The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Patriots' in London, or How Not to Put on a Play in Wartime

By Emily Couch

September 07, 2023



Tom Hollander as Boris Berezovsky **Marc Brenner / 2022 Almeida Production**

On the day I went to see "Patriots," a play about the Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, a Russian missile struck the Chernihiv Drama Theater, killing seven and injuring 156 more. The attack could not help but inform my perception of "Patriots" that day, but on any day Russia's war against Ukraine has been the elephant in the theater hall throughout its run.

What does it mean to stage a play in the West about Russia when it is waging a genocidal war in Ukraine?

The signs hanging from the marquee seemed to suggest the play's relevance for today. It was called a "cooly unnerving new drama" that would paint a chilling portrait of today's Russia, with stars backstage and on stage. The two-act play was scripted by Peter Morgan, the writer behind Netflix's "The Crown," and directed by Rupert Goold. Written as a drama, though peppered with dry British humor, it premiered at the Almeida Theatre in Islington in July 2022

and then transferred to the West End in June of this year for a twelve-week run. Berezovsky is played by British TV and theater veteran Tom Hollander ("The White Lotus," "The Night Manager"). Critics believe a Broadway run is in the offing.

The play begins in Russia with Berezovsky at the height of his power in the 1990s and ends with his mysterious death in London in 2013. The play's title, "Patriots," refers to its driving dramatic question: Is Berezovsky motivated by a genuine desire to reform Russia or pure self-interest? The plural in the title alludes to play's other central character, Vladimir Putin, who is played with eerie physical accuracy by Will Keen ("The Crown," "Wolf Hall"). The play hinges on the reversal of a power dynamic: In Act I, Berezovsky holds the power and Putin is merely a relatively low-ranking official. In Act II, Putin is the president and Berezovsky is exiled. Both men, the play tells us, are motivated by what they consider patriotism although, in both cases, this sentiment is inseparable from the personal desire for power.

"Patriots" has a large but under-utilized cast of sixteen, with most of the actors — except for Hollander, Keen, Luke Thallon (who plays Roman Abramovich), Josef Davies (who plays Alexander Litvinenko), and Ronald Guttman — playing multiple characters. Boris Yeltsin and his daughter Tatyana are among the famous figures who make cameo appearances. The set and lighting, designed by Miriam Buether, Deborah Andrews, and Jack Knowles, is flashy, with significant use of projections and dramatic shifts from light to dark. The staging is centered on a prominent T-shaped platform that is often illuminated red.

Patriots is not a fundamentally bad play — the action is fast-paced and there is a healthy smattering of insightful remarks about Russia's trajectory post-1991 — but ultimately falls prey to stereotype. "What do you mean, you won't take a bribe?" Berezovsky demands of a Putin, when the latter is still working for St. Petersburg mayor Alexander Sobchak. "Are you even Russian?"

This tired quip was one of several eye-roll moments that prevented the play from being the searing new portrait of Russia that Morgan seems to have set out to paint. The aggressively red set, Katya Berezovsky's ringtone being a tinny rendition of the Russian national anthem, and indulgent musings about the so-called 'Russian soul' amount to a picture of Russia as Western audiences are accustomed to seeing it. These cliches did not seem to trouble the audience, whose chatter in the interval and on the street afterwards was largely positive.

The play is book-ended by a soliloquy from Berezovsky about how the West sees only Russia's hardship and cruelty when really it is "picking mushrooms in the forest," "laughter in the bathhouse," and being "wrapped up against the cold in a *shapka ushanka."* The saccharine pathos in these lines, combined with the cliches, allows the audience to fall back on comfortable preconceptions of Russia rather than forcing them to confront the horrifying reality of what it is doing in the world beyond the theater walls. Even the poisoning of whistleblowing FSB officer Alexander Litvineko — during which we hear the harrowing groans of the dying man — ends up being cheapened by the contrived appearance of Litvinenko's white-clad ghost in the final scene.

While Morgan wrote 'most' of the script prior to the full-scale invasion, according to producer Sonia Friedman, "Patriots" arrived on stage five months into the conflict. This was sufficient time for the stellar cast and creative team to rethink certain lines or staging choices

to speak meaningfully to the current moment without it becoming a heavy-handed morality play.

For example, in the opening scenes we see Berezovsky at his zenith, calling the shot from behind a desk as the chaos of 1990s Russia — demonstrated by the sounds of gunshots and a panicked call from one of his associates — reigns around him. At one point, his assistant arrives with a plate of food that Berezovsky rejects in disgust. "F*cking Armenian can't cook," he says. The audience chuckles. Even if this line was intended to show his casual racism, the audience response demonstrated that it failed to hit.

The Second Chechen War is an off-stage event with the focus on Keen's rendition of Putin's now-infamous "we'll wipe them out when they're in the sh*tter" comment and Berezovsky's irritated response. Giving greater attention to the atrocities committed in Chechnya — precursors to those committed in Ukraine — would have leant the play a more chilling resonance.

Playwrights are not journalists, and they are not obliged to tether their work to the news cycle. Yet the lack of even an oblique acknowledgement of the war, or any meaningful engagement with the political and social currents that made it possible, meant that "Patriots" ultimately rung hollow. While it was a generally engaging piece of theater with sporadic, powerful moments, the overwhelming sense with which I emerged from the theater two and a half hours later, was one of missed opportunity.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/09/07/patriots-in-london-or-how-not-to-put-on-a-play-in-wartime-a82391