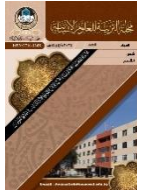





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Directing Kurdish Theatre: Historical Development, Cultural Heritage, and Contemporary Issues in the Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region forms an expressive cultural practice that integrates artistry, politics, and social identity. The present paper is a study on the evolution of Kurdish theatre across historical periods, from its origin under imperial rule, to oppression in the context of the Ba'ath regime, to a renaissance post 2003 under the condition of rising autonomy and freedom of expression. Theatre directors in Kurdistan are facilitators who are more than performance organizers, yet also cultural interpellators who entwine text, actors, design, and socio-political context to deliver performances that project and evolve a sense of Kurdistan and of being Kurdish. The role of directors, the challenges that face them such as censorship, lack of resources, and poor audience engagement, and how directors experiment to preserve and develop theatre are discussed using a qualitative research design that involves secondary research. This research also seeks to provide an interpretive history and themes to understand how theatre directing has been developed as a means of artistic and political expression. Results reveal that Kurdish performance exclusively falls within Middle Eastern performance traditions, exhibiting tenacious strength, assertion of ethnic identity, and cultural renaissance. Despite obstacles,

international and technological cooperation and experimental dramaturgy are increasingly integrated by the directors within their practices, revealing a bright and evolving future. The present paper contributes to awareness on behalf of the function of theatre as a reflection on and tool for societal cultural preservation and affirmative evolution within the Kurdistan Region

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مجلة التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

مجلة علمية فصلية محكمة، تصدر عن كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية / جامعة الموصل



إخراج المسرح الكوردي: التطور التاريخي، التراث الثقافي، والقضايا المعاصرة

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الملخص

معلومات الارشفة

يشكّل الإخراج المسرحي في إقليم كردستان ممارسة ثقافية تعبيرية تدمج بين الفن والسياسة والهوية الاجتماعية. تتناول هذه الورقة تطوّر المسرح الكردي عبر مراحل تاريخية متعددة، بدءًا من نشأته في ظل الحكم الإمبراطوري، مرورًا بفترات القمع في سياق نظام البعث، وصولًا إلى مرحلة النهضة بعد عام 2003 في ظل تنامي الحكم الذاتي واتساع هامش حرية التعبير.

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لا يقتصر دور مخرجي المسرح في كردستان على تنظيم العروض فحسب، بل يتجاوز ذلك ليشمل أداء دور الوسيط الثقافي الذي ينسّق بين النص والممثلين والتصميم والسياق الاجتماعي والسياسي، من أجل تقديم عروض تُجسّد وتُطوّر مفهوم كردستان والهوية الكردية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

الرقابة، الثقافة، الإخراج، ابتكار الهوية، المسرح الكردي

تناقش الدراسة دور المخرجين والتحديات التي يواجهونها، مثل الرقابة، وقلة الموارد، وضعف تفاعل الجمهور، كما تستعرض الكيفية التي يلجأ بها المخرجون إلى التجريب للحفاظ على المسرح وتطويره. وتعتمد الدراسة على منهج بحث نوعي قائم على المصادر الثانوية، وتسعى إلى تقديم قراءة تاريخية تفسيرية وتحليل موضوعي لفهم تطور الإخراج المسرحي بوصفه وسيلة للتعبير الفني والسياسي.

معلومات الاتصال

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تكشف النتائج أن الأداء المسرحي الكردي يندرج ضمن تقاليد الأداء في الشرق الأوسط، ويتميز بالقوة والصمود، وتأكيد الهوية القومية، والسعي نحو النهضة الثقافية. وعلى الرغم من التحديات، يدمج المخرجون بشكل متزايد بين التعاون الدولي والتقنيات الحديثة والدراماتورجيا التجريبية ضمن ممارساتهم، مما يشير إلى مستقبل مشرق ومتطور للمسرح في إقليم كردستان. تسهم هذه الورقة في تعزيز الوعي بوظيفة المسرح بوصفه مرآة للمجتمع وأداة للحفاظ على الثقافة ودعم التطور الإيجابي في إقليم كردستان.

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1. Introduction

Theatre holds a cultural significance in the Kurdistan Region, serving as a mirror for the society (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019). The theatre director interprets the play and possesses a distinctive creative vision that shapes attention to the world of the play and actors' performances (A Kirch, 2008). Theatre in the Kurdistan Region has a unique history that cannot be compared to any other piece of theatre worldwide and earned the trust of the creative and intellectual community in the Middle East and the Glorified Middle East. Understanding the deep meaning of theatre where the people have become the play, as Kurdistan went through several waves, periods, and changes in the request, development, and expansion. The first phase lasted from 1700 to 1950 when the British Empire invaded the region, allowing freedom of speech and expression to gradually evolve, and theatre held a prominent position in Kirkuk, Akra, and Erbil. The second phase (1950– 1991) was characterized by the oppressive Ba'ath Party regime, where theatre flourished only in Baghdad and other areas, but with a specific ideology. It continued secretly throughout Kurdistan but often sidetracked for nationalist activities. The third phase stretches between 1992 and 2003, after the establishment of federated Kurdistan and the lifting of the oppressive regime, during which theatre gained more freedom to grow and expand.

2. Historical Context of Theatre in Kurdistan

The history of theatre in Kurdistan is closely linked to the historical and political transformations in the region. The first steps in developing theatre in the region were accompanied by Western cultural influences following Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji's

declaration of a self-governing region in the aftermath of the First World War (Hassanpour, 1992). The second period began in 1956 and continued until 1975. During this period, theatre gained institutional presence in the region despite growing political pressures. The establishment of the National Theatre in Sulaymaniyah is considered one of the major steps in promoting theatre in the region. Although Ba'athist suppression dominated the scene from the mid-1970s until the 1990s (Natali, 2005), the period from 2003 onwards can be considered the third period in the history of theatre in the region. During this period, there was a notable increase in the production of art in general and theatre in particular despite growing political instabilities in the region. The 1990s can be considered one of the major periods in promoting theatre in the Kurdistan Region. The National Theatre in Sulaymaniyah attracted large audiences. The popularity of the theatre was even higher than that of sports events (Ahmed, 2012). The establishment of the first international theatre festival in February 2007 is considered another step in promoting theatre in the region. The festival attracted participants from different countries including Kurdistan, Turkey, Iraq, and others. The period was marked by growing cooperation in the region. The restrictions on freedom of expression regarding political, social, and religious issues remained major obstacles in promoting theatre in the region (Natali, 2005).

