The dark side of Russian theatre’s latest boom

Buildings are being rejuvenated, new writers are flourishing and diverse directors are emerging. Is Russian theatre blossoming? **John Freedman** warns that the growth is masking censorship, marginalisation and attacks on art in the name of morality.

ny story about Russian theatre today is a tale of two cities. Which tale you encounter depends on where you look.

On the surface, business is booming in Russian theatre. A new generation of strong, diverse directors emerged in recent years. New writers seemingly continue to pop up in bunches. Some older Moscow theatres have undergone complete transformations and promise boldly to lead this theatre-loving city into the future. According to one expert, the once-neglected and oft-maligned provinces, or regions, now function on a par with Russia’s two ‘capitals’, Moscow and St Petersburg.

“Throughout recent years, the country has witnessed the integration of theatre in the capitals and the regions,” critic Alyona Karas told Ogonyok magazine. “We see the result of that today. Regional theatre is now even in fashion.”

This is all true. We have seen the rise of major directors Philipp Grigoryan, Yuriy Muravitsky, Marat Gatsalov and Timofei Kulyabin, to name just a few, in large part thanks to their work in such cities as Perm, Rostov-on-Don and Novosibirsk. Add to that the fact that theatres are as full as ever, and things sound quite rosy.

But there is a darker side. Here we see evidence of creeping censorship, attacks on theatres on the grounds of ‘morality’, pressure from bureaucrats on those daring to make controversial art, and the marginalisation of artists outside the political mainstream.

The Russian theatre community was shocked in late October 2016 when Konstantin Raikin, the actor, director and artistic director of Moscow’s Satirikon Theatre, spoke at a Theatre Union congress and denounced creeping Stalinism, veiled censorship, and hate attacks carried out by “morality activists”. Muscovites were not used to hearing a major artist speak so bluntly at an official gathering.

“We are all worried by these attacks on art and theatre” carried out by “absolutely illegal, extremist, brazen, aggressive individuals clinging to words about morality”, Raikin said. He blamed government officials, too, stating: “Our leaders speak to us in Stalinist terminology, Stalinist paradigms,” and adding metaphorically that he had no desire to “read that disgusting book again”.

Raikin’s theatre had come under fire from conservatives in 2015 when it opened Vladimir Zaitsev’s play All Shades of Blue, the tale of a gay teenager coming out to his family and friends. But the director was also referencing a host of other incidents, including the notorious banning of Kulyabin’s production of Tannhauser at Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre because of a criminal suit in which the Orthodox Church claimed that “religious believers’ feelings had been insulted”. There was also an onstage interruption of a show at the Moscow Art Theatre by religious activists and cases of activists urinating or dumping severed pigs’ heads at the front doors of the Art Theatre and Lev Dodin’s Maly Drama Theatre in St Petersburg.

How deep does this fear run? It depends who you ask. Pavel Rudnev, a prominent critic and management official at the Moscow Art Theatre, states flatly that the “problems of Tannhauser are over after the Raikin speech”. Two directors of different generations suggest it may not be that simple.

Vladimir Mirzoev, a top Moscow director for more than 25 years, tells how a production of Richard III he agreed to stage at Moscow’s Vakhtangov Theatre fizzled out. After several months of silence, the Vakhtangov’s artistic director admitted the show would not happen because of “pressure from above, and fear of a production about a usurper”.

“After the annexation of Crimea and the murder of [political opposition leader] Boris Nemtsov, we entered a new era,” Mirzoev declared in reference to the events that occurred in March 2014 and February 2015, respectively.

Yevgenia Berkoivich, a young director who has been condemned for daring work with social issues in such shows as Marina at Moscow’s Gogol Centre, tempers her optimism with realism. She sees Moscow as a relatively free place to work.


