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Live in Russia? Love British Literature? This is the Year for You

By Olivia Bagnall

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William Shakespeare

Russia's reputation as a country built on strong literary traditions is to be strengthened this year through its collaboration with the British Council on the U.K.-Russia Year of Language and Literature. The upcoming year-round events that form the festival program will celebrate the written and spoken culture of both countries, paying particular attention to the life and work of William Shakespeare. The British Council see the year as a way of building on the success of the 2014 U.K.-Russia Year of Culture and want to further bond the rich literary culture of both countries which, according to the Council announcement, "have a deeply held respect for each other's culture and literature."

Celebrating Shakespeare

The year of U.K.- Russia Language and Literature coincides with the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, an event that will remain the focus of the majority of the program

events. Not only is Shakespeare one of the backbones of English literature, but according to Michael Bird, Director of the British Council in Russia, “nowhere in the world will Shakespeare’s anniversary hold more resonance than in Russia, where Shakespeare, because of his influence on Russian writers, is practically a Russian writer himself.”

The Year program kicked off in January with the launch of a massive online course based on Shakespeare’s works. This free educational course explores the life and work of Shakespeare, runs for six weeks and features lectures and videos from British actors.

In February, CoolConnections, a Moscow-based Russian art-group, in conjunction with the British Council will launch TheatreHD, a project that will live stream performances of Shakespeare’s works by leading British theatres, including the Royal National Theatre, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre and the Barbican, across 50 cities in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. CoolConnections is also involved in the organization of the 2016 New British Film Festival that will show a range of documentaries and short films about Shakespeare’s life alongside screenings of Maxine Peake’s "Hamlet," staged at the Royal Exchange Theatre.

One of the main events of the year will be a large-scale summer festival dedicated to Shakespeare in one of Moscow's public parks. The festival program includes music concerts, theatre productions, film screenings, lectures, master-classes and more. A retrospective of film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, including contemporary productions as well as the very first archive films of the playwright’s works is set to be the major draw to the festival.

A Year for Learning

The U.K.-Russia Year of Language and Literature is above all else an educational initiative aimed at Russians hoping to acquire English. With this in mind, the British Council has re-opened the IETLS (International English Language Testing System) exams in Moscow. Since December 2015 it has once again been possible to sit the exams three times a month in Moscow.

The educational program also extends to primary level students in the form of a National Shakespeare Schools Olympiad. In March the Olympiad will be held in schools across Russia for schoolchildren from 1st to 11th class, opening with a special lesson dedicated to the life of William Shakespeare. So far 150,000 schoolchildren and 40,000 teaches are set to participate. Students will also have the opportunity to win educational trips to British boarding schools through a national essay competition.

More Than Literature

The Year of Language and Literature bypasses the borders of the spoken and written word and delves into the realm of art to mark the 160th anniversary of the establishment of both the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the National Portrait Gallery in London. In another British-Russian collaboration, both institutions will present joint exhibitions showcasing masterpieces from their collections in the spring.

Prized portraits of writer Lev Tolstoy and Modest Mussorgsky among others will visit the Portrait Gallery in London, while visitors to the Tretyakov Gallery will be treated to portraits of Isaac Newton, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth I, and of course the star of this 2016 U.K.-Russia

Year of Language and Literature, William Shakespeare.

Information about the festival and a schedule of events is available on the website britishcouncil.ru*.*

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