

Essay

# War and Contemporary Georgian Theatre

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**Abstract:** How is war and its consequences reflected in the theatre? How, in particular, has the Georgian theatre reacted to war, and to what degree does its presence impact Georgian theatre directors and audiences? When and under what circumstances do theatre companies stage plays on the theme of war? Since war never loses its relevance for Georgians, new texts are written continually on this topic and subsequently turned into plays, primarily by young directors. These productions grapple with the experience of war and its impact on the nation and its people, who are radically transformed by their individual histories. In addition, sometimes, they help to reveal hidden passions.

**Keywords:** war; theatre; modernity; Georgia; war dramaturgy; human; drama

## 1. Introduction

Georgia and the Georgian people have always known war (Bokuchava 2018; Bukhrikidze 2016); for centuries, they have either been at war or engaged in agriculture. One of Georgia's symbols embodies this duality: the monumental statue of *Mother of Kartli* (erected on Sololaki mountain in Tbilisi 1500 years after the founding of the capital) (Chkhartishvili 2022a). She holds a sword in one hand (in order to attack the enemy) and a chalice of wine in the other (to greet guests). This monument, now a symbol of Tbilisi, expresses the history and character of the Georgian nation (Chkhartishvili 2019a, 2022b).

Theatre reflects life, but war often has prevented the theatre from functioning. For instance, in 1795, the Georgian King *Erekle II* was defeated by the Iranian Shah Agha-Mohammed-Khan in the Battle of Krtsanisi, in which renowned actors and directors fought alongside their compatriots on the front lines (Chkhartishvili 2019b; Georgian Theatre Electronic Archive 2021; Georgian Theatre 2018). Sadly, most of the nation's actors died in this war, which is why it took half a century to restore the Georgian theatre. Today, in the oldest district of Tbilisi, a monument commemorates Georgian actors who died in the Krtsanisi War (Kajrishvili 2013; Khalvashi 2013). Another distinguished figure of the Erekle King Theatre Era is "Head of the theatre Company" — Machabela (მაჩაბელა), whose name is mentioned differently in diverse sources: Tamaz, Levan, or David. As reported, he was an extremely talented Georgian actor, coming from a low-class family background. David Machabeli (დავით მაჩაბელი) is presented as an interesting individual by Teimuraz Batonishvili. In 1795, during the invasion of Agha-Mohammad Khan, David Machabeli led the army of actors on the battlefield. With his comrades, he heroically passed away in an unequal battle. Major Gabriel (გაბრიელ მათორი) "fearlessly died on his war cannon." Lord Ioane Abashidze (იოანე აბაშიძე) was killed in the battle as well. As King Erekle's right-hand historian, Oman Kherkheulidze, reports, Major Gabriel died along with Machabeli in the Krtsanisi Battle in 1795. Major Gabriel was an artilleryist and he had a title of Major. His contribution in the Krtsanisi battle was immense. He was an extremely courageous and fearless figure. In 1795, "Krtsanisi tragedy ended the history of the first Georgian professional theatre" — outlines famous Georgian theatre researcher Professor Vasil Kiknadze (ვასილ კიკნაძე) (a theatre critic from King Erekle's era) in his book "History of Georgian Theatre Drama."



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The establishment and development of public professional theatre in the King Erekle era was a significant phenomenon, not only for the city Telavi, but also for the history of Georgian theatre in general. Hence, this epoch delivered Georgian original classicism in the theatre, as well as drama and classicism in professional theatre (Khatiashvili 2015; Kiknadze 2003).

Since then, Georgia has endured many wars, and the theme of war and emigration has become a leitmotif in the repertoire of the Georgian theatre because of its ubiquitous presence in Georgian life (Khatiashvili 2015).

In modern times, war has not lost its relevance; Georgians have lived with it since the day they gained independence from the Soviet Union (Kiknadze 2003). Since the War of August 2008, Russia has occupied 20% of Georgian territory and deprived Georgia of dozens of villages, turning their citizens into displaced persons in their own country (Kilasonia 2013). Still today, the ghost of that war lingers near the occupation line; the war has not gone anywhere, and people live in anticipation of quietened embers being again stirred up.

