

Modernizing Russian culture

The reopening of the Bolshoi Theater

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Conservative modernization and the Bolshoi Theater

The idea of modernization was one of the most important themes of Medvedev's presidency. Today, his reform efforts, including high-tech development, the struggle against corruption, and the desire to diversify the resource-based economy, have generally lost their political momentum and been consigned to oblivion. Medvedev's modernization project proved unsuccessful from the very start; it failed first and foremost at the conceptual and structural level. The ideas of modernization that Medvedev boldly expressed in his article "Go Russia!" [*Rossiya, vpered!*], published in *Gazeta.ru* in 2009, were heavily criticized by most Western and domestic analysts. They were seen as unfeasible without significant political change in the Kremlin, change which never took place, and in fact was never even initiated.¹

In contrast to the economic field, modernization efforts in the cultural sphere were supposed to be more visible. One of the best examples was the reopening of the Historic Stage of the Bolshoi Theater, which was launched with great pomp in 2011 after almost six years of reconstruction. This article analyzes the official discourses surrounding the reopening of the theater and its relevance to the process of Russian cultural "modernization". It attempts to highlight the paradoxes of this process, its ambivalence and ideological ambiguity. The ultimate aim of this article is not only to stress the peculiar features of Russian "modernization", but also to understand why this project turned out to be unsuccessful. The main material for analysis was derived from



The Bolshoi Theater.

press publications (with the use of the Integrum databases), and the Internet, including contemporary and archived versions of the Bolshoi Theater's website (www.bolshoi.ru), Yandex, Rutube, and other Russian search engines. The speeches of officials and publications in the press were evaluated using the methods of discourse analysis. We tried to unveil the "discourse of power" and to analyze what hidden intentions and goals stood behind

the propagandistic and popular discourses influencing public opinion on the Bolshoi Theater, both in 2011 and later.

THE BOLSHOI THEATER has always had a very special position on the Russian cultural map, so the success of its "modernization" could be seen as justifying Medvedev's modernization in general. Officials constantly stress the importance of the Bolshoi Theater for the entire post-Soviet space, which is not only an ideological means of unifying now separate nations, but also a way to strengthen the

movement of various national elites towards the central power and national values. The Bolshoi's website confidently stated, "The reconstruction and refurbishment of the Bolshoi Theater's Historic Stage was a colossal, world-scale project. The Theater's building has long been seen as one of Russia's symbols. The Theater's rehabilitation therefore came under constant scrutiny from state authorities and the public alike."² Despite the international character of opera and ballet, and status as part of the global cultural milieu, the Bolshoi Theater very much serves to promote escalating nationalism.

The image of the Bolshoi Theater, now open after its reconstruction, is being created instrumentalizing of various historical



The reopening of the historical stage of the Bolshoi Theater was launched with great pomp in 2011 after almost six years of reconstruction.

legacies and by manipulating imagery and emotions related to these past legacies. The theater's Stalinist past – that is, the period when this theater had the highest position on the cultural map of the USSR – is idiosyncratically amalgamated with the Tsarist imperial period. In addition, the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods of the past are *equally* embraced by the Kremlin for commercial use. However, the combination of imperial and Soviet traditions brings a certain dissonance to the stylistic image of the Bolshoi Theater. Here one can trace the inner logic of official rhetoric; apparently aiming at the future, modernization and progress, but at the same time longing deeply for imperial greatness and stability. This is a traditional dichotomy, which was described in *Russian Cultural Studies* (edited by Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd) as one of the most characteristic features of Russian culture, and it has left its imprint on the Bolshoi Theater reconstruction project both rhetorically and visually.³

NOSTALGIA FOR THE SOVIET PAST is tightly bound up with the search for the new Russian cultural identity, which is sought in certain clusters of excellence – ballet, opera, chess, sports, physics, and so on. The Bolshoi apparently remains one of the most prestigious examples of Soviet cultural life inherited by the contemporary Kremlin. It is almost as highly valued and treasured by officials today as the myth of the Great Patriotic War, another source of national pride and ideological unification. The newly restored Bolshoi Theater combines the most advanced technologies of stage production⁴ with the preservation of the building's beauty and traditional architectural features, a task accomplished with great difficulty.⁵ The interior of the Bolshoi Theater has been refashioned in the most eclectic manner, combining the features inherited from “the last Russian tsars and the Bolsheviks” in a most peculiar and significant way (while pretending to

be “historically authentic”), revealing the dualism of the governmental attitude towards the theater.

