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## Ilkhom Theatre: The realization of a dream, clouded by tragedy

By Misha Berson  
Seattle Times theater critic

The Ilkhom Theatre of Uzbekistan makes its Seattle debut at ACT Theatre next week, a long-in-the-works dream on two continents.

Many have pitched in to import two productions, 31 actors and other personnel from this celebrated troupe, which is based in Seattle's sister city, Tashkent, and has close ties to this community.

But last autumn, the excitement of the venture was suddenly tempered by grief.

On Sept. 7, 2007, Mark Weil, the dynamic artistic leader of the Ilkhom and a part-time Seattle resident, was returning home from a rehearsal of Ilkhom's new version of "The Oresteia" in Tashkent when the tall, gray-haired director, 55, was struck on the head and fatally stabbed by two attackers.

Six months later, Weil's killing remains an internationally decried incident wrapped in mystery. Some of his allies — in Tashkent, London, Seattle — fear the killing was politically motivated. If Ilkhom Theatre Company's shows are not literally critical of the regime of strong-arm Uzbek leader Islam Karimov, they have alluded to provocative subjects.

In 2005, reports the journal Eurasia Insight, Ilkhom's poetic work "Flights of Mashrab" contained "a not-so-subtle anti-authoritarian message" after the infamous shooting of hundreds of demonstrators by government security forces in the Uzbek city of Andijan.

Notes Ilkhom actor Maxim Tumenev, by e-mail, "Everything ... the Ilkhom is producing can be considered as controversial — homosexual themes, reflection to political situation and government position. But we never had ... a goal to make these visible parallels on purpose. People see what they see and make their own decisions."

After Weil's death, police questioned his Ilkhom co-workers. "Almost all members of the company went



TIMUR KARPOV

The Ilkhom Theatre Company will perform "Ecstasy With The Pomegranate" April 9-13 at A Contemporary Theatre.



Part-time Seattle resident and Ilkhom Theatre artistic leader Mark Weil was killed in 2007. Some speculate his attack was politically motivated.

through tough interrogations," writes Tumenev, who was questioned four times. "I can tell you it's not pleasant. One of the actors was put in jail for 10 days."

Since then, there has been scant official news about the homicide, and no apparent arrests. Says Alain Délétroz, who befriended Weil while working in Tashkent with the Open Democracy Institute (George Soros' public-policy organization): "I do not think we will ever know what happened to Mark. I would not trust an Uzbek investigation in a case like this. And like many places with a dictator in power, Tashkent is a place of many, many rumors."

This much is clear: Weil was a bold, charismatic cultural figure in a Central Asian Republic still in the shadow of Soviet Communism. And he would be mourned by many in an American city some 6,000 miles away from the theater he ran for more than 30 years.

### International ties

Seattle has forged a bond with Tashkent, a storied city of 2 million — the largest, and one of the oldest, in Central Asia.

Tashkent dates back to at least 1 B.C., and over its history has been a multiethnic, cosmopolitan trade and cultural center under (at various times) Arabian, Mongol and Turkish rule. In the 1860s, Uzbekistan was colonized by Russia. And in the 20th century, under Soviet control, the country grew more politically oppressive and isolated.

Mark Weil was born into a Jewish family in Tashkent. Ambitious and creative, he started his own youth drama troupe at age 17. Then in 1976, after studying at the Tashkent Theatre and Arts Institute, Weil cofounded an upstart theater, later baptized the Ilkhom (Uzbek for "inspiration").

Remarkably, the Ilkhom has endured and flourished outside the "official" system of state-subsidized, government-endorsed Uzbek culture — surviving on ticket sales, grants and touring revenues.

Weil's link to the Northwest begins back in 1973, when Seattle became the sister city of Tashkent. Seven years earlier, Tashkent endured a devastating earthquake. By the late 1980s, when Seattle actress Michelle Blackmon joined a cultural exchange mission to the city, it had been extensively rebuilt. And the Ilkhom had become a hub for the Uzbek artistic intelligentsia — as one admirer called it, "a tiny, bright and incredibly unlikely beacon of light" in the region.

"It was an amazing experience being there," recalls Blackmon, now a Seattle Center administrator. "We were a group of 30 people [from Seattle], sponsored by the performers' union in Tashkent.

