

Wagner Opera Scandal Reflects Deep Divide in Russian Society

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Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater's director was suspected of having offended the sentiments of religious believers by his staging of Wagner's "Tannhauser."

An avant-garde production of a Wagner opera in a Siberian city that has seen conservative Russian Orthodox activists declare war on the liberal intelligentsia is a sign of things to come, some in Russia fear.

The production of "Tannhauser" at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater is accused of the crime of insulting the feelings of religious people, and has exposed the sharp divisions within Russian society: What some perceive as a sophisticated work of art was interpreted as offensive blasphemy by others.

The high-profile scandal, which has seen the country's Culture Ministry weigh in on the side of the Orthodox activists, is a "pure political action whose goal is to crush the independence of modern art and create new instruments for the censorship of creative work," Irina

Prokhorova, one of Russia's leading culturologists, told The Moscow Times this week.

"The problem is that the hysteria of many 'believers' is determined by the fact that such behavior works as a social lift for the worst part of our society. Today, just as in Soviet times, it is possible to swiftly make a career without many professional competencies and skills simply by emphasizing personal patriotism and spirituality," Prokhorova, who together with her billionaire brother founded the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation that supports many regional cultural initiatives, said in e-mailed comments.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Church sees the conflict as redressing an imbalance in society.

The "Tannhauser" scandal reflects the desire of the liberal intelligentsia to preserve "its monopoly of state funds that they earned in the 1990s, when it was decided that innovation is always good, and traditions are bad," said Vsevolod Chaplin, spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church.

"The reason why this scandal has reached such heights is because many people want to preserve their place under the sun," he told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

The fierce debate is not limited to public figures. Multiple advocacy groups and letters of petition have been established on social networks during recent weeks, with some people calling for the director to be prosecuted and others calling for his works to be performed on the stages of the country's top theaters.

The Charges

In 30-year-old Timofei Kulyabin's staging of Wagner's story about a contrary medieval composer who takes part in a song contest, the action is transposed to the modern day and the protagonist enters a film competition with his work on the unknown years of Jesus Christ that were not described in the New Testament.

The film, whose action is also portrayed on stage, suggests that between the ages of 12 and 30, Jesus lived in "Venus's grotto" — which also serves as the film's name — where he is tested by the temptations of love and pleasure. At the end of the film, Jesus destroys the grotto and leaves the world of fantasy for the real world of suffering and death.

At the film competition, the character of Tannhauser presents a poster for his film, which depicts a crucifix between a naked woman's open legs. It was the poster that elicited the most criticism from Orthodox activists.

Ironically, in the opera itself, which premiered in December, the poster also sparks heated indignation from other contestants and the public, who banish Tannhauser from the town of Wartburg where the contest takes place.

On March 10, a local court in Novosibirsk threw out an administrative case brought by prosecutors against Kulyabin and the theater's director, Boris Mezdrich, of offending the feelings of religious believers. The proceedings were initiated by the regional leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Tikhon.

Public actions that offend religious believers' feelings were made a crime in 2013 following an anti-Putin performance by female protest group Pussy Riot in Russia's main Orthodox cathedral the year before. The crime carries up to three years in prison.

The Orthodox camp did not give up following the court's decision, and has called for Kulyabin to face criminal prosecution, a proposal taken up with gusto by Yaroslav Nilov, head of the State Duma's committee on public associations and religious organizations.

"I believe it is better to bring criminal proceedings against one person than let others publish such materials and incite others to revenge and acts of terror that can result in innocent victims, including you and myself," Nikov told Russian News Service radio earlier this month.

A Time to Compromise

In an open letter about the scandal, Kulyabin wrote that "the artistic decisions that emerged during work on the production were determined by Wagner's opera, which I have tried to deliver to spectators.

"There was no provocation or any desire to scandalize the public," he wrote.

The director declined repeated requests to comment on the situation to The Moscow Times.

Amid the scandal, Kulyabin agreed to replace the controversial poster with a blank piece of paper for the opera's second two performances in March. Orthodox activists, however, continue to demand that the production should be struck off the theater's playbill altogether.

Some have claimed that they are defending the rights of Wagner, whose legacy, they say, has been compromised by Kulyabin's production.

"The church is often accused of fighting art. The church does not fight art, but wants to defend it. Today we are in a situation when we need to defend great authors, including Wagner," Vladimir Legoida, a spokesman for the Church's Moscow Patriarchy, told RIA Novosti this month.

No Backing Down

Both sides have signaled their readiness to defend their beliefs with open letters and rallies in central Novosibirsk, but while the intelligentsia has called for a dialogue, many Orthodox activists have demanded a public apology and an inspection of the theater's finances.

The Novosibirsk Orthodox Diocese has called on the Federal Security Service, Prosecutor General and Investigative Committee to conduct an objective investigation into the activities of anyone connected with the "Tannhauser" production.

"This opera has insulted religious believers' feelings, has instigated instability in society and is capable of destroying the good soul of our nation," the diocese said in a statement Saturday.

Orthodox activists now plan to stage a rally in central Novosibirsk this Sunday, with

the participation of a boxer-turned-Duma Deputy Nikolai Valuyev.

Not to be outdone, the Novosibirsk intelligentsia is planning its own rally in the city center to defend freedom of creativity.

Silver Lining

While the storm around Kulyabin's "Tannhauser" — the first Wagner opera that the prestigious Novosibirsk theater, often dubbed Novosibirsk's coliseum for its size, has produced in the past 50 years — has left some cultural figures despondent, it has also demonstrated that they are a force to be reckoned with. Numerous theater directors, actors, musicians, composers have issued statements in support of Kulyabin and his work.

The director of Moscow's legendary Bolshoi Theater has invited him to work at the theater, the TASS news agency reported.

And for Kulyabin himself, for whom "Tannhauser" was his first full-scale opera production, the fallout may not ultimately turn out to be a bad thing.

Mark Zakharov, the eminent director of Moscow's Lenkom theater, who has also invited Kulyabin to work at his theater, offered Kulyabin some advice in a humorous comment in the Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper on Sunday. Zakharov advised Kulyabin to order a Mass in honor of the Novosibirsk bishop who organized him "a brilliant PR campaign with a loud scandal" and thus launched his career on a national scale.

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