In his article “Go Russia!”, Medvedev named his “heroes of innovation” from Russian history. He wrote: “Some elements of innovative systems were created – and not without success – by Peter the Great, the last Russian tsars, and the Bolsheviks. However, the price for these successes was too high.”⁶ It clearly follows that a less painful modernization is needed, one that does not reject conservative values and traditions. However, what Medvedev had in mind when he criticized Peter the Great was the idea of “conservative modernization” – not the freshest of political concepts.⁷ Nevertheless, the fact that Medvedev explicitly called for it makes the application of this concept unique. The appearance of this term in the media and in the program documents of the government party *Edinaia Rossiya* (United Russia) signifies the aspiration to back modernization up with conservatism. The two contradictory concepts, change and traditionalism, are peculiarly united in the statements of the governing party: “It is very important to take into consideration that most of the successful reforms were undertaken thanks to a balanced combination of fresh ideas and conservative values.”⁸ The Bolshoi Theater, with its cherished traditions, thus becomes one of the most impressive, yet modernized examples of such “conservative values”.⁹ Operatic art, as it is presented at the stage of the Bolshoi Theater – conservative by nature, time-honored for generations, associated with luxury, and possessing an international character, but also bearing links with past Soviet successes – is able to attract everyone, to unify what might otherwise be incompatible, and to provide a feeling of belonging.

But this sense of belonging is, in fact, far from democratic. The Bolshoi Theater building, modeled as a baroque opera house, is hierarchical in its nature, with its rows, parquet, amphitheater,



The evolution of the Bolshoi Theater curtain is reminiscent of the fate of the Soviet hymn, which at first glorified Stalin, then the friendship of the peoples of the USSR, and, finally, the democratic freedom of the new Russia with the same music and even rhymes by the same poet, Sergei Mikhalkov. To the left and above the new curtain falls, embroidered with the word "Russia" and double-headed eagles.



To the low left: In 1935, Fedor Fedorovsky, a famous Soviet decorator, designed a red curtain with three dates woven with golden thread: 1871, 1905 and 1917. Right: In 1955, a new curtain was created with new symbols. The changes to the curtain were applied by the designer Mikahil Petrovsky.

boxes, and tiers. The revival of “baroque” hierarchization under Stalin made an indelible imprint on the whole of Soviet culture¹⁰ and shaped the self-image and the media representation of the Bolshoi Theater during the years of its most impressive artistic impact. Featuring opulent regal boxes, opera houses were constructed as much to dramatize the power of princes as for enjoying the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of opera. Simultaneously, opera houses enacted a symbolic reunification of the “grassroots” spectators with their rulers in the same hall, embraced by the same cultural environment and with the same purpose of enjoying the music and performance. In this sense, opera theaters were a metonymic embodiment of the traditional nationalizing empire. Strange as it may sound, the “golden age” of opera is taking place today. It is driven by the open transmissions of opera productions from the best opera theaters in the world (the Met, the Grand Opera, etc.) to the cinema screens. Opera is no longer associated with court entertainment; on the contrary: the democratic atmosphere of cinema screenings, the cosmopolitan commercialization and global outreach reflect the structure of the modern, globalized world.

The Bolshoi Theater redux: restoration or reconstruction?

The opening concert of the Bolshoi Historic Stage, which took place on October 28, 2011, was delayed by Dmitry Medvedev’s speech. Medvedev, then the president of Russia, was the first person to perform on the legendary stage. His speech intentionally reminded one of other events that had taken place at the stage of the Bolshoi Theater, such as Lenin’s public appearances or Stalin’s speeches. Medvedev symbolically reconfirmed the hierarchical importance of the Bolshoi Theater for the new Russian society now being modernized. The Bolshoi Theater again took on the mission of being the “flagship” of Russian theaters, but still more than a theater, it again became a national symbol, the producer of eminently approved art, and the instrument and ideal arena for transmitting ideological messages. In a figurative sense, the person who dominates the Bolshoi Theater holds not only Russia, but all the territories that value the imperial traditions. Medvedev took possession of the powerful discourse, and he confirmed his primary position in the hierarchy of power: he was symbolically “crowned” by the Bolshoi Theater as the official holder of the discourse.

