

# on love in uzbekistan



We've just arrived in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. I'm a theatre director and Northern Irishman and my colleague Adam is a photographer, a South African Jewish Londoner. We're here to try to understand the Uzbek question. Billy Connelly springs to mind: A Northern Irishman and a South African Jewish Londoner have just arrived in Tashkent to try to understand the Uzbek question... Anyway, we're here for a week.

Tashkent doesn't look like Central Asia. Well actually, it looks exactly like Central Asia, it just doesn't look like the current news footage of its neighbour, Afghanistan. But at least we know where Uzbekistan is now. We're in a Stan beside Afghanistan. The British Council have asked me to make one of my Theatre Essays here and Adam is going to document the entire process with a view to exhibiting the experience both in Tashkent and London. I need to give you some background.

I've created a new theatre company called On Theatre. The company is called On Theatre as each piece of work we make is On a given subject. I call our work Theatre Essays. It's a new form of theatre that I've been developing for the past seven years. Like a written essay, a Theatre Essay starts with a theme and a question. We ask the question to Experts, Artists, Interest Groups and members of the public, then we dramatise their responses and stories. When the material is edited and structured we have our final piece. A Theatre Essay. We're making one for London next year On Ego. The question is: Who am I, now? We've been working with Experts including a neuropsychologist, a psychotherapist and a philosopher; with Artists, with Interest Groups; the brain-damaged, those in therapy, and we've gathered stories from a cross-section of the London public. It will be performed in London next year. But now we are most certainly not in London. Now we're in Central Asia looking for a new subject and a new question and wondering if anyone will tell us any stories at all.

We're met at the airport by our guide and translator, Zohidjon. He introduces himself as Zett. This time we're Abbott and Costello: Zohidjon? Yes, Zett. Zett? Yes. We were expecting Zohidjon. Yes, hi. Hi. So you're Zohidjon? Yes. Right. I'm Mick. Nick. No, Mick. Hi Nick. No, Mick. From Michael. Ah, Michael. Yes. Mick. And you're Zett? Yes. And I'm Adam. (pause) Hi Adam. Hi. Thank God for the Jews! Adam's on first.

Explaining what a Theatre Essay is, and that we've come in search of a subject and a question is much the simplest conversation we have in the car. We're all tired, nervous and excited so it's hard to engage. I look over my shoulder as we turn into the hotel. Are we being followed Zett? Probably. Don't worry about it. I'll see you tomorrow.

We're too late for a drink that night but we'll make up for it in the next few days. Food and drink are cultural and political signifiers. And for a country that's 90 per cent Muslim I'm slightly surprised to see pork and vodka everywhere I turn. I've a grand theory about alcohol consumption, religious zealotry and state control but I'll save it for another time.

Today we're meeting all the theatre people. We visit each theatre in turn. There's only four and our hosts are understandably suspicious of our motives. The Uzbek National Theatre has just had a reflective glass face-lift and the Artistic Director is very proud of his newly mirrored facade. It's discussion of the work we want to do that breaks the ice with him and his leading actors. On Theatre.. Theatre Essays.. collecting stories.. in search of a question .. The Russian style Gorky Theatre is next. More discussion and more reflective glass. We watch part of a performance with the director and I'm surprised and delighted to see a majority of young faces in the audience.

Following hilarious workshops at the National Youth Theatre we arrive at the Ilkhom. The Ilkhom Theatre is the only independent theatre in Tashkent. It's small, has no money, produces radical work and there isn't a pane of reflective glass to be seen. It feels like home. I suppose it reminds me of my old theatre in London, The Gate. The auditorium holds about 250 people, the actors train together as a school and company and upstairs they have access to a beautiful gallery-like space. Celebration. The Ilkhom will be our key collaborator.

Adam is not a theatre person, he's got different eyes. That's why I love him, that's why he's here. It's Day Two in the On Theatre House and we have an hour off before a dinner party. Zett takes us to where the young people hang out. It's a street called Broadway and it's a cross between a fair ground and a market. I don't notice them but Adam does. Hip hop rappers. Adam's photographed the music industry for years, I didn't even know who Tupac was. I do now. Zett does more than notice them, he knows them and now I know why he's called Zett and not Zohidjon. Zett is cool. Adam's not surprised to find child gangsters here, he's surprised to hear rap. Rap is a politically provocative art-form, surely it's banned. It is banned and The Innocent Family have to perform secretly. We tell them we would like them to be involved with our project. Suspicion tumbles into disbelief. No one has asked them to be involved in anything before. We leave their bar when The Innocent Family begin to demonstrate their gangster credentials. I say goodbye to the deputy as he picks up some random bloke and holds him upside down. Just keeping it real I guess.

