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Lyubimov and Taganka – Is It Final This Time?

By John Freedman

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The Taganka and its director are set to part ways after almost 50 years. **John Freedman**

I have waited my whole adult life to say this: Leo Tolstoy was wrong. On the first page of "Anna Karenina" he wrote, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

An epic saga unfolding at Moscow's legendary Taganka Theater indicates just the opposite, however.

Everybody knows that Russian theater troupes are families. And everybody knows that when Russian theater troupes fall apart, they do so in the exact same way.

Step 1 has two variants: Either actors rebel, or management accuses actors of sin and greed. From that moment on, truth is buried in a firefight of escalating accusations and counteraccusations. It is not a sight for the weak-at-heart.

The scandal at the Taganka — and it is now a full-fledged scandal — in just one week has followed all the steps of the archetypal "unhappy family." And it has seen more mud thrown than a sun-drenched kindergarten sandbox after a downpour.

It began during the Taganka's brief tour of two cities in the Czech Republic. Alongside successful performances of director Yury Lyubimov's historical production of Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Person of Setzuan," the director and his actors were to participate in a master class for theater fans in Prague on June 24. Instead, the Prague event appears to have become the Taganka's Waterloo.

What actually happened is uncertain, although there are dozens of media accounts. Shocking stories of actors "demanding" money and giving Lyubimov "ultimatums" abound, as do accounts of Lyubimov or his wife Katalin, who has doubled as the unpaid deputy director of the Taganka for years, angrily throwing packets of money at the actors.

Most of these supposed incidents would now appear to be fiction, as was a rumor that Lyubimov would be replaced by actor Valery Zolotukhin, a founding member of the Taganka. What did occur was a disagreement between theater management and the actors in regards to their honorariums. That was followed by an ugly public war fought in the press and on the Internet.

In a statement issued Friday and published in its entirety on the Newsland site, the actors admit that their request was honored by the theater and each received due payment.

But as writers of less insight than Leo Tolstoy have noted over the centuries, marriages and families don't really fall apart over money. The problems are more deeply seated, and that is surely true at the Taganka. This incident has led the Taganka, as we know it, to the brink of extinction.

Lyubimov, who turns 94 in September and who confirmed at a news conference on Thursday at Itar-Tass that he will resign for good when his current contract expires on July 15, had already tendered his resignation twice earlier this season. He has declared repeatedly that he cannot work with his current troupe and has often accused them of being lazy and unprofessional.

According to some accounts, Katalin threw fat on the fire by comparing the actors to cattle and insects. In a contentious interview published on the web site of Teatral magazine on Tuesday, Katalin let slip a phrase about her husband that indicated she may be part of the problem. "He and I have had enough," she declared.

Speaking at a news conference hosted by Komsomolskaya Pravda on Friday, one of the Taganka's leading actors, Felix Antipov, had this to say: "We have had many scandals in 40-some years of work, but they all have been smoothed over. Even now we are willing to put up with anything from Yury Petrovich! But we are not willing to put up with Katalin accusing us of being unprofessional and greedy."

As a frequent visitor at the Taganka over the last 23 years, I have often heard rumors among actors about Katalin's difficult and even abusive character. I have also seen that under her control, the Taganka has perennially been one of the cleanest, sharpest and best-run houses

in Moscow.

Be that as it may, a transcript of the Prague encounter published by Komsomolskaya Pravda shows that the conversation between Lyubimov and his troupe was tense, through proper, in tone until Katalin joined it. By apparently raising her voice (actor Ivan Ryzhikov repeatedly asks her not to shout) and questioning the actors' commitment to the theater, Lyubimov's wife seems to have brought underlying animosities to the surface.

For those of us who have watched Lyubimov and the Taganka for decades, this altercation comes as no surprise. His entire career, during which he became one of the world's most famous theater directors, has been accompanied by resignations, expulsions and scandals.

Lyubimov famously was deprived of his Soviet citizenship in 1984 while working in London on a production of "Crime and Punishment." In 1989, during the Gorbachev era, Lyubimov was asked to return to Moscow to reclaim control of the playhouse he founded in 1964 and transformed into an international theater mecca.

But by 1992 Lyubimov had soured on his troupe, and they on him. A protracted battle ensued, ending in an uneasy peace a year later when half the troupe seceded under the leadership of actor and former Soviet Culture Minister Nikolai Gubenko and created a new theater called the Commonwealth of Taganka Actors. The state gave the new theater a newly built stage at the Taganka while Lyubimov retained the old stage, on which he had built his reputation.

At present, the troupe of the Taganka consists primarily of young performers who studied under Lyubimov at the Shchukin Institute, as well as a handful of veterans who have been with the theater for 40 years or more. On Friday, veteran Alexei Grabbe indicated that only one of the theater's older actors, Dmitry Mezhevich, a troupe member since 1968, was supporting his director.

"In the consciousness of the general spectator, the Taganka and Lyubimov are a single brand," Grabbe said. "But this theater is finished. It's a shame that Yury Petrovich, a director of genius, is leaving in such an ugly way."

History suggests that Lyubimov and his troupe will be reconciled in some way, shape or form. It has happened so many times before. On the other hand, the facts and emotions indicate that it won't be possible this time. I hope I am wrong, but I fear that the Taganka is headed the way of so many unhappy families: divorce.

This column first appeared on John Freedman's Theater Plus blog on The Moscow Times web site.

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