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EVEN DEATH IS HUMANE; THE HUMAN BEING IS NOT (CONTEMPORARY GEORGIAN THEATRE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CRISIS OF HUMANISM)

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ABSTRACT

Art has historically functioned as one of the most significant spaces of humanism, a domain in which the individual confronts ethical boundaries, responsibility, and the meaning of human existence. In the contemporary world, however – particularly against the backdrop of global wars, systemic violence, and the erosion of spiritual values – the crisis of humanism has become increasingly visible, not as a failure of the idea itself, but as a failure of human practice. This presentation examines how contemporary Georgian theatre reflects this crisis and how it interrogates the very possibility of humaneness in the modern age. The research focuses on three productions from the most recent theatrical season, staged in different theatres and cities across Georgia: *The Robbers*, directed by Saba Aslamazishvili (after Friedrich Schiller, Marjanishvili Theatre, Tbilisi); *The Birds*, directed by Antonella Cornici (after Aristophanes, Rustavi Theatre); and *Who Are You?*, directed by Zaza Sikhulidze (based on the life of Niko Pirosmiani, Batumi Music Centre). The presentation employs a comparative-analytical methodology, combining theatre studies with philosophical and cultural analysis. The analysis demonstrates that in these productions humanism is not presented as a harmonious or stable value, but rather as a tense, problematic, and often failed process. In *The Robbers*, violence committed in the name of justice transforms into tyranny; in *The Birds*, the pursuit of peace generates new hierarchies and conflicts; while in *Who Are You?*, death emerges as a humane interlocutor who poses an ethical question to the human subject. Collectively, these works articulate a striking paradox: death often appears more humane than the living human being. The presentation concludes that contemporary Georgian theatre actively responds to the crisis of humanism by refusing consolatory narratives and instead confronting the audience with ethical responsibility. In this context, theatre functions as a moral mirror, revealing the audience's own involvement in the broader ethical breakdown of contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary theatre; Humanism; Contemporary Georgian theatre; Violence; Responsibility; Contemporary productions

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, art has constituted one of the most significant spaces for the articulation of humanism. Yet humanism in art has never been confined to the idealization of the human being. On the contrary, it has frequently served as a means of exposing human vulnerability, violence, and moral failure. As Bertolt Brecht famously argues, the purpose of theatre is not to console the audience, but to keep it critically alert: *“The theatre must not content itself with reflecting the world; it must provoke people to think about how it can be changed”* (Brecht, 1964, p. 71).

As a living and collective experience, theatre places the spectator within a space of ethical responsibility and compels reflection on one’s own role and agency. In the contemporary world—marked by global wars, violence, and profound value crises—the question of humanism has once again become acutely urgent. Within this context, the ways in which contemporary Georgian theatre responds to the problem of human (in)humanity deserve particular attention.

This paper examines three productions from the 2025–2026 theatrical season, staged in different theatres and cities across Georgia, united by a shared thematic concern with the crisis of humanism.

2. VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE

Saba Aslamazishvili’s *“The Robbers”*, staged at the Marjanishvili Theatre, is a contemporary interpretation of Friedrich Schiller’s drama that rejects the classical moral opposition between good and evil. Instead, the conflict unfolds between dark forces that are equally driven by the pursuit of power.

Karl Moor (Paata Inaouri), who perceives himself as a fighter against tyranny, ultimately becomes a violent subject himself. Here, Hannah Arendt’s definition of violence is particularly relevant: *“Violence appears where power is in jeopardy; it is a substitute for power rather than its reinforcement”* (Arendt, 1970, p. 56).

In the performance, the desire to restore justice transforms into a legitimization of violence. Karl’s quest for revenge alienates him from humanism and leads to the erosion of his identity. Franz Moor’s (Shako Mirianashvili) self-destruction is not an act of repentance but an existential failure—the inability to confront the reality he has created.

As previously noted, *“Aslamazishvili’s The Robbers depicts a destructive struggle for power in which the desire to defeat tyranny itself turns into tyranny. It is a story of how individuals lose their*

identity when the pursuit of justice merges with revenge” (Chkhartishvili, 2025a). Consequently, the world of the performance is devoid of humanistic values: those characters who retain even a trace of compassion or forgiveness are either powerless or already dead.

Thus, *The Robbers* reveals a central paradox: the struggle against tyranny assumes the very form of tyranny it seeks to destroy. Violence is not an exception but the logical outcome of the process, leaving no space for humanistic ideals.

3. PEACE THAT GENERATES A NEW WAR

Romanian director Antonella Cornici’s *“The Birds”*, staged at the Rustavi Theatre, offers a contemporary reading of Aristophanes that exposes another troubling aspect of human nature. People fleeing war seek refuge in the world of birds, yet this space rapidly transforms into a new state governed by hierarchy and the logic of power.

As Albert Camus writes, *“A revolution that oversteps moral limits inevitably justifies violence and ultimately destroys the very values it claims to defend”* (Camus, 1951, p. 147). In the performance, the pursuit of peace functions merely as a pretext; in reality, humans remain incapable of relinquishing their desire for control and domination, thus reproducing conflict.

Here, grotesque imagery is not merely a stylistic device but a bearer of meaning, emphasizing the absurdity of human behavior. Audience involvement plays a crucial role as well. As Erika Fischer-Lichte observes, *“In contemporary theatre, the spectator is no longer a passive observer but becomes a participant in the performative process”* (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38).

The spectator is denied a safe distance and is instead implicated in the ethical processes unfolding on stage. In such a world, there is little room left for humanism.

4. DEATH AS A HUMANE INTERLOCUTOR

Zaza Sikharulidze’s *“Pirosmani”*, produced by the Batumi State Musical Centre, stands out as one of the most philosophical and intimate works of recent Georgian theatre. Here, the question of humanism is articulated through a dialogue between life and death. Death does not appear as an enemy; rather, it is calm, attentive, and capable of listening.

As Emmanuel Levinas asserts, *“Humanism begins when I feel responsibility toward the Other – an Other who escapes my control”* (Levinas, 1969, p. 97). In the performance, death embodies precisely this “Other.” It poses the question “Who are you?” –

addressed not only to “*Pirosmani*” but ultimately to the audience.

Life and death do not confront each other as opposites; they coexist as integral parts of a single whole. The performance thus proposes an alternative vision: humanism may not reside in violent resistance but in dialogue, acceptance, and responsibility.

Music by Zviad Bolkvadze functions as the true protagonist of the performance, determining its tempo-rhythm and emotional atmosphere. As noted elsewhere, “*Music here is not merely an atmospheric background or emotional intensifier; it constitutes the backbone of the performance, shaping its dramaturgy, rhythm, and scenic logic*” (Chkhartishvili, 2025b).

5. CONCLUSION

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The three productions discussed here present a coherent picture of contemporary Georgian theatre as a space that actively and critically responds to the crisis of humanism. The human being is no longer portrayed as an unquestioned bearer of humane values. Instead, death, grotesque imagery, or artistic form itself often serve to remind us of the ethical boundaries humanity has lost.

The Robbers demonstrates how justice transforms into tyranny; *The Birds* reveals how the pursuit of peace generates new wars; “*Pirosmani*” offers a rare yet possible model of humanism grounded in dialogue. Georgian theatre thus emerges not as a consoling but as a warning space—one that confronts the spectator with a difficult but necessary choice: to acknowledge our participation in a shared ethical collapse and to assume responsibility.