

The History of Georgian Artists – The Theater That Emerged From Georgian Roots in America.

Respondent
Paata Tsikurishvili

Interviewer
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Introduction

Paata Tsikurishvili, the founder and the artistic director of the Synetic Theater – A Dynamic Synthesis of the Arts, talks about the history of emigration to America, which begins in 1995. In the second part of the interview, Paata tells about the foundation of his theater, and the theater's Georgian roots. Paata expands on the role of theater as a cultural manifesto of sociopolitical and public issues.

Background

Nini Sikharulidze: I would like to start with the details of your immigration. How and when does your story begin?
Paata Tsikurishvili: The story of my emigration to the USA begins in October 1995. What we went through in the 90s was a total nightmare. First, the 90s were inherently terrible, and even before the 90s, life was difficult: this slave mentality, graying life... The Russian occupying regime was merciless and nobody helped us Georgians. We were abandoned to the Russians. It was a very emotionally difficult and dark time. Emigration became the only solution.

Nini Sikharulidze: When did you settle first when you came to the U.S.? Has your place of living changed?
Paata Tsikurishvili: At first, I came to Washington, D.C., and to be honest, I never left Washington after that. The fact was that I got a lot of culture shock from day one. It was difficult for me to adapt to different values. Before that, I lived in Europe: in Germany, Holland and Western Europe, mainly. America is still different. Being a foreigner here is normal. I even felt like I was at home. It was difficult for me that the theater is different. The theater culture and system in America is different.

The Specifics of Acting in the United States

Nini Sikharulidze: What was this experience like for you, especially with the specifics of you being an actor?
Paata Tsikurishvili: After a bit of this culture shock passed, I started performing solo performances in restaurants, on the street, in public gathering places… Anywhere, really. At that time, I was good at pantomime. Pantomime didn't even require language skills, and it really helped me because of my foreign accent. Jewish Russians discovered me. A new children's theater was opened. I was invited to play at the opening concert. There I met Andrey, the artistic director, the grandson of the famous Odessa writer Babel. He had graduated in directing in Moscow. He suggested that we establish a theater together, and this is how the idea of the Stanislavsky Theater was created in 1997. Then I began to study the structure of American theater.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Since 1997, as soon as we staged the first play, the critics noticed us. They started to point out that my and Irina's style was different. We attracted attention. I had the passion and desire to turn movement, narration, and physical text into pantomime techniques. Our rise began in that period. Our popularity increased even more after staging Dostoevsky's "Idiot." We staged this performance in the style of synthetic art, directed by me and Andrey,

choreographed by Irina. Of course, we were also acting at the same time. It was then that the Washington Post discovered us and we received our first nominations. "Host and Guest" ("სტუმარ-მასპინძელი") and "Hamlet" were released. Nominations competed with each other. That's when the idea of forming our own theater was born in order to be able and put our own vision out in the world.

The History of the Emergence of the Georgian Theater

Nini Sikharulidze: How was "Synetic" born?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I invented the term "Synetic" myself. It emerged from a fusion of "kinetics" and "synthesis."

Nini Sikharulidze: Your style must have been very different from what the American audience is used to.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Everyone was very interested in our style. "Hamlet" was an incredible fairy tale without text. It was the silent Shakespeare that became our business card. Right from the marketing, I started promoting this play as a textless Shakespeare. I remember very well that at that time I was not taken seriously even among the community of actors; it seemed impossible to stage "Hamlet" without script, or words. After the performance, it was written that, "this is the Hamlet we know in our bones." After that, I did 14 Shakespeare plays, and we ran each Shakespeare play without a text.

Nini Sikharulidze: What were the first challenges you had to overcome as an immigrant?
Paata Tsikurishvili: As soon as I arrived to the U.S., I was faced with the reality that due to a strong accent, acting would not work out in my case. I realized that the Americans had no idea of physical theater. The entire American theater is based on Stanislavsky's system, and choreography is based on Balanchivadze (Balanchine). I knew the story of Balanchivadze. I realized that this was my opportunity to become a pioneer in the field of physical theater in the U.S.

