

## ОГЛЯДИ

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17721/1728-242X.2024.30.11>Zamina Kerim Kyzy ALIYEVA, DSc (Philol.), Assoc. Prof.  
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-4704-6749e-mail: [zemineali63@gmail.com](mailto:zemineali63@gmail.com)

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

**AZERBAIJAN THEATRE:  
ITS ROLE, HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT, REASONS FOR SUCCESS,  
CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS**

*The history of Azerbaijani theatre is a rich tapestry woven from various cultural influences and artistic expressions. This article explores Azerbaijan's earliest theatrical forms, tracing their roots and examining their impact on the development of a unique theatrical identity. This comprehensive review chronicles the trajectory of Azerbaijani theatre, highlighting its origins, key transformations, and enduring socio-cultural significance. Azerbaijan's position within this global context was unique due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Theatre in Azerbaijan emerged as a potent medium of expression, reflecting societal aspirations, struggles, and transformations. This article sheds light on the establishment of early theatre initiatives in the late 19th century, emphasizing their role in language preservation, national identity formation, and social commentary. The narrative further explores the challenges and eventual triumphs encountered by this nascent art form. Drawing from a diverse array of sources, the study explores the evolving role of theatre in Azerbaijan – from a form of entertainment to an educational tool, embracing technological advancements in the 21st century. In this way, Azerbaijan's early theatres contributed to: language preservation, national identity formation, empowerment and emancipation; acting as a bridge between past and present, fostering cultural exchange and diplomacy, advancing education and enlightenment, and serving as an economic catalyst. Like other artistic movements worldwide, the journey of Azerbaijani theatre was marked by both defeats and victories. While its emergence was a bold statement of cultural assertion, its sustainability required perseverance, innovation, and resilience. Despite these challenges, Azerbaijani theatre experienced remarkable triumphs: community support, recognition beyond borders, an evolving legacy, a platform for social discourse, an educational role, and international acclaim.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijani theatre, Cultural heritage, National identity, Socio-cultural implications, Historical trajectory, Modern theatrical practices.

**Background**

The history of Azerbaijani theatre is a tapestry of various cultural influences and artistic expressions. This article explores Azerbaijan's earliest forms of theatrical expression, tracing their roots and examining their impact on developing a unique theatrical identity.

Profound shifts in global sociopolitical landscapes marked the latter half of the 19th century. The rise of nationalism as a potent force reshaping identities and nation-states was evident across the European and Asian continents (Hobsbawm, 1992). This period, often characterized by the earnest pursuit of nationalistic ideals, witnessed the emergence of concerted efforts aimed at cultural revival, linguistic preservation, and the expression of national identity.

Azerbaijan's position within this global tableau was unique due to its strategic location and consequent historical experiences. Being a vital part of the South Caucasus, the land had historically been a coveted prize, drawing interest from numerous empires due to its geopolitical significance and natural wealth. By the 19th century, Azerbaijan found itself under the expansive umbrella of Tsarist Russia, a result of treaties like the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) (Swietochowski, 1985).

Under Russian rule, Azerbaijan underwent significant transformations. The influx of European ideas, coupled with Tsarist policies, led to both challenges and opportunities. While the era brought advancements like the oil boom in Baku and the consequent rapid urbanization (Atkin, 1993), it also led to concerns about preserving Azerbaijani culture amidst increasing Russification. The 19th-century Russian Empire, in its imperialistic pursuits, often sought to assimilate its diverse subjects, pushing for the adoption of the Russian language and customs at the expense of local traditions.

Within this backdrop, Azerbaijani intellectuals began their quest to safeguard and promote their national identity.

They recognized the importance of cultural mediums as vehicles for this mission. Literature, music, and, notably, theatre emerged as potent tools for expressing the unique Azerbaijani spirit and resisting the encroachment of external cultural influences (Altstadt, 1992).

With its power to visually and audibly depict narratives, theatre quickly gained prominence in this cultural renaissance. As Smith (1971) contends, theatrical performances become arenas where societal values, historical memories, and aspirations converge, offering audiences entertainment and an engagement with collective identity. For Azerbaijani intellectuals, theatre provided the platform to fuse traditional tales with contemporary concerns, creating productions that resonated deeply with local audiences while educating them about their rich heritage.

