

26.7 Theatre in Albania post-1989

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1. Context: **The aftermath of communist rule**

Albanian theatre post-1989 faced the cultural vacuum left by the communist rule between 1944-1992. Using tactics such as the persecution of playwrights, eradication of amateur theatre, and institutionalisation of buildings and ensembles in most major cities the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha had shaped Albanian theatre 'to conform to the doctrines of socialist realism and Zhdanovism' (Elsie 2004). With a few exceptions of heavily censored translated plays (Klosi 2018), the regime gradually banned foreign and classical plays and reduced Albanian theatre writing to 'a bland mixture of edifying morality plays and historical dramas, full of patriotic pathos and heavy-handed political messages' (ibid). But such dated and propagandistic narratives and characters were presented to Albanian audiences with exceptional stagecraft that evidenced influences from Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre and also Erwin Piscator (ibid). Even so, by 1990 Albanian theatre was isolated from the outside world and alienated from its audiences, serving as an instrument of power in the hands of the communist party.

The political changes and social unrest that followed the economic collapse of the late 1980s, which reflected the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, brought about a new era for Albanian theatre. The advent of democracy saw foreign and classical plays being re-visited with contemporary translations and adaptations (Klosi 2018, 14). The freedom to travel abroad since 1990 allowed for new influences from the outside world. The liberation from censorship invited Albanian theatre makers to create works that reflected on the aftermath of the communist rule but also tell the stories of their contemporaries, who suffered economic hardships and migrated in masses. Several Albanian theatre-makers undertook training outside the Eastern block and returned to Albanian stages bringing influences from the Western world, personal and collective histories and narratives. The following sections offer an overview of how Albanian theatre has been reinventing itself during the last thirty

years through developing a distinctive theatre-making culture and re-visiting theatre infrastructures to engage new audiences.

2. Cultures of Theatre-making: **Decolonising repertoires and creating postmodern theatre**

The main impulse of post-1989 Albanian theatre-makers was to address the censorship that dominated the staging of classical plays during the communist rule. Albanian creatives revisited classical plays with new adaptations and translations and updated staging. A major influential figure is the director Agim Qirjaqi, who after a two-year training with the Italian theatre director Giorgio Strehler at the Teatro Piccolo in Milan and Teatro Eliseo in Rome, introduced Albanian audiences to the contemporary staging of classical plays. In his seminal 1991 production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* at Tirana National Theatre, Qirjaqi used '60 pints of pigs' blood' and dressed 'the actors as butchers in blood-splattered white coats' to expose the feelings of horror that dominated Albanian people during Hoxha's dictatorship (Qirjaqi in Frei 1992). In liberating themselves from the communist regime, the Albanian stages lashed against their oppressors.

A more subtle decolonising strategy was to commission new translations of classical plays. In the first decade of 2000 Albanian stage directors such as Alfred Trebicka, Albert Minga and Spiro Duni staged new translations for Arthur Miller's plays *Going Down Mount Morgan*, *A View from the Bridge* and *The Crucible* (Klosi 2018, 12). Prominent actors include Timo Flloko, Eva Alikaj, Drita Pelinku, Naum Shundi, Neritan Liçaj, Fatos Sela, Elia Zaharia, Flaura Kureta, Erjona Kakeli, Vasjan Lami, and Mehdi Malkaj; translators include Rudi Erebara and Gjergj Peçi; and scenic designers Agim Zajmi (ibid, 13). Because of the ties between Albania and Russia during the communist rule, Albanian artists have been trained on systems influenced by Russian theatre and have excelled in realism. For example, in 2011 the ensemble of the Academy of Arts in Tirana presented *The Crucible* at an international festival in Pristina and won accolades (ibid). Several cultural projects used theatre to reconcile Albania with neighbouring countries with a history of conflicts, such as Kosovo, Montenegro and Italy.

