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Whither the Taganka Theater?

By John Freedman

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This isn't a prediction, but it is a sneaking suspicion. I think that in the relatively near future there will be some big news concerning the Taganka Theater.

Let me say immediately that I am not sticking my neck out. Imagine a huge round boulder teetering at the top of a cliff. Imagine a rainstorm. Imagine lightning striking the earth beneath the boulder. Imagine the wind whipping around it on all sides.

Predicting the downfall of that rock is easy. The only question is "when?" So it is with the famed Taganka, buffeted for several seasons now by metaphorical winds and lightning. When will the change happen?

We are approaching the theater's 50th anniversary in April. That makes this season a big one. It is hard to believe that Sergei Kapkov, the proactive head of the Moscow Culture Committee, is going to stand by and watch this thing play out on its own.

Last season was a difficult one. The actor Valery Zolotukhin, who had been the artistic director

since Yury Lyubimov quit in 2011, died in the spring shortly after resigning his post. A lot of names were kicked around as possible replacements, none of them panning out yet.

For the record, some of the candidates mentioned were Vladimir Mirzoyev, Alexander Ogaryov, Dmitry Volkostrelov and even Lyubimov himself. For a day or so in May the news hit the wires that Volkostrelov, then still at the ripe age of 30, had been appointed to the post. But that turned out to be a red herring. In fact Volkostrelov was appointed to a group of people overseeing the festivities that will surround the 50th anniversary this season.

Surely the biggest sign that something must happen soon is the fact that Lyubimov this summer, still spitting angry at the troupe of the theater he founded in 1964, pulled all of his productions from the theater's repertory. You can see it for yourself if you go on the theater's website to peruse the September repertory: they're all missing, from the classics "The Master and Margarita" and "The Good Person of Setzuan" to the newer shows Lyubimov created in the last years of his tenure.

Lyubimov claimed author's rights to all the shows and demanded that they be shut down. When Izvestia reported the announcement in late June, the paper estimated that Lyubimov was depriving himself of somewhere between 600 thousand to 1 million rubles in royalties per month. That's roughly $20,000 to $30,000.

Could Lyubimov be maneuvering for a reappointment as the theater's head? I wouldn't doubt it for a minute. Even as the director nears his 96th birthday on September 30 he remains as feisty as ever. He opened a new production of "Prince Igor" at the Bolshoi Theater in June and his production of "The Demons" at the Vakhtangov Theater in 2012 was a hit.

Lyubimov returning to the Taganka might be a move Kapkov would like. He has worked hard to return Anatoly Vasilyev, another "director-in-exile," to the fold in Moscow. My understanding is that Vasilyev will soon be establishing a new school on the grounds of his beloved former theater on Povarskaya Ulitsa. Putting Lyubimov back in the saddle at the Taganka for its 50th anniversary would be a similar move.

Of course the biggest question remaining would be: Would Lyubimov want the hassle? At present he can work at the Bolshoi or the Vakhtangov or anywhere else he wants without the added baggage of being the top dog. That must be attractive, too.

In short, who knows what is going to happen? And when? But I'll bet you bottom dollar something will.

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