

## *The Virsaladze Family*

Soliko Virsaladze was born in Tbilisi in 1909. His mother Elene Muskhelishvili was a woman of great talent. She was both musical and artistic, and as Soliko Virsaladze himself recalled: 'In salons she sometimes performed duos with Vano Sarajishvili'. Elene Muskhelishvili went to the Saint Nino Boarding School and later worked at the Society for the Promotion of Literacy. She also published works in the *Jejili* and *Nakaduli* literary magazines under the pseudonym Elene.

His father Bagrat Virsaladze went to the Theological Academy. Later he received a diploma in Economics and served as head of the Tax Service during the Menshevik period. Although a dedicated professional, he had a deep passion for the theatre.

The Virsaladzes' had two daughters, Fina, the eldest and Elene (Lolota), the youngest. Later, Fina Virsaladze became a well-known art critic while Lolota became a folklorist and historian of Georgian literature.

It was a loving and closely knit family as the family friends and relatives describe it. Art and sciences were the centrepiece of the Virsaladze family life.

"Our house was full of the reproductions of the works of great French and Italian artists. They were part of our childhood. To say nothing of the Georgian magazines *Jejili* and *Nakaduli*. We also had a subscription to the so called 'small universities', a series of French books "The Library of Roses" and the *Apollo* magazine. All this extended to the limit the family's modest means.

However, Mother considered them to be among our family's basic necessities. It is perhaps not surprising that my sister Fina and I went into the arts, and Lolota began to study literature.

Since early childhood, our parents would take us to see the matinee opera and to the gatherings of the artistic community. When I first entered the Opera House I was so dazzled by the splendour of the building that I immediately decided that some day I would work there. As to what work though, I did not know."

Already as a child, Soliko Virsaladze knew what he would devote his life to. Unlike his sisters, he was not particularly diligent and hard working at school. He showed a special talent for painting and began to attend the Mose Foidze evening studio. In addition to studying painting, Virsaladze went to Maria Perini choreographic studio. Love for music, dance and painting determined his choice of career.

In 1927 Virsaladze entered Tbilisi Academy of Arts. He studied in the studio of I. Sharleman, who, apart from being a graphic artist and teacher, also worked at the theatre and was close with the Mir Iskustva artists (Benua, Dobuzhinski, Rerikh, Bilibin and others). It is undeniably due to this professor that Virsaladze was initiated to the aesthetic programme of this group.

Virsaladze recalled: "I decorated performances of the Zubalashvili House Workers Troupe. One of them was directed by Mikheil Chiaureli. It was "The Worst of a Fool" by Fougel. I remember I worked on two acts and Petre Otskheli on the other two. Petre and I went together to the Academy of Arts. You would never tell by his works that he was a beginner. Maybe because he was fated to live such a short life. Who knows..."

In 1928 Virsaladze moved to Moscow to continue his studies at the Theatrical Department of the Faculty of Painting of the Technical Institute of Arts. Here he studied under I. Rabinovich, one of the leading artists of the twenties. The influence of modernist aesthetics on artistic thinking was still strongly felt, Moderne whose singular flavour and elegant style could be eradicated neither by the Bolshevik onslaught or its violent attempts to impose a socio-realist aesthetics.

In 1930, when the Theatrical Department of the Moscow Institute of Arts merged with the Leningrad Academy of Arts, Virsaladze went to study in Leningrad. In 1931, he graduated from the Bobishev Studio. Through contact with artistic luminaries in this stage of his career, Virsaladze's natural gifts were further refined and developed.

The professional life of Soliko Virsaladze as a theatrical artist is closely interwoven with the history of Georgian and Russian theatre. His work represented a natural outgrowth of the best traditions in Russian and Georgian theatrical decoration.

Virsaladze's early works reveal a profound knowledge and exquisite sense of Georgian tradition. This is translated above all in the sophisticated use of colours evident from his early works. Virsaladze's meticulous attention to colour was reflected in a lush and varied palette on the stage despite his use of relatively few main colours and shades.

