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After Attack, Rivalries at Bolshoi Draw Scrutiny

By Natalya Krainova

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Filin, center right, posing with Bolshoi Ballet members after a rehearsal of “Sleeping Beauty” on Sept. 20, 2011. **Mikhail Metzel**

Ballet may be high art onstage, but last month's acid attack on Bolshoi Ballet chief Sergei Filin has drawn attention to the fact that it's a dirty business behind the scenes.

Two weeks after an unidentified assailant threw sulfuric acid in Filin's face outside his apartment building, the attack remains in the national spotlight.

Police have opened a criminal case in connection with the attack and have tentatively linked it to Filin's job but have named no suspects. Filin has also said he believes it was connected to his work, while some observers think it was the work of people with financial interests connected to the theater.

As artistic director for one of the world's most prestigious ballet companies, Filin, 42, had

fierce rivals and critics, as well as the power to make or break dancers' careers.

During Filin's almost two years as Bolshoi Ballet director, he had the tires of his car slashed multiple times by vandals, including one such incident the day of the acid attack, media reports have stated. Also, Filin's e-mail and Facebook accounts have been hacked.

Earlier this week, a leading Bolshoi dancer came forward saying she had received threats. Svetlana Lunkina extended a leave of absence from the theater because she said she is afraid to return home from Canada because of threats targeting her and her husband, a film producer.

Boris Akimov, a ballet repetiteur at the theater and one of Filin's former teachers, said he believes the attack on Filin was motivated by the "fight for power and posts."

Akimov, who himself worked as director of the Bolshoi Ballet from 2000 to 2003, said people who occupied the post were often attacked in some way. Within a month of his appointment, Akimov said, he saw a false media report saying he had been fired, part of what he described as a smear campaign.

American theater critic Raymond Stults, who has known Filin for many years and has covered the Bolshoi for two decades, said he thought Filin got along well with his dancers.

"He has done very well as an artistic director and, I believe, is well-liked by most of the dancers at Bolshoi," Stults said, adding that most of the theater's current dancers had been Filin's colleagues until he quit dancing five years ago.

Stults described Filin as "very soft-spoken, very gentle [and] very straightforward."

"The fact that he was a star dancer didn't go to his head," he said.

Stults said he thought it was highly unlikely that someone inside the theater had committed the attack. Instead, he thinks it was "the work of some fanatic outside the theater."

But the person who has faced perhaps the closest scrutiny following the attack is a prominent figure at the Bolshoi: star dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze.

Battle For Control

Tsiskaridze, 39, and Filin had been involved in a highly public feud over influence within the ballet company since shortly after Filin's appointment to a five-year term as artistic director in March 2011.

Moscow police said they questioned Tsiskaridze on Jan. 23 as a witness in the attack on Filin, noting that they were also questioning other Bolshoi Theater employees and Filin's acquaintances and family members.

The month Filin was appointed to the post of artistic director, he told Kommersant he intended to make Tsiskaridze, who was nearing the standard retirement age for dancers, the chief repetiteur, or performance coach.

"Unfortunately for Nikolai Tsiskaridze, the position of Bolshoi Ballet director has been filled for the next five years, but it is my duty to use his energy and knowledge," Filin said.

Stults said Tsiskaridze was never a candidate for the director position because his conservative views on the theater's repertoire do not coincide with those of Bolshoi management.

When Filin was asked in the March 2011 interview what would happen if Tsiskaridze didn't like the other repetiteurs selected by Filin, the latter said: "I'd suggest we play a game. ... Those who don't play by the rules will get the boot."

Tsiskaridze said that during his time as a repetiteur, Filin criticized his work and tried to push him out.

In a live interview on Dozhd television on Jan. 10, Tsiskaridze told interviewer Ksenia Sobchak that Filin and the theater's management had attempted to have his responsibilities reduced as a repetiteur. He also said Filin pressured colleagues into signing a letter demanding that Tsiskaridze be reprimanded for allegedly offending Bolshoi management.

The Dozhd interview was prompted by an announcement that day by the Bolshoi that Tsiskaridze had been dismissed along with dancer Yan Godovsky as part-time repetiteurs at the theater.

The firings took place on New Year's Eve. That same day, Filin's cell phone was bombarded with incessant calls, media reports said.

Tsiskaridze blamed his dismissal on his public criticism of the theater's long-delayed reconstruction, which lasted from 2005 to 2011. After the theater reopened in October 2011, Tsiskaridze said it was unfit for rehearsals and performances, criticism that the culture minister at the time, Alexander Avdeyev, called unfounded.

Bolshoi Theater expert and State Duma Deputy Alexei Mitrofanov said in an interview that someone may have "decided to deal a blow to Tsiskaridze" by attacking Filin given Tsiskaridze's conflict with Bolshoi management.

