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Uzbek company stages in Seattle

Ilkhom Theater takes 'Stork' on U.S. tour

By [LYNN JACOBSON](#)

SEATTLE -- This past week at Seattle's ACT Theater, Uzbekistan's Ilkhom Theater company presented a production of "White White Black Stork." The play involves murder, mystery and the redemptive power of art -- much like the remarkable story behind Ilkhom's current five-city U.S. tour.

The idea for the tour was hatched three years ago, when ACT artistic director Kurt Beattie traveled to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent, one of Seattle's sister cities.

"I was there for about two weeks," says Beattie. "And one thing that struck me about the company is that all their works are very different. They range from experimental to serious dramas that relate to the politics of the country -- and then other pieces are pure entertainment."

Beattie and Mark Weil -- the company's internationally celebrated artistic director, a native of Uzbekistan -- plotted to bring Ilkhom (pronounced ilk-home) to Seattle. Plans were all in place last September when tragedy struck: Weil was accosted by two men outside his Tashkent apartment after a late rehearsal, hit over the head with a glass bottle and stabbed. The men fled, and Weil died hours later at a nearby hospital. Reportedly, some of his last words were, "I'm opening a new season tomorrow, no matter what happens."

The company performed the next day, wishing to honor Weil's commitment, and though grief-stricken, its members have managed to carry on. Beattie says those closest to the director don't believe the mystery surrounding his murder will ever be solved.

"Some think he was just unlucky -- in the wrong place at the wrong time," Beattie explains. Others think it was a violent act of anti-Semitism. Still others suspect the government -- because although Ilkhom was founded in the former Soviet Union in 1976, it has operated, quite successfully, outside the state system for three decades.

It's also possible that gay subject matter in a handful of the plays in Ilkhom's repertoire angered some people in Tashkent. "It's illegal to be gay in Uzbekistan," Beattie notes. "And of course there's a severe prohibition against it in Islam, as there is in Judaism and Christianity."

"White White Black Stork" tells a story of love thwarted by religion, custom and taboo. A second play to be performed on this tour, "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," is a dance-theater work, based on the life of painter Aleksandr Nikolaev. Both are presented in Russian with English supertitles at ACT.

The Seattle stand spans 31 performances and involves more than two dozen Uzbek theater artists. It will cost ACT \$285,000, according to managing director Kevin M. Hughes, though he stopped short of calling it a big financial risk.

"It's part of the subscription series, so we spread out the risk a lot," Hughes says. It also has provided an opportunity to reach out to new funding sources and new audiences that may expand ACT's support base in Seattle. Contributors include One Nation, a nonprofit philanthropic group dedicated to improving U.S. perceptions of Islam, and the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Assn.

To promote Ilkhom's appearances, ACT placed its first-ever Russian-language ads in an area Russian newspaper and is arranging artist interviews at a local Russian-language radio station.

Ilkhom will make four short U.S. stops after Seattle in April and May, at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, Indiana U., San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Miami U. in Oxford, Ohio.

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