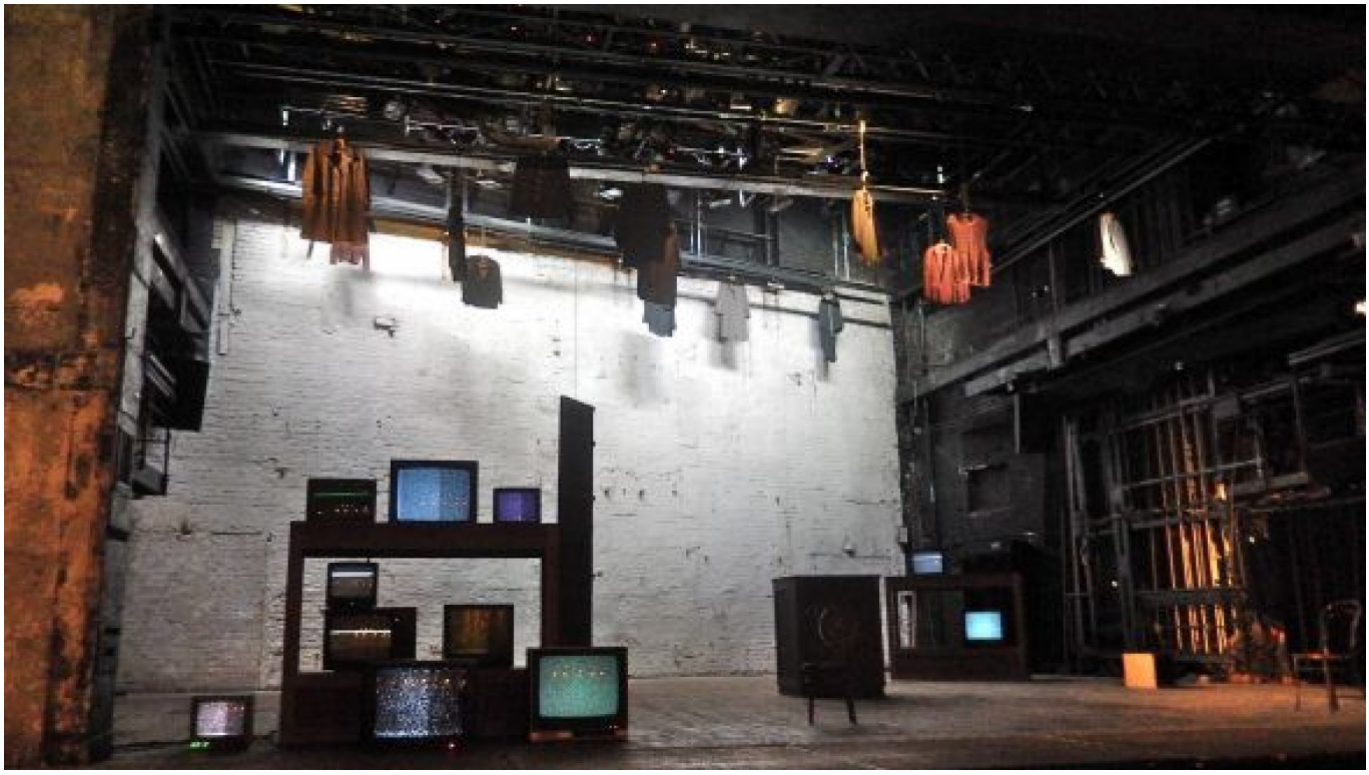
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Scandal Can't Stop Indomitable Taganka Theater

By John Freedman

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The stage design for “Orchestra Rehearsal” uses recycled elements from old productions at the Taganka Theater. **John Freedman**

The Taganka Theater just can't do without a good scandal. It's in its blood. Yury Lyubimov gave birth to the theater 50 years ago in scandal — firing most of the resident actors when he took it over in 1964 — and he left it in scandal in 2011 after a bitter falling-out with the members of the troupe.

The latest kerfuffle took place Friday during and after the premiere of a new production called "Orchestra Rehearsal." It was the second event in the 50th anniversary project being conducted by a group of young artists, critics and future theater managers with the aid and encouragement of the Moscow Culture Committee.

The first event, a low-key exhibit in the theater's foyer, exploded in scandal two weeks ago when angry Taganka actors demanded the "interlopers" who created the exhibit be kicked

out. Heated press conferences were held, graffiti appeared on some of the exhibits and accusations of people seeking to "destroy" the Taganka and "dismantle the Russian repertory system" flew fast and heavy.