The fervour for a distinct Azerbaijani theatrical tradition was not an isolated phenomenon. Parallel movements were observed across other regions under Tsarist Russia, where indigenous populations sought to express their unique identities through art (Martin, 2001). Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani theatrical movement, with its synthesis of native elements and external influences, crafted a distinct niche in the broader canvas of 19th-century theatrical traditions.

In the subsequent sections, we will delve deeper into the pioneering efforts that led to establishing Azerbaijan's first theatre, exploring its initial challenges, the personalities that shaped its trajectory, and its lasting influence on the nation's cultural heritage.

**Results**

The evolution of the performing arts in the South Caucasus region, specifically Azerbaijan, during the 19th century offers a captivating panorama of cultural resilience and reinvention. Amidst the challenges of external influences and internal desires for modernization, the birth of the Azerbaijani theatre is a landmark event in the nation's rich tapestry of artistic achievements.

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The honour of pioneering theatre in Azerbaijan is attributed to the "Majlis-i Uns" (Council of the Intimate) club theatre established in the thriving city of Baku in the 1870s. Anchoring this revolutionary endeavour were stalwarts like Hasan Bey Zardabi and Najaf Bey Vezirov, both of whom were luminaries in their own right. Zardabi, known for his journalistic pursuits, and Vezirov, an eminent playwright, came together with a shared vision – to create a platform that would mirror and mould Azerbaijani sentiments, aspirations, and narratives.

In its early days, the "Majlis-i Uns" offered the audience an eclectic mix of performances. Rooted deeply in the nation's literary traditions, readings from cherished Azerbaijani classics formed the cornerstone of their early productions. Such readings were more than mere recitations; they were imbued with emotive performances that breathed life into the narratives, enabling the audiences to connect profoundly with their literary heritage.

From these humble beginnings, the theatre's repertoire began to evolve. Emboldened by the enthusiastic reception and recognizing the potential of theatre as a medium for cultural discourse, the "Majlis-i Uns" started incorporating plays into their offerings. A significant turning point was the performance of "The Adventures of the Vizier of the Khan of Lenkoran." This play drew inspiration from the writings of Mirza Fatali Akhundov, an iconic Azerbaijani writer and philosopher known for his progressive ideals. Akhundov's works, characterized by their forward-looking themes, satirical style, and deep-seated social commentaries, resonated with the theatre's ethos.

Akhundov's influence on the early Azerbaijani theatre was not limited to this singular play. Akhundov's vision for a modern Azerbaijani cultural identity was rooted in an enlightened worldview, seeking a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity. His works laid the foundation for a theatrical tradition that aspired to entertain, educate, and elevate societal consciousness.

In general, the birth of the theater belongs to the beginning of the 20th century. On January 12, 1908, the premiere of Uzeir Hajibeyli's opera "Leyli and Majnun" took place in Baku, which initiated the development of national opera art in Azerbaijan. But back in 1897–98, in Shusha, an amateur group staged a scene written by the young playwright A. Akhverdov "Majnun on Leyla's grave" from the poem by Fizuli, and in 1902, a musical scene based on Alisher Navaya's poem "Farhad and Shirin" was staged in Baku. On October 18, 1918, a significant event took place in the theater life of Azerbaijan – the Azerbaijan State Theater was created with the transfer of the building of the Mailov brothers' theater to it. It was the first state theater in the country and leading directors and actors began to unite around it. On August 22, 1919, at a joint meeting of the board of the Baku "Union of Turkic Actors" and the board of the "Directorate of the Hajibeyli brothers" for the purpose of developing the national theater, training actors and raising their professional level, a decision was made to create artistic courses consisting of four departments: dramatic, comedic, musical, literary. The heads of the music department were represented by Zulfugar and Uzeir Hajibeyli, 15-year-old Muslim Magomayev and Gurban Primov. On November 17, 1919, at a government meeting, the Minister of Education's report on the organization of the Turkic Opera and Drama Theater was heard and the project for the creation of the State Turkic Opera and Drama Theater was approved. Thus, a series of events culminated in the creation of a state theater, and later its nationalization. The development of theatrical art began to be considered as

