Qyrq Qyz: Forty Girls

BAM Harvey Theater
Mar 23 & 24 at 7:30pm
Running time: approx. one hour & 25 mins, no intermission

Directed by Saodat Ismailova
Written by Saodat Ismailova and Ulughbek Sadikov
Cinematography by Carlos Casas
Music by Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky
Scenography by Kamilla Kurmanbekova
Movement and lighting design by Séverine Rième
Sound and technical direction by Joseph Jabbour
Costumes by Hilola Sher

Produced by the Aga Khan Music Initiative, a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Bloomberg Philanthropies

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PART I: EARTH

PART II: AIR

PART III: WATER

PART IV: FIRE

PERFORMERS

Raushan Orazbaeva lead musician, qobyz

Gumshagul Bekturganova vocal, dutar

Gumisay Berdikhanova vocal, ghirjek

Aziza Davronova vocal, doyra

Alibek Kabdurakhmanov conductor, percussion, chang

Tokzhan Karatai vocal, qobyz

Makhabat Kobogonova vocal, kyl-kiyak, chopo-choor, komuz, jygach ooz komuz

Arailym Omirbekova vocal, dombyra

Saltanat Yersultan vocal, zhetigen, qobyz

Aysanem Yusupova film actor (Gulayim)
Qyrq Qyz (Turkic: “40 Girls” or “40 Maidens”) is the Aga Khan Music Initiative’s multimedia retelling of an epic poem whose origins are in a constellation of stories and legends widely known in Central Asia and surely of ancient provenance. While bardic reciters of the Iliad and the Odyssey disappeared millennia ago, in Central Asia the performance of epic and other forms of oral poetry remains a living tradition—essentially a contemporary form of performance art in which the central figure of the bard is at once narrator, musician, actor, and mime. For Central Asian audiences, epic is not merely entertainment, but is imbued with moral values and embodies the history and social identity of clans, tribes, and peoples.

Like other oral epic poetry from Inner Asia, Qyrq Qyz interweaves elements of myth, legend, history, and geography. Qyrq Qyz is distinctive, however, in the realm of gender: its main heroes are female—young women whose equestrian skills, valor, and military prowess call to mind the legendary Amazons described by ancient Greek geographers and historians. Indeed, like the Amazons, the heroes of Qyrq Qyz may reflect history as much as legend. A recent book, The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World, by Adrienne Mayor (Princeton University Press, 2014), cites new DNA and bioarchaeological analysis showing that among the ancient nomadic groups known collectively as Scythians, about one-third of Scythian females were active fighters.

The present production of Qyrq Qyz is based on the epic story of Gulayim, the 16-year-old daughter of Allayar, a ruler of the semi-nomadic Karakalpak people, who lives in the fortress of Sarkop. Gulayim receives a gift of land from her father on the island of Miueli, where a fort is built for Gulayim and her 40 female companions—young women whom she trains in the art of war to defend their lands against invaders. Sarkop is invaded by the Kalmyk khan Surtaiishi; Gulayim’s father is killed in battle, and many Sarkopians are led away into captivity. Hearing of the invasion, Gulayim and her 40 companions vanquish Surtaiishi and the Kalmyks, liberate the captive Sarkopians, and demand that the Kalmyk invaders offer compensation for the destruction they wreaked upon the Karakalpaks.

Before the battle, Aryslan, a knight from the neighboring kingdom of Khorezm, seeks the love of Gulayim, and Gulayim invites him to join her not in love, but in war. Following their victory, Gulayim and Aryslan join their lands, uniting peoples from different tribes and ethnicities, and build a society founded on peace and compassion.

The story of Gulayim resonates with accounts by Herodotus and other ancient historians of female warrior-rulers who belonged to the nomadic or “barbarian” cultures beyond the Black Sea. Among these is Tomyris, ruler of the kingdom of the Massagetae, whose territory lay south and southeast of the Aral Sea. According to Herodotus, Tomyris led the Massagetaens in defending their land against Persian invaders led by Cyrus, founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty of Iran.

Qyrq Qyz represents a vestige of the archaic currents of matriarchy that course through Central Asian cultures, traces of which remain robust today in the form of numerous legends about “40 girls” told and retold particularly among women (in Tajikistan, the Forty Girls are known under their Tajik name, Chil Duhtar). These legends are physically embodied in the eponymous names of ancient fortresses, sacred pilgrimage sites, shrines, and personified geological formations such as rock outcroppings and large boulders that local inhabitants perceive as human figures. Pilgrimage sites and shrines are often draped with strips of cloth left as offerings to the spirits of the Forty Girls.

