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Thoughts on a Moscow Landmark Designed by Igor Popov

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I am sitting on a breezy patio in Southern California drinking a long, tall glass of iced tea. With mint. And a pinch of lemon.

But thoughts can travel.

And so as I look out over my mother's lush garden of ferns and palms, where my wife is sunbathing in a patch of sunlight on a thin strip of thick, green lawn, I think back to Moscow where one evening in late July I took a few photos before catching a plane to the United States.

I was standing in front of the School of Dramatic Art, which is located so gracefully in the crux of Ulitsa Sretenka and Posledny Pereulok. The sun was on its way down, traffic had eased and a lovely calm fell over the buildings and the few people who were present to experience the moment.

The actual physical plant of the School of Dramatic Art is, in my book, the most beautiful theater space in Moscow. It was built with city money in 2001 at a cost of just under $30 million. Paid for by then-Mayor Yury Luzhkov, it was conceived by the mercurial director Anatoly Vasilyev and his longtime creative partner, designer Igor Popov. The story of how Vasilyev and Luzhkov fell out, in part, over this gorgeous theater space and how Vasilyev ended up going into voluntary exile in Europe is long and complicated. I have no desire to think about that now.

What I do relish every time the opportunity presents itself is to marvel at the house that Popov built.

Inside of the building that is officially located at 19/27 Ulitsa Sretenka visitors are greeted by a head-spinning potpourri of styles. There is one vantage point — about ten meters in from the entrance — that trumps just about any I have ever seen in a theater anywhere.

Look down towards the entrance to the small Globus hall and you will see a lovely light parody of an Italian street, with the balconies and arched windows overlooking what could be a sheltered piazza in Padua. Turn around the other way and look up to the second floor and you will be amazed to see what looks suspiciously like the deck of an ocean liner, replete with a wall of circular portholes.

Standing in the same place, now turn your head directly upwards and you are greeted with the inspiring sight of a 21st-century style of glass ceiling architecture. A slight turn downwards to the space beyond the coat racks and the style is 17th-century Russian Orthodox, with angled walls and high, cathedral-like arches which are slightly reminiscent of iconostases.

Finally, right there beside you is a circular stairwell that leads from the cafeteria in the basement up to the third floor. This is no simple stairwell. The structure housing the stairs is tipped significantly to one side and provides the unmistakable sensation that you are viewing the leaning Tower of Pisa.

The whimsy, the precision, the irony and the historical breadth encompassed in Popov's design is so striking that I have never visited the School of Dramatic Art without stopping to be amazed by these sights for at least a few moments. I can't imagine taking in a show without first taking in the brilliance of the architect's vision.

Of course, I have described just one single vantage point. The huge, sprawling theater that covers much of a city block is filled with surprises and delights on every floor and every wing. There is an actual chapel built into a niche on the roof. Roofline passageways encased in glass provide beautiful views of the structure from inside and of surrounding buildings. The Globus stage, a creative copy of Shakespeare's famous Globe Theater, is built as a hollowed-out tower in which narrow balconies ring a small, circular performance space below.

The exterior of the School of Dramatic Art is no less impressive.

A short walk up and down Posledny Pereulok, the side street where both the main entrance and stage doors are located, reveals Popov's loving dialogue with the surrounding buildings, most built in the early 20th-century I would guess.

A rounded turret on the top of the building across the street at 26/1 Ulitsa Sretenka is given a humorous echo with a glass box atop an aborted turret in the front corner of the theater.

Angled sides of the glass ceilings in the main foyer provide beautiful reflections of several nearby buildings.

The bank of doors comprising the main entrance for spectators is set at a small angle on the side street as if to "catch" people coming towards the theater from the main street of Sretenka.

In short, Igor Popov's design for the School of Dramatic Art is one of the wonders of Moscow architecture. The next time you find yourself on Ulitsa Sretenka, don't go past without taking notice.

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