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Religious Offense Charges Against Russian Opera Director Dropped

By Peter Spinella

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Director Timofei Kulyabin

A Russian opera director who found himself mired in legal controversy after he provoked the ire of a local church leader was cleared of a charge of offending the sentiments of religious believers, the theater announced Tuesday via Twitter.

Director Timofei Kulyabin had faced administrative charges for offending religious believers with his rendition of Richard Wagner's opera "Tannhauser," which has been performed at the Novosibirsk State Theater of Opera and Ballet since December.

The presiding judge found Tuesday that it had not been proven that Kulyabin violated the law.

Prior to the acquittal, the judge considered the opinion of a panel of experts who concluded that the opera had not desecrated religious sentiments, state news agency TASS reported Tuesday.

"The production contains emblems and symbols that represent religious beliefs, but they were not degraded or destroyed," Vladimir Vinokurov, an expert from Moscow State University, wrote in the statement, which was read out before the court.

Kulyabin "did not want to offend anyone in any way. Quite the opposite, he is extending his hand to the Orthodox Church, and in response he has received insults," Boris Falikov of the Russian State University for the Humanities said in the statement.

Kulyabin's rendition of the opera features a scene where the Roman goddess Venus promises eternal love to Jesus Christ, so long as he agrees to stay with her in a grotto. But he rejects the offer and destroys the grotto with the help of the Virgin Mary, according to a summary on the theater's website.

The investigation was launched because of a complaint by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region, Metropolitan Tikhon.

He referred to the opera as "an affront to the feelings of religious believers, an offense to the Orthodox Church and an incitement to religious hatred," culture news site Colta.ru reported.

Russia criminalized insulting the sentiments of religious believers in 2013 after protest group Pussy Riot sang a "punk prayer" in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral calling on the Virgin Mary to banish President Vladimir Putin.

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