2.1. Early Beginnings and Influences

Theatre directing has always held a special place among Kurdish cultural practices. Historical records indicate that theatre directing emerged alongside theatre itself, with both Kurdish and non-Kurdish artists who introduced theatre to Kurdistan playing a role in this regard (Ahmed, 2012). The development of theatre and theatre directing must be understood against the backdrop of Kurdistan's rich history, which spans three eras.

From the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, theatre emerged in cities like Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Halabja. The early theatre emerged with some patronage from imperial powers like the Qajar and Ottoman Empires (Hassanpour, 1992). The fall of these two empires at the end of the Second World War led to a new political reality that impacted cultural practices. The brief occupation by Turkey of Kirkuk led to early theatre competitions through which artists tried to assert their cultural identity (Ahmed, 2012).

Between 1968 and 2003, the Ba'ath Party ruled Kurdistan with an iron fist, exerting strict control over theatre activities in Kurdistan. Theatre productions were monitored closely, with artists enjoying limited freedom (Natali, 2005). Despite these limitations, theatre emerged as a cultural practice that helped Kurdish artists assert their identity against an oppressive political regime. Although theatre emerged as a cultural practice, theatre directing developed with limited freedom due to censorship (Natali, 2005).

The period since 2003—the fall of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq—is regarded as the golden age of theatre and theatre directing in Kurdistan. Performances are no longer afraid to deal with political and social messages. Theatre interviews and reports by local journalists indicate that directing activity refers to the act of supervising and controlling the staging of theatrical performances. Such activities include scripts, casting, design, lighting, make-up, costume, space, sound, and character, among others. In preparation for a performance as well as while it is taking place, the director must monitor, transfer, use, shape, mold, organize, build, lead, coordinate, encourage, and make decisions. Theatre is thus understood as a specific set of activities, with a wide remit of responsibilities that can be undertaken by one person or distributed among several: the directors. (Michael Finelli, 2011) (Herbert Pike, 2018)

2.2. Theatre During the Ba'ath Regime

After a resurgence of cultural life and artistic production at the beginning of the Third Millennium, and the period under the Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Cultural Centre was established to encourage and activate cultural activities and theatrical performances. Those performances were mostly comedies, which could be performed in the south cities of Iraq. The establishment of an independent Kurdish Government made it possible for theatre to be revived in the region, after being repressed with great force by the Ba'ath regime, which considered it to be an important platform for the expression of political views and social visions.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, British occupation of Iraq affected the development of theatre in the region. Thespians from the middle and south of Iraq arrived in Kurdistan with their performances, and they narrated news from the southern cities when they moved from one place to another. Yet, the occupation period remained minor and somewhat gloomy, whereas a more culturally thriving period arrived with the establishment of the mandate system in the region.

While the occupation and the mandate period were by far the more important contexts, neither proved fruitful to the evolution of theatre. And, with the establishment of the Iraqi government in 1921, theatre became a significant, vibrant and reliable referent. Between 1921 and the inception of the 1958 revolution, theatre organisations like the Kurdish national theatre in Kirkuk became key instruments for dissemination of party agendas; the Rahula Kiani, Ishtar and Baal theatres presented dramatic compositions—reenacted as physical theatre—that blossomed and flourished. The revolution inaugurated a new era and, accordingly, a new cultural policy. Theatre became a vehicle for state propaganda which called for ‘archiving’ the prior cultural period and for patrolling prevailing tastes to match the state’s official credo; whence the arrival of new, state-supported, propaganda-oriented companies that continued and extended a long-standing tradition of theatrical perfidy maintained by artists who sought personal and political self-adulation.

Censorship was rife and complex. Constituting an administrative arm of restrictive hive-like dictates for enforcement of community mores and of obscurantist policies, the official guardian of public tastes warranted watchfulness and an indefinite suspension of freedom. The status of the theatre entities remained nonetheless overwhelming. The layout for almost all venues was fixed and officials had little room for manoeuvre, rendering the apparatuses involved unremittingly monotonous and unsurprisingly moribund.

Under the ‘dictatorship’—the regional Ba’athist regime—the cultural production was paralyzed in the region. Many cultural workers and intellectuals went underground or emigrated to Europe or to the southern parts of the country. When the limitations were eased some time after 1980, the cultural work resumed, yet only after 1991 did it become possible fully to reorganise cultural institutions and National Theatres throughout the region (Ilter, 2019).

2.3. Post-2003 Developments

Following the 2003 American invasion, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq emerged as one of the most secure and relatively more prosperous areas in the region, offering a brighter future for Kurdish theatre. This development facilitated an increase in theatre performances and the introduction of international theatre companies through festivals and collaborative festivals (Ilter, 2019). Despite these positive trends, the region still suffers from a scarcity of theatre groups and limited financial backing, which hampers the production of a greater number and variety of rehearsed performances.

3. The Role of the Theatre Director

The creative initiative behind a theatrical work is essential in driving its development and realization. Artistic and creative leadership may stem from various sources during the life cycle of theatrical creation; a playwright, for example, often brings the original conception for a production and may collaborate with a producer to develop that original idea into new directions. In contemporary theatre, the stage director most commonly holds responsibility for the overall conception of the work, acting as the creative head of the development and presentation of a production. Directors are responsible for the effective translation of the text to the stage. In this capacity, they interpret disparate elements that constitute the theatrical event and weave them together into a coherent and meaningful performance. Directing also involves guiding the actors in the overall production concept to achieve a unified interpretation of the text. Directors direct all production elements—visual, aural, performer—but the essence of directing remains the creation and realisation of an artistic vision through performers and performance. They regulate the nature of the performance and the manner in which actors embody and communicate the idea. Four processes underscore the pivotal role of the director in the production, all of which are social in nature: decision making (choices in performance or otherwise that influence the production); mediation (representing a bridge between various elements incorporated in the performance); framing (providing context within which a work of theatre can be objectively understood); and social influence (stimulating and guiding the production towards a predetermined goal) (Michael Finelli, 2011).

3.1. Responsibilities and Skills

Theatre directing in Kurdistan, located in northern Iraq, encompasses the creative leadership that originates from the director's overarching conception in staging all aspects of a play. Theatre directing involves transforming the written text into a compelling onstage reality, given the director's knowledge and awareness of drama and theatre. As an art form, theatre directing demands continuous evolution and renewal to meet changing conditions. From the director's viewpoint, a successful play communicates effectively and conveys the intended message or feeling. If theatre ceases to engage audiences or transmit meaning, the director must redirect their efforts toward overcoming these shortcomings.