Enter a soft-spoken young director named Andrei Stadnikov. It fell to him to create the first of several full productions that will be part of a season of various events honoring the Taganka's jubilee year. Under the circumstances, it couldn't possibly have come off without incident. And, of course, it didn't.

There were attempts to disrupt the performance when it was underway, and a scheduled post-show discussion at times turned into a free-for-all shouting match. One furious spectator stood in the third row during the curtain calls and, pointing an accusing finger at each actor, shouted "Shame! Shame! Shame!" over the thunder of a standing ovation from, perhaps, half of the crowd.

During the discussion a teacher who identified herself as a fan of the Taganka complained that she couldn't hear the actors and couldn't see them because of the low light. She concluded that she would no longer recommend the Taganka to anyone and that she would return to her students the next day to declare that Russian culture, indeed, is dying.

Stadnikov planted a few little structural bombs in his otherwise low-key production. At one point the actors seemed to rebel against the show and began arguing among themselves, demanding that the director explain what they were supposed to be doing.

This gave disgruntled spectators the opportunity to join in the chorus of dissent and a few, indeed, did so. During a musical interlude where actors worked their way from chaos and cacophony to a few, gentle, dying, harmonious notes by playing on string instruments with various objects, someone in the audience shouted sarcastically "Bravo! Can you play that again?!"

During the discussion the composer Dmitry Vlasik expressed amazement at the intolerance some showed. "Even in the arch-conservative Moscow Conservatory you don't hear outbursts like this anymore," he said.

The fact of the matter is that Stadnikov, working with designer Ksenia Peretrukhina and choreographer Olga Tsvetkova, staged a gentle, insightful performance that sought to take a glimpse inside a legend. The result was moving and thought-provoking, a ground's-eye view of a cultural colossus.

Peretrukhina's design is subtle and meaningful. She used elements from several famous old Taganka productions, spreading 11 television monitors around the stage. Most of the time they showed nothing but static, but for brief seconds images of famous Taganka actors would come into focus and then disappear into static again.

The actors for the most part performed in the hall with the spectators — until the end the stage itself was a space reserved for the past.

Much of the spoken text was drawn from interviews done with theater employees — electricians, firemen, a public relations agent, costumers and the like. These usually

anonymous workers are all played by actors, but their words, we are informed in the program, remain unchanged. The first of the voices to be heard was that of a man whose mother worked at the theater well before it became known as the Taganka. The second was with a fireman on the job for just two days.

Some of those interviewed spoke with piety of Lyubimov and the Taganka. Others were more ironic or realistic in their attitudes. A couple of cleaning ladies, migrants from former Soviet republics, express little sense of the history around them but are conscientious in their attitude towards their job. An electrician claiming that Lyubimov was a great artist is reminded by a colleague that he used to ridicule the director before he resigned. The chastised worker sheepishly admits it's true.

A turning point in the performance takes place when a woman tells how she once passed the theater on Alexander Pushkin's birthday. She was impressed to see that the Taganka was performing Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" that day.

"I went to see 'Eugene Onegin' and I realized Lyubimov was a genius," she said, adding that she then wished to work for him and "help him in his work."

"The fact that Yury Petrovich is not here any more doesn't matter," she concludes, "His influence on this theater has not ended."

Later we hear the words of a PR manager who began working at the theater as a ticket taker and then an administrator. "I don't love people much," she declares, "but I love this place. I believe this place will either disappear into oblivion or will have a great future. It will never be mediocre."

The image that arises is touching and believable at the same time. The great Taganka isn't a "great theater" every moment to those who work there. It cannot possibly be. It is the place they live the biggest part of their lives. One woman speaks fondly of the theater because it is where she met her husband. This is real-life stuff. It lends flesh and blood and a true humanity to a place that some would rather see in unmoving and unchanging bronze.

"Orchestra Rehearsal," which only takes its name and basic idea from the Federico Fellini film, ends as five of the actors repeatedly walk up to the back wall on stage. At first it seems we are watching curtain calls from a backstage vantage point. But soon the actors are running up to the wall and slamming into it with increasing fury. It is as though they wish to break it down, or break through it. They cannot. They eventually fall in exhausted heaps. The famous back wall of the Taganka remains standing.

This latest scandal won't be the last we see at the Taganka this season. But here's one thing we can already say for certain: The Taganka is alive. Stadnikov's "Orchestra Rehearsal" makes that abundantly clear.

"Orchestra Rehearsal" (Repetitsiya Orkestra) will be performed again on Jan. 23 and 24 at the Taganka Theater, 76/21 Zemlyanoi Val. Metro Taganskaya. 495-915-1217. taganka.theatre.ru*. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.*

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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