Some observers have said Tsiskaridze has powerful backers in his long-standing fight with Filin and theater management.

In November, a group of cultural figures, including the artistic director of Moscow's Estrada Theater, wrote to President Vladimir Putin asking that Tsiskaridze take over the post of general director of the Bolshoi from Anatoly Iksanov, Izvestia reported.

In the Jan. 10 Dozhd interview, Sobchak suggested that Sergei Chemezov, head of the state corporation Russian Technologies and a longtime Putin ally, was lobbying on Tsiskaridze's behalf at the Bolshoi. Tsiskaridze said he knew Chemezov but denied that he had lobbied for him.

Creative Differences

Another point of contention between Filin and Tsiskaridze, as well as among the management

and other dancers at the theater, was the balance of classical and modern performances in the ballet's repertoire.

Filin has apparently supported both the conservative and progressive repertoires, Stults said. He may have wanted to replace some of the old performances but may have had "no choice" but to keep them because they are all staged by Yury Grigorovich, the renowned ballet-master of the Bolshoi for the past 30 years.

But Stults said Filin has been promoting the modern repertoire, inviting the world's leading choreographers to perform their ballets at the Bolshoi.

While Bolshoi director Iksanov has "strongly supported" Filin in this move, Tsiskaridze has favored the classical ballets staged by Grigorovich, the critic said.

Alexei Ratmansky, Bolshoi Ballet director between 2004 and 2008, had "a great deal of opposition" from Tsiskaridze, apparently because Ratmansky "did a great deal to change the repertoire. He wanted to phase out Grigorovich's ballets," Stults said.

"I think he [Ratmansky] simply got sick and tired of the whole thing," the critic said about Ratmansky's departure from the theater.

Ratmansky was replaced as ballet director by Yury Burlaka, whom Stults described as a "weak" director who re-enacted 19th-century ballets without staging new ones.

Burlaka was succeeded in March 2011 by Filin, who had danced at the Bolshoi for 20 years. At the time, he was serving as artistic director at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Music Theater.

The decision to appoint Filin to the Bolshoi post was a "sudden" one, Stults said. The theater's supposedly preferred candidate, Makhar Vaziyev, who at the time was head of St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater, rejected the job because he was working under another contract.

Another candidate, Gennady Yanin, who was assistant ballet director at the Bolshoi and was supposed to replace Burlaka temporarily, resigned after someone hacked his website and posted images purportedly showing him having sex with a man, media reports said.

Filin came to the Bolshoi with a team of several associates from his former job. In one of his first interviews after being appointed to the Bolshoi post, Filin told Kommersant that by the time the theater's main stage reopened after reconstruction in October 2011, he would keep in his troupe "only people who are able to work and want to work."

When Filin began phasing in more modern repertoire, Tsiskaridze and others in the ballet resisted the changes.

Akimov, the former Bolshoi Ballet director, criticized the new ballets, which consist overwhelmingly of one-act performances staged by foreign choreographers.

"[These] performances lack a plot. They only re-enact choreography," Akimov said.

The Bolshoi has traditionally staged ballets of two to six acts based on classical Russian

and international literature.

But Akimov, who is 66, acknowledged that many of the theater's young dancers like the modern repertoire.

He said members of the Bolshoi ballet troupe of his generation mostly share his views on Filin's policies but that of the troupe's roughly 220 members, the older generation is represented by only 20 to 30 people.

Long Recovery

After Filin was attacked, he was hospitalized with severe burns but listed in stable condition. He has undergone multiple eye surgeries and one plastic surgery, and doctors said Thursday that he may need at least one more eye operation.

It is not yet clear whether his eyesight will be completely restored, but earlier this week the head ophthalmologist at the Health Ministry said Filin was making good progress.

"We checked his vision, and he can see at the moment. I won't say to what extent, but he can already see pretty well for such an injury," Vladimir Neroyev told Interfax.

Filin is expected to be sent to Germany as soon as next week to continue his recovery, which doctors have said will take at least six months.

The criminal charge that forms the basis of the police investigation is intentional infliction of grave bodily injury, which carries a maximum sentence of eight years in prison. Police have said some witnesses in the case will be interviewed with polygraph tests.

Last week, the Bolshoi Theater appointed longtime dancer Galina Stepanenko to be Filin's temporary replacement as ballet artistic director. Filin has said he hopes to return to the job.

"I am not going to lie. Of course it is very hard for me and very difficult," Filin said in a video-link interview aired on NTV on Sunday. "Even if the worst happens, I will continue to look upon this world, and I will continue to do what I do. I promise that you will see me on stage."

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