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LES KURBAS AND HIS LEGACY IN MODERN UKRAINIAN THEATRE

Les Kurbas was a prominent figure in the development of modern Ukrainian theatre, pioneering new techniques that pushed the boundaries of traditional performance. Les Kurbas, the founder of Molodyi Theater and Berezil in Ukraine, is widely recognized for his contributions to the development of modern Ukrainian theatre. His impact is comparable to that of prominent European directors. However, the Stalinist regime prevented him from fulfilling his potential in life. Today, Molodyi Theater and Berezil serve as a reminder of his legacy.

Oleksandr-Zenon, also known as Les Kurbas was born on February 25, 1887, to Stepan Kurbas and Wanda Teicher, both of whom were involved in the arts. Les came from a family with a history of acting, but his grandfather, Pylyp Kurbas, disapproved of the theatre and even separated himself from his son for not completing high school. Despite opposition from his family, Les pursued his passion for the arts and followed in the footsteps of his parents and grandmothers.

Kurbas started his theatre career in Lviv. He directed his first play, «The Jews», in 1909 with a student amateur group. The play focused on the pogroms of the 1900s and received critical acclaim. Kurbas played the role of Nakhman and was awarded a laurel wreath for his performance. After being expelled from the university in 1910, he pursued acting and became the administrator and co-director of the Hutsul Theater created by Khotkevych in 1911. In 1914, Kurbas became a professional actor in the Ruska Besida Theater and played one of his most noteworthy roles.

In 1915, Les Kurbas and his companions founded the Ternopil Theater

Evenings. This theatre was situated in the frontline zone and its primary audience consisted of Ukrainian soldiers from the Tsarist army. The theatre showcased an array of plays, including classic and modern works by Vynnychenko, as well as traditional ethnographic performances, such as *Natalka Poltavka*. Kurbas aimed to cultivate the Ukrainian spirit among the grey, oppressed masses, who were beginning to rediscover their cultural heritage and develop self-awareness.

In March 1916, Kurbas became a premiere actor at the Mykola Sadovskyi Theater in Kyiv and established the Young Theater studio at the same time. Just over a year later, the Young Theater opened with a new repertoire that was unusual for the Ukrainian stage. Despite some seeing it as a risky venture, this «Society on Faith» went down in history as the first modern Ukrainian theatre. In 1922, Kurbas went on to establish the Berezil Theater.

The artist aimed to help the audience overcome their sense of national inferiority by encouraging them to express themselves freely through art. Despite facing restrictions, the artist urged people to fearlessly pursue their artistic experiments and push for cultural renewal. Sadly, this movement was abruptly halted in 1937. Kurbas and his fellow Ukrainian artists, who shared his vision, were branded the Executed Renaissance. Kurbas was accused of supporting Ukrainian nationalism and had to leave his theatre in Kharkiv in 1933. He then worked at a state Jewish theatre in Moscow, where he was later arrested by the Chekists on December 26, 1933.

«Kurbas Oleksandr Stepanovych», the arrest warrant read, is being exposed as a member of the counterrevolutionary Ukrainian Military Organization. On April 9, 1934, a three-member panel of the GPU board sentenced Kurbas to 5 years in the camps. But the director was never released. On November 3, 1937, on the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution, Les Kurbas was shot dead in the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp.

Let's delve into Kurbas's theatrical philosophy. Kurbas believed that the human body can transform through movement, which he revitalized with

inspiration from Bronislava Nizhynska. This is evident in his plays where actors transform through movement, portraying workers, machines, gas, buildings, explosions, and victims. Additionally, Kurbas was a pioneer in using video clips as a part of the main narrative of a play, unlike previous uses of cinema for scenery changes. Finally, Kurbas's work involved the process of transforming an actor into a character, similar to Picasso's painting of faces to depict internal action. Kurbas's actors start as themselves on stage and then transform into their roles through their actions.

Despite facing opposition from the Soviet regime, Les Kurbas remained dedicated to his artistic vision and his belief in the transformative power of theatre. His legacy continues to inspire generations of Ukrainian artists, and his techniques continue to influence modern theatre. Kurbas's contributions to Ukrainian cultural identity are significant, and his story serves as a reminder of the importance of artistic freedom and cultural expression.

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