The current generation of theatre directors was born during a period of war, social hardships, and general stress, and their experiences have been reflected in their plays as childhood nightmares, the ghost of the past, and as the current, uncertain situation of today (Lasha Chkhartishvili's Blog 2021; Maka Vsaadze's Blog 2021).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, directors born in independent Georgia (after 1991) addressed on stage the inheritance of the previous century and analyzed the results they had experienced: the wartime era they inherited and the city that greeted them became personal traumas for them and their generation (Pchiauri 2018).

## 2. Results

War and the city became the main foci of this generation of directors. To engage with these topics, they turned to documentary sources. They sought testimony from war survivors and developed original theatre texts based on their stories. The resulting dialogues often adopt texts verbatim from research documents because directors considered them the most convenient and successful way to communicate with their audience and to convey issues with greater intensity, drama, and realism.

Post-war traumatic experiences were reflected in Davit Tavadze (დათა თავაძე, born 1989) and David Gabunia's (დავით გაბუნია born 1982) play *Women of Troy* (ტროელი ქალები), first performed at the Royal District Theatre in 2013. Three years later (2016) and in the same theatre, this troupe staged *Prometheus-25 Years of Independence* (პრომეთე დამოუკიდებლობის 25 წელი), which spans the time from Georgia's independence (1991) to the present day. In 2018, Davit Khorbaladze (დავით ხორბალაძე, born 1993) and Mikheil Charkviani (მიხეილ ჩარკვიანი, born 1991) performed *Dead Cities* (მკვდარი ქალაქები), a play that describes cities devoid of life. In 2022, a few days after the start of the war in Ukraine, *Mother War* (დედა ომი) premiered at the Ozurgeti Theatre, a production staged by the young director Saba Aslamazishvili (საბა ასლამაზიშვილი, born 1995). In February 2022, at the Sandro Akhmeteli Theatre in Tbilisi, director Irakli Gogia (ირაკლი გოგია, born 1982) staged *Bad Roads* (ცუდი გზები), whose script was written by contemporary Ukrainian playwright Natalya Vorozhbit (born 1975). These contemporary plays were staged by young directors in theatres in Tbilisi, as well as in regional theatres.

*Women of Troy* is not only the best-recognized of these war-themed works, but it is also one of the most highly acclaimed productions of recent decades; it currently belongs to the active repertoire of the Royal District Theatre. Playwright Gabunia collaborated on the collaged text of the play, a reinterpretation of a fragment from Euripides's *The Trojan Women*. The group that authored the play created a completely new text based on documentary sources and the memories of women who fought in the 2008 war. At the same time, the playwright used fragments of texts by foreign playwrights, including Yasunari Kawabata, Oscar Wilde, and Michael Bond. In the play, only women speak about the war and the mourning it caused, and they are portrayed as possessing great moral and spiritual

strength. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, war became a way of life and mourning became such an everyday collective experience that it became banal. In addition, the play suggests, people forgot how to talk about mourning, a traumatic issue referred to repeatedly in the play, at the same time as characters discuss mourning with pain and feeling.

Like Euripides's characters, the real characters brought to life by the actresses in the play "Women of Troy" became heroines because they lost everyone and everything. "I am not proud of myself, but I am the heroine. And my mother is, too. My mother and I are heroines—as we have endured, as we have not broken down, as we have survived and saved the children as well. This is why we are heroines," says the character of actress Salome Maisashvili. Data Tavadze found a new way and language to talk about the war. His actors distanced themselves from the real characters. The new text (even in terms of structure) brought a new form. Regarding this issue, director Data Tavadze concludes in a conversation with us: "On the one hand, there is something rational that we want to focus on, what we want to talk about, and then we start thinking about how we want to talk about it, how to express it. It depends on how angry we are about what we want to talk about. For example, when we were standing, we knew that it should be very close to the audience because you can't shout these texts, I don't want these texts to sound so that the audience on the tiers can hear what these people are talking about. Because this text cannot have a loud expression. This text must have an intimate form, otherwise, you will not understand. If there is no whispering space, nothing will be said."