An obvious theme for our Theatre Essay is freedom and an obvious question is: What does freedom mean in Uzbekistan? The problem is that freedom is such a shrill word here. The question is loaded with implications, particularly when it comes from us. We're not comfortable with this theme but decide to test the question when we reach the Ferghana valley. This famous valley is divided from Tashkent by a long ridge of mountains and the drive is dangerous. It's dark, very dark and old Russian trucks have no lights. Neither do Uzbek cows who use the pot-holes in the road as drinking wells. We arrive, just about in one piece, and head off to a local restaurant for a steak.

Ferghana is not only famous for its cotton and silk. This was the home of Abduvali Mirzayev, the foremost among the new generation of Uzbek imams. He didn't exactly speak out against Uzbekistan's government but he did preach passionately about the need for truth and justice. In the late summer of 1995, Mirzayev flew from Tashkent to Moscow to attend a conference on religious affairs. The thing is he didn't arrive. The thing is he hasn't been heard of since. I'm staying with an historian in Ferghana so I ask him about it. He doesn't reply and instead gives me the official history of Uzbekistan written by Islam Karimov. Islam Karimov is the President. As I said, freedom is a shrill word in Uzbekistan.

I've brought a dramaturg and a famous actor from the Ilkhom Theatre with us. They both speak Uzbek. Most people in Tashkent speak Russian, most people in Ferghana speak Uzbek. To their palpable alarm I present them with dictaphones and give them an hour to collect a story each from a stranger. The theme is freedom and the question: what does freedom mean to you? The rest of us are going to visit a silk factory and I'm excited. Five years ago I ran the Gate Theatre with an intrepid French producer called Philippe Le Moine. Philippe is now the international department at the National Theatre Studio and has agreed to manage the project. We share a passion for Eastern Europe and Central Asia and we always planned to make a piece of theatre about the Silk Route. Now I'm on the silk route and I'm going to bring him back photographs.

Our story collectors return. The dramaturg is as dour as ever but the actor has a spring in his step. The actor's name is Boris and he's just been named the most sexy man in Uzbekistan by the leading glossy magazine here. Anyway, Boris has a story. After several abortive attempts he managed to persuade someone to let him record them. It was an old

lady working as a public toilet attendant. To the old lady, freedom meant more than having money, freedom meant sadness. Nine years ago the old lady's daughter secretly sold the family home and left her mother and the country. After four years of living on the street the old lady met an old man. They now live together, taking it in turns to provide each other with food when one of them is sick. The old lady misses her daughter but thinks that she will never see her again. We listen to the tape and we all know how beautifully the story is told. But the story's not really about freedom, it's about love. The old lady's final sentence is: I will die soon and not because I'm old. I will die soon because my heart is broken and I don't know how to fix it.

It's our final night in Tashkent and we haven't found our theme and we haven't found our question. I'm despondent but I'm being a good director and lying to everyone. "Of course we'll find the theme! Of course we'll find the question!" It's always like this! The truth is that it is always like this when I start to make a Theatre Essay. Except I always forget. Tonight's going to be good though. We're having dinner with young human rights lawyers. My sister and my best friend are both human rights lawyers. They are front line justice fighters and they remind me about my central aspiration for my work: to stand up and to make theatre which matters to people, theatre which contributes to society and attempts to make a difference.

It's the first good meal we've had in Uzbekistan. Obviously Adam and I can't eat a thing because we've contracted the local dysentery but nevertheless the dinner is a riot. Our new friends have a hard time fighting for human rights in Uzbekistan. I'm sitting beside a very charismatic charity worker who I vaguely fall in love with as she tells me her story. Her father was a military man. She was an A grade student and unbeknownst to her family, won an international scholarship to study in England. They were thrilled for her so she travelled to London. A year later she returned with a masters degree in human rights law. Dad locked them up, I try to get them out. The proud father watched his daughter work and suddenly he couldn't do his job anymore. So he resigned. He didn't want to compromise his daughter. The family has now relocated. Another beautiful Uzbek story. Another love story. And of course our theme. Quietly waiting for us to discover it: On Theatre, on love again but this time On Love in Uzbekistan.

A final visit to the toilet, a final glass of cheap wine and it's back to the hotel to pack. I'm so full of adrenalin that I'm practically buzzing. I just can't wait to tell Adam. On Love in Uzbekistan. Adam smiles, but I'm still too excited so I phone Philippe. On Love in Uzbekistan. Philippe laughs. It's that French laugh of his which lets me know that he thinks the idea is good. Finally I calm down and go to bed wondering: How does love work in Uzbekistan?

So, the making of the Theatre Essay On Love (in Uzbekistan) has begun and Adam and I are about to go back to Tashkent. This time Philippe's coming too. We're delivering twenty dictaphones and hundreds of tapes. Experts, Artists and Interest Groups have agreed to act as love story collectors and I can't wait to brief them. The adventure is about to continue. Uninvited, Frank Carson pops into my head: A Northern Irishman, a South African Jewish Londoner and a Frenchman go to Uzbekistan looking for love...