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**RUSSIAN THEATRE IN NUMBERS**

- There are 170+ theatres in Moscow. Approximately 100 are funded by Moscow’s Department of Culture, while 16 are funded by the federal government.
- Moscow’s Russian Army Theatre is funded by the defence ministry and nominally run by the defence minister.
- St Petersburg has 101 theatres, of which 58 produce dramatic productions and nine are puppet theatres.
- Throughout Russia, the federal government supports about 160 theatres, 139 of which are in the so-called provinces or regions.
- These theatres in 2015 (the latest available statistics) undertook 577 tours around Russia and 319 tours abroad, and each had an average of 78 employees.
If a project is closed in one theatre I can go to another,” she says. But she also admits she has felt the heavy hand of pressure from above. Asked about the freedom she has to follow her muse, Berkovich notes: “I see seemingly minor, but essentially major, changes in this sphere when I do shows for children. Absolutely idiotic ideas ‘sent down’ from above by parliamentarians and God-knows-who-else corridor the environment of the heads of managing directors, parents, teachers and directors themselves. Censorship is fear. And fear kills creativity.” Rudnev agrees that “the formation of fear among managing directors and directors” is a danger, although he says that the trend is now “in remission”. 

One would be hard-pressed to explain that to the team at Teatr.doc, which, after being forced out of two venues in a seven-month period from December 2014 to June 2015, continues to suffer a heightened state of interest in its often politically oriented repertoire at its third location. Teatr.doc’s artistic director Mikhail Ugarov wrote on Facebook in late February that ‘Doc’, as the theatre is commonly called, was visited again by police officers accompanied by dogs and plainclothes officers demanding to know “on what grounds” they were offering that evening’s fare. When shown the proper papers, all but one officer departed, leaving one man behind to watch the show.

In a mid-February interview with OpenRussia.org, Yelena Gremina, Doc’s managing director, stated she did not believe there was a “serious order” to shut them down, but admitted there was “pressure from some not-so-smart people in places of power”. 

In fact, the realities of Moscow life are worsening havoc on the lives of some artists.

Famed playwright Maksym Kurochkin, a Ukrainian who moved to Moscow 20 years ago and has written all of his 30-plus plays in Russian, confesses that Russia’s war against Ukraine forced him to reconsider his adult life in full. “There is such a concept as ‘phantom pains’,” Kurochkin writes by email from Kiev, his birth city, to which he is now returning. “I can describe my relationship to the theatre of the aggressor nation as ‘phantom interest’. I remember how I used to be excited about new shows. But that has passed. I am ashamed I wasted so much time playing someone else’s game.”

Mirozov, whose most recent Moscow production is of Kurochkin’s Be Silent, Oedipus! at Teatr.doc, and who is an outspoken critic of Kremlin policies, is no less frank. He talks openly about being squeezed out of his profession. “I now have to take on tiny, independent shows – essentially volunteer work – to keep my pants up. Theatres and directors who have proven that they are loyal can be freer. Those direc-
tors, actors and theatre who oppose the powers-that-be are considered unreliable and are pushed out of the profession. Essentially it’s an unsung ban on exercising your profession.”

The point of view of Berkovich – the youngest practitioner mentioned here – is instructive. She came of age as a director in 2010 when Vladimir Putin had been in power for a decade. “The ‘psychoanalytical’ (director Yevgenia Berkovich’s description) play tells the tale of people, including a gay clairvoyant, searching for a lost girl. This and another Berkovich production, Russian Beauty, cause a critic for the arch-conservative Kultura newspaper to put her front and centre in an attack on the theatre as a place where it is “dangerous to send children”.

“Of course, I remember how I used to be excited about new shows. But that has passed’ Maksym Kurochkin, Ukrainian playwright working in Russia

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**5 RECENT RUSSIAN FLASHPOINTS**

1. Tannahouser, Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre
   After the show premieres in 2014, a local Orthodox church leader sues director Timofei Kulyabin and managing director Boris Mezdrich for “desecration of objects of religious worship”. Trial is thrown out for “lack of a crime committed”, but Mezdrich is fired by the Department of Culture and Tannahouser closes.

