

Threads of Silk

If you think the Silk Road is far away – it is. Tashkent is almost as far as China, seven hours in the air. When you get there you find a spacious city of three million inhabitants with broad, tree-lined avenues defining blocks of peaceful residential areas. The old city of madrassas, mosques and courtyard houses is just a tiny corner now after the dreadful earthquake of 1966.

Islamic heritage is currently being made more visible in a host of new and impressive public buildings set in extensive public parks. Huge blue domes alongside motifs from more ancient times contribute to a modern architectural style in tune with the new national identity. This emphasises Uzbeks as descendants of Timur, who we know as Tamburlane the Great, a ruler whose Empire stretched from Istanbul to Dehli.

Russian Presence

From mid-19th Century Russian colonisation of the region up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Tashkent grew up with architectural features you see from Riga to Vladivostok. Older stuccoed public buildings sit in avenues lined with apartment blocks. But millions of trees make the city especially attractive.

As with English in India, Russian is the principal language of communication between so many ethnic groups. It also links artists in Tashkent to Russia's rich culture of theatres, books and films. Even today, years after Uzbek has been the official language of Government, Russian enables Central Asian theatre practitioners from Azerbaijan to the border of China to communicate fluently and from the basis of a common cultural heritage and experience.

Most of today's mature theatre workers trained in Russia or in Tashkent's higher education institutes for theatre arts, dance, design and music - still staffed with teachers trained in leading Soviet institutions. On the evidence of the skills displayed at the **2011 Theatre UZ** festival, actors from Central Asia are fast on their feet, highly competent technically and working to the highest world standards. They are artists too. So far, the commercial pressures which so influence theatre in the West have not seriously affected theatre people's desire to be, first and foremost, part of an artistic community.



17th Century Registan in Samarkand

Madrassas with 'Oxbridge' style courts



Festival poster in a tree lined avenue



Modern amenities

New private owners of 1960's panel flats brick up windows and balconies to make more space and save energy. Temperatures here range from 40C below in Winter to 50C above in Summer!

Big Companies, Big Scale

A tradition of theatre created and delivered by a large, permanent repertory company has not died with the Soviet era, far from it. There is a contract system now, so artistic directors can choose who works for them. Nabi Abdurakhmanov at the Russian language Youth Theatre in Tashkent has built a lively young company and a repertoire of musical and dance based shows mostly from former students. His ensemble productions with 20 actors on stage at times are exhilarating to watch and full of variety as well as energy.

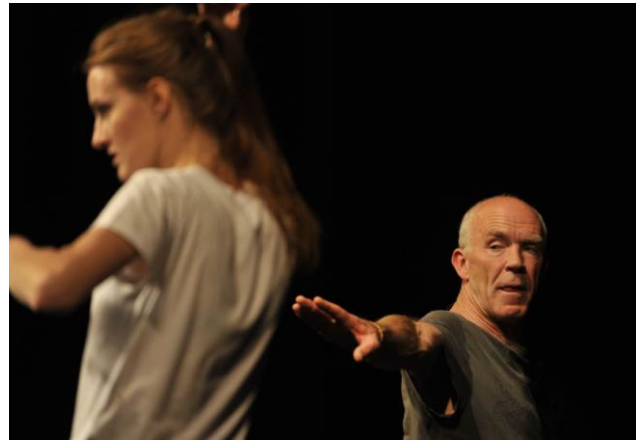
Other regional companies at the festival were also based on the 'family' tradition of Soviet theatres. Nabi's company organised and ran the Festival so at the post-festival company banquet plenty of drink flowed, there were speeches praising the work of each department and old and young danced to Uzbek pop favourites and a Beatles compilation. I ate with the Tadjikstan company members a couple of times and was not only the butt of much merry banter taking advantage of my poor Russian but also welcomed as a fellow artist and admitted to some frank talk on theatre politics.

It is important for Western theatre people to understand how this 'family' ethos in companies keeps actors willing to create new and challenging work and also deliver hundreds of performances to the same high standard.

Touring Rewards

The Russian word for touring is Gastrol'ye and being invited as a guest to a festival or another theatre is a great honour much enjoyed. The leading companies from the region expect to show at key festivals in Moscow or 'Peter' every couple of years – to keep up to date.

Sadly, the cost of hosting such large companies in the West is prohibitive and so, with British Council help, a small exchange programme, linked to ASSITEJ *New Faces*, is being cooked up for 2012. That would allow a small group of younger artists from Central Asian countries to visit UK companies and later mount a small-scale production for international touring – with their UK TYA host companies showing work at **Theatre UZ Festival** in 2012 and 2013.



"There Never was a Story of More Woe..."

Actors of the Youth Theatre worked with Philip MacKenzie of Sherman Cymru Theatre, Cardiff in a Shakespeare master class at the 2011 Festival



The Parable of Love Given



Little Match Girl

Old and New

Most shows I saw were based on traditional material – folk tales and local epics. Theatre companies follow the lead of societies which want to retain a sense of continuity with the modern past – the positive elements of the Soviet legacy, such as internationalism, science, planning, arts – married to the older heritage of an international trading route and a modest expression of Islam.

There have been some dreadful terrorist outrages and Afghanistan is just over the mountains so any show of Islamic militancy is not at all welcome. Naturally enough, Western governments want stable governments and societies in the region at pretty well any price. And there is no shortage of investors – from Tesco to Texaco, Daewoo to Chrysler, evidenced by smart, new or refurbished buildings all over Tashkent. The streets are full of Uzbek-made Matiz and Lacett cars.

Culture plays its part

The theatre festival was part of **Style Week UZ** including film and fashion festivals. Gulnara Karimova, daughter of the President, is the power behind a drive to assert Uzbek presence in the wider World as a centre of cultural and creative business and enterprise.

Gulnara is a remarkable role model for Uzbek women, whose traditional place in society is in the home. She has her own fashion and jewellery brand, and can discuss cultural relations with China at a press conference or energise a fundraiser for the Pink Ribbon breast cancer charity both in Russian and excellent, informal English.

The World today has many centres. Post-Soviet Central Asia may be a long way from the UK but it is very close to China and India. The Silk Road has been a major trading area for centuries and has cultural links in all directions. We should travel that road too.

Sites to Visit

Fund Forum: <http://fondforum.uz/en/>

Uzbekistan Youth Theatre: www.mtu.uz



Open for Big Business

Uzbekistan is a magnet for International commodity firms - gas, cotton, metals



Best value for basics is at the Market



Bread from Samarkand is legendary

Real life, food, family and fellowship mean a lot still. So does Culture.

**Paul Harman represented
ASSITEJ International at
Theatre UZ Festival 2011**