"I worked on a show with Mark at Ilkhom, and found him to be an extremely magnanimous man who knew how to negotiate difficult situations with people from different backgrounds. We all loved him."



PAVEL SOLODKIY  
"White White Black Stork" plays at ACT Friday-April 6. The shows are performed in Uzbek and Russian, with English supertitles.

#### Coming up

**ACT's Ilkhom Theatre Festival** includes runs of "White White Black Stork" (Friday-April 6) and "Ecstasy With the Pomegranate" (April 9-13), at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle; \$10-\$55 per show. Tickets and special programs: 206-292-7676 or [www.acttheatre.org](http://www.acttheatre.org).

**Note:** The shows are performed in Uzbek and Russian, with English supertitles.

In 1991, Uzbekistan broke away from the U.S.S.R., but Karimov, the formerly Communist Uzbek leader, retained power as president of the new "democracy" in elections the U.S. called "neither free nor fair."

Also in 1991, Weil visited Seattle for the first time. Warmly greeted by friends, and impressed with the city, he urged his wife, Tatyana, and daughters Julia and Aleksandra to settle here.

As he told The Seattle Times in 2003, Weil feared "an explosion of Islamic fundamentalism" in Uzbekistan, and wanted his daughters to be educated. Both became UW graduates. (The Weil family supplied information for this article, but declined to be interviewed.)

Weil visited his family here several times a year. But his devotion to Ilkhom kept him in Tashkent and on tour most of the time.

A hot ticket in Eastern Europe, Japan, England and elsewhere, his troupe was hailed for its invigorated classics and its original theater pieces steeped in Uzbekistan's complex, turbulent history.

The two works in ACT's "Ilkhom Festival" reflect Ilkhom's range. "White White Black Stork" is a romantic tragedy that one London critic termed "a touching, gently sad piece from an important international company."

"Ecstasy With the Pomegranate," a collaboration with American choreographer David Rousseve, drew some fire for its homosexual content. The piece was inspired by the life of early 20th-century Russian artist Aleksandr Nikolaev and his paintings of the Bacha — a traditional Uzbek dance performed by men in female garb.

### **Intense direction**

Often invited to direct and teach abroad, Weil staged the Russian play "The Suicide" at Seattle's University of Washington drama school in 2003.

UW drama professor Mark Jenkins recalls Weil as "a soulful visionary, natural leader, first-class director and smart entrepreneur.

"At first our students were pretty shocked by how he liked to work — not from the inside out, as they were used to, but the outside in. He'd give them very extreme physical directorial choices. They came to appreciate his approach."

Several UW students later went to Tashkent to study at the Ilkhom. In spring 2007, Jenkins visited, and saw the company's entire 14-play repertoire.

He was struck by the 200-seat venue's popularity in a city "that's very pleasant, superficially, with its wide boulevards and parks, but incredibly repressive politically."

In his own 2005 trek to Tashkent, ACT Theatre artistic director Kurt Beattie was also struck by the Ilkhom's sold-out houses, and its "amazing, beautifully trained actors, capable of anything... Chekhov, Goldoni, modern stuff. And 'White White Black Stork' — Wow! It was so exquisitely poetic. The staging was brilliant."

### **Bringing in Ilkhom**

With Weil, Beattie began laying the groundwork for an Ilkhom run at ACT, enlisting help from supporters and such groups as the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association.

In September, the elaborate logistics, the housing and visa arrangements were all in place. ACT had raised \$400,000 for the project, from local patrons and national funders (the Ilkhom will also do a short tour to several other U.S. cities). Welcoming events hosted by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association were also set.

Then the shocking news of Weil's brutal, perplexing killing reached Seattle.

"Mark always felt very safe," says Jenkins. "I don't think anybody remotely anticipated this."

Writes Tumenev, "Mark never told us that he was getting threats. Probably he was, but I think he wasn't scared by them. He was a very strong and brave person."

Beattie says Weil's death adds poignancy and urgency to ACT's presentation of works he directed and co-wrote.

And the Ilkhom troupe has stayed passionately focused on carrying out their late "master's" artistic plans. With this visit, they're honoring the spirit of what were widely reported as Weil's final, defiant words: "I'm opening a season tomorrow, no matter what."

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