Quite a few directors are trying to create an identity of new contemporary Albanian theatre and have focused on developing Albanian writers. Altin Basha brought influences from English theatre which he encountered during his training at BADA—British American Drama Society (Dervishi 2019, 14). Since 2020, Basha is the director of the Kujtim Spahivogli National Experimental Theater, after 17 years of directing the sketch comedy and variety TV show “Portokallia’ or ‘Orange’. Basha’s ground-breaking collaboration with the acclaimed playwright Stefan Capaliku introduced Albanian theatre to wider European audiences. Capaliku’s plays *I am from Albania* (2006), *Allegretto Albania* (2008), and *Made in Albania* (2016) explore and expose the identity challenges of the nation post-1989. For the writing of *Allegretto Albania*, Basha orchestrated a ‘laboratory process’ that invited the playwright to attend all rehearsals and develop the script from the improvisations of the actors (Dervishi 2019, 16). The postmodern political comedy received numerous national and international awards and Capaliku is considered the most successful contemporary Albanian playwright.

It is important to acknowledge the contribution of Albanian theatre-making outside of Albania. The North-Macedonian-born director Qendrim Rijani studied directing at the Arts University of Tirana to a Masters level and now operates both in Albania and North Macedonia. Apart from several foreign plays, in 2016 he directed at the Albanian Theater in Skopje the plays *Darka e Thërrimeve* or *Dinner of Crumbs*, written by the Albanian playwright Refet Abazi. In 2019, following two years of development at the Macedonian National Opera and Ballet, he directed the first Albanian opera *Skënderbeu* or *Skanderberg*, with librettist Arian Krasniqi and composer Fatos Lumani, about the life of the Albanian hero Skanderberg who led the rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century.

The real shift in theatre-making came from directors who work outside of text-based frameworks. Ema Andrea blends theatre with performance art to bring the voices of the actors and local communities to the forefront. Gjergj Prevazi, who established the first Albanian dance company, Albanian Dance Theatre Co, draws on dance theatre to develop his own productions but also influences the overall style of Albanian theatre through his movement direction of several productions.

3. Institutional structures: **Struggles with funding and audience engagement**

Unfortunately, because Albania struggled through poverty and civil war, Albanian theatre suffered from small audiences during most of the 90s. However, to mark the transition to democracy, key state theatres continued to operate. The communist regime left a clear sense of theatre infrastructure, including established subsidized theatres and ensembles in major Albanian cities (Elsie 2004). In 1991 the main theatre in the capital Tirana, Theatre of the People, was renamed Tirana National Theatre.

Other big theatres outside the capital that continued to operate after the fall of communism include the Zihni Sako Theatre in Gjirokaster. Notable institutions as Andon Zako Çajupi Theatre in Korçë and Migjeni Theatre in Shkodër offer a variety of shows for their audience, inviting also foreign directors. But because of the lack of funding since 1989, state theatres had to resource alternative income. For example, the Andon Zako Çajupi Theatre in Korça since 2013 organises the KOKO comedy festival; the Skampa Theatre in Elbasan operates as a touring house for music events and also organises an annual international theatre festival, and; the Aleksandër Moisiu Theatre in Durrës operates as a cultural centre that hosts a variety of cultural events. Other theatres struggled more with resources. For example, the Berat Theatre survived until 1997, but then seized its activity for about 20 years, and current efforts hope to secure its reopening (<https://teatrial.home.blog/ish-teatri-i-beratit/>). Most of the theatre still happens in the capital of Tirana, and the rest of the country remains mostly inactive.

