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Oleg Menshikov Takes on Russia's Repertory System

By John Freedman

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Few topics in the Russian theater world make people lose their cool more quickly than a discussion about the future of repertory theater. The received opinion is that this system, one in which a theater is perceived as a home and everyone who works in it is family, is outdated, broken and needs a complete overhaul. More than a few simply want to rip it down and throw the whole thing away.

Not long ago I was asked to speak about American theater before a group of some 30 future theater leaders. During a question-and-answer session afterwards I was asked what I, with my American background, thought of the repertory system. Being one to relish a good controversy and knowing the probable expectations of this crowd, I chose to bait them a bit. I said something to the effect of, "You know, the one thing Russian theater is admired most for in the world is the repertory system. People come here from the United States and Europe and they salivate with jealousy at what the Russian repertory system can provide — the building of an acting ensemble, the extended rehearsal time it makes possible, the ability

to run a show longer than a few weeks..."

I never got any further. Within seconds 60 fangs were out and I began to feel like someone's imminent dinner.

I mention this because, for all the foaming at the mouth, I really don't hear many making well-considered suggestions about how to proceed practically with the reform of Russian theater's infrastructure. You hear people talk about a contract system for actors and directors, you hear lots of talk about getting rid of bad actors and directors, you hear about closing down state-funded theaters. But, until now, at least, you really don't see anybody actually doing anything constructive about the problem. You rarely hear serious talk about preserving the good along with excising the bad.

Maybe that has changed.

Many in Russia were shocked in early April by the announcement that the matinee idol Oleg Menshikov had been named artistic director of the — let's be honest — moribund Yermolova Theater. Menshikov, 51, is Russia's biggest box office draw in both cinema and theater and was probably the last person anyone would expect to take a job like this. He has had enormous success with his own private production company, the 814 Theater Association, through which he has produced shows for himself and, on at least one occasion, for others.

Even more than surprise, however, was the skepticism that greeted Menshikov's taking on the new job. The actor's celebrity status, in the eyes of many, precluded his being a legitimate candidate for a hard and serious job. On the contrary, however, the actor-turned-artistic director began to emerge as a rather hardcore reformer.

"Repertory theaters," Menshikov said on the "Na Noch Glyadya" (Looking Towards Night) television show in April, "are no longer necessary in their current form." He added that he has taken on the task of running the Yermolova in order to "renew the relationship" that state theaters have to the state and to those who work in them.

Indicating that he is not interested in creating a "theater-home," he declared, "I want to create a theater of professionals."

(These and other comments on the situation at the Yermolova Theater may be heard from the 20- to 30-minute mark in the video above.)

After two months of silence following his appointment at the Yermolova, Menshikov last week spoke publicly about his plans for the future. And it turns out that his radical, but measured, approach is still fully intact. After viewing 90 percent of the theater's current repertoire, he decided to close approximately 80 percent of its shows. Furthermore, he has no plans to engage all of the actors in the theater's company.

"A troupe of 75 for a Moscow theater is too much," he told newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets on Thursday. "I can't give roles to them all. People are going to have to be prepared for that."

Admitting that Russian labor laws will not allow him to fire actors outright, he declared that only those capable of entering into "creative collaboration" will retain full salaries. Those

who are not, in his opinion, will have their salaries reduced to 30 or 40 percent of the current level. His clearly stated assumption is that in time the actors who don't fit into the revamped theater's plans will begin leaving of their own volition.

Menshikov's plans seem to be nothing less than to carry out a full remaking of the Yermolova Theater.

The theater building, located at the south end of Tverskaya Ulitsa just across Manezh Square from the Kremlin, will be reconstructed and renovated, and a new small stage will be opened. November will see the unveiling of a new emblem incorporating the image of the great Russian actress Maria Yermolova, for whom the theater is named. Also that month, Menshikov expects to begin premiering no less than eight new shows — four on the main stage and four on the small stage. Among them are Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Dorian Gray," Alexander Ostrovsky's "The Snow Queen," Anna Yablonskaya's "Pagans," and a show called "One Very Small Drama" based on works by Anton Chekhov.

Menshikov himself will not direct or act in any of these shows, although according to one account in Moskovsky Komsomolets, he does plan to move three shows of his own production company — "The Gamblers," "1900," and "Wind Orchestra" — onto the Yermolova stage.

Skeptics remain, of course. Writing on the news page of Mail.ru, theater critic Grigory Zaslavsky suggests most curiously that Menshikov has never done anything of value through his production company and adds, "Why suddenly, why on earth was it suddenly decided to entrust him, above all others, with this theater located in such a sweet spot? It's incomprehensible."

Menshikov himself has repeatedly said there is no guarantee of success. "Everything we do is a risk," he said during the "Na Noch Glyadya" program.

In fact, what emerges from this developing story is a picture of someone not flailing at the sacred cow of Russia's repertory system, but actually looking to reform and reinvent it.

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