In 2016, on the 25th anniversary of Georgian independence, Tavadze and Gabunia's troupe premiered a new play, *Prometheus: 25 Years of Independence*. Their research was based on document fragments and memories that represented the 25-year history of Georgia's independence. The performance becomes a single chain of documentary material and literary texts that acquires the character of a destructive "play," as well as of a theatrical text. As with *Women of Troy*, the creative team offered a mix of documentary and artistic texts (the play uses fragments from Aeschylus's tragedies, as well as texts by Howard Barker, Augusto Boal, and Franz Kafka).

The play is based on the actors' real-life stories, and in it, the characters and the newly independent nation of Georgia are peers. Their biographies constitute the history of independent Georgia. The young actors of the Royal District Theatre reveal important details of their biographies and those of their generation, which are closely intertwined. As the Georgian critic Tamar Bokuchava (თამარ ბოკუჩავა, 1963–2019) wrote: "The performance is a kind of civic manifesto of the young troupe, which acknowledges its 25 years of existence. At the same time, it reflects on the nature and essence of life, theatre culture, humanity, youth, and the chain of discoveries and disappointments that accompanies the process of growing up." The play reveals the assessment of the young Georgian generation regarding its era and the history of independence. The reality, which became an artistic fiction in the play, is mutilated, as are their lives, their visions about their homeland, and, finally, their era.

The generation born in the year of the declaration of independence of Georgia is looking for its own independence within its peer homeland, as it remembers and forgets the experience.

Based on the history of people, the play also shows the history of a country that gained its independence but has hardly learned anything. It seems we slowly, painfully, and reflexively get out of a difficult situation and go back to the dark past. Prometheus and independent Georgia have one important thing in common: a painful fate.

*Women of Troy* highlights three themes: war, mourning, and women's experiences. As with Euripides's characters, the real-life characters brought to life by the actors become heroines because they lose everyone and everything. Based on the history of everyday life, this play also exposes the history of a country that gained independence but has not learned important lessons from its past. It seems that Georgians slowly and painfully extricate themselves from difficult situations only to return to the same tribulations of the past. Prometheus and independent Georgia have one important common element: a fate

of suffering. Old, familiar, and seemingly insignificant stories from the past enter the play, which is thus transformed into an epic that describes Georgian national history, one of blackmail, civil war, displacement, hunger, and violence.

Director Misha Charkviani came up with an original (in the universal sense of the word) scenic solution to the original text that synthesized the message and “its form of its delivery that generated a cathartic experience for the audience” (Radio Freedom 2015). He placed the audience amidst a vicious circle, in which the actors function as trapped individuals. The circle physically rotates and the actors change places, but the audience remains in one place; they travel in their imaginations, as do the actors physically. All participants return to their original physical locations and conditions, which conveys the notion of a vicious and unbreakable circle, a wheel of fate that travels through space and time yet returns everyone to their starting points.

The play *Dead Cities*, staged by Mikheil Charkviani at the Poti Drama Theatre in 2018 and written by the young playwright and director Davit Khorbaladze based on the stories of the actors and residents of the town of Poti, explores the tragic fate of the dead and half-empty cities. The problems posed in the play are generalized and projected onto a global scale. The authors tell the stories of abandoned, ruined, and lifeless cities, a legacy inherited by the younger generation since independence.

*Dead Cities* is a play that addresses a specific, local problem, yet it examines more than a particular location to acquire global significance. The inhabitants of the small town, the characters of this dramatic work, ask for help. The residents of the city of Poti ask for assistance from the government, society, and the press to improve social conditions. The abandoned town evokes the Chernobyl tragedy, an intentional parallel in the dramaturgical text. Charkviani’s aspiration to shock the audience and, more importantly, the authorities was clear and pedagogical. He wanted to expose and publicize a problem and encourage its solution. He sought to reveal the problems of dead cities and awaken a dormant sense of civic activity. The spectrum of problems he addressed included the inertness of civil society, which he challenges to talk about social problems. Charkviani concludes through his research that talking always makes sense, even if you do not believe that strategy will change things. The director assumes that speech always has meaning, while silence and the avoidance of problems exacerbate suffering. The director believes it is better for an artist to talk openly about problems and topics relevant to modern society (Radio Freedom 2015).