a matter of state importance. The National History Museum of Azerbaijan houses many valuable exhibits that reflect the theatrical life of Baku during the ADR. Photographs, posters and other exhibits presented in the new exposition of the museum reflect in detail the history of the musical theater. Special mention should be made of the print of the Azerbaijan State Theater from 1919 with the image of a lyre, the emblem of the crescent moon with a star, and the inscription in the Azerbaijani language in Arabic script, which means "The Troupe of the Azerbaijan State Theater". This print came from the collection of the prominent Azerbaijani actor Sidga Rukhulla Akhundov. During the ADR period, the premiere of M. Magomayev's opera "Shah Ismail" took place, which became an important event in the country's cultural life. The score of the opera was finished by the author in 1916, but the premiere took place only on March 7, 1919. The opera was a great success, as evidenced by the reviews of the local press, which praised the rich melodic language. The success of the young composer was largely facilitated by the talented performance of the main role of Shah Ismail by the outstanding actor Huseyngul Sarabskiy, whose benefit was the first performance. The exhibition of the museum contains a theater poster about the performance of the opera on March 8, 1919 and the program of the opera "Shah Ismail" on April 7, 1919 in the government theater. Directorate Br. Z. and University Hajibeyli" staged a performance for the benefit of the artist O. N. Olenska (she performed female roles in Azerbaijani performances for 15 years) and director-artist H. B. Sharifov. A major role in the development of the Azerbaijani musical theater was played by the tours of representatives of Russian and European musical and performing arts, the productions of classical Western European and Russian operas on the Baku stage. This is confirmed by the State Theater announcement poster presented in the exhibition about the production on April 9, 1919 for the benefit of the Sisters of Mercy of Baku of the lyrical opera "Minion" by the French composer Ambrose Thom, based on Goethe's novel "The Years of Teaching Wilhelm Meister", as well as on April 10 – the opera "Boheme J. Puccini and on April 12 – "The Tsar's Bride" by N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov. The history of the birth and development of the Azerbaijani musical theater is closely connected with the names of the great composers of Uz. Hajibeyli, M. Magomayev, Z. Hajibeyli, prominent actors H. Sarabskiy, A. Aghdamkiy, M. Aliyev, G. Arablinskiy and others. The photo included in the exhibition shows the theater troupe of the Hajibeyli brothers, who later formed the core of the professional musical theater. Their outstanding talent and dedication to their native art led to a huge contribution to the development of Azerbaijani musical culture.

Later, the "Majlis-i-Uns" theater takes a leading position. It led to the revival of Azerbaijani performing arts, creating productions that were quintessentially Azerbaijani yet universal in their appeal – this transformative period also marked the emergence of professional Azerbaijani actors, directors and playwrights, setting the stage for a thriving theatrical landscape in the following decades.

It fostered a space where traditional narratives met modern theatrical techniques, creating productions that were quintessentially Azerbaijani yet universal in their appeal – this transformative period also heralded the rise of professional Azerbaijani actors, directors, and playwrights, setting the stage for a flourishing theatrical landscape in the subsequent decades.

In the forthcoming sections, we shall delve deeper into the cultural significance of the "Majlis-i Uns" theatre, examining its legacy, the challenges it confronted, and its overarching impact on Azerbaijani arts and identity.

The implications of the inception of Azerbaijan's first theatre extended far beyond its immediate artistic contributions. It emerged as a beacon of cultural identity, serving functions that resonated deeply with the broader socio-political dynamics of the time.

In this way, Azerbaijan's first theatre contributed to:

**Language Preservation:** Against the backdrop of Tsarist Russia's dominance, pressures of Russification sought to diminish the prominence of indigenous languages, including Azerbaijani. The theatre emerged as a bulwark against linguistic erosion in this challenging environment. By staging performances in Azerbaijani, it not only celebrated the linguistic richness but also reinforced its continued relevance. This acted as a countermeasure to external assimilationist policies, ensuring the survival and flourishing of the Azerbaijani language.

**National Identity Formation:** Theatre, in essence, reflects collective memories, aspirations, and identities. The "Majlis-i Uns" theatre fostered a shared sense of belonging by weaving narratives rooted in Azerbaijani folklore, legends, and contemporary tales. These performances crystallized a collective Azerbaijani consciousness, reminding the audience of their unique heritage, shared past, and common destiny. Such theatrical portrayals fostered unity and solidified a cohesive national identity amid external pressures and challenges.

