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About the Authors

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Olivia Jaques is an independent artist and cultural worker based in Vienna. She co-organises the performance platform Performatorium, frequently teaches, organizes artistic events and writes. In her work she focuses on social, performative, discursive, collective, process-based and experimental formats, as well as curatorial questions.

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MIHR Theatre of dot-dot-dot

An Exploration of Performance Art, Performing Arts, Contemporary Dance and Theatre in Armenia Today

By Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan (MIHR Theatre, Yerevan) and Olivia Jaques (Performatorium, Vienna)

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Abstract

MIHR Theatre was established in 2003 by sister and brother Mlke-Galstyan as the first independent contemporary dance theatre company in Armenia. It attempts to complement the state-dominated theatre with a dance system that is characterized by free expression and the combination of different genres, understanding art as always being connected with society and its changes. One of the founders, Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, together with her Austrian artist colleague Olivia Jaques in this article develops an explanation of the approach of MIHR Theatre—how it seeks to leave behind the traditional Soviet educational system in order to establish a contemporary dance scene in Armenia, as well as to incorporate Armenian traditions into their practice. But above all, the authors elaborate on the specific context MIHR Theatre finds itself in and works with extensively.

Performing Arts in the Changing City of Yerevan

MIHR Theatre was established in 2003 by a group of friends who spent their time gathering on the street and discussing art and the big questions of the world. They wanted to do contemporary dance performances in order to change the world they lived in. The group included non-artists, art students and artists from various fields like fine art, dance and theatre. From this huge group, the siblings Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, trained in Latino-American dances and contemporary ballet, and Tsolak Mlke-Galstyan, coming from contemporary dance and also having a fine arts background, continued with the

concept until today, more recently accompanied by Petros Ghazanchyan, a contemporary dancer. In 2014 the musicians Eliza Baghdiyan and Lusine Mlke-Galstyan from Tiezerk Band joined the MIHR Theatre crew.

MIHR Theatre chose performance art for its ability to facilitate the expressing and feeling of the issues of the present through movement, staging already existing plays as well as creating their own. In collaboration with musicians, fine artists, sound performers, and architects, its pieces combine different genres, such as action painting, storytelling, “music of movement”, audio performance, and drama theatre. Inspiration is derived from personal reflection as well as from political topics. *The Song*

of a Refugee (2018) refers to a special genre in Armenian music in which the historical experience of emigration is still part of everyday life. Inspired by Heriqnaz Galstyan's sculptural work "Horovel" (2008), it is not only about geographical migration, but also about the loss of and longing for the homeland. Longing used to be a process through which people found hope. But nowadays, alienation leads to the loss of hope that urges the vagrant to search for a new land and new aspirations. This special kind of alienation, by force and not by choice, is infused into the song, and thus into the performance. *Black Castle* (2010) deals with a more concrete political event, the so-called March First, the tragic events during the Armenian presidential election mass protests in 2008 in Yerevan.¹ The dancers, all dressed in black, try to conquer a steel framework, the Black Castle, which is made from envy, jealousy and betrayal. Whoever possesses the Black Throne is the king of the Black Castle, but that power only brings death.

The Song of a Refugee, 2018, Yerevan, Armenia.



Photo: Seda Grigoryan

There are no heroes, there is only evil. On other occasions, MIHR Theatre works with more private topics, as in *Unreal Stories from My City* (2018), a project together with Tiezerk Band which reflected on the personal experiences of the group members related to the changes in the city districts they live in. The old buildings get demolished, the city transforms, and different perspectives on the transformation as well as individual memories are brought together in the performance—the private meets the political.

In 2015, MIHR Theatre produced a flyer saying "MIHR Theatre of ...", meaning that MIHR Theatre is a concept where one can express oneself freely by exploring new forms of contemporary dance. In English, "theater" is a more precise or more defined concept, while the Armenian concept of theatre (թատրոն—*theatre, playhouse, play, stage*), pronounced *tatron*, describes a more general concept of the performing arts, meaning types of

art (such as music, dance, or drama) that are performed for an audience, including e.g. site-specific performances. The term "performing arts" (կատարողական արվեստ) can be literally translated as "doing art" or "doers of art". Along with "performance art" (պերֆորմանս), it is a term without a proper definition and is mainly used within the art community. For the broader audience one would instead use "theatre piece" (թատերական ներկայացում).

