

CREATIVE RESEARCH OF GENDER STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY GEORGIAN THEATRE

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

Creative Research of Gender Studies in Contemporary Georgian Theatre

This article aims to examine the intersection of gender studies and contemporary Georgian theatre, exploring how gender dynamics and representations are portrayed on stage. The study seeks to shed light on how Georgian theatre reflects, challenges, and shapes societal perceptions of gender roles, identities, and power dynamics. By analyzing selected performances and artistic practices, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of gender issues within the Georgian cultural context.

KEYWORDS

gender studies, contemporary Georgian theatre, feminism, Giorgi Jamburia, *Berserkers*

In Western theatre history, particularly from the 1960s onward, research has become a fundamental aspect of theatrical discourse and practice, notably within the experimental works of influential theatre practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner, and Ariane Mnouchkine, among others. These practitioners delved into new concepts, methodologies, or phenomena within the performing arts, aiming to expand the field's knowledge. By disregarding conventional cultural paradigms and exploring uncharted territories, each of these practitioners established unique creative spaces where the potential for innovative, authentic forms was hidden. The rise of "alternative theatre" resulting from their endeavors fundamentally transformed perceptions of theatre art, expanding the horizons of artistic possibility. For instance, Schechner, in his practical work and theoretical approach known as "Environmental Theatre", integrated spectators as "scene-makers" rather than mere "scene-watchers".¹ This was closely linked to his exploration of the dynamic relationship between actor, space, and spectator. Similarly, in his iconic production "Dionysus in 69", Schechner undertook a scholarly exploration of the ritualistic origins of theatre, aiming to reconnect with its primal essence. This, along

with numerous other instances, can be interpreted as an illustration of the director assuming the role of a researcher. And now, the question arises: if some of the greatest theatre directors have integrated scholarly investigation into their artistic works, why should academic culture exclude creativity from its pursuits, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence? This question sets the stage for a broader discourse. Following this introduction, I will proceed to the primary focus of this article: the examination of Creative Research within the context of Gender Studies in Contemporary Georgian Theatre. Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that examines and explores the social, cultural, and political aspects of gender. It involves analyzing how gender shapes and influences various facets of human experience, including identity, behavior, relationships, power dynamics, and social structures. Gender Studies emerged as a distinct field of study in the latter half of the 20th century, influenced by feminist movements and activism. It draws from a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, literature, cultural studies, and political science. Since the 1990s, gender studies within the performing arts, including theatre

¹ Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater*, Applause, New York, 2000, p. xxvi.

arts, have gained considerable importance. Towards the end of the 20th century, driven by the momentum of feminist movements, there emerged a critical demand within scholarly circles to examine gender roles and representations across all facets of public engagement, including theatre. Gender studies in contemporary performing arts encompass a broad range of creative research and exploration. From avant-garde theatre productions to immersive multimedia performances, artists are continually challenging conventions, interrogating societal norms, and engaging with complex themes. Scholars in this field alike challenge traditional notions of gender, explore diverse identities, and address issues of power, representation, and inclusion. This article seeks to examine the intersection of gender studies and contemporary Georgian theatre, exploring how gender dynamics and representations are portrayed on stage. By analyzing selected performances and artistic practices, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of gender issues within the Georgian cultural context. Cultural changes do not happen instantly; rather, they are preceded by various socio-political processes. In Georgia, gender has been perceived more or less as a social science and a subject of analysis since the 1990s, which coincided

with the beginning of significant political shifts in society. At the legislative level, the state began addressing issues related to gender when the Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law on Gender Equality in 2010. This was followed by the adoption of a multilateral anti-discrimination law in 2014, which bans all forms of discrimination, including based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, even after a decade, both the state and Georgian society remain distant from ensuring the proper fulfilment of these laws. Challenges related to gender equality, domestic violence, sexual harassment, women's rights, LGBT+ rights and various other issues persist and continue to grow. Efforts towards addressing these issues are imperative for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society in Georgia. Traditionally, Georgian theatre has been shaped by cultural and societal norms, often reflecting conventional gender roles and expectations. However, since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable growth in interest in exploring and questioning these norms within the domain of theatre and performance. The Royal District Theatre, which holds a distinctive position within the Georgian theatre landscape, was one of the first to advocate for gender equality on the Georgian stage. Over the past two decades, The Royal District Theatre