A deep knowledge of Niko Piroshmanashvili's work is strongly felt in Virsaladze's works. They shared a love for similar colours, achromatic colours such as black and grey and chromatic red, yellow and blue and their combinations. Like Piroshmani, Virsaladze's sets too display an unexpected prism - bold combinations of precision and abstraction, diversity and realism, and a sense of monumentalism.

It pays to recall that Russian art at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries had a great influence on the formation of Virsaladze's artistic creed. He was influenced by Italian, Egyptian and the Middle Eastern art in general. He possessed an exquisite appreciation of the beauty and value of metal, ceramic and fabric, once remarking, "The best art has been created around the Mediterranean". Virsaladze admired modern art as well, and believed that genuine artistry must be open to different cultures.



## *A New System*

When creating his decorations and artistic images, Virsaladze always took into consideration the music, choreography and director's interpretation of the work. In doing this, he reveals a deep insight into the specificities of this art. His scenery always thoroughly meshes with the intonation of the musical piece, forming an harmonious whole with the choreography.

In the 30-40s, Virsaladze attempted to reflect music in his set painting. He gave himself complex colour tasks. In his early works, colour and lighting serve as the primary visual source of emotion.

The scenery for Paliashvili's *Daisi* is notable among his early works. Here, painting plays an important role. In the sketches for the play, we see the important role of black in combination with red, blue, yellow, gold and silver. Virsaladze was well aware of the absorbing quality of black, using it as a backdrop for chromatic colours, to remarkable effect. He used this to achieve a perfect balance between colour and the developing music.

*Daisi* was staged in Tbilisi in 1936, directed by Alexandre Tsutsunava and conducted by Evgeni Mikeladze.

"To this day, I have a vivid and indelible impression

from working on *Daisi* together with Alexandre Tsutsunava and Evgeni Mikeladze. I learned so much from them. Evgeni Paliashvili, the chief conductor of the theatre was a man of iron discipline, very demanding of himself and the staff. To say nothing of his great musical talent. I remember how this maestro hurried to listen to everything, as if he subconsciously anticipated his tragic fate. Years spent with Evgeni will always remain for me - and I believe for everyone who worked with him - a fascinating chapter of my life. What a man! In fact it was he who created the Opera Theatre orchestra. He knew what he wanted, what he was doing and how to do it. Within a very short period this young man established an enormous reputation. I remember how we rejoiced at the triumph of our culture and the success of our company during the Decade of Georgian Art in Moscow in 1937."

After the Art Decade, Virsaladze went to Leningrad which enabled him avoid the repressions which went on in Georgia.

A wave of repressions swept across Leningrad in 1935, when Kirov was executed. Arrests in the subsequent years were less rampant. As for Tbilisi, 1937 turned to be one of the most tragic years for Georgia's intellectual community.

In Leningrad, Virsaladze worked at the Kirov Theatre of Opera and Ballet, and the Leningrad Maly Theatre of Opera and Ballet under a short term contract. He intended to return to Tbilisi, but he was warned that the situation there was becoming increasingly strained and it would not be prudent to return. While strongly advised to remain in Leningrad, Virsaladze's father, young sister, brother-in-law, and many of his friends were arrested back home. Soon, he was offered a full-time job at the Kirov Theatre and he decided to stay. Until the end of his days, Virsaladze remained grateful to the city that saved his freedom and life.

In Leningrad, Virsaladze began to work with Vakhtang Chabukiani, whom he admired and considered one of the greatest dancers in the world. He took it very close to heart that after leaving the stage, Chabukiani was not adequately appreciated, except for being buried at the Mtatsminda Pantheon.

"I worked with Vakhtang Chabukiani for many years. This magician of dance worked miracles in front of my eyes. I worked on *Laurensia*, *The Heart of the Mountains*, *Don Quixote*, *Swan Lake*, *Othello* and others with him. Today, most people only remember his *Othello*. You should have seen him earlier - this man was gifted from the God."

During the war, Virsaladze was working in Tbilisi.

In 1945, he returned to Leningrad to work as Chief Artist of the Kiev Opera and Ballet Academic Theatre. His mastery was established, his talent for painting flourished, and the range of themes expanded.