While, structurally, *Dead Cities* does not conform to the rules of classical dramaturgy because there is not a clear plot development, witness texts evoke emotions when they assume an artistic form and are heard from the stage. *Dead Cities* also contains musical elements composed by Khorbaladze. The repetition of certain phrases intensifies the emotion the author seeks to communicate. “Dead Cities” is not a traditional, classical dramaturgy in its structure. However, this text obviously evokes emotion when heard from the stage and assumes an artistic form. Davit Khorbaladze’s text, “Dead Cities,” also contains musical elements. The repetition of certain phrases not only enhances the emotion (what you want to say), but it also acquires a kind of musicality. The author of the music is Davit Khorbaladze.

Actor, director, and playwright *Data Tavadze* started to formulate *Mother War* in August 2008 during the Russian–Georgian War while on holiday in Tserovani, close to the battlefield; traces of the author’s feelings and experiences emerge in the play. *Mother War* won the highest award bestowed in 2013 by the Austrian–Georgian project “Conversation Without Borders” and “The New Georgian Play.” In 2013, a theatrical reading of *Mother War* was organized in Kyiv as part of the British–Ukrainian–Georgian project “New Writing,” just as Russia annexed Crimea and declared a hybrid war on Ukraine. The world premiere of the play took place in 2015 in the German city of Zittau and was in the theatre’s active repertoire for two years.

The first stage interpretation of *Mother War* in Georgia took place at the Ozurgeti Aleksandre Tsutsunava Theatre in Tbilisi and was directed by Saba Aslamazishvili. This performance expanded the experimental parameters of the Ozurgeti Theatre. It occurred against

the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This revived and intensified the festering wound of the 2008 war because the Georgian audience was reminded of its suffering then and of the relevance of war as an eternal, lived theme.

From the stage of Tbilisi's Akhmeteli Drama Theatre, the characters of *Mother War* tell authentic, painful, and recent stories that relate to the world's arguably most urgent problem—war. Sadly, this topic is again current, since war is raging in our friendly neighboring country of Ukraine, a situation that also affects Georgians. In Aslamazishvili's staging, we encounter various generations, including war veterans and war novices. Kindness seems to vanish among those engaged in war when the instinct for survival dominates. Tavadze's apt metaphor—"People turn into beasts, like dragonflies into locusts"—is realized as the play unfolds. The imaginary metamorphosis of dragonflies into locusts unfolds parallel to the events of the play. In the finale, the artistic metaphor and the process of turning people into beasts intersect.

Data Tavadze and Saba Aslamazishvili sometimes tell the story of war and people at war with humor and irony, especially in Zina (Tamar Mdinaradze) and Manana's (Shorena Gvetadze) dialogues. The severity of the war is softened by their slightly absurd dialogues. Data Tavadze generalizes the problem from local, almost documentarian, concrete facts and provides it a global context. The director tries not to go beyond the local tragedy and to preserve the authenticity of the story. However, in the finale, he still cannot avoid mentioning the world wars, which Tamar Mdinaradze (Zina) reads in a declamatory manner, first in a gallant tone and then in an energy-less tone.

In 2022, Irakli Gogia (born 1982), an artistic director of the Akhmeteli Theatre, staged a performance of several short stories by the modern Ukrainian author Natalya Vorozhbit at the Georgian Theatre in Tbilisi shortly after the start of the latest Russian aggression in Ukraine; actors interpreted her war chronicle through documentary methods. During the course of the play, the audience was profoundly moved and watched with rapt attention the stories of war heroes unfolding on stage. Gogia shows, on the one hand, individuals corrupted by war and deprived of their dignity, self-respect, and integrity, but he also shows empathetic people who care for each other, who retain the strength and ability to save themselves and others, and who maintain and restore their dignity and self-esteem.

At the edges of the stage of the Akhmeteli Theatre, there are several windows, and in its depth, there are iron barrels in which the fire is burning. Here, we can see a dilapidated and damaged bus stop, which is a waiting room for passengers. The scenography is in dark tones, although it is implied that the environment in which the citizens of Donbas lived before the war was bright and colorful, but the war here together with the people changed everything.