has begun to explore gender representations within Georgian theatre. They have initiated an analysis of the portrayal of women in theatrical texts, the involvement of women in the production process, and the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms within the theatre industry. If we examine the repertoire of this theatre over the past two decades, we will notice a growing emphasis on gender issues in their performances. Let's consider some examples. For a considerable period, the theatre's most recognized performance was *Women of Troy*, which premiered in 2013 and remains in the theatre's repertoire. The play was directed by Georgian theatre director Data Tavadze and adapted by Georgian playwright Davit Gabunia. The devised play is based on the deconstruction of Euripides' iconic tragedy to depict the experiences of Georgian women from the 1990s to the present. The war experiences of these women used as verbatim material, form the core of the narrative. It highlights the enduring cycle of violence against women, which has remained unchanged throughout history. Women's needs during wartime are often neglected, and their complaints go unheard. The show aims to give voice to the silenced and present post-Soviet Georgian history through women's narratives, where "personal becomes

political". With this production, the theatre explores feminist reinterpretations of classic plays, offering a fresh perspective on gender dynamics and challenging traditional narratives.

Another notable example is *Phaedra in Flames*, which had its world premiere on October 28, 2022, at the Royal District Theatre. This production, written and directed by Nino Kharatishvili, a renowned Georgian novelist, playwright, and theatre director based in Germany, stands out among recent works of the theatre for its exploration of gender and gender identity issues. Through a contemporary interpretation of the Greek myth, Kharatishvili examines the complex interplay between human freedom, societal norms, and political-religious intrigues. In her version, Phaedra is depicted as weary and disenchanted with the male-dominated world's phallogocentric authoritarianism. Her romantic connection with a woman serves to deconstruct the traditional narrative surrounding Phaedra's character. Among the famous Phaedras in world dramaturgy, who is Kharatishvili's Phaedra? She is the aging queen of Athens, burdened with disillusionment and nihilism. Nothing holds significance for her anymore as she realizes that the best years of her life have passed in vain (Phaedra: "*I've missed out on my life, all because my father wanted*

to uphold his word... Can I now take back everything that I could not use, that I could not live? My old age should solely belong to me and no one else."²). She is married to Theseus, a renowned figure known for his successful conquest of the Minotaur. Yet, despite his achievements, he harbors a fear of assuming and delegating power to his heir. Together, they have two sons: Demophone, resembling Hippolytus in his pursuits, athletic abilities, and lack of interest in Phaedra, and Akamas, who contrasts sharply with his brother by embodying femininity and a strong bond with his mother. The relationship between Phaedra and her sons invites a Freudian analysis, given the dynamics portrayed between the characters. However, this article takes a different approach from any potentially "misogynistic" interpretations of Freudian theory, aiming to provide a more balanced perspective. Departing from tradition, in Kharatishvili's interpretation, Phaedra's affections turn towards her eldest son's fiancée, Persea, thereby dismantling the myth. The play's central theme transcends conventional notions of heterosexual love, focusing instead on the romantic entanglement between two women. The tragedy lies in the societal intolerance towards

unconventional relationships. Kharatishvili's portrayal of Phaedra transcends phallogocentricity; rather, she emerges as a victim of a world entrenched in phallogocentric values. Nino Kharatishvili's Phaedra defies the traditional archetype of a tragic woman consumed by unfulfilled love. Despite her age, she ultimately finds the love she has yearned for, experiencing both the joy of receiving and giving love. In an unexpected twist, Phaedra emerges as a character marked by happiness, yet tragedy strikes in the finale (reminiscent of the cruel endings found in Sarah Kane's works) with the death of her beloved, Persea, leading Phaedra to take her own life. Nevertheless, Phaedra finds her "feminist" identity, as she no longer serves men's logos. Finally, she finds her true self. (Persea: "You do know who you are, don't you? Does memory awaken within you, Phaedra?"³). Their profound love shatters the patriarchal world they inhabit, leaving the male characters to confront the harsh reality of a transformed existence. Among the celebrated Phaedras created by male playwrights, Nino Kharatishvili's interpretation stands notably close to that of the woman playwright, Sarah Kane, not only in its exploration of cruelty (such as the tragic death of Persea in the finale, torn apart by dogs, eerily