These were the years of still prevalent naturalist tendencies, but Virsaladze himself never made a habit of blindly following the prevalent trends. His sets depicted the specific environment warranted by the theatrical production itself. Scenery created by Virsaladze is not merely decorative background for dance. It is closely integrated with every aspect of the given production. Decorations are not bare imitations of reality. Every piece of Virsaladze's work conveys the movement of colour, and this becomes the hallmark of all his future work.



The arched side-scene composition and the painted curtain-panel of the background depicting the place of action was the centrepiece of the decoration for Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*. The arched composition remained unchanged throughout the play, separating the world of the theatrical performance from the reality of the world of the audience. The panel scenes change as the story developed.

By combining permanent features and changing elements in his decoration, painted panel and architectural elements, a new system emerged in Virsaladze's work.

The second half of the 50s was marked by a new period in the history of the Soviet culture. The notion of realism acquired a deeper meaning which necessitated enriching the artistic language.

Under these circumstances new dimensions emerged in Virsaladze's work. He retained his fundamental principles and the individuality which later determined his style.

From 1957, we can see a clear tendency toward combining artistic illusion with reality in producing a set, and also special significance of the set in ballet productions. As we examine Virsaladze's work during this time, we see his awareness of how the set functions as the "tuning fork" for the entire production. Sets for the *Machavariani Otello* (1957, Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Academic Theatre, choreographed by V. Chabukiani) are an excellent example of how artful arrangement of curtains suggest the place of action, while a few carefully chosen details give tangible form to the scene. In this manner, choreography and atmosphere become a perfectly synthesised, cohesive work of art.

## *The New Phase*

1957 clearly marks the beginning of a new phase during which the ballet dominated Virsaladze's creative endeavours: "Although I like to work on other performances as well, ballet is my undiminishing love. It is closer to my soul, here there is more harmony and aesthetics." The artistic relationship between Virsaladze and the Chief Choreographer of the Bolshoi Theatre Yuri Grigorovich began during this period.

"I have worked with Yuri Grigorovich longer than with anyone else. We mounted our first performance *The Stone Flower* in Leningrad. It was followed by twelve ballets on the Bolshoi stage alone- *Sleeping Beauty*, *Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *The Legend of Love*, *Spartacus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Ivan the Terrible*, among others. We often work together abroad as well. I like to work with him, I got used to him and we understand each other very well. I think I've not disappointed him either."

Yuri Grigorovich, a leading contemporary ballet choreographer achieved a perfect synthesis of drama and musical choreography by which he expanded the horizons of the art of ballet considerably. In his poetic perception of the world, the story and its visual aspect represent a harmonious whole. The classic principles of choreography represent the highest aesthetic value for him.

It must be especially noted that Virsaladze played an important part in shaping Grigorovich's own approach to scenery. According to the critic Alexandre Demidov, it was him who introduced into the staging of Grigorovich's performances a metaphorical interpretation instead of mere illustration, which gives the place of action a more generalised sense. This effect is realised through the free alteration of the scenic symbols, thereby elevating the stage into a micro universe.

The objectives of the performance are achieved through the marriage of Grigorovich's choreography and Virsaladze's scenery - indeed, it is difficult to imagine one without the other. This artistic duo is so organic, so harmoniously do these two complete each other, that sometimes it becomes difficult to draw a dividing line between the respective choreographic and scenic contributions of these two great masters. One can say that his collaboration with Grigorovich set the tone of Virsaladze's work from the 60s all the way into the 80s.

Other Virsaladze achievements in the late 1950s and 1960s include particularly notable productions of Prokofiev's *The Stone Flower*, Melikov's *Legend of Love* and Chaikovski's *Nutcracker*.

In *Nutcracker*, we can see a perfect blend of reality

and fantasy. The backstage panel painting of the New Year's tree is a perfect balance between the two, perceived as concrete in one moment, and ethereal the next. One by one the toys come to life. The tree - the leitmotif of the production - together with other decorations leave an indelible impression on every audience.

"I am happy when through my painting the audience feels how music becomes visible, how dance is being clad", commented Virsaladze.

At the end of the 1960s, yet another ballet masterpiece appeared on the stage of the Bolshoi - Khachaturian's *Spartacus* (1969). In these sets, Virsaladze creates a generalised image of the Roman Empire. *Spartacus* is a sparkling example of the musical, choreographic and scenic trinity for which his collaborations are best known.

