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Pain of forbidden love in Ilkhom Theatre's "White White Black Stork"

By Misha Berson
Seattle Times theater critic
Theater review

The Ilkhom Theatre Company of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, has come a long distance from Central Asia to perform at Seattle's ACT Theatre. Judging from "White White Black Stork," which is having its West Coast premiere at ACT, local theater-lovers can be grateful the Ilkhom arrived.

The first of two productions the respected troupe will offer at ACT (the other, "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," plays April 9-13 only), "White White Black Stork" was co-written and directed by Ilkhom's revered late artistic leader, Mark Weil.

This archetypal fable is performed with (sometimes distracting) supertitle English translations of the Uzbek dialogue. But much of the work's potency and poignancy are due to a theatrical sensibility that is foreign yet accessible, elegant and visceral, and largely nonverbal.

On a stage bathed in hot white light, and anchored by a single tree with a canopy of bare branches, the show sweeps us into an orthodox Muslim community in Tashkent — sometime in the 20th century.

There Makhzum, a dreamy-eyed boy of 16, gazes at high-flying storks and imagines them to be angels. His imagination, and lack of machismo, renders him an outcast. Makhzum repulses even his own schoolmaster father, especially when the boy is naively open about his infatuation with a male schoolmate.

Meanwhile, in a garden nearby, lovely young Makhichehra is another dreamer. She becomes smitten with a handsome (but poor) cloth-seller as he hawks his wares. Her overbearing father has other plans for Makhichehra, however. He wants to marry her off quickly, to the highest bidder.

Deviance from the norm, and defiance of parental authority, defines centuries of legends about star-crossed



VITALY EVDOKIMOV

The Ilkhom Theatre Company's production of "White White Black Stork" makes its West Coast premiere at Seattle's ACT Theatre.

Now playing "White White Black Stork"

Ilkhom Theatre Company, Tuesdays-Sundays through April 6, at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle; \$10-\$55 (206-292-7676 or www.acttheatre.org).

young love. In the repressive patriarchal culture depicted in "White White Black Stork," taboo erotic desires destroy two families, plunging them into a downward spiral of litigation, anguish and grief.

But first the piece evokes the exhilaration of innocent young love. It does so with a fluid physicality and vivid stage images, as performers run and chase, roughhouse and swing from a pair of trapezes strung from tree branches.

The inevitable tragic collision of innocence and authority is dramatized with a heavier hand, as the focus shifts from the attractive, compelling younger characters to their scheming, warring relations.

"White White Black Stork" is based on a novel by 19th-century Tashkent author Abdullah Kadiri. It told an extremely daring story for its time, given Kadiri's poetic, unveiled treatment of homosexual yearning.

In modern-day Uzbekistan, the subject of homosexuality remains controversial, culturally and politically. So by our own culture's standard, what may seem like a tame evocation of same-sex attraction was actually a risky endeavor for Ilkhom artistic head and part-time Seattle resident Weil. (Weil was murdered in Tashkent last fall, by as-yet-unidentified assailants.)

Consider too that the play's forced marriage of Makhzum and Makhichehra, and the enraged reactions of family members to adolescent nonconformity, is still in force in many tradition-bound communities around the world — and not just those steeped in Muslim orthodoxy.

"White White Black Stork" is not a polemic, but rather a piece of theater with a refined and sophisticated aesthetic. Such enhancements as the simple white costuming and the beguiling original music of piping flutes and brooding chords are impressive.

And the Ilkhom acting ensemble is near-seamless. The cast's fine-tuned gestures, facial expressions and more-subtle emotional dynamics are perfected, but not studied or gimmicky.

Most striking are the ethereal beauty and naked vulnerability of the dazzling performers portraying the story's young protagonists: Said Khudaibergenov (as Makhzum) and Nigora Karimbaeva (Makhichehra). Long before the show ends, you ache with them. And long afterward, their faces haunt you.

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