

# the Stranger

## THEATER

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### The Undeterred

**Their government hates them. Someone assassinated their founder. This Uzbek theater company came anyway.**

by [Brendan Kiley](#)

One Thursday night six months ago, a 52-year-old theater director named Mark Weil was murdered in the entrance of his apartment building in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Neighbors say they saw two men with baseball caps waiting for the director, who was to premiere a high-tech version of *The Oresteia* the following night. The two men hit Weil over the head with a bottle, stabbed him several times in the stomach, and ran. They didn't take his money; they just wanted him dead.

Weil was the founder and dynamo of Ilkhom Theatre, which has produced controversial and contrarian work since 1976, when it became one of the first companies in the Soviet Union to refuse state funding. Since then, Ilkhom has outraged Communist apparatchiks, Muslim fundamentalists, and members of the current Uzbek dictatorship. But detectives concentrated their murder investigation on the artists of Ilkhom, interrogating them for hours at a stretch, asking about their personal lives and favorite positions in bed. Four months later, police announced they had no leads.

"The people who did it thought they'd end the theater, but they were wrong," said assistant director Maxim Tumenev, sitting in the production offices of ACT Theatre. "Spiritually, it has made us stronger. We cannot quit."

And so they've come to Seattle, as they'd been planning since before Weil's murder, bringing two works: *White White Black Stork* and *Ecstasy with the Pomegranate*.

Their hometown is Tashkent, a way station on the Silk Road. A cosmopolitan merchant city since the seventh century, it became a destination for intellectual exiles from Moscow and Leningrad under Stalin's regime. The theater was born in this climate of underground dissent, in the basement of an abandoned building where Weil and his ensemble staged forbidden plays.

For its first years, Ilkhom thrived at the fringes of Soviet culture, unnoticed by censors. But, in the early 1980s, the company leapt into the bear's mouth and toured to Moscow. Alarmed Muscovite bureaucrats threatened to smash the company, but were thwarted by one powerful apparatchik.

"He was one of the old Communists who was not afraid of anything," Tumenev said. "He said to young functionaries who wanted to close the theater: 'You will not close it, and you will obey me because I saw Lenin when he was alive!'"

When Uzbekistan declared independence from the crumbling USSR in 1991, theaters in Tashkent went on a political bender, preaching from every stage. Weil, always the contrarian, responded by producing five years of silent clown and mime work.

But the era of Uzbek freedom didn't last long. Tashkent, its capital, is sliding into anxious mediocrity, with artists and intellectuals fleeing the country's dictator—and former Soviet leader—Islom Karimov. When someone at a bar table begins criticizing the government, others hush him up, Tumenev said: "The city has been castrated."

But, even in this climate, even with the murder of their director, Ilkhom will not be deterred. "We do what we want," Tumenev said.

Tumenev suspects Muslim fundamentalists killed Weil—over a recent play about a heretical Sufi philosopher—but it's not as if the Uzbek dictatorship was sorry to see him go. Ilkhom has produced several shows that have needled zealots in the government and the mosques with gay characters, criticisms of Islam, and romance.

"No kissing allowed on stage," Tumenev said. "Like in the Soviet Union, there is no sex in Uzbekistan." One of his colleagues directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in one of Tashkent's national theaters and, per "representatives from the Ministry of Culture," had to stage the romantic comedy with lovers who never touched.

If Tashkent is such a bleak place to make art, why don't they leave?

"We cannot," Tumenev said. "Tashkent is part of Ilkhom. If you move the company out of the city, it will die." And Ilkhom is part of Tashkent. Beneath Tumenev's lament for his graying city, one detects his feeling that to leave it would betray it: Ilkhom has a dedicated local following and a small academy. Weil stayed in Tashkent, even after moving his wife and daughter to Seattle, where he had connections at the University of Washington. Perhaps leaving would be a betrayal of him, too.

"These artists are sharp, defined, and committed," said Kurt Beattie, ACT Theatre artistic

director. "They have to be committed, in a way I don't think any theater in Seattle could be."

Ilkhom has 20 core members, 20 satellite members, and 12 shows in its repertoire, from *The Oresteia* to Brecht to ensemble work made from scratch. Twenty-nine of them have come to Seattle to perform two plays, in Uzbek and Russian, with English supertitles. *White White Black Stork* is one of Ilkhom's more realistic and austere original works, a tragedy about two young Sufis forced into an arranged marriage. He's gay, she's in love with a traveling salesman, and both are doomed.

The play—by Weil and Elkin Tuichiev—has been in Ilkhom's repertoire for 10 years, and beats relentlessly forward, like *Romeo and Juliet* without any comic relief. A newer work that uses dance and video, *Ecstasy with the Pomegranate* concerns a Stalin-era painter who travels to Uzbekistan and is bewitched by the "bacha boys," young Sufi men who perform women's parts in traditional dances.

The company spends months, sometimes a year, creating a production, and prioritizes acting over sets or spectacle. The results are palpable: Performances in *White White Black Stork*, which I saw in previews, are hermetic and confident, both physically and vocally. The actors perform with an authority one doesn't see in American theater, where directors and actors have mere weeks to bang a show together.

Weil directed by improvisation. He had actors improvise for months, feeling out the borders of their characters while he watched, noted the best moments, and molded them into the production. "The actors never waited around while he staged them, telling where to walk or stand," Tumenev said. "He invited them to sink into the material."

How will the company persist, now that its center of gravity is gone?

"There is a phrase I like very much," Tumenev said. "Genius is opening the door and letting talented people walk through.' Mark was a true genius—he invested a lot in all of us. He opened many doors, but he left the keys when he died." ★