In the last decade of his work, Virsaladze designed several very distinct ballets, all staged by Yuri Grigorovich in the Bolshoi - *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Angara*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Gold Age* and *Raimonda*.

In his *Sleeping Beauty*, he deliberately avoids specificity, although he remains precise when depicting the place of action. He sets the stage as an arena wherein ensues the eternal fight between good and evil.

In *Swan Lake*, the scene painting, together with other details, gives a general depiction of the place of action, while colour and lighting represent the visual score of the music.

Scenes for *Raimonda* create the impression of a medieval fairyland. Dancers are literally animated decorations who before our very eyes spring from the decorations, and afterward, recede.

*Ivan the Terrible* is a deep, psychological tragedy. Virsaladze is a true co-author of the concept of this performance. The decoration is one with the choreography. By using elements of old Russian architecture, iconography and frescos, Virsaladze created eloquent decorations which convincingly express the spirit of the epoch. The gold colour, harkening back to Byzantine and Russian iconography, plays a special role in the performance.

As a costumer, Virsaladze retains the flavour of the particular epoch, to spectacular effect.

It was a real challenge to create fur costumes for the boyars, which did not interfere with the dance itself. Virsaladze chose a light fabric thus making it convenient for a dancer. At the same time he retained the main features - a fur collar and cuffs. The costumes while static appear heavy, and acquire special expressiveness in dance.

In artistic treatment, *Romeo and Juliet* actually somewhat resembles *Ivan the Terrible*. Poetic and romantic attitude is strongly felt. The ballet scenery is mostly in black and red, emphasising the tragic nature of the play. At times, when the set is completely dark, the impression is that human feelings have burst out of darkness. The appearance of the characters in the costumes of the Italian Renaissance intensifies the perception of the period.

The decorations exhibit a monumental quality and a certain lightness at the same time. The scenery plays a key part in the psycho-emotional interpretation of the story and music. Taking even one element out would break the spell.

The decorations for *Angara* and *Gold Age* are quite abstract. The artist uses the stylistic elements of the 1920s, an interesting device for bringing the audience into the appropriate epoch.

Virsaladze was the master who never betrayed the conventional nature of the theatrical art. The years served only to expand his artistic repertoire of combination of colours, lighting, curtains and details characteristic to different epochs. Loyalty to these traditional devices evolved into a unique artistic concept.

Virsaladze's portfolio fascinates by its sheer colour. In his sketches, he sought to capture the artistic effect achieved through costumes and lighting. The general melody and sound of colours are already present in the sketch. The final version of the decorations and costumes retained the sketch's form and their execution required the supervision of the artist himself.

It was perhaps for this reason that Virsaladze did not like to exhibit his works. He believed that performances themselves should be the venue for the scenographer's art.

"Unlike many other artists, for whom the sketch is most important, for me actual decorations are decisive. Onstage, entirely different forces come into action. Sometimes at the rehearsals I would change already finished costumes and decorations."

The artist personally supervised the realisation of the sketches and models. He checked the installations, painted panels and curtains on the spot during the run of the performances.

The simplicity of Virsaladze's decorations allowed for a smooth and easy fluctuations of the place of action.

Virsaladze was indefatigable in his work. Performances with his scene painting were successfully staged in the Paris Grand Opera, Stockholm's Opera House, Vienna Opera, Milan's La Scala, and theatres in Prague and Sofia. Virsaladze always remained loyal to the



theatre, even when he worked in film, as a costume designer for Kozintsev's movies of Hamlet and King Lear. Musical theatre and ballet in particular remained the main sphere of his work.

Although Virsaladze was quite a refined painter, he never created a painting meant to stand alone. This reveals the professional honesty of a true theatrical artist. He had an excellent sense of the specificity of theatrical painting, he knew that theatrical painting is dynamic and changing, that it is born, lives, and dies with the performance. And yet, the life of each work, the impression it makes on the audience is undeniable.