Nini Sikharulidze: How did this come to fruition?
Paata Tsikurishvili: Likewise, I, as an actor, and Irina, as an actress and choreographer, could not do this alone. We invited a troupe and started training them. The process began with the bringing up of actors. It took a year. Then, we slowly started doing little plays before the troupe was finally formed. Even today, the formation of a troupe is one of the most important processes, because the generations of actors are always changing. In the American theater, there is no concept of troupe or repertoire. They always bring new actors and directors. Our desire was to

create a troupe. That's why we spent a lot of time teaching our troupe movements, mannerisms, various choreographic details... trying to make the most of each member's talent. This is exactly what we call dynamic synthesis of art.

The Process of Staging a Play

Nini Sikharulidze: Could you tell us more about your style, the process of staging a play and the different nuances that go into it?
Paata Tsikurishvili: During the rehearsals, before we start working on the play, we go through together with the troupe what is the inspiration of the play, what is the meaning of this play for society. The inspiration comes from seeing the qualities in the actors that remind me of the characters in the play. Certain events also serve an inspiration. For example, "Medea," "Divine Comedy" and "Host and Guest" emerged from current topics of social and political everyday life.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Then, I start working with a playwright. Before I was able to bring up and train a playwright in the theater, I had to think about these specifics. The playwrights here would not understand our style. In American theater, the first word is the playwright, not the director. The director is limited in the changes he can make in the play. We operate more Georgian. The first and last call in our theater is on the director.
Paata Tsikurishvili: For example, during the performance of "Romeo and Juliet," I remember one actress came in. It was as if Juliet stood in front of me. In general, when you stage "Romeo and Juliet," if you don't have a Juliet, an actress who will naturally embody this role, the play cannot be performed.

Nini Sikharulidze: How do you select the scene design and other major aesthetic elements?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I start looking for a theme that I would use in the play as a metaphor that runs throughout. I discovered that Shakespeare mentions the word “time” 172 times in “Romeo and Juliet.” This led me to the concept design and staging. We created a clockwork design that we used to motif the background and structure of the stage. The whole performance took place inside the clock. When you have a concept or a vision, you start working with designers. After that, everything goes well because everyone has the same vision. I decorate the performances in the same way that film is decorated with music and design. We have our own style of story boarding. This style seems to come from the fact that I graduated as a film director.
Paata Tsikurishvili: I work on the concept with the director. We have a separate group for music. At the first rehearsal, the actors, administration and design teams are introduced to one another. The team as a whole must be cohesive. When I enter the rehearsal, I present my ideas. The stage designer also shares his vision. The playwright offers his presentation. During the big plays, we break down and work on understanding the language of the text. This is necessary when working on a massive text, such as "The Three Musketeers."

Nini Sikharulidze: What does the first week of rehearsals look like?
Paata Tsikurishvili: The first week of rehearsals we call “mess-around.” We read the play so that the actors can mentally embody the play. During this time, Irina does team improvisations to work out the movements to bring these big concepts and metaphors into motion. We work "around the table" for a maximum of three days. By then, everyone should know the play by heart, and that's when we start working on the stage.

Nini Sikharulidze: When is it that the music comes into play?
Paata Tsikurishvili: There is a certain amount of time dedicated for a specific scene so that we have time to process all the scenes. We rehearse in small episodes, as films are shot in small episodes, and we work on the music at the same time. For example, we have to decide what color the music is, what feeling it gives, what effect it should leave. When the first stage of the rehearsals is over, then we start rehearsing with the musical combination and joining of the scenes. This is the stage where editing begins when making a film.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Technical rehearsals also occur with the stage manager in order to give the right cues with lighting and music transitions to the actors. At least 1,200 light and musical moments are reviewed at each rehearsal. Dynamics alone does not come from the charms of an actor. This is part of the montage itself. This dynamic is introduced in the transition from scene to scene. When working with light, we often use cinema terminology: close up, wide shot, medium shot. This is by using light to focus on certain details. I call this the pre-production period of the play. During the testing period, we observe how the performance affects the audience. At this time, we will consider possible changes that will improve the impact of the performance on the audience. This is the final detailing process. When the premiere opens, the work on the play ends. Then we can no longer meddle with the play.

