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Rumors and Departures Continue to Shake the Bolshoi Theater

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A performance of “Pikovaya Dama” will start the opera’s 238th season.

As long-time employees continue to leave the Bolshoi Theater and inflated personalities duel with rumors, the theater begins to seem more and more like a soap opera or a train gone off the rails. In the latest of a string of revelations about the future of the theater, departing creative director Mikhail Fikhtengolts revealed in an interview with RIA Novosti that new general director Vladimir Urin intends to fully restructure the Bolshoi Theater, likely leading to major changes in staff and also commented on the theater's fiscal situation.

The Bolshoi last week declared that long-time director of creative planning Mikhail Fikhtengolts would not be returning to the theater for the upcoming season as his contract would expire on August 31st and had not been renewed. While sudden, the announcement was not surprising: Fikhtengolts was a close associate of former general director Anatoly Iksanov, who left the theater in early July.

"Vladimir Georgiyevich [Urin] said it seemed to be a great mistake on the part of Gennady Anatoliyevich Iksanov to entrust the ideology and the strategic development of the opera troupe to a non-creative individual," said Fikhtengolts in an interview with RIA Novosti.

Fikhtengolts was known to be involved in the complex and acrimonious politics surrounding the theater, which has recently seen the departure of key staff, including director Iksanov and star dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze, as well as an acid attack on ballet director Sergei Filin that was supposedly planned by ballet soloist Pavel Dmitrichenko.

Filin was left wholly blind in one eye, making it unclear whether he will be able to continue his work, yet he expressed his desire that the Bolshoi "keep on dancing." Dmitrichenko later stated in a bail hearing that he was frustrated with the unfair allocation of funds to dancers.

In addition to the theater's staff rivalries, money has been a frequent source of gossip and scandal at the Bolshoi. The theater's extensive reconstruction, which lasted six years and cost as much as $1.2 billion, went far over budget and has resulted in numerous complaints about the supposedly low quality of the workmanship.

It was in part controversy over these repairs that led to the departure of star dancer Tsiskaridze, whose contract was not extended after he appeared on television criticizing former director Iksanov's handling of the renovations and expressing his willingness to take over as director. Iksanov was also criticized for his use of the theater's ballerinas, with former soloist Anastasia Volochkova accusing him of pressuring dancers to sleep with donors and board members.

These scandals led to Iksanov's ouster in early July, and Fikhtengolts seemed to suggest that the impending reorganization was a logical consequence of the transition to Urin's management: "It is a normal European practice that a new intendant, or in this case a general director, should clean out the old team and bring in a new one," he said. Fikhtengolts suggested that it was mostly the opera department of the theater that would see restructuring, though further changes in the ballet would also come as no surprise, given the recent controversies.

Fikhtengolts also revealed details about the financial status of the Bolshoi, stating that the theater had postponed the premieres of two operas, "Iolanta" by Tchaikovsky and "Mavra" by Stravinsky, due to cost concerns. While both of these operas were due to premiere in February, they have been postponed indefinitely, though Fikhtengolts told RIA Novosti that Urin had promised that they would open in the near future.

Overall, Fikhtengolts' interview seems to reflect the beginning of a period of rebuilding at the Bolshoi. Hopefully, over the course of the coming season Urin will succeed in his reconstruction of the legendary theater, putting an end to the endless scandals and restoring it to its traditional place at the peak of Russian performance arts.

The Bolshoi will begin its 238th season Sept. 15 with a concert of Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich. The first opera of the new season, Tchaikovsky's "Pikovaya Dama" will be performed Sept. 17th.

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