This is how the new generation of Georgian playwrights and directors regard the problems of the last century. They are creating a new Georgian theatre, both in terms of form and content, based on a deconstructive approach to play texts. They share hurt and concern regarding both the past and the present because they realize that problems of the past linger with the same intensity and relevance as earlier. Still, the wars of their era have been the most destructive, leading to cities losing young people. They deal with these topics despite spiritual and physical suffering. They speak loudly and courageously, offering ways to solve them, but the problem, unfortunately, remains a problem.

### 3. Discussion

*Women of Troy* highlighted three main topics: war, mourning, and women. As was the case in Euripides's plays, the individuals brought to life by the actresses became heroines because they lost everyone and everything.

Based on a microcosmic history of individuals, the play also shows the history of a country that gained independence but seems not to have learned helpful lessons. It seems that Georgians slowly and painfully extricate themselves from difficult situations but quickly return to the dystopic conditions of the past. Prometheus and independent Georgia have one important element in common: a painful fate. Patches of history grad-

ually enter *“Women of Troy.”* Old and familiar, seemingly insignificant stories, transform into an epic that describes the story of Georgia: independence movements, displacement, civil wars, blackmail, hunger, and violence.

Misha Charkviani devised an original (in the universal sense of the word) scenic solution to the original text that synthesized the message and the form of its delivery in order to induce a cathartic experience for the audience. He situated the audience physically in a circle in which the actors function as citizens and become individuals locked in a vicious circle. The circle rotates and the characters of the performance change places, but the public (the audience) remains in one place, just as the artists return to their original locations. It is a vicious and unbreakable circle, a kind of wheel of fate that travels through space and time and brings everyone back to their starting points.

In Aslamazishvili’s play, we come across various generations—war veterans and war debutants. Kindness disappears completely in people of war, and only the instinct of self-survival, selfishness, dominates. *“People turn into beasts, like dragonflies into locusts.”* Data Tavadze’s apt metaphor literally and emotionally unfolds in the play. The scientific story of the transformation of dragonflies into locusts occurs parallel to the events of the play. In the finale, the artistic metaphor and the process of turning people into beasts intersect.

Gogia shows, on the one hand, people who are finally corrupted by war, deprived of their sense of dignity, lose self-respect and integrity. At the same time, he shows people who care for each other, who still have the strength and ability to save themselves, restore their dignity, and retain their self-esteem.

The performances that I reviewed in this article have been prepared based on the press and the articles of professionals in this field, as well as on my own experiences and opinions. The article, *“The Reality of War and the Ghosts of the Past,”* by Sofo Kilasonia (born 1981), a Georgian researcher of modern art, which was published in *“Aril”* magazine on 25 October 2013, helped me significantly in the research process. The researcher and author appreciates Data Tavadze’s play and notes that this play is much more; it is a social action to wake up society.

#### 4. Conclusions

This is how the new generation of Georgian playwrights and directors perceives the most debilitating problems of the last century. To address them, they have created a new approach to Georgian theatre, both in terms of form and content, with one based on new deconstructed theatre texts. The new generation feels hurt and worried by the past and the present because past problems have not lost their intensity and relevance. History seems, in some measure, to repeat itself. The wars of their era have turned out to be the most degrading in history and have emptied cities of young people. These theatre professionals deal honestly with the spiritual and physical suffering they and their predecessors have endured. They speak loudly and courageously, and they offer ways to solve them. However, sadly, the problem of war and the suffering it engenders remain a problem.

#### 5. Materials and Methods

In research, we mainly rely on historical facts, monographs, studies, and works of scholars. In addition, the work is prepared based on the periodical press, which was published in various local or international press. The work also uses reviews published on specific productions in professional publications and interviews with members of the production group (playwright, director, actor). The vast majority of these materials can be obtained online in electronic format on the website of the National Library of Georgia (in the section of press and periodicals, scholarly journals) in the corresponding catalogs on the website of the electronic archive of the Georgian Theatre in museums of specific theatres.

Research methods: We use a qualitative method in research. In addition, we conduct secondary (review, articles of performances) and primary data (news, interviews) analysis. The analytical method is one of the most intensively used methods in the process of

research preparation. It is also impossible to prepare the present work without using the method of observation and analysis of the used literature and sources.

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