

Russia-Georgia Theater Wars

By [John Freedman](#)

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Thank God for Robert Sturua.

I have known and loved the great Georgian director for two decades. His work with the Rustaveli Theater in Tbilisi is some of the finest, most exhilarating theater I have ever encountered. Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" and "The Good Person of Setzuan." Shakespeare's "Macbeth," "Hamlet" and "The Tempest."

The latter, by the way, was not a production of the Rustaveli, but was staged this last season in Moscow at the Et Cetera Theater. As you can see in a short [video](#) on the net, it is a beautiful show.

But my gratitude for Sturua at the moment is for something he did not do. He said he would not become the artistic director of the Taganka Theater, the storied Moscow playhouse that Yury Lyubimov resigned from in July after nearly half a century as the theater's leader.

But before we get to the talk about Sturua and the Taganka, we must go back even a little further.

Reports appeared last Wednesday that Sturua had been fired from his position as the artistic director of the Rustaveli Theater for allegedly making xenophobic remarks about Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

According to various sources Sturua's offending [comments](#) included a declaration that Saakashvili could not understand the Georgian people because he is of Armenian decent, as well as a call to the Georgian people to "renounce the country's leadership just like the Germans renounced Hitler."

This is astonishing news in itself.

Sturua has run the Rustaveli since the 1970s. His reputation as a first-class artist is recognized throughout the world. He continued to lead his theater throughout the 1990s and 2000s during times of war and severe deprivation. For years the Rustaveli could only perform during the day because it had no access to electricity, and it was unsafe for spectators and theater employees to be out after dark.

Still reeling from this news last week, we were then presented with something so absurd and wrong that it was hard to believe. [Reports](#) began circulating that theater authorities in Moscow were preparing to offer Sturua the job that Lyubimov had vacated at the Taganka.

No specific source was named for these rumors. Moscow's deputy mayor for social policy Lyudmila Shevtsova is quoted as saying that Sturua would be welcome to "stage plays in various theaters in Moscow," but that is a long way from an invitation to take over the Taganka. Any thought of the latter is enough to curdle the stomach.

Lyubimov's break with the Taganka was painful and ugly, like all family break-ups are. What monstrous Machiavelli could possibly have considered it legitimate that Sturua, one of Lyubimov's longtime colleagues and friends, would step into his shoes after being fired in an equally ugly family and political feud?

Yikes.

Which is why I say thank God for Robert Sturua. He wasted no time in [quashing](#) the silly rumors.

Here is what Sturua said on the topic, according to Lenta.ru: "I have loved this theater [the Taganka] very much and I still do, but it's history is completed. It's necessary to build a new theater there and I don't have the strength to do that."

As reported in Gazeta.ru, citing Interfax, Sturua also [said](#), "I am bound with Yury Petrovich Lyubimov by a relationship that is too old, too warm and too close for me to take his place in such a situation."

It's impossible to imagine the Taganka without Lyubimov and I can't possibly imagine the Rustaveli without Sturua. But what a mess it would have been to mix these two sad stories!

There is some good news coming out of all this. Alexander Kalyagin, the artistic director of the Et Cetera, has already extended an invitation for Sturua to become a staff director at his theater in Moscow.

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