The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Will Kirill Serebrennikov Remake the Gogol Theater?

By John Freedman

August 20, 2012



Award-winning director Serebrennikov at the Golden Mask ceremony. **G. Avramenko**

Since making his Moscow debut in 2001 at the Playwright and Director Center, Kirill Serebrennikov has enjoyed one of the most successful and popular careers a director could hope for.

His productions at the Moscow Art Theater and the Sovremennik were both hits and controversial in good measure. His forays into film — including the recent "Betrayal" — solidified his reputation as a producer of slickly contemporary and innovative art. His heading up of the experimental, youth-oriented Platform workshops at the Winzavod arts complex fortified his standing as an artist looking actively toward the future.

Surely, though, what few would have expected him to do was to take on the responsibilities of running a traditional repertory theater. But that is just what he did in the early days

of August. As of this month, Kirill Serebrennikov is the artistic director of the Gogol Theater.

It is one of the most curious combinations one could imagine. The Gogol, under the leadership of Sergei Yashin, rarely distinguished itself in recent years. Located a long, dirty and smelly walk through a tunnel behind the Kursky train station, it is not a favorite destination for Moscow's theater-goers. I think it safe to say that the theater has virtually fallen off the Moscow theater map in the last decade.

Serebrennikov stands for everything hip, hot and new. What could possibly have brought him to take on the day-to-day burdens of running a moribund theater?

One of the answers to that question is Sergei Kapkov, the relatively new head of the Moscow Culture Department. Since taking over that position in September 2011, Kapkov has made numerous bold moves, including successfully mediating a serious conflict between artistic director Mindaugas Karbauskis and the managing director at the Mayakovsky Theater, and appointing popular actor Oleg Menshikov to the post of artistic director at the floundering Yermolova Theater. Kapkov has also taken steps to bring legendary director Anatoly Vasilyev back to Moscow — Vasilyev has not worked here since he was fired in 2006 by Kapkov's predecessor Sergei Khudyakov.

The appointment of Serebrennikov was bound to stir controversy if for no other reason than Yashin stated in an interview the day before he was fired that he would not be fired. The troupe at the Gogol predictably rallied around their former leader and expressed fears that Serebrennikov would destroy the theater by abandoning its status as a repertory theater and recreating it as a cultural center. The company was particularly concerned about a quote from Serebrennikov contained in the official Culture Department statement and quoted again in an account on the Gazeta.ru website.

"The leadership of the Moscow Culture Department," Serebrennikov said, "offered me the interesting idea of coming up with a way to reformat a long-lived and problematic theater. One might attempt to create a new 'place of power,' but the main thing is that this will be an entirely different structure than that of a customary repertory theater."

Last week the troupe called a news conference to publicly air their grievances. Serebrennikov, who is currently staging Olga Neuwirth's "American Lulu" at the Berlin Comic Opera, did not attend. Kapkov, however, did, and he assured the troupe that the Gogol Theater would not be deprived of its status as a repertory theater.

As reported by RIA-Novosti, many problems remain, the most pressing being that many actors are concerned they will be fired. Anyone seeking comfort on this topic was not encouraged by statements from Alexei Malobrodsky, who was installed along with Serebrennikov as the theater's new managing director.

"I can imagine any variables and any percent of rotation," Malobrodsky told RIA-Novosti, alluding to changes that may take place among the company staff.

The day Serebrennikov was appointed head of the Gogol he wrote on his Facebook page that he was experiencing many of the feelings a sapper must encounter when stepping onto a mine field. "It's terrifying and interesting," he said.

He also promised to share updates about his "adventures" at the theater. So far, however, the only direct reference to events at the theater was a short phrase: "A letter came to Putin (there's something about me in it)." This referred to a letter of protest that the theater company addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin and other government officials.

In fact, few more fireworks are expected until October, when Serebrennikov returns to Moscow from Berlin.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/20/will-kirill-serebrennikov-remake-the-gogol-theater-a34344