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# 'Graf Orlov' Musical Goes for Glitz, Extravagance

By Lena Smirnova

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Count Orlov, played by Alexander Ragulin, with Yekaterina Guseva as Catherine the Great in the new musical. **Alexander Utyupin**

There is nothing modest about the new musical "Graf Orlov."

From star-studded auditions worthy of a reality show to the large billboards around Moscow and the thunderous arias from actors in costumes that weigh up to 10 kilograms, the new musical at Moscow Operetta Theater oozes extravagance.

The glitzy musical offers an account of the 18th-century encounter between Count Aleksei Orlov and Princess Yelizaveta Tarakanova, a pretender to the Russian throne.

In the musical, the count, who once helped Catherine the Great seize power, is in exile in Italy where he meets Yelizaveta, who claims to be the granddaughter of Peter the Great and the rightful heir to the Russian throne.

Orlov plots to hand the girl over to Catherine and thus win back his place at court. To do so, he pretends to be infatuated with Yelizaveta and promises to help her return to Russia, but the plan turns sour when this infatuation turns into a mutual feeling of love.

One of the most anticipated musical premieres of the year, "Graf Orlov" is meant to dazzle audiences with the scale of the production but the grandeur sometimes undermines the efforts as the loud music and flashy costumes threaten to eclipse the more subtle messages of the plot and obstruct audiences from feeling a strong attachment to the characters.

The musical does not aim for historical accuracy, said director Alina Chevik, but focuses instead on the "love, passion and betrayal" facets of the story.

"We tried to bring on to the stage not the historical characters that were forced upon us by schools, history and films, but our own view of these characters," said Rulla, one of three actresses who play the empress. "We tried to put on stage people who are tormented about power and officer's rank, as well as their extravagance."

In the historical version, Tarakanova was lured onto a Russian ship by Orlov and arrested. Brought to Russia, she died alone in the Peter and Paul fortress and is buried in Novospassky monastery.

The new show follows on the heels of the Operetta Theater's previous production about another count, "Monte Cristo," which had a record four-season run.

The team behind the first count musical joined together to work on "Monte Cristo" and there was already wide media coverage and interest when the first day of castings started in March. Russian bard Yuli Kim and composer Roman Ignatyev, again wrote the lyrics and the music to make the score that once more shows influences of contemporary French musicals, such as "Romeo and Juliet" and "Notre Dame de Paris."

Kim and Ignatyev showcase a variety of musical numbers that play on the different dimensions of the characters. There are the robust group numbers, romantic ballads, agonizing arias and a powerful trio between Orlov, Catherine the Great and the self-declared Russian heiress.

The score helps to set the tone of the scenes, though sometimes the intensity of the music outruns the vocal talents of the actors.

The same can be said for the lavish costumes and stage design that often overshadow the fragility of the main characters. Catherine the Great's dress in the show is decorated with more than 15,000 semiprecious stones and weighs almost 10 kilograms. Wearing such a dress would be difficult under any circumstances, but actress Lika Rulla had to do so while descending a revolving staircase on a three-story-high stage construction.

"Every time you step down, you need to maintain a good posture, yet you are thinking all this time 'How can I find the next step' so that, God forbid, you don't fall," she said. "There is this fear that you'll trip somewhere, get wrapped up in the underskirts and there you go — the empress goes tumbling down."

With or without any wardrobe malfunctions, "Graf Orlov" offers a spectacle that lives up to its grand name but it remains to be seen if audiences can look past the impressive stage design and costumes to feel the story underneath.

"Graf Orlov" runs at the Moscow Operetta Theater. 6 Bolshaya Dmitrovka Ulitsa. Metro Okhotny Ryad or Teatralnaya. Tel. 495-925-5050. www.orlov-musical.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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