2 Nino Kharatishvili, *Servants' Autumn and other plays*, Intelekti Publishing, Tbilisi, 2022, pp. 147-148.

3 Ibid, p. 223.

reminiscent of Kane's Phaedra) but also in its incorporation of other elements (e.g., confrontational style, breaking boundaries, emotional intensity, social critique, cathartic experience, uncompromising realism, and so forth) typical of "In-yer-face theatre". The production itself is likely aimed primarily at shocking the Georgian audience, much like Kane's productions once did to the conservative British stage. I believe this resemblance is intentional. For the Georgian playwright, the female version of this ancient myth holds significant importance as a "primary source", and Kharatishvili's Phaedra is depicted from a distinctly feminist perspective, emphasizing the depth and complexity of the character. It's worth noting that the seemingly disparate plays by the German-speaking Georgian writer Nino Kharatishvili share a crucial commonality: their central figures are remarkable women. Each of these characters leaves an enduring impact, showcasing their strength and determination to confront societal norms. It is of interest also that Kharatishvili's plays, though written in German and spanning diverse historical, geographical and temporal contexts, remain closely intertwined with Georgian reality,

addressing contemporary issues that resonate deeply within Georgian society. This remains equally true for *Phaedra in Flames*: In addition to addressing gender and gender identity issues, critiques of religion emerge, shedding light on the hypocrisy of Pharisaical clergy and high officials who publicly condemn others for transgressions they themselves conceal - a portrayal that closely mirrors the realities of Georgian society.

In short, by showcasing performances centered around feminist ideas, the Royal District Theatre plays a significant role in promoting gender equality, raising awareness about women's issues, and fostering discussions on social justice. It provides a platform for artists and playwrights to share their unique perspectives and stories, amplifying marginalized voices and encouraging audiences to reflect on the topics presented.

Furthermore, the younger generation of playwrights, directors, and performers has been increasingly vocal in their exploration of gender-related topics, challenging traditional gender roles and norms. Among them is the young Georgian theatre director Giorgi Jamburia⁴, who stands out as one of the most

4 Giorgi Jamburia, born in 1992 in Tbilisi, Georgia, is a playwright and theatre director. After graduating from Heidelberg College in Germany, he pursued advanced studies at the Free University of Berlin, specializing in philosophy and German philology. In 2016, he continued his studies at the Berlin University of the Arts in the Faculty of Drama. There, he graduated with honors in 2020. Jamburia's debut play, *The Death of Emperor Heliogabalus*, performed on the stages of theatres in Berlin, Potsdam, and Graz. In November 2022, Giorgi Jamburia

prominent emerging talents in the field. With profound expertise in theatre history and theory, in his practical-experimental, and I must emphasize, laboratory work, he seeks to explore new language and forms, striving to rethink the conventional theatrical experience. His productions break away from ready-made concepts, principles, and rules, aiming to redefine the boundaries of traditional theatre. In his second performance on the Georgian stage, *Berserkers II: Sunny Side*, a part of the mythological-theatrical cycle "Berserkers"⁵ presented at the independent company "City Theatre" and premiered on December 19, 2023, Giorgi Jamburia thoroughly explores gender-related issues within Georgian society. The performance draws inspiration from the prose of feminist writer Ketiv Nizharadze, who, despite her prominence, has been largely excluded for many years within Georgian literary discourse. Nizharadze's bold narratives portray individuals challenging the patriarchal status quo. In the late 1980s, during the collapse of the Soviet Union, the author, using her powerful female

voice, illustrated and confronted an environment where women's voices, including her own, were largely ignored. Her writing gained new attention following the release of her collection of texts titled *Sunny Side* by Melani Publishing in 2021. Giorgi Jamburia's interest in Ketiv Nizharadze's work is connected to this specific publication, as he took the initiative to stage her prose in its scenic version for the first time in the Georgian theatre. Jamburia's theatrical work can be interpreted as an endeavor to reinvigorate her legacy within the Georgian cultural milieu - a task he accomplishes with remarkable mastery. *Berserker II: Sunny Land*, rich in post-dramatic theatre elements, carries notable significance within contemporary Georgian theatre. It is important to note that, the rise of the post-dramatic theatre concept seems to represent a recent development within the broader context of Georgian theatrical tradition. This trend reflects a more general phenomenon wherein the avant-garde movements observed in Western theatre since the 1960s are gradually influencing Georgian theatrical practices. It could be

made his Georgian theatre debut with *The Berserkers I: Mission* at the independent theatre company "Haraki", adapted from Heiner Müller's *The Mission*. This production earned the prestigious "Tavisupali" ("Free") award for the best production of 2023. He has translated plays by Heiner Müller (Publishing House "Pegasus", 2022) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film Georgian State University Press, 2024) from German into Georgian. Giorgi Jamburia was honored with the "Elizabeth Orbeliani Prize" by the President of Georgia in 2024. He is also the founder and director of the "Performing Arts Laboratory."