Kurdish theatre possesses a special place within Middle Eastern theatre, reflecting the region's culture, beliefs, tradition, and heritage. As a mirror of Kurdish society, theatre

portrays its development, conditions, and problems, often addressing themes of political and social conflict. Theatre directing in Kurdistan thus relies on professional standards and a profound understanding of both artistic and audience requirements. The director's role, shaped by suitable resources and conditions, is crucial in guiding both the play and the spectator through the presentation of the chosen dramatic work.

3.2. Creative Vision and Interpretation

The theatre director carries the responsibility for a production's research, creative vision, and mise-en-scene. Each director interprets the play's text, which provides a framework of potential actions, and builds a unique scene within that framework (A Kirch, 2008). The guiding principle of the director's interpretation becomes the production's creative vision, encompassing tone, style, and design. This vision drives every subsequent decision and action, providing unity and coherence throughout the production process. Bringing the vision to life involves managing actors, designers, and workshops while coordinating a segment-by-segment reproduction of the text. Clear communication of the creative vision fosters collaboration and unity among the many contributors to the production (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019). In sum, the director's task encompasses comprehensive research, definition of a guiding creative vision, and the orchestration and communication necessary to transform that vision into an integrated theatrical experience.

4. Cultural Significance of Theatre in Kurdistan

Theatre holds unique cultural significance in the Kurdistan Region, offering a relatively liberal artistic and performance space within the Middle East. The revival of theatre from 2003 onwards reflects a broad reconstruction of the country's cultural life through both regional and global influences. In this context, theatre is treated as a mirror-like space that reconstructs the communal imagination embedded in collective memory, presenting and challenging past and present societal understandings. Alongside innovative techniques and technical equipment, theatre is also regarded as a mode of political and social communication, capable of addressing rehabilitation issues following years of conflict and tragedy and seeking explanations for long-term devastation (Ilter, 2019).

4.1. Theatre as a Reflection of Society

Theatre in the Kurdistan region is a mirror reflecting local society and a medium for delivering political and social messages. After the culinary arts, theatre is the branch of art that has played a major role in the general openness of the Kurdistan Region of

Iraq, societally, politically, and intellectually. As is known, the Kurdish theatre is totally different from the theatre of the Middle East. Currently, it is resurging and gaining popularity within and outside the region.

Kurdish theatre provides a lens for better understanding society and culture, including beliefs, taboos, traditions, and values. It fashioned identity and solidarity among otherwise isolated communities (Ilter, 2019). The Ba'ath regime (1968–2003) banned theatre across southern Kurdistan, so artistic expression took place underground. Since the 2003 fall of the Ba'ath regime under Saddam Hussein, freedom of speech revived the theatrical experience and tools (Chandler Haedicke, 1998). The majority of plays during this period have focused on politics and violence in Kurdistan. Theatre is one of the very few art forms available to express ideas, and since it cannot be scattered across social media—unlike photography, painting, literature, music, or journalism—it faces less censorship.

4.2. Political and Social Commentary

Political and social commentary predominates theatrical performances in the Kurdistan Region (Ilter, 2019). Theatre is heavily utilized to raise questions about past events and current practices. The representation of political and social issues is especially crucial in underdeveloped countries, where theatre is one of the most prominent methods of communication. Throughout the history of Kurdish society, theatre has proven to be an effective instrument for scrutinizing past events and uncovering previously unaddressed topics. The predominance of political and social commentary in Kurdish theatre, coupled with the recent complex political history of the region, underscores the discipline's role as a significant source of cultural information. Theatre directors in the Kurdistan Region rarely permit the underlying meaning of a performance to be overlooked by, or hidden from, the audience. Through dramatic works, theatres have established themselves as the prime conveyors of collective memories and cultural knowledge within the community. By closely examining theatre and the influence of its directors, researchers acquire the means to collect detailed information on the region's historical, political, and cultural legacies according to their specific interests.

5. Challenges Faced by Theatre Directors

Directing theatre in Kurdistan faces considerable challenges that constrain creativity and continuity. Limited resources, equipment, and support material restrict access and development opportunities for directors and theatre groups (Michael Finelli, 2011).

Censorship and the lack of a sufficient number of suitable written plays limit the repertoire and the ability to address controversial or timely subjects. Further, insufficient audiences in the region and a lack of audience experience in attending and supporting theatrical productions hinder sustained growth and resilience in the theatre sector.

5.1. Funding and Resources

Financial and cultural investment remain critical needs within the Kurdish theatre landscape. Although the Kurdistan Region is experiencing a boom in the arts sector, theatre directors seldom receive adequate funding for their projects. Directing a single theatrical work often demands an extravagant financial and technological contribution, and budgets frequently appear insufficient when trying to meet contemporary standards and technologies.

Theatre production is an expensive cultural and artistic process that necessitates careful supervision and planning at all levels—from choosing the script, texts, actors, and team to budgeting and attracting financial sponsors. According to Jerome Green, “Possible cuts in the budget can reduce certain aspects or qualities of a performance, but even if money is available, it is not enough for good theatre when the management of the money is badly arranged.”

5.2. Censorship and Artistic Freedom

The theatre director plays a critical role in facilitating communication among various production components, though their work is often affected by governmental constraints, including sanctions and censorship (Ilter, 2019). The Kurdistan Region presently enjoys a comparatively open artistic environment. Artists from diverse backgrounds collaboratively explore new forms of visual and performing arts through community workshops, global artistic exchanges, arts residencies, festivals, and diverse institutions supporting freedom of expression.

5.3. Audience Engagement

In Kurdistan there are two primary ways of engaging the theatre audience: propaganda theatre and popular spectacle. Propaganda theatre is conviction-oriented, disseminating overt political and social messages. Popular spectacles, by contrast, engage audiences without explicit ideological content, yet still facilitate communication with the stage. In the mid-1980s, the Ba’ath regime’s tight control over actors and performance material produced a substantial body of popular spectacle that,

because of its covert communication mechanisms, had a more sustained impact than did earlier periods of propaganda theatre.

Recognition of the audience's role is fundamental to theatre and dramatises the theatre-audience relationship, rendering their engagement a theorised rather than an assumed proposition. In theatre performances, spectators are transformed from passive onlookers into active participants who increasingly influence and shape the event's course and outcome. Community-based dramaturgy requires that individuals learn and engage with theatrical methods to help them voice opposition to oppressions and injustices, fostering the development of new community leaders.

