

Resurrecting Lost Russian Theater in the United States

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This is what one prominent cable news channel might call "the back story."

I tell the front story, as it were, in a piece that ran in Monday's print issue of The Moscow Times — the world premiere this week at Princeton University of a lost adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's verse novel "Eugene Onegin."

In order to write that article I talked with Caryl Emerson, a scholar of Russian literature at Princeton who has gotten into the habit over the years of putting the theories of her profession to practical test.

That is, she doesn't just dig up lost texts, publish them and write about them. When she comes across an old theater project that for some reason never came to fruition, she can't help but try to rectify that historical injustice.

"Onegin," scored by Sergei Prokofiev and adapted by Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, was supposed to have been staged in 1937 as part of the huge centennial of Pushkin's death held that year. For various practical reasons having little to do with censorship it was abandoned before it ever reached rehearsals. As Emerson described it to me during a conversation in her office, this was not the classic destruction of a work of art during the Soviet period, but "it was a dissolution nonetheless."

Enlisting the talents and services of Prokofiev scholar Simon Morrison, conductor Rossen Milanov, the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, director Tim Vasen and a cast of student actors, Emerson saw to it that the forgotten work was resurrected.

This is not, however, the first time Emerson, Morrison and Vasen have tackled a project of this nature. In 2007 they mounted a similar project that gave form to another "lost" production — Vsevolod Meyerhold's planned production of Pushkin's "Boris Godunov" with a score by Prokofiev.

The music from that unrealized work was not entirely lost, however. According to Emerson, Prokofiev recycled the "Godunov" music "into later symphonies and cantatas" while portions of "Onegin" were incorporated into the composer's opera of "War and Peace."

To hear Emerson tell her story about these two scholarly and theatrical projects, watch the video embedded above.

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