

Ideology almost invariably arises from the aesthetics

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More than 400 guests from all over the world were welcomed to the Russian Case 2021 which was held online for the first time in its history. The five-day showcase of Russian theatre launched in 2000 by the Golden Mask Festival is addressed to international programmers, theatre researchers, journalists and critics. It traditionally presents premieres of the previous season nominated for the Golden Mask Award and some of the most interesting ones of the current season.

The diverse and wide-ranging programme curated by Marina Davydova included 25 productions, 22 of these were available for online viewing, all with English subtitles. The curator was guided in her selection "by nothing else but the aesthetics criteria", as she assumes that "not every political statement that I share is aesthetically sound but nearly every theatrical utterance that makes an aesthetical impact on me carries a powerful political charge". For this reason, Marina Davydova did not take into account such considerations as "relevance" and "progressiveness". The showcase offered a remarkable variety of theatre forms, including musical theatre, opera, one-man-shows, dance theatre, site-specific performances, classical drama, object theatre, commedia dell'arte, intimate chamber plays and documentary theatre, leaving the viewer with a difficult choice.

Horizontal theatre

Among the "most important productions" was *An Oak Tree* by Michael Craig-Martin which emulates the work "An Oak Tree" exhibited at the Tate Modern by British artist Michael Craig-Martin. Director **Ilya Moshchitsky** himself performs together with a randomly selected spectator. One can see the latter reading from pages of printed text, playing an invisible piano, following dance instructions given by the director in headsets. Video projections, suitable light and sound design complete the scenery. Moshchitsky manages to manipulate the audience's minds to the point that one doesn't know anymore if the story told on stage is real or pure fantasy.

Another production with a strange title was *The University of Birds* whose description of the synopsis listed in detail not less than 12 bird types. The creators of this immersive sound performance are members of the **Theatre of Reciprocal Actions**. They use the concept of "horizontal theatre" to work together and influence one another, instead of

building on top of the other. This site-specific performance invited spectators to take a walk through several venues. The viewer discovered several facts about the life of birds and was given the opportunity to look at the world through their eyes. Though interesting as concept, this kind of show has much more impact in its "live" format than being watched online.

A further example of horizontal theatre was *Finist the Brave Falcon*. Created entirely by women (playwright Svetlana Petriyчук and director **Zhenya Berkovich**, among others), this performance is about women recruited online by radical Islamists. Nine excellent actresses forming the independent theatre project "The SOSO Daughters" contributed to this documentary and feminist project based on actual prison sentences and protocols of interrogations of hapless wives of terrorists. The colorful rugs, kokoshniks and sundresses, folk tunes and in general the entire entourage of the performance is a counterpoint to its rigid documentary texture, tending to turn into a folk tale and sometimes even into a philosophical parable.

Focus on Russian literature and recent past

As a matter of fact, cleverly selected costumes and soundtracks (mostly Russian folk songs or pop tunes) as well as impressive stage designs were conspicuous features of the showcase. These characteristics could be found for example in **Konstantin Bogomolov's** *Dostoevsky's Demons* and in *The Idiot* directed by **Andrei Prikotenko**. Both manage to transpose on stage the famous novels by employing an ingenious mix of technology and artistry, last but not least thanks to the outstanding acting of the companies of the Theatre on Bronnaya (Moscow) respectively "Stary Dom" Theatre (Novosibirsk).

Several other productions were based on Russian literature. *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* is one of the most important works, being part of the secondary school curriculum. It tells of the unsuccessful campaign of Russian warriors against the Polovtsians. Director **Kirill Vytoptov** and playwright Sasha Denisova combine the old Russian epic of the XII century and the documentary material the actors collected by interviewing today's security guards. The show becomes an absurd and comic parody of a war campaign without heroes.

One of my personal highlights was *Boris*. Director **Dmitry Krymov** deconstructs Pushkin's tragedy "Boris Godunov". And at the same time he disowns attempts to establish a direct continuity of the current governance of Russia with its imperial past,

as well as all the myths on which Russian identity now rests. The premiere of this ironic theatrical collage was performed at the premises of the Museum of Moscow, which also provided the production with artifacts from the times of Ivan the Terrible and Boris Godunov. Professional lighting helped create a special atmosphere enhanced by Russian music which alternated with fragments from Beethoven or Chopin. This spectacular production had so many layers that it was almost impossible to be deciphered entirely by a foreign spectator. More accessible and all the same breathtaking was *The Norm*. Director **Maxim Didenko** and playwright Valery Pecheikin use Vladimir Sorokin's novel to expose a totalitarian era that regulates all manifestations of human existence.

"The last two theatrical seasons of the Russian theatre were characterised by interest in the country's recent past", says Marina Davydova. Thus, in *A Tale of the Last Angel* **Andrei Moguchy** makes "the wild 90s" the subject of his reflection. Texts by Roman Mikhailov and Alexei Samoryadov form the literary basis of the production. But they are only a starting point for a grotesque theatrical road-movie through the troubled times of change of the last century. *The Observers* also dealt with the country's past, albeit with the forced labor camps established in the Soviet Union during Stalin's reign. This unusual production directed by **Mikhail Plutahhin** evolved from a sketch created as a result of a workshop in the GULAG History Museum. The creators use objects from labour camps to tell a story.

And the winner is... *Gorbachev*

But the programme included also shows based on international plays like *The Son* by French playwright Florian Zeller (director **Yuri Butusov**) and *The Broken Jug* by Heinrich von Kleist. For the latter, director **Timofey Kulyabin** created a modern, fast-paced and funny staging with many skilfully exploited ideas.

One production was presented off-programme. Anton Chekhov's *The Bear* turned out to be a witty performance with two brilliant actors in the lead roles. Director **Vladimir Pankov** highlighted the lyrical and comical traits of Chekhov's plays by opera arias. Once again the musical component was so well integrated that although one expected a classical drama show, the result was pure delight.

Finally, the main hit of the current Moscow theatre season turned out to become also the viewers' winner, which was chosen during the closing Zoom "wine party" organised by the Russian Case team. There are only two characters in *Gorbachev*, the show

written and directed by **Alvis Hermanis**. The historic events provide a background to the story about Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev`s private life. Hermanis' theatrical biopic is based on their memoirs, letters and public appearances. The initiator of Perestroika is seen as a man who values love more than power. The two outstanding actors are not only acting out their love, but also trying on costumes, wigs and makeup, as the action takes place in a dressing room.

The Russian Case 2021 presented a programme with many highlights that reflects the trends in the current Russian theatre landscape. Not only was the online access to the productions perfectly organized, but the guests were able to take part also in five meetings via Zoom which addressed topics such as unconventional spaces, contemporary plays and censorship in arts. A lively community evolved around this year's Russian showcase.