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# Cultural Battle Goes on, Gogol Center Under Attack

By John Freedman

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As a law took effect last week banning obscenities in works of art, and as Russian parliamentarian Yelena Mizulina — the author of the so-called anti-Magnitsky law banning adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens — pushed creating a law that would require individuals to use their passport to gain access to the Internet, we continued to see signs that the turmoil lately engulfing Russian culture and media is not about to let up.

Once again, Russian Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky singled out a favorite punching bag for criticism — Moscow's Gogol Center. Speaking at a session of the presidential council on cross-national relations, he ridiculed Kirill Serebrennikov's production of Nikolai Gogol's "Dead Souls," which begins with a comic prologue depicting drunken men attempting to get a broken wagon back on its wheels.

And for the first time in its storied 12-year history, the independent Teatr.doc, which has declared it will not obey the anti-obscenity law, has indicated that recent government policy changes could threaten the theater's existence.

"Beginning in spring 2015 Teatr.doc will not be able to win a single grant, regardless of the quality of our projects," wrote the theater's managing director Yelena Gremina on a newly established Facebook page entitled Who Would Like to Help. The theater will host fundraisers to make up for the substantial loss in financing they expect to face next year. The first of these events will take place July 18, with tickets costing 1,000 to 10,000 rubles for the opportunity to hear major contemporary writers read from their latest works.

As fate would have it, I came home to learn about these latest developments after participating on Thursday in a conference hosted by the European Union Delegation to the Russian Federation. Chaired by Tomas Reyes Ortega and Soren Liborius, it devolved into a discussion about whether Russia's current cultural politics are a hindrance to its relationship with Europe, or whether this is a time of increasing clarity in Russia's perception of itself and, therefore, a prime time for renewed international cooperation.

Inna Prilezhayeva, project director at the Association of Culture Managers, put forth the notion that Russia today is not anti-European, that its values are compatible with those of Europe and that this is the ideal time for Russian and European collaboration.

As the second invited speaker, I found myself in the position of being a downright sourpuss. I could not help but bring up the flurry of repressive actions, measures or language used by the Russian government or its officials over the last six months in regards to artists and their work.

Aside from the anti-obscenity law, these have included numerous attacks on Gogol Center and the Taganka Theater; two issues of Kultura newspaper accusing dozens of directors and playwrights of perversion and evil intent; the banning of a showing of a documentary film about the Pussy Riot protest punk group; the banning of numerous theatrical events at the recent Moscow International Book Festival; a proposal to outlaw the "unjustifiable" use of foreign words in the media and the arts; and accusations that the Golden Mask Festival offered an "anti-government performance" during one of its evenings celebrating its 20th anniversary.

This, I said — and as I have written in these pages in the past — is too similar to dangerous and deadly periods in Russia's past to ignore. As I spoke at the conference I still did not know about Medinsky's comments or the fears raised by Teatr.doc.

In fact, the culture minister's claims were more than just controversial, they were very strange. He fired his latest salvo at the Gogol Center while making his main point that, specifically, Russia's Young Spectator Theaters should be held under greater control so as to stop them from tormenting schoolchildren with experimental interpretations of the classics.

What Medinsky either didn't know, or didn't care to clarify, was that the Gogol Center has nothing to do with the official chain of Theaters Yunogo Zritelya, or, Young Spectator Theaters, throughout Russia. In any case, as quoted on the "http://km.ru/" website, the minister declared that Russian classics should be presented on stage "in a technologically contemporary manner, but without essential distortions, without eccentricities in the guise of an innovative reading."

So, while kicking the Gogol Center apparently just because it's there, Medinsky's declaration actually might have been an assault on Moscow's Theater Yunogo Zritelya, where directors Genrietta Yanovskaya and Kama Ginkas have won international renown for their inventive productions of Russian classics. Or it might be a warning for other well-known Russian Young Spectator Theaters in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg or Krasnoyarsk, all of which have played an important role in developing the art of theater over the last decade or more.

In this increasingly repressive atmosphere, Teatr.doc's moves to ensure its survival are understandable. Declaring that she is not afraid of what the future has to bring, Gremina wrote on Facebook, "but we don't simply want to survive, we want to continue working productively. For that reason we are now thinking about the cold spring of 2015 that awaits us."

Speaking informally after the EU-hosted conference, Helena Autio-Meloni, the cultural counsellor at the Finnish Embassy in Moscow, summed up thoughts I heard from several attendees. "These are the most difficult times I have known in 30 years of dealing with Russia," Autio-Meloni said, "but we must not be deterred by that. There are great people here who share our values and we must do everything we can to support them."

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