One version of the Forty Girls legend includes the names of Zoroastrian deities, underscoring the pervasive influence of ancient Iranian religion on spiritual and expressive culture in Central Asia. “All around Uzbekistan, you still find local people who believe that fire-worshippers (i.e., Zoroastrians) were the founders of their civilization,” said Saodat Ismailova, artistic director of Qyrq Qyz. “In creating a structure for my adaptation of the epic and associated legends, I drew on Zoroas-
trian cosmogony, which deifies the four elements of earth, air, water, and fire. The performance is divided into these four elements, and the emotional development of the main character, Gulayim, is supported by a text that proceeds through these different parts of creation.”

In Saodat Ismailova’s luminous reimagination of Qyrq Qyz, video filmed in the wind-scoured Karakalpak steppe and other locations in Uzbekistan is woven together with a musical score by the celebrated Tashkent-based composer Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky that merges ambient sounds of the steppe and live percussion with onstage performance by a group of intrepid young female bards—living embodiments of Gulayim and her 40 companions. These bards perform songs and instrumental music drawn from the traditional styles and genres of epic reciters, shamanic healers, improvising oral poets, virtuoso solo instrumentalists, and singers of female love songs.

Among Central Asian nomadic peoples, poetic verse, singing, and musical instruments were believed to have therapeutic powers—in particular, the power to heal the psyche, and, by extension, to bring about social equilibrium and harmony. In Central Asian Turkic languages, terms for “epic reciter” and “traditional healer” or “shaman” are often cognate—for example, among the Karakalpaks, a baqsy is an epic singer whereas among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, a baqsy (or bakshy) is a traditional healer—evidence that both professions developed from the same cultural practice.

Qyrq Qyz filters the panoramic landscape and soundscape of the Central Asian epic world captured by Saodat Ismailova through the prism of Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky’s l lumbent compositional imagination, providing a modernistic gloss on an ancient tale. This is appropriate, for the story of Gulayim and the Forty Girls is at once primordial, universal, and urgently contemporary.
The setting of Qyrq Qyz is the windswept steppe land surrounding the southern portion of the Aral Sea, which comprises the territory of present-day Karakalpakstan, a culturally and linguistically distinctive administrative region within Uzbekistan.
SAODAT ISMAILOVA (director) is one of the most internationally visible and accomplished representatives of a new generation of artists from Central Asia who came of age in the post-Soviet era and have established cosmopolitan artistic lives while remaining deeply engaged with their native region as a source of creative inspiration. Her debut feature film 40 Days of Silence, a poignant depiction of four generations of Tajik women living in the complete absence of men, was nominated for best debut film at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival, and thereafter was screened in more than two dozen prestigious festivals around the world. Her video installation Zukhra was featured in the Central Asian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, and her documentary film Aral: Fishing in an Invisible Sea won Best Documentary at the 2004 Turin Film Festival. Among many other works are nine music documentaries for the CD-DVD anthology Music of Central Asia, co-produced by the Aga Khan Music Initiative and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Saodat Ismailova resides in Tashkent and Paris, and is affiliated with Le Fresnoy, France’s National Studio of Contemporary Arts.

DMITRI YANOV-YANOVSKY (music) has produced a distinguished and culturally unique body of work characterized by a merging of musical influences from his native Central Asia with postmodernist compositional styles of Russia and Eastern Europe. Yanov-Yanovsky’s music has been commissioned and performed by leading musicians and musical organizations in the US, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, North Carolina Symphony, Kronos Quartet, soprano Dawn Upshaw, and the New Juilliard Ensemble. From 2008—10, Yanov-Yanovsky was a composer-in-residence at Harvard University, with support from the Scholars at Risk Program. During the same period, he taught music composition at Dartmouth College. His music has been recognized internationally through prizes and awards, recordings, and performances in prestigious concert venues. Yanov-Yanovsky is also a prolific composer of film soundtracks. From 1996—2006, he served as artistic director of the International Contemporary Music Festival Ilkhom-XX, in Tashkent, the only festival of its kind in Central Asia.