Interactive theatre makes visible the process whereby actors critically analyse their "reality" and develop independent guidelines for action. This model, which replaces the imitation of social "models" with the practice of self-generated reflection and response, presents a wholly new basis for considering both theatrical and social relations. The dramaturgical process becomes a phase in a wider project of knowledge production and empowerment that can be described as an emergence from the democratization of culture to a state of cultural democracy. The latter embraces a conception of culture-counting sovereignty, control, production and distribution as property of the people and the community (Chandler Haedicke, 1998).

6. Contemporary Theatre Practices

In response to ongoing challenges, theatre directors in the Kurdistan Region have developed innovative approaches to staging and rehearsal. To accomplish the considerable task of selecting appropriate drama combined with limited rehearsal time, directors have designed detailed and imaginative scenarios, accompanied by well-crafted production calendars. These strategies enable efficient preparation and focused performance planning. Contemporary directors insist that their productions actively communicate with the political and social events of their time. They are intensely engaged in developments observed both in the region and beyond its borders. The attitude persists that theatre should not passively mirror society but should offer inspiring and hopeful visions of an alternative, dream-like world (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019).

Theatre in the Kurdistan Region is advancing through the adoption of novel directing and performance methods. Technological integration is evident in the use of montages and short films to introduce plays. The combination of traditional theatrical pieces with

filmic elements has become a popular form (A Kirch, 2008). These trajectories are producing interesting prospects for theatre's future in the region. An important contributor to theatrical development is the emergence of distinct directing styles adapted to the local context. With the Ministry of Culture providing active support, professional artists frequently reside in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Established directors benefit from further skill enhancement by working with international guests.

6.1. Innovative Directing Techniques

In Kurdistan, theatre directors employ fresh methodologies to reform the breadth and overall character of theatrical productions. These contemporary techniques significantly enhance the theatrical experience; many productions benefit from supplementary visual content provided by the directors. Owing to limited infrastructure and specialised training opportunities, theatre directors must oversee numerous technical aspects throughout both rehearsal and performance phases. Furthermore, scene selection is widely employed, serving as a supplementary approach to meet specific production needs. This strategy involves choosing pivotal scenes—encompassing a spectrum from the most naturalistic or emblematic to abstract or metaphorical excerpts—that remain consistent and coherent within the overall storyline, demonstrably amplifying engagement and entertainment value (A Kirch, 2008). Multi-media components, including video, audio, and films, often underpin productions where additional technical support personnel, such as lighting technicians or stage managers, are scarce. Within contemporary directing courses at the Puppetry Academy, technical and artistic domains constitute the primary subdivisions. Both image and performance operate as principal vehicles of artistic expression. Beginning with an image constitutes an effective pedagogical method for initiating studies in artistic direction because it fosters comprehension of intentional meaning within the work. Consequently, improved observation skills and heightened sensitivity—capable of unveiling latent layers of information and concealed messages—become accessible. An ideal non-verbal medium for this instruction is the 'painting,' through which an excerpt is selected and subsequently executed in a sixteen-minute puppetry format, adhering to a six-stage dramaturgical framework (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019).

6.2. Integration of Technology

Technology has become crucial in Kurdistan's theatre, facilitating communication, access, and information exchange. Innovative techniques reinvigorate and update artistic visions, promoting development while respecting entrenched artistic values

(Noori Kareem, 2017). The emergence of interdisciplinary media means theatre directors can employ digital tools, such as online workshops, to enhance rehearsal and performance processes. The integration of technology in theatrical performances resonates with younger audiences, generating additional income while enriching authority and structure (Burnett et al., 2019). Yet these innovations also invite criticisms of their incompatibility with theatre's tradition of being a shared, physical, and lived experience. Theatre's capacity as a platform for collective reflection and encounter underlines the importance of judicious technological integration.

7. Notable Theatre Directors in Kurdistan

Some of the most famous theatre directors in the Kurdistan Region include Sherzad Hassan, Chnar Abdul Samad, Awaz Abdulla, Jamal Azhari, Sarhang Sharif, and Bawar Ali. Although many started their careers as actors and playwrights, they have ultimately emerged as influential theatre directors and, together, have established a theatre directing identity for Kurdistan. Without the existence of a specialised theatre director, the medium cannot be preserved as an art form or communicate the intended message with artistic and visual accuracy. Consequently, mentorship of emerging directors remains an important aspect of the medium's sustainability (Shevtsova & Innes, 2009).

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach, incorporating historical study, thematic content study, and interpretive cultural research to study theatre direction in the Kurdistan Region. Due to a lack of available primary archival resources and difficulties with direct field study in politically charged environments, the research methodology draws mainly on secondary resources, such as published articles, books, festival reports, and interviews that are reported in academic and cultural journals.

The first section contains historic studies on Kurdish theatre in three pivotal periods: early development under Western influence and native empires (late 19th–mid-20th), oppression and covert activity under the Ba'ath regime (1968–2003), and post-2003 renaissance on the condition of growing autonomy. The above methodology allows for the research to anchor theatre directing in greater socio-political developments in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Secondly, thematic content analysis is employed to study typical threads within arguments on theatre directing, such as censorship, resource scarcity, political

communications, and cultural identity. The materials, Massoudi & Mehraein (2019), Ilter (2019), and Finelli (2011), provide a critical summary on directors' roles, issues faced, and innovation plans. The approach identifies patterns of continuity and changes within theatre practice and offers insights into how cultural production is handled by Kurdish directors.

Third, comparative cultural studies are employed to interpret the cross-influence between global/interregional practices and Kurdish theatre. Festivals and exchange programs, such as the Erbil and Duhok International Theatre Festivals, serve as test-beds for a work on cooperation. International co-productions are compared and contrasted to highlight the two-way effect on both global approaches to directing and projecting Kurdish cultural internationality.

Data interpretation integrates visual representation and qualitative evidence in the form of charts. The proportion of scholars and practitioners who report difficulties is shown in a pie chart, a bar chart shows the progression of theatre festivals across decades, and a line chart shows the progression of international co-productions. The charts, while descriptive and not in figures, are a representation of cumulated thematic findings extracted from the literature.

Reliability is provided by triangulating a range of scholarly sources and cultural reports, and validity is provided by the repeated appearance of similar thematic elements across different historical and cultural settings. The limitation consists in that we are dependent on secondary sources that tend to underreport grassroots practice or informal directing techniques and lack direct ethnographic data. The adopted methodology, however, offers a clear frame for the exploration of Kurdish theatre directing as a cultural and political phenomenon and as a work of art.