The Journey From Acting to Directing

Nini Sikharulidze: What does acting mean to you?
Paata Tsikurishvili: The last time I was on stage was in 2012. Acting requires no less work, energy and dedication. An actor still needs to understand what the director is looking for. This is a very big and complex matter. I was an actor before I became a director. I was discovered as an actor in the press. Furthermore, I was helped by the fact that after the formation of the troupe, Irina became the leader of the troupe. This freed up time for me to become a director.
Paata Tsikurishvili: I love acting. I have specially adapted the role of Jokola. This topic is mine, which helped me to establish "Host and Guest.” After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I realized that Americans did not have a proper conception of the Muslim world. The fact that the Christian-Muslim problem is solved in "Host and Guest" to the level that the problem does not

exist at all, is the reason as to why I presented this play. It was an important decision, and quite a difficult moment since "Host and Guest" is entirely Georgian in its composition.

"Host and Guest" ("სტუმარ-მასპინძელი") [1]

Nini Sikharulidze: I would like to discuss "Host and Guest," one of the leading literary depictions of the Georgian culture, hospitality and acceptance. I know that you had a team of very talented, well-known and loved artists.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Gogi Meskhishvili decorated this performance artistically. The playwright was Ronald Reed. In the library I found a small book by Vazha-Pshavela, in English. It was translated in a somewhat old Shakespearean-English style. We developed this concept with the playwright.

Nini Sikharulidze: "Host and Guest" is very Georgian in its nature, language and performance. Did you adapt it to the American audience?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I tried not to make this production too natively Georgian. With emotions and elements, of course, this is a Georgian story in spirit, but I tried to present it in a language understandable to the audience. Americans were greatly affected by this staging. It was so depressing that I remember the audience leaving the hall devastated after the first premiere.

Nini Sikharulidze: What was your motivation for staging "Host and Guest"?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I wanted to introduce Georgian to Americans. I wanted to show who we are genetically with this 19th century history of Vazha-Pshavela. In America, identity is highly valued and attuned to, especially in regards to people with indigenous roots. Americans do not know that we Georgians are the indigenous people of the Caucasus. This in itself affects the mentality of Georgians. All Georgians have the historical, internal wounds and scars that history has brought us. I wanted to show Americans how we Georgians managed to overcome these differences, that above religion there are human, humane values that we should follow. We staged this play for the first time in 2003.

Nini Sikharulidze: From what I know, you have returned "Host and Guest" on stage multiple times.

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[1] "Host and Guest" (სტუმარ-მასპინძელი) is an epic written by a prominent Georgian poet Vazha-Pshavela (1861 – 1915). It is deeply loved by Georgians as a masterpiece and manifestation of the Georgian literature and culture. The story circulates on the two protagonists Joqola, who is Muslim, and Zviadauri, who is Christian, and aims to philosophically portray how the cultural gap can be closed through hospitality and acceptance, or as per Joqola: "the guest will be the last to die." The orchestration of this lessening gaps is seen by Georgians as the power and manifestation of the Georgian hospitality, culture, acceptance and respect for all.

Paata Tsikurishvili: "Host and Guest" was the most traveled play due to its political significance and its meticulous performance. Recently, still, it keeps winning Helen Hayes awards. Even today, 20 years have passed, and I returned "Host and Guest" to the stage. In 2023, I dedicated this play to Ukraine; in 2008 – as a result of the Russian war and occupation of Georgia. This performance won the title of the best production. We have returned "Host and Guest" to the stage many times. "Host and Guest" has the most returns and tours, followed by "Midsummer Night's Dream." " Midsummer Night's Dream" is also special in that it is candy for the eye because of the design. Very pleasant, funny, understandable for Americans. It's like a painting.

Nini Sikharulidze: On the topic of stage design, could you tell us what drives your inspiration?
Paata Tsikurishvili: In general, we look for everything in the painting. I stumbled upon a painting of King Lear, painted in black and white, but featuring a clown. I also got the inspiration for the clowns from there. Federico Fellini had a lot to discover about clowns. I was obsessed with the idea of a clown. This also became a concept in the production of "King Lear."

