

The 1909/1924 Amateur Theatre, Cinema and Musical Movement in Vlora

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Abstract: The goal of the paper is the identification of the characteristics of the amateur theatre, cinema and musical movement in Vlore during the beginning of XX century (1909/1924). For the realization of the paper has been used many methods that are really closed with the research and literature review in articles and different document of the time.

Key words: theater, movie, orchestra, comedies, journal, club

1. Introduction

The city of Vlora has been distinguished for the cultural development undergone throughout various historical periods. Notwithstanding the extremely difficult situation of Albania in general, the proclamation of Independence finds Vlora with some cultural progress in the field of education, journalism, music, theatre and cinema.

The following article presents some characteristics of this time (1909/1924), that are part of my studies at doctoral school.

2. The 1909/1924 Amateur Theatre, Cinema and Musical Movement in Vlora

The city of Vlora has been distinguished for the cultural development undergone throughout various historical periods. Notwithstanding the extremely difficult situation of Albania in general, the proclamation of Independence finds Vlora with some cultural progress in the field of education, journalism, music, theatre and cinema.

With the foundation of “Labëria” Club in the autumn of 1908, a large cultural movement began in the city. In addition to the main club, many branches of “Labëria” Club were opened in Kurvelesh, Mesaplik, Himara, Dukat, Topallti, Cakran and Kuthës. Besides the valuable contribution of the Club to the “Muradie” school, many journals like “Liria” in Thessalonica, “Rrufeja” in Cairo, “Zgjimi i Shqiperise” in Ioannina, “Kombi” in Boston and “Drita” in Manastir, wrote about the foundation of the musical orchestra and the amateur theatre in the city of Vlora.

“Labëria” Club was engaged in such a comprehensive patriotic activity that the Club’s reputation grew so high at to make people turn to the Club itself rather than to the official administration for a solution to their problems.

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In addition to the political and patriotic activity and the foundation of the Albanian school, “Laberia” Club held the first national theatre show in Vlora. The Vlora patriots wanted the show served to the national call for freedom and independence. Therefore, the Club picked the tragedy “The Death of Pirro” of Mihal Grameno as the first theatre show. The title speaks for itself: although the work deals with some aspects of Pirro’s life, indeed the ideas and characters it encompasses are those of our National Renaissance. The author here indirectly raises an issue that seriously concerned the Albanian Renaissance of the time, the Albanian governing bodies. The author is looking for a brave leader, as well as a genuine patriot, who is closely related to his people, just like Pirro and his wife, who stands in his place with great dignity at the head of the state and army and gets killed in war to defend the national borders. Therefore, the work has encompasses significant educational values. However, the organizers faced many difficulties while putting the show on stage. They lacked almost everything, from the theatre hall to those simple yet substantial means. Nevertheless, the love for the nation and the determination to give people a beautiful show won over such difficulties. So, the first show was put on stage on the 29th January of 1909.

The inspirer and the main organizer to put this tragedy on stage was the patriot teacher Jani Minga, who as carrying a wide political, patriotic and educational activity in the city of Vlora. During the performance he did the prompter. The actors were young patriots of Vlora, from some intellectuals of higher education like Spiro Jago Koleka to simple handicraftsmen like Lluke Papajorgji, Muhamet Berberi and others. Marigo Posjo published a correspondence at “Liria” magazine of 28 February 1909, where she writes, “All these gentlemen play with great finesse and erudition”.

The show was such an outstanding success that even diplomats serving in the foreign consulates located in Vlora wrote about the show in the reports to their chiefs. This is what the consul of Viena reported on the success of the performance: “This piece was put on stage by some Muslim & Christian guys with such an enthusiasm that the audience kept applauding for a long time. The first theatre show has been considered as an important political & social event. The author and the Club wanted this theatre show to be a motivator for national union...”

At the end of the show, people were so enthusiastic as to acclaim the author and the actors, who had performed with such an exceptional passion and mastery. At that moment, a representative of “Laberia” Club came on the stage and proposed that a congratulation telegram was sent to the author. Unanimously the crowd welcomed the proposal in enthusiastic applause.

For many days to come the show was the word of the day in almost every family, social gathering, street and bar. On the other hand foreigners opposed to the show and tried to denigrate it in Vlora and elsewhere by making defaming critics in foreign journals. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the patriotic people of Vlora, this show remained a valuable performance.