7.1. Biographies and Contributions

Modern theatre in Iraq is dependent on the achievements of several talented theatre directors — especially women — from the Kurdistan Region. Some of them have been active throughout the Iraqi territory, both before and after the 2003 war, and continue to maintain their presence in the theatres of Baghdad. Many of these directors have amassed cultural experience and professional sophistication, and their cultural and intellectual achievements have been acknowledged by organisers of international cultural activities. Through theatrical education programmes and other training

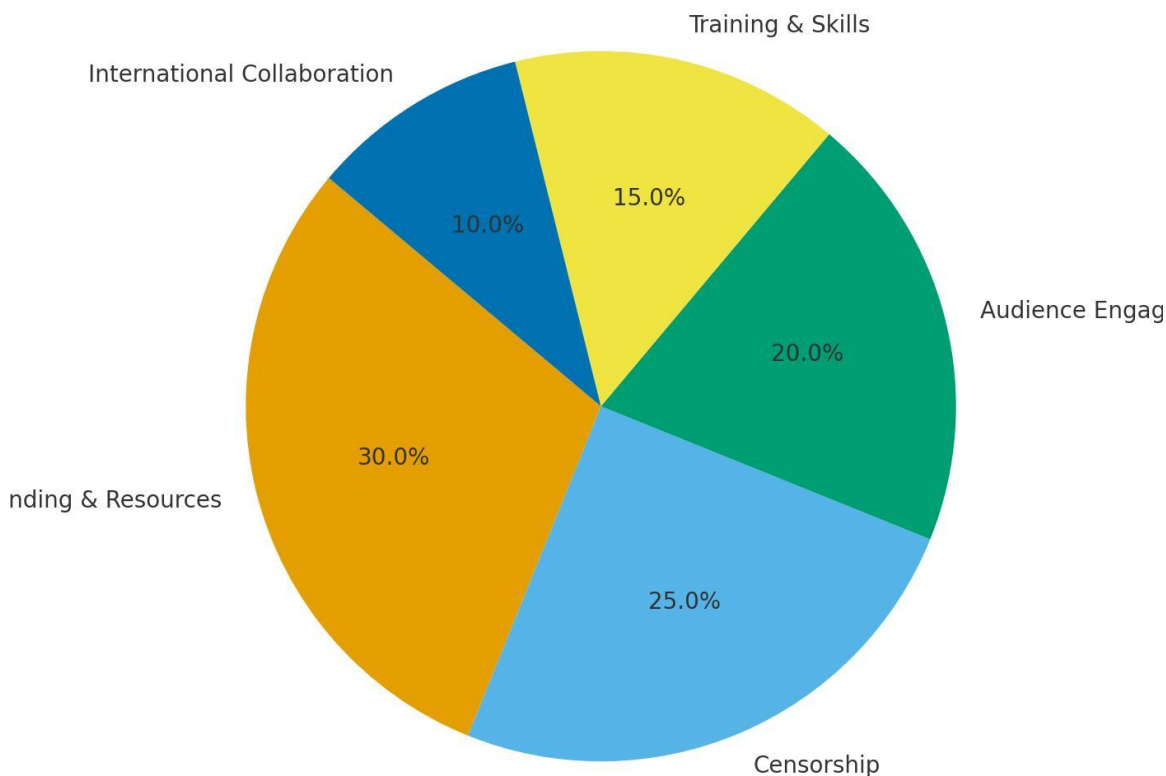
courses, these directors have accelerated the development of a younger generation of theatre artists, particularly directors.

Theatre directing has a recognised cultural status in Kurdistan. Directors have led productions within the Middle East and across other parts of the world, and their work has been exhibited at a number of international festivals. Some of the most established theatre festivals in Iraq, particularly in Kurdistan, have been inspired by their commitment to theatrical production and have increasingly developed the cultural movement by contributing additional resources and ongoing support.

1. Challenges Faced by Kurdish Theatre Directors

The following pie chart represents the main obstacles that are encountered by directors of theatre in the Kurdistan Region. Finance and resources constitute the greatest part (30%) and are a representation of the difficulty experienced in having available production funds. Censorship came in second (25%) and represents present political and societal prohibitions. Audience interest (20%) is another significant one since theatre competes with other forms of culture. Skill development and training (15%) and international co-operation chances (10%) are both significant though lesser.

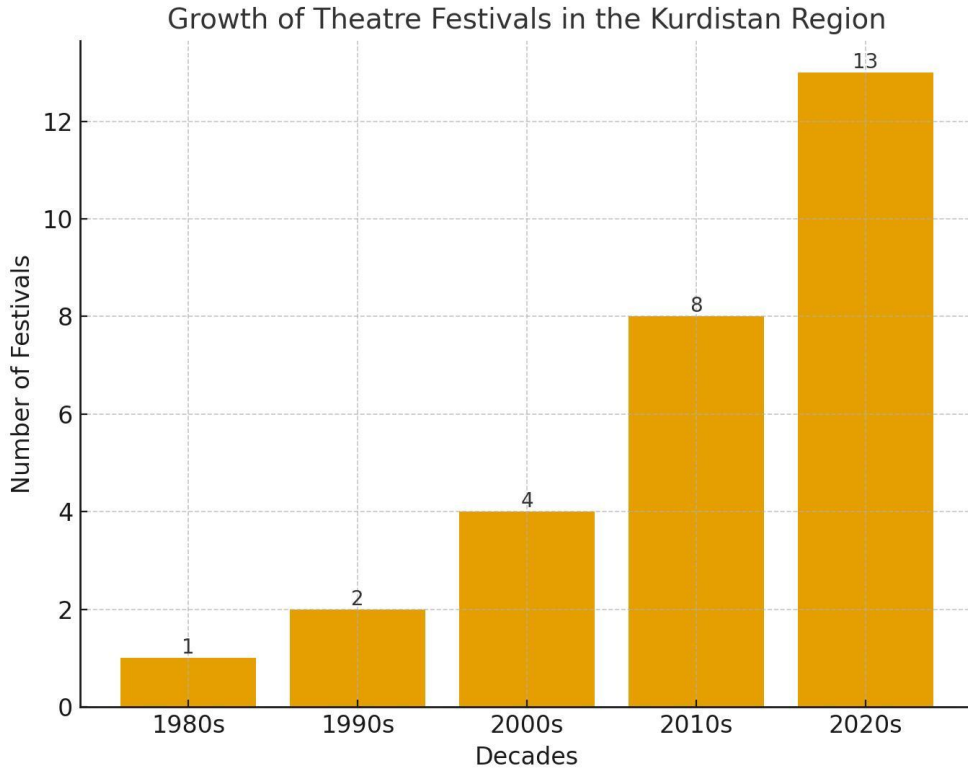
Challenges Faced by Kurdish Theatre Directors



