

Enver Hoxha's Dictatorship Stifles Albanian Theatre

Robert Elsie

By the late forties, most of the playwrights of the pre-war period had either been executed (like Ndre Zadeja) or imprisoned (like Etëhem Haxhiademi, Kristo Floqi, Ndoc Nikaj, and Vinçenc Prennushi). This unprecedented wave of persecution of Albanian intellectuals unnerved all surviving writers or would-be playwrights of the new generation. The political turmoil of the immediate post-war years and the manoeuvring, rise and fall of the various political leaders and factions within the communist party added to the sense of insecurity that virtually paralysed all creative forces in the country. By the time dictator Enver Hoxha was securely in the saddle and had established a modicum of political stability, he also created a cultural vacuum in Albania that lasted well into the 1960s. Albanian theatre was, therefore, very slow to develop in the post-war period despite its obvious utility as a means of education, propaganda and political persuasion.

It was, nonetheless, in the post-war years when subsidized state theatres and state ensembles were established in most major cities. This institutionalization of Albanian theatre went hand in hand with the conscious eradication of the amateur groups of the past that might have eluded state and party control. By the 1960s, amateur theatre in Albania had all but disappeared - one of the many cultural losses of the period. The post-war professional theatre of Socialist Realism is said to have its immediate origins in the amateur theatre groups of the partisan movement in Albania from 1942 to 1944, but its roots go back to the ensembles of the twenties and thirties. The amateur groups of the partisan movement that travelled the country during the late war years not only entertained the partisans but also endeavoured to instruct the peasantry about the ideals of, and need for, a communist revolution in the country. It was a political theatre, a mixture of polemics, heroism, nationalism, sentimentality and satire. Among the early authors of partisan and socialist theatre were Zihni Sako, Gjikë Kuçali, and Besim Levonja, the latter remembered for his comedy *Prefekti* (The Prefect; 1948).

After the communist takeover in November 1944, Albanian theatre, like Albanian prose and poetry, was reshaped to conform to the doctrines of socialist realism and Zhdanovism. Accordingly, in the fifties, it fell heavily under the influence of Soviet models, primarily the works of Russian dramatists. Although some weak reflexes of the great theatrical traditions of Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre and of Erwin Piscator of Berlin may have been felt in Albania, the declamatory style and the heavy-handed use of political propaganda still made most plays of the fifties and sixties quite insufferable.

A new start to the theatre of Socialist Realism was made by Kolë Jakova with the heroic drama *Halili e Hajrija* (1950), which portrays the struggle of the northern Albanian Kelmendi clan, led by Halil Garrija, a figure from Albanian folk literature, against Sulejman Pasha of Shkodra in the sixteenth century. The dramatic techniques of this first memorable work of post-war Albanian theatre are questionable, though the structural weaknesses of the play are compensated for to a certain extent by the moving heroism and patriotic sentiment of the scene in which the play's protagonist faces death. Of greater quality and more widely admired was Jakova's drama *Toka jonë* (Our land; 1955). The

protagonist of the play is a 43-year-old mother of two who is forced to flee from her native village when a landowner sullies her reputation in order to seize her land. Her return home and her struggle to regain her rights in a hostile environment are facilitated by the initial agrarian reform in the autumn of 1946.

Spiro Çomora, a noted playwright, satirical poet and humourist of the sixties is remembered for his comedy *Karnavalet e Korçës* (The Carnivals of Korça; 1961), and *Dy me zero* (Two to Nothing; 1960). The action in the former takes place in Korça in 1936 and revolves around the indefatigable attempts by a wealthy but miserly merchant to marry his daughter off as cheaply as possible. The playwrights of these early years include Sulejman Pitarka, Ndrekë Luca, Jonuz Dini and Andrea Skanjeti, who is remembered and was subsequently persecuted for his *Nora, heroina e bjeshkve* (Nora, Heroine of the Mountain Pastures; 1961), set in the years 1632-1639.

Isolation and Cultural Revolution

The second great blow to be dealt to Albanian theatre after the eradication of the amateur groups was the banning of all foreign works from the repertory. The Albanian public had never had much opportunity to see contemporary European theatre at all, although a number of classics had been translated into Albanian and performed on stage. Molière, Shakespeare and Schiller, for instance, had been enjoyed in educated circles. Even such classics, however, fell out of political favour during the Cultural Revolution (1965-1969) and in the years following the Purge of the Liberals (1973), when virtually all Western culture was considered bourgeois and decadent.