An article of 28 February 1909 in “Liria” (Freedom) journal of Thessalonica writes: “We have been hearing from Vlora that the play ‘The Death of Pirro’ of 29 January made a worth of 40 napoleons to the benefit of ‘Laberia’ Club. The actors performed in the hall room of Eqerem Bej Vlora where the audience was so immense as to occupy any corner of the house. In the next performance of 12th March Mihal Grameno himself and his brother Koço Grameno were also present”.

Marigo Posjo also emphasized the impact of the theatre show in a special article she published in “Rrufeja” (Thunder) Journal, where she writes: The actors played with great mastery and expertise. The theatre team management of “Rrufeja” Journal of Cairo 1909 presents the names of Thanas Flloqi and Kole Kamsi, who put on stage a drama entitled “Besa” (Faith) of Sami Frasheri. The article of 19th April 1909 introduces even the names of some young actors from Vlora, like Dhionis Karbunara, Qazim Kokoshi, Spiro Koleka, Aleks Koleka, Hamza

Isai, Kol Kamsi, HajriKreshpa, Lluca Papajorgji, Vasillaq Posjo, Muhamet Çobo, Hamdi Dervishi, Hidai Myftiu etc. Even patritic Albanian clubs of Manastiri, Bucharest and Cairo congratulated the theatre of Vlora in the press of the time.

The theatre activity in Vlora had a revival in the years 1912–1913, time when under the guidance of Kristo Karbunara and Jani Minga, some local performers and students of “Muradie” school put on stage the drama “Oxhaku” (the Chimney) of Mihal Grameno, where Milo Duçi played a special role as the director of the show. In the years to come we have no tracts of such theatric movement until 1920–1924 with the foundation of the cultural — patriotic organizations “Vlora” and “Bashkimi”. During this period many dramas and comedies were put on the stage of cinema “Perparimi, thus revitalizing the city theatre.

The first Albanian theatre in the city of Vlora was founded on 12 November 1908 by the patriot and musician Thanas Floqi who taught in “Muradie” school. It was “Laberia” Club who demanded it. The orchestra included 20 instrumentalists, 13 men, 5 male students of “Muradie” school and 2 women as reported in the book “The National Movement in Vlora 1878–1912”. A greeting card published in “Rrufeja” journal of Cairo mentions some of the instrumentalists: the director Thanas Floqi, Hajri Kreshpa, Muhamet Berberi, Lluca Papajorgji, Ferëniqi Posjo, Aleks Koleka, Kristo Karbunara, Aristidh Ruci, Ibrahim Vila and Dom Mark Vasa. The school principal Leonidha Naci is watermarked on the background of the greeting card. The photo of this orchestra was published even on the national calendar by Kristo Luarasi from Sophie Bulgaria, who made 200 greeting cards. The members of this Albanian orchestra in Vlora held musical instruments in their hands like mandolins, guitars, flutes.

An article published in “Rrufeja” journal of 21 April 1909 under the name of Kol Kamsi says that the music and orchestra of Mr. Thanas Floqi enchanted the hearts and ears of the people with national songs and other music pieces and made that beautiful note sound so strong as to remain forever in their hearts.

So, the Albanian orchestra of Vlora performed until the fall of 1912, when together with the orchestra of Korca they played the national anthem in one of the public gardens of Vlora. They played again the same anthem in 1919 and the event was reported by “La Voce Valona” journal of 14 February 1919. The report says that the orchestra of LecKurti of 25 members, in the funeral of Ismail Qemali held in Kanina, escorted the procession of the old man from Vlora. According to “Politika” (Politics) and “Mbrotjtja Kombetare” (National Defense) journals the musical movement in Vlora perceived an invigoration in 1920–1924. The orchestra was composed of 34 members. A special historical moment was the “War of Vlora” victorious march of 03 September 1920, where the music band of Vlora together with the “Vatra” band of Albanians in the USA, under the direction of the composer Thoma Nashi composed and performed the anthem “Vlora Vlora” written by Ali Asllani.