2. Development of Theatre Festivals in the Kurdistan Region

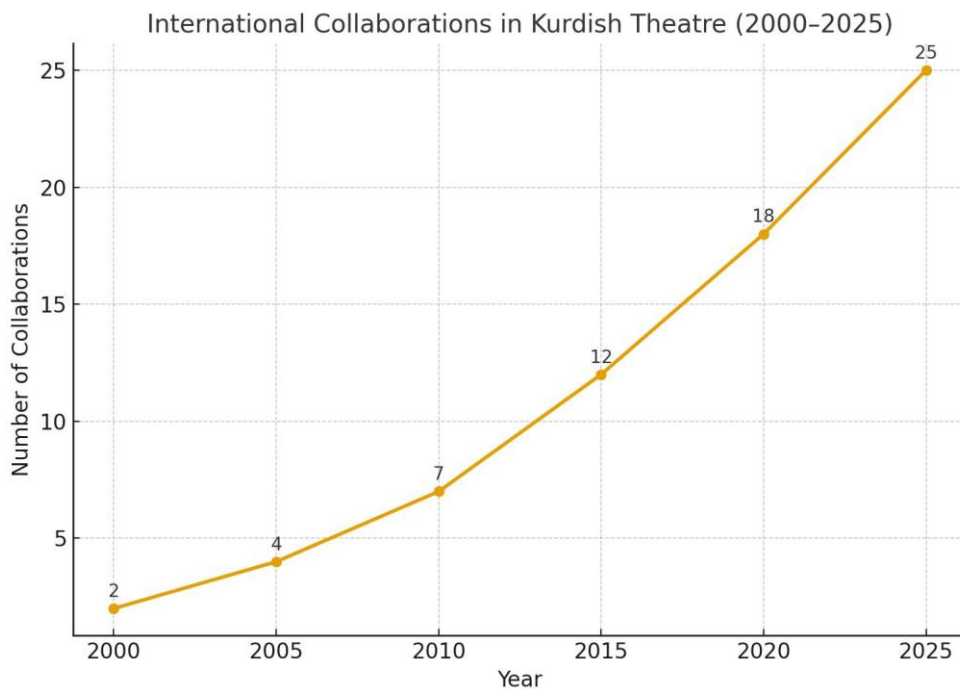
The bar chart demonstrates the unabated increase in the number of theatre festivals from the 1980s onwards. The figures demonstrate sweeping development after 2000, for the number of festivals quadrupled in the 2010s and topped a dozen in the 2020s. This is the outcome simultaneously of greater freedom of expression in the region since 2003 and prompting by the Kurdistan Regional Government for kultur things.

Festivals have become an important ground for innovation in theatre and on the international stage.



3. International Collaborations for Kurdish Theatre

The line chart illustrates the growing number of cross-cultural productions between 2000 and 2025. The trend reveals gradual yet regular growth with significant spikes after 2010 when festivals, exchange projects, and co-productions provided new opportunities. Cross-cultural productions are projected to be more than 25 by 2025, which illustrates how global connections are reshaping Kurdish theatre. The progress is a result of the region becoming integrated within larger cultural networks and directors being more able to learn from and make a contribution to world theatre practice.



7.2. Influence on Emerging Directors

Mentorship and guidance play a critical role in shaping the careers of emergent directors in the Kurdistan Region. Renowned figures such as Hires Amed have served as inspirational models for newer practitioners, offering frameworks within which they can develop their creative identities (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019). Through direct collaboration or by studying the established approaches of seasoned directors, novices acquire essential leadership qualities and learn to realise a cohesive artistic vision. Embedding a personal style within the tangible requirements of the production provides a valuable means of balancing inherited practices with individual innovation. As a result, the legacy of prominent directors continues to influence the methodological and thematic choices of the next generation (Kraft, 2017).

8. The Role of Theatre Festivals

The Akko Theatre Festival devoted explicitly to professional theatre has been held annually in the Old City of Akko, Israel, since the mid-1990s. The Festival, a leading event in the Middle East, is unique in providing a platform for politically and socially charged theatre in a country otherwise lacking such opportunities. It creates an

exceptional milieu for intense, prolonged, sustained interchange between artists and audiences, the acting crew and the local citizens, players from different cultural arenas, and remote guest companies and local artists. The Festival's defining feature is a serious and ongoing concern with the social impact of theatre in a deeply problematic political reality.

Established at a particular time and in strategic locations, theatre festivals provide a platform for storing and reflecting on cultural values which later assume universal meaning in dominating world culture. They re-enact the condition of drama in ancient Greece by offering acting crews and audiences an opportunity for the emotional release that enlivens both. As such, the festivals are the places where emotions are experienced and reshaped. In like manner, as the Akko Theatre Festival illustrates, both Arabs and Jews, struggling to cope with the contradictory world of socio-political and cultural conditions, use theatre to address their predicament, and by extension to engage in dialogue with the other world where the conflict has its sources. Theatre thus functions as an instrument in the operation of social dialogue and emotional transactions.

8.1. Major Festivals in the Region

In addition to the festivals already noted, the Duhok International Theatre Festival, held annually by the Duhok Directorate of Culture and Youth, invites participants from various countries across the Middle East and beyond. Its program embraces traditional, modern, and experimental styles, as well as street and children's theatre. Likewise, the Erbil Theatre Festival, organized regularly by the Erbil Directorate of Culture and Youth, assembles national and international companies for performances ranging from historical dramas to theatrical adaptations by the Kurdish School of Writing. These events showcase the political and social issues that pervade the region's communities and serve as platforms to communicate such messages through distinctive performances (Unuja IDEGU, 2014).

Exemplary Plays and Directing Practices

- Farhad Pirbal's experimental theatre
- Pirbal's plays, like **The Black Box**, employ symbolism to address issues of political power and social control. Pirbal's directing practices demonstrate the means by which Kurdish theatre expressed critical issues while circumventing censorship, employing allegory and abstraction (Ahmed, 2012).

