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Culture Ministry to Probe 'Blasphemous' Novosibirsk Opera

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Russia criminalized insulting the sentiments of religious believers in 2013 after female protest group Pussy Riot performed a "punk prayer" in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

Russia's Culture Ministry announced plans Wednesday to launch a probe into a beleaguered Novosibirsk production of Richard Wagner's "Tannhäuser," which has provoked the ire of certain powerful members of the Russian Orthodox Christian community.

The Novosibirsk State Theater of Opera and Ballet's recent production of the opera, directed by Timofei Kulyabin, features a variety of provocative scenes starring biblical and mythical figures. At one particularly controversial point, a poster was shown depicting Jesus Christ standing between the open legs of a naked woman. That scene has since been altered.

"We are not encroaching on the freedom of creativity; we certainly believe in the most daring possible interpretations of theatrical classics and experimental scenes," the Culture Ministry said in a statement. "However, the [theater] should not only warn their viewers about unusual

treatments of classic works. They should also try to explain the authors' concept and what will occur during the production so as to show respect for all types of audience members."

Citing what it said was a large number of inquiries about the amount of funding Kulyabin's rendition of "Tannhäuser" had received and the wages earned by its director and actors, the ministry said it would audit the theater's financial and economic activities.

The ministry also noted that the appropriate next step would be for the theater to "make the necessary changes to the [opera's] formulation," and to issue a public apology to anyone that was offended by it.

It added that the ministry retains the right to deny funding or otherwise apply administrative or financial pressure in certain "extreme cases" involving divisive or offensive productions.

Kulyabin's production has been mired in scandal in recent weeks. An administrative case was launched against him on a charge of having offended the sentiments of religious believers. Prosecutors had initiated the case after the regional leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Tikhon, complained.

A Novosibirsk court later dropped the charge, though prosecutors have vowed to appeal that decision.

Kulyabin's rendition of the opera has been performed at the theater since December.

In a statement released Tuesday, the theater's director Boris Mezdrich referred to the scandal engulfing the production as "a sad precedent" that he hoped "would be first and last in the history of Russian theater."

A group of prominent theater experts who serve as judges for Russia's national theater award, the Golden Mask, voiced support for the production, saying in an open letter that the scandal carries "a threat of censorship."

Many theaters from across the nation have sent their letters to Novosibirsk law enforcement agencies and officials, voicing support for the production.

On Friday Novosibirsk's SoMA gallery will launch an exhibition entitled "Artistic Porn," which will feature paintings, photographs and works of digital and performance art.

Squeamish in the aftermath of the "Tannhäuser" scandal, the exhibition's organizers announced that the show will be free of any images of Jesus and other biblical characters, news site Lenta.ru reported on Thursday.

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

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