MIHR Theatre is the first contemporary dance company in Armenia. It defines itself as the only truly independent theatre group in Armenia, understanding independence in a financial as well as ideological and organizational sense. In this regard it challenges

other independent theatre groups—such as Arina Araratyan Dance Theatre, Theater on the Roof, Epsidon Theatre Group, or Infinite Theatre Ireland—by demonstrating that surviving independently, even for such a long period, is possible no matter the difficulty of the circumstances. At the same time, it

is this challenge, along with the importance they assign to the freedom of production (and freedom of expression, of course), which fuels MIHR Theatre to stay independent in a radical sense. With its emphasis on its independence as well as its process-driven, experimental production, MIHR Theatre in many aspects might be closer to independent (fine) art spaces, e.g.: the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU Armenia), whose cultural program with its curator Anna Gargarian (2016–2019) aimed to connect the local art scene with the international art world; the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (ACCEA, or NPAK in Armenian), being the starting point of various alternative art initiatives and a hot spot for the contemporary art scene for years; and the Naregatsi Art Institute (NAI), which supports young artists, provides space for the alternative arts free of charge and supports people with disabilities.

¹ See Thomas Hammarberg: "Special Mission to Armenia", Council of Europe: Strasbourg 20.03.2008, <https://rm.coe.int/16806db879> (23.08.2020).

Spaces and Places for the Contemporary Performing Arts

One of MIHR Theatre's first venues was a former Soviet amphitheatre at Mashtots Park in the city centre, then used as a spot for leisure. The decision to use this public venue was a practical one, as state theatres are expensive to rent. Renting theatre spaces would have only been possible if the company were to receive additional project funding to cover the costs. The amphitheatre attracted the passers-by to linger. That's why this place was the perfect starting point for an open-air performance as well as for MIHR gatherings (which therefore became public too), and one simple letter to the municipality got MIHR the permission to work there. This experience also led MIHR Theatre to develop site-specific performances at several other places such as AGBU, the Yerevan Modern Art Museum or open-air at Charles Aznavour Square, Freedom Square, and the amphitheatre at Kirov Park. But this ideal situation lasted only for one summer, as the frosty conditions of Yerevan's winter generally create an unwelcoming atmosphere, and already in Summer 2004 the location was closed due to so-called "renovations". Eventually, following Occupy Mashtots in 2012, which aimed to prevent the destruction of green zones in Yerevan, the old amphitheatre got demolished and in 2018 a restaurant opened at its former location.² Today MIHR finds a new place for each performance, places which are free of charge but inspirational, such as exhibition halls or open-air stages.

The Price of Independence

Being self-funded as an independent theatre company or self-employed as an artist often leads to having multiple side-jobs, in Armenia as in other countries. In the best-case scenario, it hence brings together fruitfully the independent and institutional art scenes. Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan and Tsolak Mlke-Galstyan have been working at HIGH FEST International Performing Arts Festival within the organisation and coordination team from its inception in 2003. The festival is an important event for the performing arts in Armenia as it brings together Armenian contemporary performing artists of all sorts and connects them with international

artists such as Mark Ravenhill (UK), Maxim Gorky Theatre (FRG), Evgeni Grishkovec (RF), or Les Plasticiens Volants (F). HIGH FEST was created by Artur Ghukasyan and is organized by the Armenian Actors Union NGO. Its aim is to present the contemporary theatre arts in Armenia, including a variety of performing art genres such as drama, comedy, musicals, dance performances, puppetry, movement and text-based genres, mime and street performances by artists from Armenia and abroad. It introduces international trends to the Armenian art scene and fosters discussions between the audience and performers after the shows. From the beginning the festival has included a workshop format

whereby artists and the interested public can exchange and learn from each other, covering artistic practices as well as discursive topics such as cultural management, international cooperation or cultural policy issues. Through this exchange, MIHR Theatre members were able to contextualize their experimental way of working artistically in an international context as performance art.

The art scene in Armenia in general is fragmented due to limited resources. Instead of an artist lobby, there are only malfunctioning leftovers of the once-powerful Soviet Artist Unions—for performance artists either the Theatre Workers Union/Actors Union or the National Dance Art Union of Armenia. As these state unions date back to Soviet times, members are mostly elderly and profit from the unions' resources (studios, summer cottages or residences) in return for a monthly fee.

The main source of financing for art in Armenia is the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. It supports mainly the state cultural organizations next to the art education sector, but also further applied projects. In return for its support, the repertoire of the state theatre—such as the Gabriel Sundukyan National Academic Theatre, the Stanislavsky State Russian Drama Theatre, the Hovhannes Tumanyan State Puppet Theatre, and NCA Small Theater—must be approved by the national government before each season. Plays about domestic violence, nudity, or LGBT issues are never seen on stage, although the total number of rejected productions is very low due to self-censorship. At the same time,

Black Castle, 2010, Tsaghkadzor, Armenia.