⁵ Giorgi Jamburia interprets "Berserkers" as the state of a person being both spiritually and physically fearless.

argued that Giorgi Jamburia's theatrical style and expression closely align with the characteristics of postmodern theatre (It is necessary to highlight that the director regards the "Berserker" cycle as a unique form of theatre, termed "a new processional theatre", emphasizing a procession-like nature with a focus on the process). Notably, as said above, his work reflects a departure from orthodox theatrical forms and an intentional rejection of conventional norms. The performance *Berserker II: Sunny Land* serves as a testament to this viewpoint, showcasing a wide range of approaches marked by fragmentation, self-reference, intertextuality, the incorporation of meta-theatrical elements, cultural and political critique, language deconstruction, interactive and participatory elements, innovative approaches to dramaturgical sources, and most significantly, a critical exploration of gender and gender identity. Despite his young age, Jamburia demonstrates a distinctive theatrical style that sets him apart from his peers, allowing for easy recognition and differentiation. One could argue that within the Georgian theatre landscape, only a select few directors possess a distinct and unmistakable theatrical "handwriting", a feat often regarded as among the most challenging to attain. Remarkably, Giorgi Jamburia accomplishes this

feat at an early stage in his career, distinguishing himself through his singular artistic expression. His artistic approach is also manifest in his second production, *Berserker II: Sunny Side*. The director's approach to language, text, and articulation stands out as particularly noteworthy. Currently, one of the primary focuses of his theatrical research involves delving into the complexities of the Georgian language, extracting new insights and knowledge from its bosom. In the second part of *Berserker*, as in the first, the performers use recitative and articulation as expressive tools. The deliberate play of consonants within words emerges as a distinctive hallmark, already becoming synonymous with the production. This particular style of expression proves to be an effective means of conveying strong and uncompromising messages from the stage – theatrical form harmoniously aligns with its content. In today's image-centric era, where interpersonal communication becomes increasingly challenging, the director and an exceptionally talented acting ensemble introduce a unique language and approach to connecting with the past, each other, and society at large. From the stage, the audience hears texts reminiscent of feminist manifestos. Meanwhile, the director explores the performers' boundaries, questioning how far

they can drive themselves and where their limits lie. Equally, this question applies to the audience. The production extends for four hours, yet the tempo-rhythm is so finely balanced that the audience remains engaged throughout. The production can be compared to an initiation, suggesting that a successful experience will result in leaving the theatre with newfound knowledge as if being initiated into a secret or obscure group through a ritualistic experience. In this spirited exchange between stage and spectators, Giorgi Jamburia's Theatre earns its epithet as "The Theatre of the Impossible". Here, both performers and spectators alike engage in challenges that appear unachievable, fostering an environment where creativity knows no boundaries. The recipient of this kind of production transcends the mass audience, instead appealing to those who enjoy exploring new and uncharted paths.

While private and independent theatre companies in Georgia have the freedom to address sensitive topics and issues through their performances, many state-run theatres face obstacles in doing so due to the influence of state policy, religious institutions, and public opinion. Although exceptions exist, the prevailing trend suggests that state-run theatres encounter limitations,

which hinder their artistic creation and operational effectiveness. These limitations also extend to the forms of theatrical expression, often appearing old-fashioned in the context of contemporary standards. This not only hampers creative innovation but also limits their ability to engage with relevant societal issues. As a result, I argue that addressing these challenges is essential for maintaining the cultural relevance and vitality of such institutions. Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his groundbreaking work *Postdramatic Theatre*, offers an interesting opinion in this regard: "Feminist theory, queer theory and postcolonial theatre scholarship, as well as the more recent analyses of disability and performance and age and performance, have all pointed out that performance has the power to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and the 'other' – more so than realist mimetic drama, which remains caught in representation and thus often reproduces prevailing ideologies"⁶ Lehmann's assertion underscores the transformative potential of performance, particularly in challenging established norms of identity and otherness. In resonance with the challenges encountered by state-run theatres in Georgia, his perspective advocates for the exploration of diverse theatrical

⁶ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, New York, 2006, p.5.

forms beyond conventional mimetic drama. By embracing feminist, queer, postcolonial, and other critical perspectives, these theatres can dismantle prevailing ideologies and foster critical dialogue. Thus, by heeding Lehmann's call, state-run theatres can reclaim cultural relevance and vitality, offering a platform for engaging with sensitive societal issues.

The examples presented in this article on gender within contemporary Georgian theatre present variations on the theme rather than serving as a comprehensive and exhaustive study of the matter. Present-day Georgian theatre is evidently in a phase of self-discovery, during which it will develop a language to address audiences on various critical issues, including gender, thus contributing to the advancement of both the theatre itself and society. Thus, I wish for Georgian theatre to dance with the fearless spirit of "Berserkers".

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