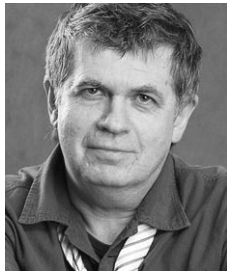




Mark Weil, Renowned Ilkhom Theater Director, Mourned

BY MARK JENKINS

On the night of September 6, 2007, Mark Weil, 55, internationally known director and leader of Tashkent's renowned Ilkhom Theater was murdered in front of his apartment building by two unknown men after the final rehearsal of his latest production, Aeschylus's *The Orestia*. The play was to open the 2007–08 Season, marking



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Mark Weil

Ilkhom's 31 years of existence. He died on the operating table. Members of the company refused to speculate on the motivation of his assailants. His last words were reported to be, "We open a new season tomorrow and everything must happen." The company went ahead with the plans to open *The Orestia* as planned the next evening.

He lived part time in Seattle, where his wife Tatyana and daughters Julia and Alexandria reside today. Memorial services were held in Tashkent, Moscow and Seattle.

The motive, circumstances and many details of the assault and the following emergency response are unknown. According to the anonymous Ferghana Information Agency reportage of September 9, 2007, there has been a media blackout in Uzbekistan regarding his death, and there has not been any official word on the details of the crime or of any investigation.

Within days of Weil's death, the surviving members of the company (about fifty actors, designers, technicians and business staff) committed to continuing Ilkhom and its training program. Boris Gafurov, a leading actor in the company who has in the past served as assistant artistic director, has been appointed temporary leader of the company.

Four days after Weil's death on September 11, 2007, Eurasia Net posted an anonymous commentary that said in part, "While the motive and precise circumstances surrounding the murder of promi-

nent theater director Mark Weil remain murky, his death has had an immediate impact on freedom of expression in Uzbekistan." The writer continued, eulogizing the life of the prominent member of the Uzbek artistic community and speculating as to the motives behind his murder while citing local opinion.

"As head of...Ilkhom, Weil enjoyed a reputation for staging provocative productions that subtly challenged both existing political practices and social customs. Accordingly, those who knew him tend to suspect that his death was somehow politically related. However, some reports have attributed the death to a random act of violence perpetrated by drug addicts. Whatever the case, Weil's passing will have a long lasting impact on Uzbek cultural life, according to members of Tashkent's embattled intelligentsia. 'Mark Weil

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was not just a theater director,' said one Tashkent artist who spoke on condition of anonymity. 'He was a pillar of western culture in Uzbekistan, one of the key columns supporting it. His death — be it at the hands of special service murderers, religious radicals or mere robbers — has political ramifications because Weil's death caused irreparable damage to the enclave of western culture and values in our country'...Among the company's most sensitive productions...was one titled *White White Black Stork*. The play explore(s) homosexuality in a Muslim society."

Adding to the outpouring of praise and tribute to Mark Weil was a recent op-ed piece appearing in the September 23rd issue of the *International Herald Tribune*. Alain Deletroz commented,

"Uzbekistan lost more than a cultural icon. His murder extinguished a flame of human decency in one of the darkest dictatorships on earth...That Mark Weil died under the blows of two murderers is both tragic and highly symbolic." He also described Weil's work and impact in Tashkent. "The subtle political messages of their work, delivered with humor and a pinch of pepper, revealed an overwhelming passion for the theater, for the soul and for everything that would help people transcend the meanness and masquerade of everyday life...(n)either Mark nor the Ilkhom ever pretended to be outright political, but the harshness of Karimov's regime made the theater one of the few places where a free spirit could still relax in the evening in Tashkent."

A September 22nd obituary in the *London Times* described Weil as "...a champion of free speech," adding, "Through his theater group he promoted creativity and innovation. He remained in the country while others left, fearing (for) their safety."

Mark was universally known for his humor, his warmth and his generosity. With those qualities, he refused to have his artistic visions censored or to be told he could not do things important to him.

Weil was the son of Ukrainian Jews, born in Tashkent. He studied theater in Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). With other graduates of Tashkent's Theatrical Institute, he began the Ilkhom Theater in 1976. Ilkhom roughly translates from Uzbek as "inspiration." He founded this independent theater when there were none in the USSR.