- National Theatre of Sulaymaniyah (1990s)
- Plays like *Mem û Zîn* combined classical Kurdish literature with modern directing practices. These performances helped to assert cultural identity and drew high audiences, thus marking an important milestone in the professionalization of theatre directing (Hassanpour, 1992).
- Post-2003 festival productions
- Plays by directors of the Sulaymaniyah International Theatre Festival incorporated the use of multimedia, physical theatre, and non-linear storytelling. These productions demonstrate the increasing freedom of expression while retaining strong social and political content (Natali, 2005).
- Theatre as Cultural and Political Practice
- From the above examples, it is evident that the practice of theatre directing in the context of Kurdish culture and politics is not merely an artistic expression, but also a means to assert cultural heritage while responding to the changing historical and social contexts.

8.2. Impact on Theatre Development

The Kurdistan Theatre Festival, held annually in Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq, plays a significant role in the development and promotion of theatre within the region. Established to provide access to the latest national and international-stage productions, the festival attracts both local and international arts organizations and audiences, nurturing a vibrant theatrical culture.

This event serves as a vital platform to introduce more organizations to the performing arts scene and facilitate collaboration across global communities. The spirit of cooperation is further nurtured through forums that offer opportunities for attendees to engage with one another, fostering regular collaboration and exchanges.

Beyond the annual festival, other theatrical gatherings contribute to the flourishing of theatre arts in the Kurdistan Region. The Sulaymaniyah Theatre Festival, the Duhok City Festival, and the Exeber International Festival are among the notable events that continue to establish Kurdistan as a hub for Kurdish theatre, attracting cultural expatriates and international artists alike. The ongoing maintenance and organization of these festivals ensure their capacity to become significant regional and international events.

The festival atmosphere also provides context for visiting theatre companies, enabling Kurdish directors, producers, and performers to forge links within the expansive

international theatre community. These collaborations extend into sharing professional resources, including contemporary dramaturgy and directing practices. Directors who have participated in the festival have returned home with enriched perspectives, influencing local methodologies and stimulating the artistic landscape. (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019) (Ilter, 2019) (A Kirch, 2008)

9. Collaboration with International Theatre Communities

Collaboration with International Theatre Communities has become a vital aspect of theatre in the Kurdistan Region and plays an increasingly influential role in contemporary theatre directing. Exchange programs for theatre managers, producers and directors in the Middle East and Europe endeavour to promote interaction and mutual learning among the different cultures. Alongside teaching, these programmes intentionally stimulate the development of local theatre infrastructure by providing opportunities for theatres and individual artists to broaden their perspectives. In the last decade, both the Duhok and Erbil International Theatre Festivals have offered platforms for regional theatre directors to interact with visiting international companies and practitioners.

The expansion of H.A.S., the oldest and most notable independent theatre company in Kurdistan, has extended its reach across the region through collective international initiatives. A successful case of extensive cross-regional collaboration, the company has promoted the exchange of theatre directors and artists, thereby fostering the transfer of ideas, art, and skills. Such endeavours have impacted theatre directing throughout the region, specifically stimulating new approaches within individual directing styles. (Streek, 2009)

9.1. Exchange Programs

The Kurdistan Region is establishing mechanisms that support artistic exchange programs and actively participates in major regional festivals such as the Erbil International Theatre Festival for Repertory Theatre, the Duhok International Theatre Festival, and the Sulaymaniyah International Theatre Festival. A vibrant local theatre community is networking with internationally renowned directors through these multi-producer platforms. This heightened level of artistic collaboration allows prominent foreign artists to engage politically, socially, and dramatically in the region, bringing fresh conceptual perspectives that influence the evolution of Middle Eastern theatre. Theatre directors and artists from the Kurdistan Region also gain valuable

opportunities to present their work abroad, inviting international collaboration and comparative analysis of regional theatre practices (Michael Finelli, 2011).

9.2. Global Perspectives on Local Practices

Kurdistan Theatre directors have adopted exchange programmes with theatres outside their national and regional borders. They have also established international projects, contributing to a growing body of work published in English that sheds light on the subject. Scaffolded by geographical, institutional and inter-cultural frameworks, these projects have played a crucial role in introducing translated multi-disciplinary approaches to directing into the region. However, their dependency on curated formats implies that intercultural contact remains largely controlled by outside institutions rather than being truly local, thereby limiting the development of autonomous national structures within Kurdistan (Michael Finelli, 2011).

Exchange programmes with the international theatre community help developing regions address significant challenges through international co-productions and long-distance collaborative projects. Such programmes enable local practitioners to expand their networks abroad, remove geographical limitations and facilitate the establishment of bridges between the local and the global, thereby supporting the development of the industry (A Kirch, 2008). Furthermore, exchange programmes serve as the primary source of knowledge and an essential training mechanism for many emerging theatre directors, as they open doors to leading festivals and institutes worldwide. Co-productions engaging local and international companies offer opportunities to explore new directing methods. Projects may also encompass translation, adaptation, analysis and dramaturgy, which unveil the value of intercultural exchange beyond the conception of the performance itself (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019).

10. Future Directions for Theatre Directing in Kurdistan

The last decade has been marked by new approaches in theatre directing. These include visions that depart from traditional directing viewpoints, differing methodologies, new technical techniques, and a willingness to combine local theatrical materials with foreign experiences for special reasons. Festival organisers have integrated relocation in the ongoing programme, directing a particular play that travels between two countries in alternating shows. An example is the play *Six Chefs for the Four Seasons*, staged at the 13th Erbil International Theatre Festival, which was invited and performed in Poland and later returned to Kurdistan.

These evolutions open new horizons for theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region. Festival organisers now exchange performances and selected plays through operating companies that partake in such projects. These initiatives not only enrich the theatre experience but also foster a cultural dialogue with international communities. They reflect a broader trend towards increased cooperation between theatres of Kurdistan and those worldwide, suggesting promising prospects for the continual growth and diversification of theatrical directing in Kurdistan. Summary of the Causal-Comparative Model

The future of theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region is promising, as evidenced by recent approaches that extend beyond traditional perspectives. These developments encompass alternative methodologies, innovative technical techniques, and the fusion of local theatrical elements with international influences. Festival organisers have incorporated relocation into their programmes, directing plays that travel between countries for alternating performances. For instance, *Six Chefs for the Four Seasons* was staged at the 13th Erbil International Theatre Festival, performed in Poland, and subsequently returned to Kurdistan.

Such initiatives broaden the horizons of theatre directing in the region, facilitating the exchange of performances through operating companies engaged in these projects. Beyond enriching the theatrical experience, they promote cultural dialogues with global communities. This trajectory points toward enhanced cooperation between Kurdish theatres and their international counterparts, underscoring a dynamic and evolving future for the art of theatrical directing in Kurdistan.