It should be emphasized that most of orchestra members taught in the schools of Vlora and brought this musical culture to their schools. Following the war of 1920 a small orchestra called “Bilbil Vlora” (Vlora Nightingale) was founded in Vlora. This orchestra not only illuminated the cultural and artistic life of Vlora, but its fame echoed in other regions of the country as “Mbrotjtja Kombetare” (National Defense) and “Fjala e Lire” (The free word) journals of 1921 and the well-known firm “Sheldia” report. Bardhosh Gaçe in his book “The popular songs of Vlora” quotes that the artistic band “Bilbil Vlora” (Vlora Nightingale) had started to perform since 1918–1920 by arranging and adding new notes to some popular songs. The band composed of 7 instrumentalists, based on the polyphonic songs of Laberia region, started to cultivate the popular song by adding some significant dancing notes.

Similarly to this author, even professors Beniamin Kruta and Spiro Shituni in their studies entitled “The

Albanian Polyphony”, by presenting the features of Vlora popular music of the early 20th century, provide us with a wide range of “Vlora” music band activity, who just like Delvina, Permet and Kolonje popular bands, had been performing in many concerts held in Istanbul, Thessalonica, Ioannina, Bari (Italy) and in several homeland cities.

In parallel with “Bilbil Vlora” (Vlora Nightingale) band, in the years 1916–1923 there was a significant emphasis on the polyphonic song of Himara coastline. As “Albania” journal of Worcester (1918) writes, “a group of immigrants in Chicago originating from Himara, in addition to the founding of an Albanian school in this city have recorded on “Columbia” turntable discs the seven famous songs of Himara: “Aman mike kapedane”, “Moj Katina ninanina”, “Vajzë e vogël o”, “Vajz e valave”, “Këngëpërkurbetin”, “Kamdalë me njëbreg e rri”, “Detipogjëmon”, which the artistic band “Vetëtima” (Thunder) founded by the composer Neço Muka and the teacher Niqi Veizi recovered and elaborated to adapt them to a new style, which would later make them very popular in the south of Albania. The journal “La voce di Valona” no. 184 August 1919, writes, “recently some new songs arranged in Chicago imbued with the national soul have been diffused along the coastline of Himara. People sing them in weddings and other festivities”.

Journals like “Politika” (Politics), “Mbrojtja Kombëtare” (National Defense) and magazine “Atdheu” (Motherland), “Fjala e lirë” (the Free Word) in Vlora and journals of Korca and Gjirokastra, in the years 1920–1924 provide a broad picture of the artistic and cultural life in Vlora city by evidencing the activity of a powerful amateur theatre directed by the teacher Perikli Papingji, of the music orchestra directed by Dhimitër Papajorgji as well as the Carnival and Summer Day festivities. Even Avni Rustemi, Jani Minga and Fan S. Noli participated in some of these celebrations. Journal “Fjala e lirë” (The Free word) of 13 October 1923 reports, “The people attended the drama show ‘Fe e Kombësi’ (Religion and Nationality) played by the local actors at ‘Perparimi’ theatre. F. S. Noli congratulated the actors on their brilliant performance”.

In 1919, for the first time in Vlora the Italian army projected outdoors some silent movie shows on a wall next to the city Mosque. After the War of Vlora in 1920, the Italian Giovanni Valenza, who had supplied the local warriors with weapons and munitions, put himself at the service of the culture by preparing cinema specialists like Kojdhel Lauri and Master Kajdhel Zilja, who specialized in Italy in 1921–1924. At that time, cinema played a substantial role in the cultural education of the people. Upon the proposal of Jani Minga, the Vlora Educational Board since 1921 demanded the minister Rexhep Mitrovica that movies were included one a week in the school curricula

In 1920–1924, in addition to the movie shows, the comic theatre or the so-called “the shadow theatre” also developed, where a group of actors performed comic plays in the city neighborhoods and back streets in front of a young audience.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The city of Vlora has been distinguished for the cultural development undergone throughout various historical periods. Notwithstanding the extremely difficult situation of Albania in general, the proclamation of Independence finds Vlora with some cultural progress in the field of education, journalism, music, theatre and cinema.

With the foundation of “Labëria” Club in the autumn of 1908, a large cultural movement began in the city. “Labëria” Club was engaged in such a comprehensive patriotic activity that the Club’s reputation grew so high as to make people turn to the Club itself rather than to the official administration for a solution to their problems.

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