Weil claimed that he did not set out to be nor did he think of himself as a dissident per se but, rather someone who strived for free and authentic artistic expression. The popularity of his productions, the devotion of Tashkent's audiences and his international reputation, which increased every year, are thought to have protected him and Ilkhom from government suppression. His repertory ranged from a light hearted and very funny musi-

cal adaptation of John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*; to a fiercely theatrical, high-tech adaptation of Pushkin's *Imitation of the Koran*; a madcap adaptation of a Goldoni farce set in Samarkand during the fall of Communism; to his last and perhaps most ambitious undertaking — a multi-media, rock and roll scored, expressionistic and absurdist version of the sweeping, epic Greek Tragedy, *The Orestia*.

Ilkhom has toured in over twenty countries, most recently to great acclaim in Jerusalem, Vienna, Tokyo and London's Barbican Theater. In 2002, Weil directed Nikolai Erdman's *The Suicide* as a guest director at the University of Washington's School of Drama.

Weil founded an acting school in the 1980s as part of Ilkhom in order to feed new actors into the company. His current (sixth) class of about eighteen young adults is as ethnically diverse as is the population of Tashkent. Uzbek, Kazak, Russian and three Americans (one Vietnamese born) from the University of Washington are among the class in the current three-year program. Actors from the company and some outside specialists make up the faculty.

Since 2005 when Kurt Beattie, Artistic Director of Seattle's ACT Theater, along with Sarah Nash Gates and I visited Uzbekistan, faculty members of the UW School of Drama have traveled to Tashkent to see Ilkhom for themselves. We have been making plans for the company to come to the US in the spring of 2008 for a month long residency at ACT. As part of the residency, the School of Drama is planning acting workshops, campus and community forums and cross cultural events at the University of Washington.

I spent several weeks in April of 2007 working with the Ilkhom and was fortunate to be present at several early rehearsals of *The Orestia*. During my visit, Weil stated his ambition to present authentic tragedy in today's context. He acknowledged the difficult challenge that lay ahead of imbuing the company with a genuine sense of war, domestic murders and revenge. He relied on his actors to bring their own ideas, improvisations and "riffs" from which he would build the mise-en-scene of the production. During the time I was in resi-



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From *White White Black Stork*

dence, he spent about a third of his time working on the script, cutting and shuffling scenes and incorporating actors' ideas; another third rehearsing with the actors; and final third attending to scenic and technical issues. I have no idea when he slept.

In August, Mark Weil gave me a DVD of scenes from a preview performance of the production. He clearly achieved a powerful, tragic, comic, horrific and, in light of his own murder, a painfully ironic theater event. At times live video-feeds project actors' faces onto large pieces of the stage set as if some of the events were being reported (and hyped) by CNN or Al Jazeera reporters. In this highly kinetic production, the gods are depicted as powerful but irresponsible buffoons. At certain points as violence is described rather than shown (keeping true to tradition), blood seeps through cracks in the walls. In one sequence, the character Orestes, hounded by the Furies, runs off stage. Covered by live cameras he rushes down the hallway into the lobby of the theater and outside. Seamlessly, pre-recorded footage takes over, following him outside, up a ladder onto a roof, leaving him as he jumps from a building.

Weil's ability to create both continuity and disorientation, to mix live and recorded

performance without puncturing the "suspended disbelief" of the audience illustrates one aspect of his genius. His actors are a force of nature. They can be highly sensitive and perceptive at one moment and ferocious and unpredictable the next. The performances are notable for weaving together disciplined structure and what sometimes feels like near anarchy. How he was able to create surprise that is logical is another aspect of Mark Weil's singular talent. His productions make theater *important*.

To those who knew Mark Weil and experienced Ilkhom's singular and powerful productions, there is no choice but to carry on with the work and ideals he passed on to so many fellow human beings. ♦

Mark Jenkins, associate professor and head of the professional training program (acting and directing), has had an extensive professional acting career in New York, Hollywood, on and off Broadway, in regional theatres in Seattle and around the country and in film and television. He is a member of the famed Actors Studio and has taught in Russia, Japan and Uzbekistan working most recently with Mark Weil.