Nini Sikharulidze: To my knowledge, “Host and Guest” was adorned by Giya Kancheli’s music.
Paata Tsikurishvili: You know that Gia Kancheli is a classic. He doesn't write music. He embodies music. Kancheli's music speaks volumes. He tells you everything, creates a mood. When it's tragic, it's so sad it breaks you down. It worked very well because for the audience the music was an emotional adventure and for the actors it was a second text. Knowledge of music is essential. The play is set to music. Everything is in musical phases, like in cinema. When the actors, lights, and transitions are set to the music, this is the moment when the play finalized. In this way, Kancheli musically designed “Host and Guest.” Gogi Meskhisvili assembled the costumes and designed the artistic decoration. Irakli Kavsadze became a founding member and sound designer of the company. Then, the idea emerged that Kakhi Kavsadze would be a genius Musa. This is one era – Sturua, Kancheli, Kavsadze, Meskhishvili – another dimension, another school. This helped me grow a lot. A Georgian team was formed.

“Synetic” Today

Nini Sikharulidze: What is “Synetic” like today?
Paata Tsikurishvili: When I emigrated, every theater in America was a walkie-talkie, as I call them. Having grown up on the stories of Sturua, Marjanishvili, Akhmeteli, Shalikashvili, knowing where the roots come from and how to convey history, American theater is nothing after this richness. That's why we wanted to convey the Georgian elements and present them to the American public.

Nini Sikharulidze: I know that you have won quite a bit of awards.
Paata Tsikurishvili: It's been 25 years since we have been winning the Helen Hayes Awards. Nominations speak volumes for the work you do. We have received about 150 nominations. We have had 45 ranks. It brings great prestige. The Shakespeare Theater invited us to play Shakespeare without script. The artistic director warned me that Americans would not understand this play until they saw it. It was so.

Nini Sikharulidze: Would you agree that "Synetic" offers great diversity to the concept of theater for the American audience?
Paata Tsikurishvili: There are more than 80 theaters in Washington. One of them is the Latin American theater and one is our Georgian theater. The rest are all American theaters. We made a big world map on the wall of the theater, where we marked which part of the world our artists come from, visually telling who we are.

Nini Sikharulidze: Has leading a Georgian theater helped alleviate your sense of nostalgia for Georgia? Is it a feeling of being home?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I have no nostalgia for my homeland, because I am in my homeland. I create Georgia in the theater. I follow everything Georgian. I read in Georgian. I listen to Georgian radio. I watch Georgian TV. I am very proud that we Georgians are so talented. We have this great passion in ourselves. For the last 25 years, Irina and I have not stopped. We perform 5 plays every season, 3 of which are new productions. This is madness. Our whole family is devoted to the theater. My children Vato and Anna have been actors for many years. Vato also directs.

Nini Sikharulidze: What would you highlight as one of your big recent accomplishments?
Paata Tsikurishvili: Recently, the Georgian Association in the U.S. had its 90th anniversary, we were invited and given the title of "ambassadors of Georgian culture." While we were on a tour in Tbilisi, the then American Ambassador to Georgia Richard Norland made a speech at the end of the performance and said: "You put Georgia on the map in the USA." All articles written about us today begin with the fact that we are Georgians. Our theater is popularized as a Georgian theater. We are in Washington, D.C.. On the board of directors we have congressmen, politicians… as long as I'm alive, it's not going to go away. I want the roots of Georgian theater to remain in our theater. Truthfully, the alphabet of the theater is Georgian. This is where we come from.

Nini Sikharulidze: I would like to ask about American versus Georgian audiences. Are they truly different from one another?
Paata Tsikurishvili: The American audience is very different from the Georgian audience. They are very stoic. When we came to Georgia and played "Host and Guest," my heart was about to

burst. After all, I had adjusted this play to the American mentality. We took a big responsibility on ourselves. After the first 10 minutes, when the applause started at the end of the scenes, my actors were confused. I reassured them that it was the Georgian style. It was after that the actors got fired up and played with all their passion. This energy is contagious. The spectators went crazy. After the performance, the applause did not stop for half an hour. The whole theater was booming. We Georgian viewers are temperamental and hearty. We are people of different values. Furthermore, we are hot people. American people are not like that.