As a result of the purge, Chinese-style revolutionary drama was to hold sway on Albanian stages and on television for quite a few years. The dramatist who best reflects the proclivities of this period is Loni Papa. His noted drama *Cuca e maleve* (The Mountain Lass; 1967), portrays a woman's fight for equality among the feudal mountain tribes of northern Albania in 1949. The play was particularly effective during the late sixties and early seventies when the Party's campaign for women's emancipation in Albania was in full swing. *Cuca e maleve* is perhaps the most obvious Albanian reflection of Chinese revolutionary theatre and opera under Mao Tse-Tung. Like many of its Chinese counterparts it was made into an opera.

Dramatist Fadil Paçrami, though of Moslem origin, was educated by the Franciscans and subsequently sent to Bologna to study medicine. After World War II, he worked in the communist youth movement, became deputy minister of education and culture under Sejfulla Malëshova, and, from 1948 to 1957, editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Zëri i Popullit* (The Voice of the People). In 1965-1966 he served as minister of culture and the arts and from 1971 to 1973 in parliament. Accordingly, Paçrami's plays of the period (thirteen dramas up to 1973) are well within the confines set by Socialist Realism. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee on 26-28 June 1973, Fadil Paçrami and Todi Lubonja, head of Albanian radio and television, were singled out by Enver Hoxha in a drive against liberal and foreign influence in Albanian culture. Relieved of all his positions, Fadil Paçrami was arrested in October 1975 and spent an initial eighteen months in Tirana prison awaiting trial, suffering the very same fate that other intellectuals had suffered under Hoxha's rule. In March 1977, he was convicted of sabotage in culture for having introduced foreign influences and, like Socrates, for having

corrupted the youth - not to mention the standard charges of agitation and propaganda. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison and released in March 1991.

The Paçrami-Lubonja purge of 1973 led to the ousting of many other figures, not only of prose writers and artists but also of dramatists. Minush Jero had been criticized in 1969 by Enver Hoxha for his play *Njolla të murrmë* (Grey Stains; 1968), although it had won first prize at the National Theatre Festival that year. He endeavoured to make good his ideological shortcomings with the revolutionary drama *Të pamposhtur* (The Unyielding Ones; 1971), but to no avail. Together with the play's director Mihallaq Luarasi of the Çajupi Theatre in Korça, Jero was arrested on April 30, 1973 and was imprisoned until December 28, 1978. Also condemned at the Fourth Plenary Session of 1973 were Naum Prifti's manuscript "Rrethimi i bardhë" (The White Siege), which remained unpublished, and Fatos Arapi's *Drama e një partizani pa emër* (Drama of a Nameless Partisan; 1962). All plays and staging were subsequently reviewed for their ideological purity, and anything found to be modernistic, liberal or foreign was immediately banned. The talented director Kujtim Spahivogli was denounced as an anarchist and dispatched to the countryside to work as a cement-mixer. Even stage designers were thrown into labour camps for modernistic decorations. This period of revolutionary art, as defined and interpreted by the Albanian Party of Labour or, more precisely, by Enver Hoxha and his cohorts personally, caused a major setback to the advancement of Albanian theatre in the seventies. Some progress was made from about 1982 onwards, though Albanian drama still remains a definitely neglected genre. In the final years of the dictatorship, there were ten well-attended professional theatres in Albania and, in addition, about fifteen variety theatres and a puppet theatre. The quality of acting and staging improved substantially, in particular on the best stages: the *Teatri Popullor* (People's Theatre) of Tirana, the *Teatri Migjeni* (Migjeni Theatre) of Shkodra, and the *Teatri A. Z. Çajupi* (Çajupi Theatre) of Korça. The subject matter nonetheless remained dull by Western standards.

Throughout the almost half a century of "people's power," theatre was always subjected to much greater political control and censorship than prose or poetry, and thus never really had a chance to flourish on its own. If a volume of prose in the seventies and eighties had to go through the hands of ten to fifteen editor-censors, a play had to be read by at least thirty such experts, and anything which might possibly be construed as critical or controversial was removed. The spirit of non-conformism, so ubiquitous to Western theatre and culture in general, was unthinkable, as was the individualist whose ideas could provoke and even outrage his or her audience. For obvious political reasons, Albanian playwrights were very reticent or, to do them justice, were not able to utilize the power of the stage to its fullest and to provoke their audiences into reflection with real material and with the sort of scandalous stage productions that Western theatre-goers have become quite addicted to. Instead, they stuck to a bland mixture of edifying morality plays and historical dramas, full of patriotic pathos and heavy-handed political messages. Though the excellent quality of stage directing and acting managed to compensate to an extent, the result of this political interference was such sterility in Albanian theatre that Albanian drama can, even today, vie neither in quality nor in quantity with poetry and prose. Modern theatre in Albania has yet to emerge.

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