

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCERhttp://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/theater/354888_fanf14.html**Renowned Uzbek troupe tells tales of repression and the search for identity***Friday, March 14, 2008**Last updated March 18, 2008 11:01 a.m. PT***By JOE ADCOCK**
P-I THEATER CRITIC

It cost theater artist Mark Weil his life -- in the opinion of his friend and colleague, Maxim Tumnenev.

The cost to the protagonists of two of Weil's plays is heartbreak.

COMING UP

"But you really can't say it's necessarily a Muslim thing," Tumnenev says. "Traditionally, some wealthy men in Tashkent and Samarqand would have two harems -- one for women and girls, the other for men and boys. But Islamic fundamentalists, now, are very anti-gay.

PLAYWRIGHTS: Mark Weil and Elkin Tuichev ("White White Black Stork") and D. Tikhomirov and Weil) ("Ecstasy With the Pomegranate")

"And homosexual activity is still illegal in Uzbekistan. That goes back to a Soviet-era law signed by Stalin in 1921. Police use it for blackmail and extortion. When I was young and ignorant, I was caught in a sting. There are no gay bars or clubs. So you find dates on the Internet. But you have to be careful. The police use young men from the country who don't have permits to live in Tashkent as bait."

WHERE: ACT Theatre, 700 Union St.

Weil was artistic director of Tashkent's Ilkhom Theatre Company. He was murdered in September in front of his apartment house as he was returning from work. Tumnenev believes Weil's attackers were Muslim fundamentalists.

WHEN: "White" previews starting tonight, opens Thursday and runs through April 6. "Ecstasy" runs April 9 through 13

"In Uzbekistan it is very likely that such a crime will never be solved," Tumnenev said during an interview earlier this week at ACT Theatre. "The police investigation tried to interpret (the murder) as a homosexual thing. I was interrogated four times. It was very rude, all about alleged sexual orgies and lewd plays with naked people on stage and things like that.

TICKETS: \$55; \$10 for 25 and under; \$15 for students; pay what you can Sunday and March 27; discounts for groups; 206-292-7676 or acttheatre.org

An actor and administrator, Tumnenev, 30, is here in Seattle with Ilkhom. ACT is the first stop in a U.S. tour by the internationally renowned troupe. Ilkhom (which means "inspiration" in Uzbeki) will stage two of its works here, marking the beginning of ACT's 2008 season.

Performances of the first piece, "White White Black Stork," start tonight. The play is set at the beginning of the 20th century. The protagonist, Makhzum, 13, falls in love with another boy. His father discovers their secret. Believing that his son's nature can be changed by marriage, he arranges a match. The girl in question is in love with a cloth peddler she saw only once.

Much drama ensues.

The other work is "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," also set in the early 20th century. As Tumnenev explains it, the story centers on a Russian painter who comes to Tashkent to produce propagandistic

works extolling the czar's beneficent influence on his far-flung imperial subjects. The artist is entranced by Turkistan, as it was called then. He admires the culture, particularly the dancing boys in the tea houses of Tashkent.0

He converts to Islam. He eventually discovers the degradation of boy dancers who are sold by poor families into what amounts to prostitution. The coming of the Bolshevik revolution, with its "bourgeois decadent" take on homosexuality, adds dire complications.

Seattle theater artists have been having back-and-forth exchanges with Ilkhom for several years now. When ACT artistic director Kurt Beattie saw some of the company's productions in Tashkent three years ago, he was deeply impressed.

"The style and discipline of their work is astounding," Beattie says. "They develop their pieces very slowly. They can investigate every nuance in depth. They have a company of actors who are used to working together. And what dancers! A professional choreographer can ask them to do nearly anything, and they do it. The dancing in 'Ecstasy With the Pomegranate' is exquisite."

Ilkhom is performing two pieces from its varied 12-play repertoire; both center on themes of repression and oppression of homosexuality. But Beattie sees universality in "White White Black Stork" and "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate."

"The theme of finding your identity -- having to struggle to be who you really are," Beattie says, "that has universal resonance."

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