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Bolshoi Theater to Reopen After Restoration

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A satisfied worker looking down from a VIP box upon a bustling crowd of journalists invited to tour the newly renovated main hall of the Bolshoi Theater. **Igor Tabakov**

The splendor of the tsars is finally ready for its encore.

The Bolshoi Theater reopens to the world Friday following a six-year, scandal-plagued renovation that has returned the cultural icon to its original glory while leaving observers stunned by its jaw-dropping cost.

The result is nothing short of spectacular. The interior restored to an opulent silk-embroidered, gilded grandeur of pre-revolutionary times. Behind the scenes, the theater underwent a cutting-edge technological makeover, while backstage areas doubled in size.

"There was no cost or effort spared in the reconstruction of this theater," said Mikhail Sidorov, spokesman for Summa Capital, the investment group that took over the long-

delayed project in 2009. "We made no compromises."

That attention to detail knew no bounds — even the smallest speakers tucked high up in the rafters are draped in luxuriously thick red satin fabric.

While few would quibble with the quality of the work, the question of cost has long cast a dark shadow over the massively overbudget and years-beyond-schedule project.

Originally projected to cost $610 million, the figure skyrocketed as the scope of the project ballooned and the taint of corruption led the original contractor to be fired and the state prosecutor's office to open a criminal probe.

Officials have given widely varying figures of the final cost throughout, with Sidorov placing it at 21 billion rubles ($688 million) during a grand press tour on Monday. Some authorities have suggested the cost could easily have been double that, and the Audit Chamber claimed in 2009 that the price tag had spiraled to 16 times the original estimate.

"It is unlikely that anyone will ever be sure exactly how much public money has been spent," Kommersant art critic Sergei Khodnev noted earlier this week. Yet no charges have ever been filed.

Bolshoi spokeswoman Katerina Novikova deflected the criticism by pointing out that the theater — founded in 1776 by Catherine the Great — stands as the crown jewel of the nation's vast cultural history.

"This theater is like a temple and has been treated like one throughout," she said at the press tour.

The epic renovation of the Bolshoi's main stage began in 2005 and was supposed to be finished in 2008. In the interim, performances were shifted to the smaller "New Stage," which opened in 2002.

The renovation project quickly spiraled out of control when engineers discovered that the building's foundation had dangerously shifted, leaving numerous giant cracks running from the roof to the base.

"When it was decided to reconstruct the theater, no one could have foreseen the real scope of the work," Sidorov said. "Cracks in the lower wall were so big you could put a hand through them. The theater could easily have just collapsed like a house of cards."

After extensive efforts to shore up the foundation, a cast of thousands set to work restoring the theater to what it looked like in 1853 when it was destroyed by the last of three fires.

That meant tearing out the concrete floors and orchestra pit installed in the Soviet era, while bringing an army of 3,600 skilled craftspeople to recreate the elaborately-gilded paneling, velvet and gold-brocaded balconies and reveal 19th-century murals covered over by decades of paint.

Crews also excavated deep beneath the existing theater and the square in front of it, carving out more than 40,000 square meters of new rehearsal, storage and technical space — double

what previously existed.

The main hall's plush red velour seats were stuffed with horsehair, upholstered with Italian fabric using 18th-century methods and glued together with a special recipe of tea leaves and sturgeon guts.

Six kilograms of sound-reflecting gold-leaf paint was applied to the chandeliers and partitions, and tens of thousands of pounds of hand-cut crystal pieces strung from the chandeliers — the centerpiece being a two-ton glistening behemoth hanging over the main hall.

A prominent hammer and sickle was removed from just below the roof and replaced with the double-headed eagle symbol that existed in its place before Soviet times.

While great attention was spent restoring the theater to its ancient glory, equal effort was put into upgrading the rigging, lighting and acoustical elements using the leading technological advancements available.

"This is the most thoroughly modern theater in the world today," Sidorov said proudly. "But every effort was made to keep as close to the original designs as possible."

The work is not entirely done. The Moscow metro announced early this month that it would close the part of the Dark Green Line between the Teatralnaya and Novokuznetskaya stations — running directly beneath the theater — for two last weekends of November to install the last acoustical dampeners.

Interest in what all the money and effort has delivered reached a fevered pitch in recent weeks, with hundreds of stories written about the renovation and nearly 300 reporters from around the world anxiously lining up for a guided tour earlier this week.

It is with this backdrop that the theater's inaugural gala performance unfolds Friday night, with a glittering opening ceremony led by President Dmitry Medvedev.

"This will be the most important event I have ever taken part in," said Anatoly Iksanov, the theater's general director.

The theater will then open its 236nd season on Nov. 2 with a performance of Mikhail Glinka's opera "Ruslan and Lyudmila," which premiered at the Bolshoi in 1846.

Meanwhile, tickets for the opening show on Friday appeared on several web sites last week with eye-popping prices ranging up to 2 million rubles ($66,000), but were quickly taken down. Bolshoi officials said it was either a mistake or fraud because all tickets had been given to the Kremlin administration, which denied putting any on sale.

For those who have not been invited, the opening will be broadcast live on the Bolshoi's YouTube channel, starting at 6 p.m. Friday.

Ballet and opera aficionados have waited with bated breath to finally get a glimpse at the gleaming new theater.

"This is a great moment for Russia, Moscow and the theater," opera fan Sergei Ivanov said as he stood in line for tickets earlier this week. "I wouldn't miss it."

He said he was concerned by the cost overruns but said a palace like the Bolshoi deserved the best.

"I don't think anyone would argue that they should do any less than a world-class job here," he said. "I just hope all the money went where it was supposed to."

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