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Ivan Ozhogin Says Musicals on the Rise in Russia

By D. Garrison Golubock

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Ivan Ozhogin acting as Count von Krolock with Vera Sveshnikova as Sara in the musical “Vampire’s Ball.”

Russia has a reputation for excellence in performing arts — ballet and opera in particular have seen significant contributions by Russian composers, directors and performers. However, the genre of the musical is one that has in the past received little attention on Russian stages — musicals seem more associated with theaters in Chicago and New York than Moscow and St.Petersburg. However, a new wave of Russian performers is bringing new advances to the genre in Russia, and Ivan Ozhogin is at the forefront of this trend.

Given the Golden Mask award in 2013 and the Musical Heart of the Theater award in 2012 for his performance in "Vampire's Ball," Ozhogin is a St. Petersburg-based actor who is among the few Russian performers to have performed abroad, having also performed in the Berlin production of "Vampire's Ball." Now back in Russia, Ozhogin spoke to The Moscow Times about his work and musicals in Russia.

Q: This year you won the Golden Mask award for your performance in the role of Count von Krolock in the musical "Vampire's Ball." Can you tell us a little bit about this production and your role?

A: Well, I've already been playing this role for two years in St. Petersburg, though we don't have daily performances. As in Europe or the U.S., our performances are in blocks. Altogether, we've had about 200 performances in St. Petersburg. It happened that in Berlin, when the contract of one of the performers expired and the musical was scheduled for another half year of performances, a decision was made to have me try out for the role. I tried to learn the part in German, though I hadn't spoken any German at all prior to that. As it happened, I wound up performing in two languages at the same time, in Berlin in German and in St. Petersburg in Russian.

I was given the Golden Mask award specifically for the role of Count von Krolock in the St. Petersburg production, which is slightly different from the Berlin version; it has different stage decorations and very different costumes.

Q: You've played the role of Count von Krolock both in Berlin and in Saint Petersburg: How do you think working as an actor differs here in Russia and in Europe?

A: Well, here in Russia we, unfortunately, don't have a tradition of productions on the same professional level as in Europe. In Moscow, we do now have some theatrical companies that work in a very precise, organized fashion, as in Western theaters, but in St. Petersburg everything still operates on a somewhat primitive level — we don't yet have that level of organization. You could say that this staging of "Vampire's Ball" opened up the genre of the musical in St. Petersburg. It was the first big musical staged on an international level.

There had been some attempts to stage musicals in St. Petersburg before, but they had low budgets and very local staging, nothing as original as what we have in "Vampire's Ball."

Q: Do you intend to do more work abroad, or will St. Petersburg remain your main base of operations?

A: I'm returning to Russia now and will continue performing in "Vampire's Ball" in St. Petersburg at least for the next season. I'm also going to be participating in a new musical in St. Petersburg that will be the first performance to use 3D decorations. So St. Petersburg will definitely remain my home.

If I'm invited to perform again in Germany or in Europe, then I will go, though I still don't really speak German; I just can understand it a little. I think that language is one of the main barriers that prevents Russian actors from working abroad. It is extremely difficult to sing in a foreign language without an accent, and it is hard to convey the same emotion in a language that is not one's own. For this reason, I think you could count on one hand all of the Russian actors who have managed to work abroad.

Q: The Golden Mask Award is considered to be Russia's highest theatrical honor, and you've won it as a relatively young man. What else do you hope to accomplish in your career?

A: You know, I don't really seek any particular awards, I do this work because it gives me

satisfaction and because I like it in the theater, on stage, at concerts, and, honestly, I didn't expect that I would win two such prestigious awards — the Musical Heart of the Theater and the Golden Mask. The St. Petersburg performance of "Vampire's Ball" has won further awards as a production.

This musical was staged very well with excellent directing, acting, music, decorations, costumes; we had an excellent group of actors. The atmosphere of "horror" in "Vampire's Ball" also helped to break through to audiences.

We had a very international company, and all this together had great resonance and got such good feedback from the audience and the press.

Q: How did you first begin your career as an actor?

A: I was born in Ulyanovsk, a town on the Volga River. I began to sing very young, at about the age of three my mother took me to a boy's choir and I started singing there. I was in the school choir and studied music, and then at the age of nine I entered a theatrical school and when I was 12 I came to Moscow to study at the Russian Academy of Theatrical Arts.

Q: Which of your previous roles were your favorites?

A: I have very warm memories of working on the musical Nord-Ost: a Russian production done entirely based on Russian materials. The story was based on the classic Soviet novel "The Two Captains" by Veniamin Kaverin. We had a great team on the production, all Russians, with music composed by Georgy Vasilyev and Alexei Ivashenko. They managed to create a work of very high quality on a truly international level. Unfortunately, it was during a performance of Nord-Ost that there was a terrorist act at the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in 2002, and the resulting hostage siege left many people dead. After that, the production simply was never the same and soon ended.

Q: I've heard that you are currently the lead soloist for the choir of the Nikolo-Ugreshsky Monastery. Why did you decide to start singing in the monastic choir and how does this differ from the work that you do onstage?

A: Well, I've always been interested in trying that genre of choir singing. As fate would have it, I had an opportunity to sing in the Nikolo-Ugreshsky choir starting in 2006. Since then, I've sung with choirs in other churches as well, but I consider the Nikolo-Ugreshsky group to be my main choir. I started out as just one of the members of the choir, and after a couple years we became a professional choir with invited musicians — we have about 12 to 15 regular members with extras who perform on holidays.

I've just always been interested in trying different genres. I've worked as an opera singer, I've sung Russian folk songs and romances as well as foreign jazz, rock and modern compositions; I'm interested in all genres. It was difficult to switch from one genre to another, but I like it and I make it work.

Contact the author at g.golubock@imedia.ru

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