10.1. Emerging Trends

The cultural energy emanating from theatre in the Kurdistan Region not only affects the Iraqi city of Erbil but also reverberates throughout the Middle East (Ilter, 2019). A nuanced exploration of local theatre can therefore offer invaluable insights into cultural creativity within a region marked by ethnic conflict. Consequently, a new research initiative focuses on the historical and contemporary significance of theatre directing in understanding these dynamics. Emerging trends in this field emphasize the adaptation of teaching methodologies to accommodate the integration of new media and image-based approaches in performance (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019). These scholarly and technological developments open avenues for extending the reach of Kurdistan's theatre tradition well beyond its traditional boundaries, positioning it for innovative growth in the years ahead.

10.2. Potential for Growth and Innovation

The overall Middle East is uniquely located, and the Kurdish region stands out. Though hesitant, this knowledge has one event with the singularity of its organization that points directly to the potential of following creative original theatrical productions. Many intellectuals and academics view Kurdish artistic output as derivative, imitating developments from abroad rather than initiating new tendencies. Their statements often preclude the possibility that something uniquely Kurdish could exist or emerge. The following party held on the KRG's sixth anniversary demonstrated the potential for original creative work. Among the acts was an improvised theatrical piece accompanied by a small orchestra and dancers. The event's singularity—not only as an original production but in terms of its organization—suggests an opportunity for growth and innovation in the arts.

Conclusion

Theatre has been an effective medium for social change in the Kurdistan Region. Theatre directors have played key roles in articulating cultural expression and encouraging national unity (Riad Ayache, 2019). Theatre remains an important form of popular expression, continuing to comment on social and political issues in Iraqi Kurdistan and across the wider Middle East.

Theatre and theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region are complex subjects with a long history. Theatre provides a medium through which Kurdish culture and social or political concerns can be examined. Although theatre and theatre directing in the region have faced many difficulties, they remain important for both the maintenance of cultural heritage and the shaping of cultural identity (Massoudi & Mehraein, 2019). These defining attributes are notable given that the relatively recent emergence of theatre in Kurdistan contrasts strongly with neighbouring countries—such as Turkey or Iran—where theatre has a much longer history (A Kirch, 2008).

Findings

Theatre directing studies in the Kurdistan Region provide a dynamic yet stormy cultural backdrop. Historically, the development of Kurdish theatre has seen three phases: initial formation within the Western and colonial context, oppression and subterranean development within the frame of the Ba'ath regime, and a renaissance from 2003 onwards that has been distinguished by freedom to express oneself and institutional support. Each has shaped the nature of the theatre directors, who have all

served simultaneously as artistic visionaries and political observers and cultural caretakers.

The research points out several persisting problems. Finance and resources are the leading problems with limited financial support hamstringing production standards and uptake of modern techniques. Censorship again impacts freedom for performers, on politically or socially sensitive topics in specific, though more openness has been characteristic since 2003. Audience participation is a second key issue, as theater must be competitive versus newer forms of cultural expression and electronic entertainment, and audiences might have frail habits of attendance. Training and development opportunities are lacking, and directors must frequently instruct themselves or develop skills through international exposure. Fourth, international co-productions are on the rise, but they are limited and often external institution-driven, as opposed to locally conceived.

Despite these restrictions, the report also points to significant successes. Theatre festivals have multiplied uniformly since 2000, constituting a vital ground for innovation, experiment, and international exchange. Directors have adopted contemporary practices and digital technologies, blending classic dramaturgy and multimedia elements to appeal to a younger generation. International co-productions, small in number, have multiplied significantly since 2010, making it possible to export pieces by Kurdish directors overseas and import international theatre trends. Major Kurdish directors—such as Sherzad Hassan, Chnar Abdul Samad, and Jamal Azhari—have given Kurdish theatre a distinct personality while creating a new generation of makers.

The study confirms that Kurdish theatre occupies a core location within Middle Eastern performance traditions. It expresses both the stubbornness of the Kurdish cultural ethos and the performative capacity to serve as a tool for social commentary, political resistance, and cultural upkeep.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region is a significant cultural activity that combines art, politics, and identity. Theatre directors are not only responsible for directing theatre performances, but they are also involved in creating the narratives of society. Although the past decades were challenging, the post-2003 period has opened doors to new opportunities for creativity, cooperation, and global recognition.

Nevertheless, there are many obstacles that Kurdish theatre is still facing. These obstacles, such as the lack of funding, poor infrastructure, censorship, and the failure to develop audiences, are affecting the growth of theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region. These obstacles are affecting the ability of theatre directors to carry out their activities with the required quality and frequency to compete globally.

In spite of the obstacles, there are many positive indicators of the growth of theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region. Theatre festivals, exchange programs, and international collaborations are contributing to the growth of theatre directing. Theatre directors are becoming more flexible and creative by trying new styles and techniques. There is a promising future for theatre directing, as there is a large number of young theatre directors.

In conclusion, Kurdish theatre is still a vibrant and ambitious field of culture that is still contributing to the expression of Kurdish identity, creating space for politics and social dialogue, and engaging with the global culture movement. Theatre directing in the Kurdistan Region is a promising field that is still capable of protecting the region's culture while promoting artistic innovation.

To accomplish this, several recommendations have been made. First, it has been suggested that the Kurdistan Regional Government, as well as private sponsors, should increase their investments in theatre performances, centres, and training facilities. It has also been emphasized that theatre education should be further developed through specialized schools and directing courses in cities such as Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, as well as through international institutions.

Another important aspect that has been emphasized is that there should be an increase in audience development, where theatre should be integrated into school and university curricula, as well as through community-based workshops and projects that increase audience interest. It has been emphasized that there should be more artistic freedom, reducing censorship and enabling theatre directors to openly discuss social and political issues.

Furthermore, it has been emphasized that there should be more international collaboration, where theatre should be presented as an active participant in global culture, through local-based partnerships, exchange, and co-productions that position Kurdish theatre as a participant in global culture. It has also been emphasized that

technology should be utilized to enhance theatre performances, as well as to ensure that theatre remains a live art form, as it should be.

Finally, it has been emphasized that there should be more support for young directors, providing them with opportunities through fellowships and grants that enable them to experiment without being burdened with financial issues, as this will ensure that theatre remains an important part of Kurdish culture, identity, creativity, and social transformation.

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