The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bolshoi Theater's 'Ruslan' Shocks Traditionalists

By Shaun Walker

November 20, 2011



Chernyakov is known for taking a modern approach to Russian classics. **Damir Yusupov**

The overture came to an end, the lights dimmed and the curtain parted for the first performance on the Bolshoi's historic stage. The collective sigh of relief that rippled round the theater was palpable. The Bolshoi, rather surprisingly, had given controversial director Dmitry Chernyakov the chance to open a new chapter in its history with the very first production in the restored building — Mikhail Glinka's "Ruslan and Lyudmila." Even more surprisingly, the director who had caused so much upset with his updated versions of other operas at the Bolshoi had decided to play it safe, it seemed. The set for the opening wedding scene was a domed interior painted a dazzlingly bright blue and done out in the style of ancient Rus, with everyone in lavish traditional costume. The applause that met the first glimpse of the set seemed to be an indication of both surprise and relief.

The relief was as short-lived as it was naive, however. A few minutes into Lyudmila's first aria, sung by the extraordinary soprano Albina Shagimuratova, a wayward cameraman in a

black suit appeared on the stage. It was the first night, and there were cameras across the theater, so it wasn't surprising that there were close-up shots too, but it did seem rather sloppy that the cameraman was visible when peeking out of the corner of stage left. As the aria went on, he edged further onto the stage, and before long he was standing just a few meters from Lyudmila. Suddenly, the picture was being beamed to two large screens at the back of the set, reminiscent of a shaky amateur wedding video. The woman sitting next to me shuffled uncomfortably in her seat.

The plot of Glinka's opera sees Lyudmila kidnapped on her wedding day and Ruslan having to go up against Farlaf, for her father has promised whichever man finds his daughter her hand. After Lyudmila had been rolled up in a carpet and whisked away, it gradually became clear that the lavish costumes did not mean that we were in Kievan Rus at all; instead what we were apparently witnessing was a wealthy contemporary Russian family renting out a palace and playing dress up. By Act II, Ruslan was in jeans and what looked like an H&M coat, while Farlaf, his adversary, was ripping his top off mid-aria and dousing himself in beer.

As the hero began his search for his disappeared bride, the postmodern touches continued. At the end of a scene where Ruslan walks among the bones of dead bodies, as soon as the superhero (wielding a sword, but still in jeans) had departed the scene, all the bodies got up and dusted themselves down, while halogen strip lighting on the ceiling flickered on.

Act III opened with Lyudmila trapped in an all-white room that seemed somewhere between a boutique hotel room and a cell in an asylum. A white-suited violinist aggressively played his solo onstage, while fantastical visions beset Lyudmila, a muscular Thai masseur tended to her buttocks, jugglers and chefs appeared from nowhere, and fully naked women ran around the stage. Was it gratuitous? Many traditionalists thought so, but the scene was a powerful evocation of delirium and in places a visual feast that was both touching and amusing.

Most controversial was the use of video art, beamed onto a black screen in front of the curtain during the lengthy set changes, and featuring footage of Naina and Finn, the tragic couple whom Chernyakov brings to the center of the action, suggesting that the travails of their relationship are the trigger for Ruslan and Lyudmila's ordeals. The 3D renditions of the two heads were quite extraordinary in clarity and detail, and could have easily have worked as an installation at any contemporary art gallery. The Bolshoi crowd was skeptical, however, with people using the time to chat, check their telephones, and in some cases begin rhythmic clapping or shouting "Shame!"

In the final act, we see many of the chorus still in their "modern" clothes plucking their ancient Rus cloaks from a rack and putting them back on while on stage, in case anyone was still unclear that this is a production where "traditional" stagings — so long the preserve of the Bolshoi's stage — very much take a back seat.

Is this merely a cheeky postmodern twist? Magic realism? A satire on the contemporary obsession with myths, magic and computer games? Or a lavish play on the theme of madness? It could be none or all of these things; I am not sure. But Chernyakov's staging makes you think hard about what you've seen for days afterward, it is visually sumptuous and does not drag for any of its considerable length. The staging brings extraordinary life to an opera that can often seem both lightweight and tediously drawn out.

The singing, while mainly provided by guest artists rather than drawn from the Bolshoi's own roster — a strange and worrying sign given that this was the theatre's big premiere — was uniformly excellent. And the large sections of the audience shouting "Shame!" should take a closer look at the libretto. An enigmatic character in the first scene opens the entire opera with the words: "These are deeds of long ago, legends of a hoary age." The suggestions of a "knowing narration" and of stepping back in time are not Chernyakov's impositions, after all. He simply found an extraordinary way to visualize them.

"Ruslan and Lyudmila" next plays on Feb. 16 to 19 at the Bolshoi Theater, 1 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. Metro Teatralnaya www.bolshoi.ru

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