Nevertheless, what Medvedev stated in his speech was far removed from the solemn speeches of former imperial leaders, both Russian and Soviet.

He called on the Bolshoi Theater to become “one of our few national brands”: “Our country is very big indeed”, proclaimed Medvedev, “but the number of symbols able to unite everybody, the amount of our national treasures, which we might call ‘national brands’, is very limited.”¹¹

IN TODAY’S RUSSIA, some values, such as identity, spirituality, and the independence of national culture from globalized culture, are seen as supremely national matters. But afterwards, the values that have been conceptualized as exclusively Russian “spiritual treasures” are sold abroad for the highest possible price. The

same features can be seen in talk of Russia as an “energy superpower”. Russia’s superpower qualities are solely determined by the availability of uniquely rich oil and gas reserves. By proclaiming the Bolshoi Theater as its national “brand”, Russia is seeking to become a cultural superpower as well.¹²

AT THE SAME TIME, cultural modernization aims not only at the external, but also at the internal market. The Bolshoi national brand strives to legitimate power by triggering the emotions of pride and joy, the sense of belonging to a great culture, and the collective celebration of nationhood. Merely to mention the Bolshoi Theater becomes a performative act in itself, because it means not only expectations of artistic accomplishments in the present or future, but also the continuation of a long historical tradition of cultural excellence which is supposed to be important for all the peoples of the former USSR.

Here, one may discern the traces of the old Soviet utopian idea of total “culturedness”, which in turn reminds one of another powerful utopia – the creation of a new man with better qualities and emotions. Thanks to the efforts of the officials from the very beginning of the Soviet era, listening to opera became an everyday practice and operagoing turned out to be a very common thing: it was assumed that every good Soviet citizen was “cultured enough” to listen to opera and could afford the price of a ticket at the Bolshoi Theater. The Soviet mythology of the opera theater implied (among other things) that, once the rulers and the ruled were reunited under one roof, the grassroots would rise to historical importance as the subject of artistic-cum-political activity.

The whole history of the reconstruction, reopening, and restructuring of the Bolshoi Theater is thus presented as a resurrected narrative about Russian “culturedness”. It seems that the very concept of total culturedness is still nourishing the formation of post-Soviet identity. It is important to note that, even in the 1920s, the project of total culturedness had political implications, and “total enlightenment” coincided with the desire to make the citizen more obedient and more grateful to Soviet power. Even Lunacharsky intended to keep the Bolshoi Theater open only temporarily, as the “laboratory” of the new Soviet art, until more ideologically suitable spectacles and stages (he imagined great mass spectacles and huge open theaters) would be opened.¹³ However, the ideologically charged Soviet idea of culturedness was totally detached from profit-making motives (an enormous difference to contemporary cultural politics). On the contrary, the state was to spend a huge amount of money to “keep the Bolshoi Theater”, bearing in mind its future ideological mission.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF contemporary Russian cultural politics to the Bolshoi Theater is discursively reminiscent of the Soviet “total culturedness” project, but only superficially. The big Bolshoi reconstruction project, although spoken of as if it were addressed to, and important for, everyone, does not, in fact, mandate any education or cultivation of middle-class, young, or working spectators. (Unlike many contemporary opera houses, the Bolshoi Theater has no education department at all.) On the contrary,

the prices for the Bolshoi Theater tickets are both so high¹⁴ and so inaccessible (because of speculation, the lack of open Internet sales, etc.) that they are affordable only to the higher strata of society. Nowadays, the Bolshoi enacts not the reconciliation of the ruler and the ruled, but the consolidation of elites. The lucky attendants of the Bolshoi Theater rub shoulders with the upper echelons of power and the Kremlin, and they feel themselves “chosen” and part of “the best”. Thus, in setting the prices sky high, the state gets an additional instrument for manipulating public opinion and emotions. The difficulty of access makes Bolshoi Theater productions even more desired.

