

National folk dances and epic performance

Thus the great tradition of expression of the national spirit through music, words and dance seems timeless

National folk dances already occupied an important place in the very first theatrical and operatic productions. If lyrical folk singing was transplanted to the stage practically in its entirety –with only some new words and a new arrangement –dance demanded a serious rethinking. Kazakh folk dances were closely intertwined with rituals such as the shamans' ceremony for healing the sick or the collective Sufi zikr, a chant used by Muslim mystics to achieve religious ecstasy. Dance was also an integral part of wedding games and sports competitions. Ritual poses, games and activities taken from folk culture, along with the symbolism of gestures and ornaments, were adapted to the stage in such folk dances as Orteke (The Mountain Goat in a Trap), Koyan-Burkit (The Hare and the Eagle) and Ormekbi (The Weaving Dance). Shara Zhiembayeva was the greatest Kazakh dancer of this period who performed not just Kazakh dances, but dance forms from around the world.

Another unique development in the cultural life of Kazakhstan began in the 1960s. The Young Ballet of Kazakhstan was founded by Bulat Ayukhanov who became its permanent leader. This troupe combined the achievements of classical and folk dance and established the National Ballet of Kazakhstan that absorbed and assimilated within itself a wealth of 20th century culture.

The heroes who take the stage in all these operas, ballets and dramas were gestated during the many centuries long epic tradition. The epic songs, exhortations and legends live on today in these new and beloved forms of professional folk creativity. This tradition of the epic in the oral literature is where Kazakhs have always expressed their history and philosophy. In their totality, the epic genres, both large and small gather and articulate the traditional moral code affirms the entire value system that binds the ethnic group together. Functionally, the dominant characteristic of the epic tradition is its openly didactic quality – a way of addressing one's own people in a sermonizing manner. Historically, the epic tale was literally a road map for regulating social relations, directing the private life into a channel of eternity and concentrating in the present moment all that is past and yet to come. The very life of the nomad required a command of knowledge about the past in order to survive in the present and thrive in the future. The epic tale was the only mechanism versatile enough to transmit the historical experience of the Kazakhs across the centuries.

For epic performance to function at its optimum level, it is essential to have an audience that was brought up in the traditional value system. The epic clearly and expressly addresses the theatre audience presupposing that it will understand all of the nuances and actively participate. The audience acts as a collective censor and engages in a collective dialogue with the teller of the epic tale. Through all of this, the "epic audience" absorbs, embodies and preserves the experience of Kazakh history, and thus promotes new tellers of the tales from within its ranks. In

the difficult wartime and postwar periods, the natural rhythms of Kazakh life and tradition was destroyed and it was the epic audience that preserved the epic tradition and led to its rebirth in what was then Kyzylorda Region, where it has flourished for the past few decades.

The epic singers who embody this collective memory had great social status and were called – and are still known to this day as zhiraus. Traditionally, the zhiraus were counselors to the khan, the preservers of epic history and successors to the shamans.

Their work helped to bind and unify the generations to form an ethnic consciousness. The epic singers see his performance not as “singing songs”, but as a lofty mission to which he has a calling. In the act of making music, the epic singer gives voice, to the entire epic world and thereby unites the singular, finite world of human beings with the totality and infiniteness of the folk consciousness. During his performance the personality of the epic singer becomes a doorway – a point of transit that links the present, the heroic past and the future. As the zhiraus themselves attest, the life of a human spirit is measured by the sum total of its moments in communion with the epic singing. The remaining time – the time between epic performances are merely transitory moments of existence nurtured by the memory of the great epic revelations.

Even today the Kazakh people continue to believe that the talents of the epic singers are “magical”, based not only on their remarkable ability to memorize prodigious quantities of text, but on the power and emotional influence of their manner of singing.

Thus the great tradition of expression of the national spirit through music, words and dance seems timeless. Throughout the centuries, it remained intact. What once seemed broken was only a pause before it sent out new shoots like the Tree of Life and renewed almost every aspect of the national culture. Today, Kazakh people are finding how the ancient truths reflect the spiritual needs of the present.

Used materials:

«The soul of Kazakhstan», A.Kunanbay