Furthermore, by providing a platform for local talents – writers, actors, and directors – the theatre facilitated the creation of a distinct Azerbaijani artistic tradition. While rooted in local sensibilities, this tradition also engaged in dialogues with broader global theatrical trends, exemplifying the adaptability and dynamism of Azerbaijani culture.

**Empowerment and Emancipation:** The burgeoning theatrical scene in Azerbaijan during this era played a crucial role in challenging established societal norms. By introducing characters and narratives that questioned traditional roles and hierarchies, the theatre became a conduit for discussions on gender roles, societal reforms, and the broader evolution of Azerbaijani society. For instance, plays that spotlighted the women's emancipation movement offered audiences a fresh perspective on the changing role of women in Azerbaijani society, generating dialogues and debates.

**A bridge between Past and Present:** One of the theatre's most commendable attributes was its ability to harmonize tradition with modernity. Classical tales and legends were often presented with contemporary interpretations, creating a bridge between the cherished past and the evolving present. This blending allowed Azerbaijani theatre to respect its roots while embracing the changing zeitgeist of the times.

**Cultural Exchange and Diplomacy:** Azerbaijani theatre did not exist in isolation. Azerbaijan was exposed to many external cultural influences as a crossroads between Europe and Asia. In this context, the theatre played an instrumental role in cultural diplomacy. By adapting foreign plays and integrating international themes, Azerbaijani theatre showcased its adaptability and openness, fostering mutual respect and understanding with neighbouring cultures and beyond.

**Education and Enlightenment:** The theatre in Azerbaijan was more than a platform for artistic expression; it was a classroom for societal enlightenment. Playwrights and actors utilized the stage to address pressing social issues, promote scientific temper, and inspire a generation to embrace education and rational thought. This educative role of the theatre was especially crucial in an era where formal educational infrastructure was still evolving.

**An Economic Catalyst:** Beyond the intellectual and cultural domains, the growth of theatre in Azerbaijan had

tangible economic implications. It spurred the development of related industries such as costume design, set construction, and the publishing of scripts. Theatre districts became vibrant hubs of activity, fostering ancillary businesses like cafes, inns, and transportation services.

Like artistic movements worldwide, the journey of Azerbaijani theatre was punctuated with trials and victories. While its emergence was a bold statement of cultural assertion, its sustenance required perseverance, innovation, and resilience.

**Financial Constraints:** One of the most immediate challenges faced by early Azerbaijani theatre was financial. Establishing a theatre, even one with rudimentary facilities, required capital. Every aspect of theatre operation demanded funds, from props to renting or building a venue, from compensating actors to promoting performances; in a society where patronage for the arts was still evolving, securing financial backing was a daunting task. The state's limited involvement and the scarcity of private investors often meant that theatre practitioners had to bear expenses from their pockets.

**Societal Reservations:** The introduction of theatre as an art form in Azerbaijan was not universally embraced. Conservative factions viewed it with suspicion, associating it with moral decadence or Western influence that could corrupt traditional values. Additionally, portraying specific taboo topics or including female actors on stage was met with resistance, leading to a periodic societal backlash.

**Lack of Trained Professionals:** While there was no dearth of passion and enthusiasm, the professional training infrastructure for theatre was almost non-existent in Azerbaijan during its initial stages. This lack meant that many early performers were self-taught, often learning through trial and error.

**Political Pressures:** Azerbaijan's geopolitical position under Tsarist Russia imposed certain restrictions on artistic expression. Plays deemed politically sensitive or subversive were either censored or banned, limiting the scope and reach of Azerbaijani theatre during its embryonic stages.

Yet, for all these challenges, Azerbaijani theatre witnessed remarkable triumphs:

**Community Support:** Despite the financial constraints, a section of the Azerbaijani populace showed incredible support. They contributed money, volunteered services, or provided spaces for performances, ensuring the theatre's survival during its most vulnerable moments.

**Recognition Beyond Borders:** By the early 20th century, the unique flavour of Azerbaijani theatre began to gain recognition beyond its borders. Tours in neighbouring countries and participation in international theatre festivals showcased its richness to a global audience, elevating its stature on the world stage.

