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“Sadko” Premiers to Mixed Reviews

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Damir Uysupov / Bolshoi Theatre

This Valentine’s Day marked the first time in 36 years that the epic Rimsky-Korsakov opera “Sadko” has been staged at the Bolshoi Theater. Directed by Dmitry Chernyakov, the sold-out premiere was a much-anticipated event in the Moscow arts scene.

Chernyakov is known for his audacious directorial style, which over the years has earned him both praise and criticism. He most notably made headlines when his controversial 2011 production of “Ruslan and Lyudmila” (which included brothel scenes, prostitution, and allusions to drug use) earned both cheers and boos from Bolshoi audiences. With “Sadko” marking his return to the Bolshoi Theater, Chernyakov made clear his intention to not hold back: "This opera has a false reputation — that it’s epic, grandiose, distant, and not about us. We are trying to take this textbook cliche away and understand that it *is* about us," he stated in a quote to TV Kultura.

As promised, the opera (which tells the Odyssey-esque story of its eponymous hero) has been dramatically revamped by Chernyakov for 21st-century audiences. The characters become self-aware, with a prologue explaining that they are disillusioned modern people taking part in a psychological experiment in which they embody the characters of a classic Russian epic.

They enter a “Wish Fulfillment” theme park, where they are transformed into residents of ancient Novgorod, and from there the epic story commences with the actors as role-players.

Critics gave relatively favorable reviews of the opera’s musicality, particularly the performance of soprano Aida Garifullina (who portrays the character Volkhova). The overall concept, however, was not universally well-received. RIA Novosti praised the successful integration of topical issues (domestic violence, relationship problems) into a classic medieval narrative. A few critics and theatergoers found the transformation of Russia’s mythical past into a theme park apt and meaningful. But others claimed that the premise fell flat.

Kommersant’s Sergey Khodnev expressed disappointment that Chernyakov’s signature subtlety seemed to have been subverted by a tendency towards “sketchiness and broad strokes,” while Ekaterina Kretova of classicalmusicnews.ru found the play-within-a-play storyline tedious and disingenuous: “Even the brilliant music does not save it; it is impossible to sing such music insincerely, not believing in it, not embracing it, but rather joking about it, about the plot, about the very idea of an epic opera,” she wrote. This summed up the general sentiment: While the talents, aesthetics, and ideals of the production are sometimes breathtaking, the production fails to truly move and capture the audience.

To learn more about the production or to book tickets, visit the official website of the Bolshoi Theater here.

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