KAMILLA KURMANBEKOVA (scenography) grew up in Almaty, Kazakhstan and graduated from Kazakhstan’s National Art Academy. She subsequently earned an MFA in stage design from Boston University’s College of Fine Arts. She has created scenography, costumes, and stage designs for many theatrical productions, both in Kazakhstan and internationally. Her collaborative installation, Zhok, was featured in the Central Asian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale. She led and curated Kazakhstan’s participation in the 2011 Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, which presents contemporary work by theater designers from around the world. Recent work includes costumes for the 2015 film The Wounded Angel, by Kazakh director Emir Baigazin. Kamilla Kurmanbekova presently lives in Los Angeles.

SÉVERINE RIÈME (movement and lighting design) came to lighting design by way of dance and choreography, and much of her work as a lighting designer has involved collaborations with dancers and choreographers, among them, Myriam Gourfink, Marianne Baillot, Mark Tompkins, and Mithkal Alzgair. Her most recent performance was in Nos Féroces, a staging through voice, live music, and dance of excerpts from Notebook of a Return to the Native Land by the French West Indian writer Aimé Césaire, at the festival Les Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales in the Parisian suburb, Montreuil, where Rième makes her home.

HILOLA SHER (costumes) studied costume design and scenography at the National Institute of Fine Arts and Design named after Kamoliddin Behzod, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and subsequently received an MA in book illustration. She worked as principal costume designer at Uzbek-Film, Uzbekistan’s national film company, where her credits include more than a dozen feature films. Beginning in 2000, Hilola Sher regularly produced costumes for the Sharq Taronalari State Music Festival in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. She has exhibited her graphic drawings in many international biennales and had solo exhibitions in Tashkent. She makes costumes for the concert performances of well-known Uzbek singer Sevara
Nazarkhan, and is the owner of the fashion brand Hilola Sher.

JOSEPH JABBOUR (sound and technical direction) grew up in Syria, Lebanon, Austria, and the US and earned an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering. He began sound engineering at the age of 14, focusing on live sound engineering, and has worked with a wide range of musicians in Europe and the Middle East. He served as technical director for the Damascus Jazz Festival, and is in charge of live sound engineering for the Aga Khan Music Initiative. In addition to his work as a sound engineer, Joseph Jabbour does general project management for software systems integration.

PERFORMERS

RAUSHAN ORAZBAEVA (lead musician, qyl-qobyz) is one of Kazakhstan’s most celebrated performers on the qyl-qobyz, the archaic two-stringed fiddle traditionally used by Kazakh shamans. During the Soviet era, the qyl qobyz became a central instrument of folk orchestras and ensembles that performed arrangements of traditional folk music as well as newly composed European-style classical music. A graduate of the Kazakh National Conservatory named after Kurmangazy, Raushan Orazbaeva has performed widely in Europe and North America as a member of various ensembles and orchestras. A solo recording of her performances of classic Kazakh instrumental pieces was released by the Italian label Felmay. Her musicianship is also featured in two recent world music textbooks, *The Music of Central Asia* (Indiana University Press, 2016) and *Pieces of the Musical World: Sounds and Cultures* (Routledge, 2015). She currently teaches at Kazakh National University of the Arts, in Astana, Kazakhstan, and has been granted the title Cultural Figure of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

GUMISAY BERDIKHANOVA (vocal, ghirjek) is one of only two female musicians in Karakalpakstan who play the four-stringed spike fiddle ghirjek (the Karakalpak name for ghijak). She is a first-year student in the Nukus branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts, studying in the Department of Folklore and Ethnography under Gulbahar Ahimbetova. She also studies independently as a *shogird*, or apprentice, of master musician Ghairatdin Otemuratov. In 2014 she won first prize in the Traditional Music Competition named after Muhiddin Kari-Yakubov, in Nukus.

AZIZA DAVRONOVA (vocal, doyra) is originally from Bukhara, one of the great oasis cities of the historical Silk Road, and moved to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, to study at the Uzbekistan State Conservatory, where she was a student of Shavkat Matyakubov. She works as a professional vocalist in Uzbekistan’s State Philharmonia Society, where her specialty is the performance of traditional Uzbek classical repertoire *maqom*.