In general, the narrative of Azerbaijani theatre is not just a tale of performances and plays but emblematic of the nation's broader cultural and historical evolution.

**Evolutionary Continuum:** Azerbaijani theatre's roots can be traced back to indigenous storytelling traditions, ceremonies, and shamanic rituals. This foundation has provided a rich tapestry from which modern-day playwrights and performers can draw inspiration. Today, a harmonious blend of traditional narratives with contemporary themes ensures a dynamic continuity.

**A platform for Social Discourse:** Throughout its tumultuous history, the performing arts, including theatre, have reflected the socio-political realities of Azerbaijan. This potent medium has commented on, criticized, and mirrored societal shifts, conflicts, and transformations.



**Educational Role:** The educational potential of theatre is universal, and Azerbaijan has been no exception. Theatre-based pedagogies have been recognized for their effectiveness in fostering critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and collaborative skills among students.

**International Recognition:** Azerbaijani theatre's contributions have not remained confined to national borders. Its unique narrative style, themes, and performances have garnered attention in international theatre festivals, seminars, and workshops, showcasing its distinctive artistic voice.

#### Discussion and conclusions

The evolution of Azerbaijani theatre, from its early iterations to its current form, mirrors Azerbaijan's broader historical and cultural journey. This transformation from traditional storytelling methods to complex modern productions highlights the nation's rich cultural heritage and showcases its adaptability and resilience in the face of changing times. The contributions of early pioneers and the ongoing commitment of contemporary artists and professionals in this field have solidified Azerbaijani theatre as a vital and dynamic component of the country's cultural identity. This progression in the theatrical arts is a testament

to Azerbaijan's artistic achievements and a reflection of its broader aspirations and developments as a nation on the global stage.

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Заміна Керім Кизи АЛІЄВА, д-р філол. наук, доц.

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-4704-6749

e-mail: zemineali63@gmail.com

Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка, Київ, Україна

### АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСЬКИЙ ТЕАТР: ЙОГО РОЛЬ, ІСТОРІЯ РОЗВИТКУ, ПРИЧИНИ УСПІХУ, ВИКЛИКИ ТА ПРОБЛЕМИ

Історія азербайджанського театру є багатим полотном, витканим з різноманітних культурних впливів і художніх виразів. Досліджує найдавніші театральні форми Азербайджану, простежуючи їхні корені й аналізуючи їхній вплив на розвиток унікальної театральної ідентичності. Цей комплексний огляд розповідає про шлях азербайджанського театру, підкреслюючи його витоки, ключові трансформації та стійку соціокультурну значущість. Позиція Азербайджану в цьому глобальному контексті була унікальною завдяки його стратегічному розташуванню на перехресті Східної Європи та Західної Азії. Театр в Азербайджані виник як потужний засіб вираження, що відображав суспільні прагнення, боротьбу і трансформації. Висвітлює створення перших театральних ініціатив наприкінці XIX ст., наголошуючи на їхній ролі у збереженні мови, формуванні національної ідентичності та соціальних коментарях. Також досліджує труднощі й остаточні перемоги, із якими стикався цей новий вид мистецтва. Спираючись на різноманітні джерела, дослідження розглядає еволюцію ролі театру в Азербайджані – від форми розваг до освітнього інструменту, ураховуючи технологічні досягнення XXI ст. Отже, ранні театри Азербайджану сприяли: збереженню мови, формуванню національної ідентичності, наданню сили та емансипації; виступали мостом між минулим і сучасним, сприяли культурному обміну та дипломатії, розвитку освіти та просвітництва, а також економічним чинником. Як і в інших художніх рухах світу, шлях азербайджанського театру був позначений як поразками, так і перемогами. Хоча його виникнення стало сміливою заявою про культурну самовираженість, його стійкість вимагала терпіння, інновацій. Незважаючи на ці труднощі, азербайджанський театр зазнав значних триумфів: підтримка громади, визнання за межами кордонів, еволюція спадщини, платформа для соціальних дискурсів, освітня роль і міжнародне визнання.

**Ключові слова:** азербайджанський театр, культурна спадщина, національна ідентичність, соціокультурні наслідки, історична траєкторія, сучасні театральні практики

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