

Novosibirsk Theater's New Director Cuts Controversial Opera From Repertoire

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The new director of a Novosibirsk theater that for weeks has been mired in scandal after critics blasted a rendition of Richard Wagner's opera "Tannhäuser" as sacrilegious said in a statement Tuesday he has removed the controversial production from the theater's repertoire.

Vladimir Kekhman was appointed director of the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater after Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky fired the theater's former director, Boris Mezdrich, on Sunday, citing his failure to comply with instructions, state news agency TASS reported at the time.

The firing was announced as more than 1,000 activists gathered in Novosibirsk to protest the performance, which they viewed as an effort to "destroy [their] national culture," the Interfax news agency reported.

The show, which debuted in December, had a modern-day setting in which the main character was a filmmaker, and it featured a prop poster for one of his films showing an image

of Jesus Christ crucified between the legs of a naked woman, according to a statement by prosecutors.

Having incited much of the uproar surrounding the performance, the poster had since been removed from the production.

Previously, both Mezdrich and the opera director, Timofei Kulyabin, had faced administrative charges of offending the sentiments of religious believers following a complaint by a regional leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Tikhon.

The case was thrown out by a local court in March, though the local prosecutor general has appealed the decision.

Kekhman had vocally criticized Kulyabin's rendition prior to his appointment. "[The production] is a demonstration of an internal ungodliness in the style and spirit of militant atheists. ... I think [Mezdrich] must resign, and the performance should be removed from the [theater's] repertoire," he said in comments published by the Culture Ministry on March 13.

Explaining his decision on Tuesday to scrap future performances of Kulyabin's rendition of "Tannhäuser," Kekhman praised the "high quality of the musical performance" and acknowledged the "excellent work of the troupe and the conductor."

However, two key issues stood in the way of future performances, he said: the musical conductor's contract has expired, and Kekhman had not been able to meet with the opera's director.

"There is no more intrigue. I propose that all the concerned parties put an end to this issue," Kekhman added.

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