Preservation of the Georgian Culture

Nini Sikharulidze: Are there any Georgian traditions that you and your family still follow?
Paata Tsikurishvili: We celebrate the New Year in Georgian timeline. We have a lot of fun. We end these great holidays with the Georgian Old New Year. Furthermore, we are not losing our Georgianness.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Yes, I've been gone for a long time, but I'll never be an American. I will die a Georgian. I think that all immigrants are the same. The Georgian tradition, energy, history, and values have not gone anywhere. Georgian history will always follow me. When people ask me to tell me about my country, they can't stop me from rambling. When the Ukraine-Russia war started, all this affected me very much, because I remembered a lot of pain of our own history and misfortune. I always say that what is happening in Ukraine now was our 90s, it was our 2008. Americans are now learning about our history when they see an example of what we've been through on TV.

Nini Sikharulidze: What do you remember most vividly from your emigration experience?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I came to America as an artist. Then I had a culture shock when I realized that I didn't represent anything in America. I applied a white pantomime mask, which I have never done in my life. With my wits, I mentally hid. I was ashamed to play in the street. Actually, it was this mask that helped me when a Russian Jew found me in a restaurant with Vato. We played and acted there.
Paata Tsikurishvili: Then I decided to abandon pantomime and start a synthetic theater. However, I always use clown elements in my performances. Americans are not used to this. When we played "King Lear," the Americans were choked with emotion when they left the play. A tragic clown, yes, at first it amuses you, cheers you up, but when it turns into a tragedy, this clowning is no longer clowning. It becomes otherwise grotesque. It is transcendental, takes the viewer to another dimension. Sturua and Shalikashvili ingeniously used this pantomime.

Nini Sikharulidze: I have heard about your commemoration of the Georgian-Jewish relations through a play. Can I learn more about it?

Paata Tsikurishvili: Near us is the Jewish Theater, part of the Jewish Community Center. They came and saw our performances. The artistic director offered me to do one play: a Jewish playwright working in Poland had written "Dybbuk." For Jews, a dybbuk is a soul that is stuck: neither going to heaven nor to hell. He asked me if I would do this production, knowing that I was not Jewish. He told me that there was one condition: I had to spend three months with the rabbis, going to small lectures. According to Jewish beliefs, the soul has no form. I was wondering how you could do this staging of spirits without a spirit form. I asked if they knew anything about Georgian Jews. Not only that, but I explained to them that Georgian Jews have been living in Georgia for 25 centuries, that we are the only country where they have not been oppressed. We decided to make this production in the Georgian-Hebrew style. We also touched on many religious topics.

Nini Sikharulidze: There are other instances when you have used a play to respond to socio-political unrest around the world. I believe that “Host and Guest” has also been used for that purpose, right?
Paata Tsikurishvili: In 2008, when Russia stomped on us, I was staging a different play. I crossed out everything and publicized "Host and Guest." This received a great response in the press, especially in the Washington Post. My goal is to establish an emotional bond. It's an invisible force – once you grab the audience's attention, you can't let it go. An actor should exist completely, live on stage. You must be in another dimension. We Georgians have gestures, plasticity, and reactions naturally. Our actors learned this from us. Your thinking changes. You start speaking differently.

Nini Sikharulidze: After learning so much about your aspirations and your views, I would like to ask one last question: what type of future would you like to wish upon Georgia?
Paata Tsikurishvili: I wish for Georgia a free future. I understood what freedom means in America. This does not only mean the freedom of the country. It also means personal freedom. Russia is not slowing down, neither is the East. If you are not free, you cannot be independent. It means that you are no longer dependent on someone who has been beating you in the head, killing you, eating you, and throwing you away for three hundred years. First, what did they do to us in the modern period, and then what the Russians did to us for these three hundred years... They could not make us extinct simply because we are Georgians. They couldn't unroot us, they couldn't expel us. They could not kill us throughout this history. I wish independence for my homeland. Those genetics will not disappear anywhere, the genetics of our Georgianness. Nothing can erase that.