертуар, ніж академічні театри. Але після революції 2003, коли режисери-новатори влаштувались у великих театрах, справжній характер їхньої діяльності почав згасати.

Протягом першого десятиліття ХХІ ст. розвиток театральної архітектури отримав два напрямки: а) реставрація та модернізація видатних пам'яток культурної спадщини та історично важливих театрів, та б) будівництво нових. До перших можна зарахувати висвітлений приклад драматичного театру на 800 глядачів в м. Телаві, до других – Державний драматичний театр ім. В. Гунія в Поті, Чорноморську арену в Шекветелі і Королівський районний театр, що діяльністю та зусиллями молоді трупи під опікою Д. Тєвадзе перетворився на найважливішу сцену в регіоні.

Аналізуючи театральну діяльність у позатеатральних просторах на прикладі творчості Гурама Мацхонашвілі, автор зупинилася на трьох виставах талановитого діяча театру: “Відлік часу” Т. Мєлашвілі, “Антимедея” Л. Бугадзе і версії “Гамлета” Шекспіра. Для яких режисер знайшов рішення в позатеатральних просторах: будівлі що реставрувалася для першої вистави, пляж Мальтаква у Чорному морі для другої, середовище в одному з найважливіших просторів неформальної культури Тбілісі – нічного клубу “Мктварце”.

**Ключові слова:** не театральні простори, сучасний грузинський театр, новий чутливий театр, Королівський районний театр, Драматичний театр ім. В. Гунія Поті, Міжнародний фестиваль регіональних театрів у Поті, Чорноморська арена