2. All Shades of Blue, St Petersburg
   A tour to St Petersburg in February 2016 of the story of a gay teenager accepting the reality of his world turns into a scandal. Street protesters picket the venue and two performance are interrupted by hecklers. Local politician Vitaly Milonov, who sued Lady Gaga, Madonna and numerous theatre productions for violating “moral norms”, promises to sue the producer, but never follows through.

3. Marina, Gogol Centre, Moscow
   The “psychoanalytical” (director Yevgenia Berkovich’s description) play tells the tale of people, including a gay clairvoyant, searching for a lost girl. This and another Berkovich production, Russian Beauty, cause a critic for the arch-conservative Kultura newspaper to put her front and centre in an attack on the theatre as a place where it is “dangerous to send children”.

4. Be Silent, Oedipus!, Teatr.doc, Moscow
   Kicked out of two spaces in 2014, Doc has defiantly opened three new stages. It maintains a policy of offering shows of political and social interest. Maksym Kurochkin’s play, an acerbic take on Oedipus, is not, according to critic Sergei Lebedev, “a show about how everyone wants to kill his father but about how everyone today evades responsibility. It is about refusing to admit guilt while accepting on faith anything passed down from above.”

5. Timofei Kulyabin
   Kulyabin (born 1984), along with Philipp Grigoryan (1976), Yury Muravitov (1978), and Marat Gatsalov (1978), forms the first generation of Russian directors whose shows deftly balance spectacle, avant-garde and commercial viability. Between 2012 and 2014, each has won a Golden Mask award, confirming their status as members of a new elite.

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**WORLD NEWS**

**Floating fringe**

NEW ZEALAND/ AUCKLAND

New Zealand’s first-ever floating theatre is arriving in Auckland for the region’s fringe arts festival, where its performances have already sold out. It includes a stage and 30 seats enclosed in transparent fabric. The whole structure is moved by truck on to a barge. On it, Jeremy Randerson and Jenny McCarthy perform a show described as part-mime, part-surrealist comedy. Designer and theatre director Stephen Bain says the transparent fabric allows light and the shadows of the performers and audience to be clearly seen by those outside the theatre. “Watching the structure from the shore is like watching a show in itself,” he says.

**Actors death**

INDIA/PUNE

Marathi actor Sagar Shantaram Chougule (36) has died after suffering a cardiac arrest while performing. He was rushed to hospital where he was declared dead. Sagar and his company had come to Pune to participate in a drama festival, performing AgniDiviya, a Marathi drama based on the life of social reformer Shahu Maharaj. Sagar was playing the role of Maharaj. This is the second time in a year that an artist has had a fatal collapse on stage in Pune. The eminent Marathi actor and dancer Ashwini Ekbote died during a performance at the city’s Bharat Natya Mandir theatre last October.

**Infecting the City**

SOUTH AFRICA/ CAPE TOWN

The longest-running public arts festival in the country, Infecting the City, now in its 10th year, will once again occupy the communal spaces of Cape Town’s central business district between April 5 and 8. A collaboration between the Africa Centre and the Institute of Creative Arts, it is focused on making Cape Town a more public city by providing a platform for a broad spectrum of local and international artists and art forms. Its audience numbers peaked in 2015 at more than 38,000, but the 2016 edition had to be cancelled for lack of funding.

**US travel ban**

DENMARK/ HOLSTEBRO

Internationally acclaimed director and co-founder of Odin Teatret, currently on tour in Uruguay and Argentina, has had to cancel a planned extension of their tour to Miami “because of immigration problems”. Barba was pictured recently in Tehran at Iran’s annual Fajr theatre festival.

**Match cash donations**

SINGAPORE

Finance minister Heng Swee Keat has announced a $150 million ($85 million) top-up to Singapore’s existing Cultural Matching Fund. The fund, set up by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth in 2013, provides one-to-one matching of private cash donations to eligible arts and heritage groups, to encourage private giving to the cultural sector.

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**John Freedman is an American writer, translator, critic and scholar of Russian theatre who has lived and worked in Moscow since 1988**

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