

## **Awardee: Bolat Atabayev, theatre director, Kazakhstan**

**Bolat Atabayev is a major theatre figure in Kazakhstan. For over thirty years, the co-founder of the German Theatre in Almaty has trod an undaunted and perilous path within the Kazakh cultural landscape. With the Goethe Medal, the Goethe-Institut not only recognizes his merits for German-Kazakh theatre relations, but also honours Bolat Atabayev as a courageous fighter for democratic structures.**

The concerns of the German minority have always been close to Bolat Atabayev's heart and, as co-founder of the German Theatre in Kazakhstan, he dealt with their fates even in times when ethnic Germans were still a taboo subject in the Soviet Union. During his stays in Germany he made contacts that he still maintains today; for instance with the director of the Theater an der Ruhr Roberto Ciulli, playwright Volker Schmidt, and film director Volker Schlöndorff. He says of himself, "German theatre turned me into a director" (*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*). Atabayev defies the conservative theatrical traditions still strongly anchored in Kazakhstan and often walks a tightrope in doing so – also thematically. In his artistic work he is an open, critical opponent of the prevailing circumstances, for example handling taboo themes such as the genocide of the Volga Germans in Kazakhstan in his plays. With his unconventional theatrical work and his uninhibited style, he demonstrates the courage to create something new, according to the statement by the conferment commission. In his present theatrical work, he experiments with a variety of production practices and is thought provoking to his audience.

Bolat Atabayev was born in the Taldykorgan region of Kazakhstan in 1952. Families from the German minority were forced to settle there during the Soviet era, so that Atabayev came into contact with the German language and German culture at an early age. After completing his schooling Atabayev decided to study German at the University of World Languages in Almaty where he graduated in 1974. He then worked as a lecturer for two years at the University of World Languages and completed studies at the Academy of Theatre and Art in Almaty in 1983. In the 1980s, Atabayev was one of the co-founders of the German Theatre in Temirtau and until 1991 worked as a director for this minority theatre, which moved to Almaty in the early 1990s. He then worked for theatres in Germany, where he gained new stimuli for his work. Until today, the aesthetics and forms of German theatre have marked and influenced Atabayev.

From 1991 until 2000 Atabayev was a director at the Kazakh Auezov Theatre. Native Germans sometimes reacted hostilely to the mass immigration of ethnic German resettlers from Russia due to prejudices. In his German-language play *Lady Milford aus Almaty* (2000), Atabayev deals with the fate of a German-Kazakh actress who immigrates to Germany, ending up in a village where she finds no qualified work. The play was performed in both Germany and Kazakhstan and thereby fulfilled an important function as a bridge for German-Kazakh theatre relations.

The play *Muslima* (1988) produced by Atabayev and performed in Kazakhstan deals with the drama and genocide of Volga Germans during the Second World War. This, too, is not a

conformist play, since the subject matter is still taboo in Kazakh society today. Until 2003 Atabayev was a lecturer at the Kazakh National Academy of Arts in Almaty and from 2004 until 2007 chief director of the Almaty German Theatre. Since 2005 he has been director and head of his own theatre "Aksarai," which he founded together with his theatre students. Atabayev is presently working on a Brecht piece.

### **Quotes by Bolat Atabayev**

"German theatre turned me into a director" (*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 2011)

"I know I live in the land of the eternal green tomatoes! But, please, no condolences! We will soon turn red!" (Interview in the magazine *Exklusive*, 2007)

"Who in Europe knows where Kazakhstan is? Many mistake us for Mongolia. But, it doesn't matter. We have a saying: When people throw stones at you, you should invite them over for dinner." (Interview in *ZEIT Online*, November 2006)

"The analogousness of attitudes is a characteristic of lack of culture. Dissent is the natural state of nature." (*Respublika*, February 2004)

### **Quotes about Bolat Atabayev**

*About the play Lady Milford aus Almaty*

"Director and writer Bolat Atabayev has created a masterpiece. From passages out of Schiller's classic *Intrigue and Love*, he forges long conversations with the actors and conventional clichés and prejudices of Germans into a text collage, a travel journal in the inner life of a homeless person. It is a case for more tolerance ... tolerance for that which appears foreign." (Nina Heimbach, *Fränkische Nachrichten*, October 2000)

"I was especially impressed at the way that Bolat Atabayev, the Kazakh-Russian director who studied theatre and film in the GDR, committed himself at the German Theatre in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan to the ethnic German writer Viktor Heinz, his countryman and to get his dramatic standard work produced, the drama about the fate of the Volga Germans *Auf den Wogen der Jahrhunderte*. He was successful at it so that the ethnic Germans in Russia, in spite of the most difficult conditions of a German minority in Eastern Europe, particularly in the difficult field of theatre, can show a top performance." (Interview with Ingmar Brantsch on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday)

### **Productions**

*Auf den Wogen der Jahrhunderte* by Viktor Heinz (1985)

*Der eigene Herd* by Andreas Sachs (1987)

*Muslima* (1988) in Kazakh and German

*Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* by Bertolt Brecht (1990)

*Sag ich Abai...* (1994)

*Die Möwe* by Anton Chekhov (1997)

*Abylai-Chan* by Abish Kekilbayev (1998)

*Ein Raetselmensch* (1998)

*Lady Milford aus Almaty* (2000) in German

*Kyz Zhibek* by Gabit Musrepov (2005)

*Karagoz* by Mukhtar Auezov (2006)

### **Awards**

In 1998 Bolat Atabayev was awarded the honorary title of “Artist of Merit of the Republic of Kazakhstan.”