ALIBEK KABDURAKHMANOV (percussion, chang) specializes in contemporary music and is a member of the Tashkent-based Omnibus Ensemble, Central Asia’s most accomplished contemporary music ensemble. A graduate of the Uzbekistan State Conservatory, Kabdurakhmanov also conducts the National Symphony Orchestra of Uzbekistan, and is active as a freelance musician who performs widely in international festivals and projects. As a teacher and mentor, he works with advanced percussion students in Tashkent and has been instrumental in introducing contemporary percussion music from around the world into the repertoire of young percussionists in Central Asia.
TOKZHAN KARATAI (vocal, qobyz) graduated from the Kazakh National Conservatory named after Kurmangazy, and is interested in the intersection of traditional music and contemporary music. As a performer-composer-improviser, she is seeking ways to expand the musical potential of the qobyz. Karatai has been active in international projects, and traveled to the US in 2016 to participate in Bandistan, a program sponsored by CEC ArtsLink with funding from the US Department of State. Talented young musicians from Central Asia under the leadership of accomplished performers and composers from Central Asia, India, and the US, organized by New York-based CEC ArtsLink with funding from the US Department of State’s Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

MAKHABAT KOBOGONOVA (vocal, kyl-kiyak, chopo-choor, ygach ooz komuz) is a multi-instrumentalist from Kyrgyzstan. She graduated from the Kyrgyz National Conservatory named after K. Moldobasanova, where she studied guitar. Parallel to her conservatory studies, Kobogonova studied kyl-kiyak at the Bishkek-based Centre Ustatshakirt, a project created and supported by the Aga Khan Music Initiative that cultivates new approaches to musical performance and pedagogy and helps talented young musicians reformulate traditional music in contemporary languages of art. In addition to her mastery of the canonical repertoire for kyl-kiyak, Kobogonova has performed internationally in a variety of projects that bring together Kyrgyz musical instruments and traditional musical forms with artists from the West.

ARAILYM OMIRBEKOVA (vocal, dombyra) was raised in the Kyzyl-Orda region of south-central Kazakhstan, one of the country’s richest areas for traditional music. Omirbekova is currently a student in the College of Culture within the National University of Arts, in Astana, studying traditional singing under the mentorship of Elmira Zhana-bergenova. In 2016, she participated in “Playing Together: Sharing Central Asian Musical Heritage,” a program of workshops, public events, and collaborations in traditional and contemporary music that brings together talented young musicians from Central Asia under the leadership of accomplished performers and composers from Central Asia, India, and the US, organized by New York-based CEC ArtsLink with funding from the US Department of State’s Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

SALTANAT YERSULTAN (vocal, zhetigen) studies at the Kazakh National University of the Arts in Astana, where her major subject is film animation. At an early age, she began singing the traditional vocal genre known as zhyr, learning from her mother, a well-known traditional performer and a professor at the University of the Arts. Yersultan’s talent as a singer has been recognized in a number of national and international music competitions. She also plays the qobyz and the zhetigen, a traditional nomadic instrument similar to a hammer dulcimer.

AYSANEM YUSUPOVA (film actor, role of Gulayim) is from Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic within Uzbekistan. As a young teenager, she began performing as a singer in state-sponsored celebrations and festivities, and in 2016, she was accepted as a student of film and theater acting at Tashkent State Art Institute. In 2017 she played one of the main characters in the Uzbek film Maftuning-man—2 (Fascinated by You), a sequel to a 1958 comedy of the same name regarded as a standout in Uzbek film history. Qyrq Qyz is her second film project. Yusopova is presently a second-year student at Tashkent State Art Institute.
Qyrq Qyz and the Aga Khan Music Initiative

The Aga Khan Music Initiative, producer of Qyrq Qyz, is an interregional music and arts education program with worldwide performance, outreach, mentoring, and artistic production activities. Launched to support talented musicians and music educators working to preserve, transmit, and further develop their musical heritage in contemporary forms, the Music Initiative began its work in Central Asia, subsequently expanding its cultural development activities to include artistic communities and audiences in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. The Initiative promotes the revitalization of cultural heritage both as a source of livelihood for musicians and as a means to strengthen pluralism in nations where it is challenged by social, political, and economic constraints. Its projects have included publication of a comprehensive textbook, *The Music of Central Asia* (Indiana University Press, 2016), a 10-volume CD-DVD anthology, *Music of Central Asia*, co-produced with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a worldwide performance and outreach program that nurtures “East-East” as well as “East-West” musical collaborations, and a network of music schools and centers that develop innovative music curricula and curriculum materials in the Music Initiative’s regions of activity.

Aga Khan Music Initiative
http://akdn.org/akmi

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Map credit: Nathalie Héricourt
Qyrq Qyz tour manager: John Pendleton

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