Contemporary theatres that opened in Tirana during the last fifteen years, such as the Qëndra Metropol and the Kujtim Spahivogli National Experimental Theater, produce works of Albanian and international artists and expand their activities to children's theatre, youth theatre and theatre in higher education (<http://teatrimetropol.al/>; <https://tkeks.al/rreth-teatrit-kombetar-eksperimental-kujtim-spahivogli/>). Notable work has been done by Qëndra Metropol as they try to engage young generations through free theatre courses and school lectures. The programming and infrastructure of the above theatres resemble similar contemporary venues around Europe. The opening of the aforementioned theatres aimed to inspire

the exploration of alternative ways of theatre-making and the nurturing of grassroots theatre, paving the way for a new era for Albanian theatre. However, and perhaps for reasons that have to do with fundraising and audience engagement, there is a resistance in abandoning traditional ways of theatre-making and taking risks to produce more experimental and community-based work.

Nevertheless, the independent scene got a good amount of attention. A prominent non-profit organisation is the Multi-disciplinary Arts Foundation (M.A.M), M.A.M which was founded in September 2013 in Tirana 'by Albanian contemporary artists in a spirit of community, hoping to assist and encourage innovation, experimentation and potential in the arts' (<https://multidisciplinaryarts.org>). Under the direction of Ema Andrea, M. A. M. continues to nurture young actors, training them on new styles of performance inspired by theatre practitioners who worked against the canon, such as Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, and Pina Bausch. M. A. M. organises the Performance Festival Tirana (PAFT). Among other things, PAFT showcases and celebrates the efforts of Albanian artists in the last decade to fuse theatre and performance art.

Even though certain theatres offered contemporary repertoires, there are parts of the theatre industry that are under development, such as the critical engagement with productions from theatre specialists or audiences, and an understanding of theatre happening outside of established buildings and organisations. For example, several TV news programs cover new premieres in Tirana, but they rely only on the information from press offices of the venues and ignore theatrical activities outside the capital (Ymeri 2017). As Albanian theatre is looking for its contemporary identity, key venues remain at the centre of focus.

Tirana National Theatre was built during the Italian occupation between 1939-1943 and was primarily used as a cinema and theatre during the communist era. After the fall of the dictatorship, the building faced a lack of financing (Kristo and Perna 2021, 87) but in 2000 it was included within the Tirana Historic Centre. Local communities and international organisations resisted the government's plans in 2018 to demolish it (Pompejano and Macchioni 2021). Actors and activists started the movement "The Citizen's Alliance for the Theatre" to defend the building, but it was eventually

demolished in May 2020 (Kristo and Perna 2021). The government plans to build a contemporary building with multiple stages where Tirana National Theatre and Kujtim Spahivogli National Experimental Theater will host their programmes. In the meantime, these two institutions perform their shows in a temporary venue called ArTurbina. When the construction of the contemporary venue is completed, it is hoped that ArTurbina will be used as an alternative space for smaller productions.

Even though the demolition of Tirana National Theatre is emblematic of how the neoliberal economy problematises artistic activities, it invited Albanian theatremakers to create theatre outside buildings and funding structures. The most significant initiative of contemporary Albanian theatre since the 1990s is the development of grassroots or community-based theatre.

4. Conclusion: challenges and creative opportunities

The Albanian theatre post-1989 found itself in an impossible situation. The institutional structures and the cultures of theatre-making needed decolonising from the communist ideology to invite a critical engagement with an alienated audience. It also acknowledged its role in developing an understanding of the outside world alongside its audiences. But at the same time, new financing strategies had to be invented, tested, evaluated, and at times, questioned and resisted. The main problem remains the limited repertoire. Theatre shows mostly rely on national funds, and consequently run for a maximum of twenty-five performances. There are no strategies or initiatives for audience development, or even touring and festival participation. In general, theatre work in Albania is isolated, short-lived and still not able to speak for its people, as the political stronghold still echoes old leadership. Another challenge is the low interest in producing Albanian plays, be it old or new, theatre programming lacks the representation of Albanian authors, creating a vacuum in the effort towards a grassroots movement. The challenges seem insurmountable and Albanian theatremakers have felt disheartened at times. However, their focus on community initiatives shows resilience and commitment to what matters long-term. The focus on grassroots theatre develops the audiences, the artists, and the Albanian theatre of the future.

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Further Reading

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