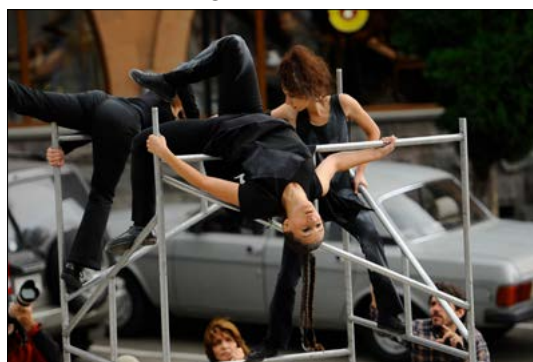


Photo: Asatur Yesayants

² In 2013 Sonia Leber and David Chesworth reflected on the transformation of the post-Soviet society in their 26-minute film *Zaum Tractor*, <http://leberandchesworth.com/filmworks/zaum-tractor/> (3.09.2020). Currently, artists are raising awareness about the demolition of Firdus, Yerevan's most historic district, e.g. documentary filmmaker Arthur Sukiasyan, featuring Christina Danielyan in the short dance movie *On Demolition and Preservation* (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=c0zIs05JTXA&feature=emb_logo (3.09.2020).

the independent art sector is constantly lacking financial support, leading to rather short-lived art initiatives, singular events or performances instead of long-lasting theatre companies.

Alternative art collectives, ensembles or initiatives must be ready to work without money and, even more importantly, they must be ready to invest and to apply for international grants. Of course, there are fixed expenses, such as (taking MIHR as an example) the rehearsal space, as well as project-specific costs such as materials or (even if only symbolic) wages for the performers, as MIHR insists on paying the dancers for each project, even unfunded ones. Also, it is important for MIHR Theatre that the performances are free of charge as well as the workshops for the youth and, recently, also for dancers with physical and hearing disabilities. Usually the curation/organisation is not compensated.

All members finance themselves with art-related side jobs and also support MIHR Theatre via a joint cash pot and by sharing and recycling wherever possible.

(Alternative) Education

Generally, in terms of art education in Armenia today, one finds a mixture of the Soviet academic system and Bologna, as well as influences from artists abroad. This leads to a highly specific concept of what an “artist” is, specifically, one trained at a university. Graduates leave the art universities with a narrow idea of what contemporary art is. This is partly because of a generation gap within the contemporary Armenian art scene. On the one hand, there is the older generation with a Soviet education, and on the other those who work more independently and who are now in their late thirties or younger. Those in between, who were at the beginning of their careers when the Soviet Union ceased to exist, mostly changed their profession during the 1990’s (especially during the 90’s war for independence of Nagorno-Karabakh) or left the country.

To open up younger artists’ understanding of what is possible in art, MIHR Theatre has implemented a wide range of social and educational projects and offers

an alternative contemporary dance education in Yerevan. This includes offerings for both regular dance students and inclusive dance students, both through regular classes and training sessions, mainly in the field of dance and theatre, but also the arts in general.

Art education, especially within the performing arts, is still in the nascent stages of becoming more inclusive. Often the stage mirrors the problems of the society, which does not yet accept its own full diversity. Only a very few initiatives, among them the NAI with its

choir, have a truly inclusive approach, i.e. the goal that the performances take place in the usual theaters and thus reach a wide audience instead of just in the less-visited spaces of the implementing NGO, that disabled and non-disabled people work together on projects, and last but not least that disabled people also take over the function of teaching. Per-

formers with disabilities are in general excluded from the stage, especially in terms of large-scale productions. After having worked with performers with physical restrictions now and then, MIHR Theatre got inspired by one dancer in particular, Edgar Merjanyan, who found his own artistic ways to move, a unique way of dancing, using his disadvantage in daily life as his advantage on stage, discovering and training his own signature movements as a dancer. With the gained experience and following its vision of working with the uniqueness and beauty of each individual dancer, MIHR Theatre created an unparalleled educational program in 2016 which continues through the present day. The group of performers with disabilities trains regularly: sessions run three to four hours twice a week, including warm-up, physical training, rehearsals, contact improvisation, discussions, sharing of emotions, information and small showcases. The training program depends on the group, and the performances are developed with the input of everyone included.

MIHR Theatre’s alternative education is further based on reading fiction and professional literature about, for example, contemporary dance in the Soviet Union, moving identities, contemporary choreographers, and

We, 2017, Yerevan, Armenia.