## *Virsaladze and the Sukhishvili Georgian National Ballet*

*Virsaladze was fully conscious of the role of the costume in any production. In the dance, costumes must first facilitate movement.*

*According to Lyubov Blok, Virsaladze had one feature that had been virtually lost after L. Bakst - he clothed the dance and not the dancers.*

*For thirty years, Virsaladze was the premier costume designer of the Georgian Folk Dance Academic Company. His costumes greatly contributed to the success of the Sukhishvili and Ramishvili ensemble.*

*"Working with this ensemble is my love and passion. For many years of living away from my country, it has kept me close to Georgia and everything Georgian. It is always a pleasure to work with them. Georgian dances help me to create my costumes. When I choose colours for my costumes, I first envision the whole dance. In this process, of course, the most important thing is the traditional national colours characteristic to our life. Also, in selecting the colours, music, rather than the dance is the determining factor. I don't even remember how many years I've known Nino. I never stop admiring her infectious enthusiasm and joy, her inexhaustible energy, and the vigour which she so unsparingly spends. Moreover, it is all for such a good cause. And how beautifully she expresses her love for Georgia. I am proud that in the enormous popularity that her ensemble has brought to Georgia, I too have made my modest contribution."*

*The range of colours used for the costumes of the Georgian dancers is rather scant. The costumes are either in two colours - one for men and the other for women, or a combination of two or three colours, with one main colour. The sketches reflect the colours as well as the dynamic changes of shade affected by lighting.*

*Virsaladze's creative imagination and mastery of his art produced costumes of striking beauty. Take the costumes for the Ajarian dance - the colour and the silhouette of the dresses are discreet and simple, yet the grey striped belt elegantly tied below the waist is a splendid touch. This detail created by Virsaladze became the principal element of the Ajarian national costume and later developed into a regular feature of Virsaladze's designs for oriental costumes. One example of this is *The Legend of Love*.*

*He found inspiration for the costumes of the Samaia in the representations of Queen Famar in Medieval Georgian mural painting. The image of Queen Famar is preserved in four frescos in Vardzia, Betania, Kintsvisi*

and David Gareja Monasteries. Virsaladze used the colour symbolism of these frescos. The three dancers are dressed in lilac, light blue and copper dresses. Before our eyes, these frescos come to life. The fabric is adorned with pearl beads, gems and small velvet patches, producing an iridescent play of colour.

While choosing the colours for his costumes, he had to consider the tempo of the dance as well. The relatively cool tones for the Samaia accentuate the chiselled and static nature of the frescoes themselves.

The lilac, rosy and red of the Celebration of the Harvest infuses the dance with vitality and drama. One can say that the monumental pictures which radiate the Georgian spirit, temperament, traditions, and national characteristics.

The large repertoire of dances determine the rich variety of costumes. The colour of costumes is as a rule enriched by lighting. The costumes on the stage glitter and twinkle with a life of their own. This makes the choreography more prominent. The costumes, the texture of the fabric and the delicate detail work are key to the overall impression.

Although the sketches give but a rough outline of the costume, the dynamics and rhythm of the dances are felt nevertheless.

"We worked in very close collaboration," Nino Ramishvili recalls, "We thought similarly, and indeed we created the dances together. There were cases when he would first see the dance and then designed costumes for it. From the movement and the dance he knew what he should do. Sometimes, the opposite was the case when the artist knew the theme in advance. He would bring the sketches, and we choreographed the dance according to them. This is the case sometimes with a brilliant artist like Soliko Virsaladze, who dictated with his sketches the very sketch for the dance... He had an extraordinary sense of the texture of the fabric. From a very simple piece of cloth he would create a wonderfully rich texture. He used to dye fabrics, make appliques and ornaments with his own hand. He had a very special sense of colour... Soliko's costumes, besides their remarkable beauty, were always designed to precisely convey the character of the dance, its nature... Perhaps because he had such an intimate feeling for the dance.

The creative life of Iliko and myself is linked with this consummate master... Without exaggeration, Soliko Virsaladze was a co-founder of our ensemble and remained its sole costume designer until the end of his life. He produced an entire epoch of Georgian dance costumes. Our success was largely determined by the costumes he created - often as soon as the curtain rose, before even the dance started, the audience would applaud. Soliko deserves credit for this applause."