Photo: David Jotyan

also films by Sergei Parajanov, Artavazd Peleshyan, and Andrei Tarkovsky. Each member can also bring other material to read. Ultimately, this kind of education aims to bring together a mixture of foreign, Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian literature (examples of the latter two including authors Yeghishe Charents and Zabel Yesayan, respectively)—two different traditions of artistic expression using the same language.³ Education in this context is understood as a process of sharing amongst peers, as peer-to-peer learning. An integral part of MIHR Theatre's grassroots educational approach is the International Laboratory. In addition to MIHR Theatre's workshops about "Storytelling as a Base of the Performance" or "Modern Technologies as Stage Expression", international artists are invited to give a workshop, free of charge and open to the public. Within alternative education of the type MIHR Theatre envisions, a process of reflection on what has been learned has to occur.

But MIHR Theatre is not the only entity thinking about and offering an alternative art education. In 2017, the dancer Rima Pipoyan founded the Choreography Development, an educational and cultural foundation aiming to support the development of contemporary dance and modern ballet in Armenia, although dance here is understood in a more traditional and academic sense. The Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in Yerevan, founded in 2006 and run by Nazareth Karoyan, promotes the operation of the art economy in Armenia, develops and implements art collections and exhibitions, archives and disseminates projects, conducts research, and organizes teaching programs in the field of curatorial practices, theory, and art education. Although not in the field of dance and performance, the ICA is an open hub for the design of cultural and contemporary art projects' development and production.

About the Authors

Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, based in Yerevan, is a lecturer at the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinematography and is active within MIHR Theatre.

Olivia Jaques is based in Vienna, where she co-organises the performance platform Performatorium along with other projects.

Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan and *Olivia Jaques* are both artists and cultural workers concentrating on the contemporary (performance) art field as well as art education and working in a transcultural context. They got to know each other during the CAS Arts and International Cooperation in Zurich in early 2017, and have developed a continuous exchange while working together on several occasions organizing cultural/artistic programs in Armenia and Switzerland.

See overleaf for Further Information and a Bibliography.

Perspectives

The well-known precarity of independent artists usually leads to a situation in which there are some gatherings of individuals for a project or a performance, but they don't last for long. Each artist struggles alone. S/he finds alternative work in a different field or stays in the arts but within a state organization—educational field included. In order to improve conditions for the independent art scene, a yet-to-be-named initiative has recently been founded by individual artists and cultural workers, including Marine Karoyan (founder/director of the ARÉ Performing Arts Festival), Nazareth Karoyan (founder/director of the Institute for Contemporary Art), Nairi Khatchadourian (independent curator), Anna Gargarian (founder/curator of Hayp Pop Up Gallery and In Situ art agency), Harutyun Alpetyan (former governance expert at the American University of Armenia), Seda Grigoryan (head of the Creative Europe Armenian Desk), and Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan (MIHR Theatre). In the last years it has become more and more important to join forces in order to present a united front, to formulate general demands and wishes and to represent interests in a united manner. For this reason, the initiative works towards the empowerment of the independent art scene in Armenia as well as the official establishment of support regulations for it. During the current circumstances of the reignited war over Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) and the recently agreed peace, the whole society is shaken and the need to improve the conditions for the independent art scene is now bigger than ever. MIHR Theater and Tiezerk Band, for example, are currently organizing cultural programs for refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, but such initiatives are only possible in the long run if they do not remain isolated phenomena but benefit from mutual support and social recognition.

³ Before the genocide, all Armenians spoke the same Armenian language (Western/old). During the Soviet period, this old Armenian language got simplified and today is called Eastern Armenian. Hence, Armenian literature is split into two languages, Eastern Armenian, which is spoken in Armenia today, and the one spoken by diaspora Armenians, Western Armenian.

Further Information

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Film Awards as Cultural Institutions Towards a Diverse Landscape of Film in Georgia

By Philomena Grassl (ADAMI Media Prize, Tbilisi)

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Abstract

This article aims to give a short overview of the history of the Georgian film industry, with a focus on recent developments, new artistic formats and experimental approaches. In addition, it is also in part an experience report of the ADAMI Media Prize for Cultural Diversity in Eastern Europe, which was founded in 2015 with the aim to support new formats in film, audio-visual media and video art focused on ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

From Soviet Cinema to Independent Film and Experimental Film Art

Georgia has a long and dazzling history of film. In the last few years, the small South Caucasian republic has

again gained international recognition as a producer of quality films, and international film festivals are keen to see what Georgian directors have to offer. In the following, the question of Georgia as a contemporary