While using the term “brand” and praising the new technologies used in reconstructing the Bolshoi Theater, Medvedev presented contemporary Russian power as “progressive”. Nevertheless, “brand” is a commercial term, connected to marketing and profit. There is a very clear contradiction in the attitude towards the Bolshoi Theater. There is a clear impulse to present it as a “national treasure”, symbolizing the Motherland, patriotism, national pride, Russian exceptional spirituality, and so on, yet at the same time there is an unconcealed ambition to sell this “national treasure” (which now becomes a brand) at the highest possible price, not only abroad, but first and foremost to those to whom it is symbolically important. Marketing and ideological campaigning have a certain syncretism when it comes to the Bolshoi Theater. The government treats the symbolic capital of the Bolshoi Theater like any other form of capital, which is expected to bring profit, both ideological and financial.

THE CREATION OF A NEW MAN, one more cultured, with only positive emotions, was the early Soviet cultural project. Today, government is much more pragmatic. It aims to create not a new person, but an obedient consumer, reconciled with the Soviet past and the contemporary post-Soviet Russian reality, who will eagerly buy expensive “brands” that have high national value.

The more-than-artistic importance of the Bolshoi Theater to all the peoples of Russia is constantly stressed. Nowadays, there is even an official formulation of the theater’s “mission”. It seems that the theater is the only national institution of this kind whose role goes far beyond artistic production. On the website of the Bolshoi, directly under the image of the two-headed eagle (the symbol of Russian statehood), is the assertion that “The Bolshoi Theater of Russia has always been, and will remain, one of the main symbols of our state and its culture. It is Russia’s main national theater, a bearer of the traditions of Russian musical culture and a center of world musical culture, the spearhead of the development of the country’s performing arts.”¹⁵

The Bolshoi Theater is thus proclaimed to be the “main national theater” not because of the quality of its productions: inversely, the quality of its productions and the solemn emotions of its spectators must be of a certain high standard simply because they are connected to the Bolshoi Theater. The art of the Bolshoi Theater is above competition. Notwithstanding the real, possibly less than stellar quality of the performances, the direct connection to the Kremlin (even the geographical proximity) makes the Bolshoi Theater internationally renowned.

The Bolshoi Theater of feelings: constructing the affective community

The legacy of the Bolshoi Theater has been discursively constructed. We may even say that a special emotional regime has been constructed at the Bolshoi Theater. The official emotional regime is constructed by using and creating positive emotives (in the broader sense of this term), that is, verbal means of creating an emotional background for Bolshoi fans. The real theater connoisseurs possess their own emotional regime and language. The official task is to create another community that would be affected by loyal emotives.

The two separate emotional regimes which now circumscribe the very existence of the Bolshoi Theater are particularly meaningful. One emotional regime, which is present in the press, critical writing, and the discussions among operagoers and musical connoisseurs on the Internet, is connected to the real situation of the Bolshoi Theater, and is very alarming. It gives an idea of the huge problems of casting, corruption, failures of certain premieres, and constant disturbances in both the opera and ballet troupes, exposing the dysfunction in the management of the “main national theater”.

Another emotional regime was initiated with Medvedev’s speech, and it is a continued presence in the official discourse about the theater to this day. This regime corresponds directly to the assertive vision of the contemporary Kremlin and is traceable to the Soviet past. It raises only positive emotions and feelings of pride, whether or not there are any substantial grounds for them.

In the official mission statement of the Bolshoi Theater we read:

“The Theater is a living organism, developing together with the whole of society and in constant search of new creative ideas. At the present stage of development in society, it promotes the formation of new aesthetic priorities in the arts of opera and ballet, particularly in the field of the Russian repertoire.

[...]

Now that the Bolshoi Theater has two stages at its disposal, one of them its legendary Historic Stage which is at last back in action again, it hopes to fulfill its mission with even greater success, steadily extending the sphere of its influence at home and throughout the world.”¹⁶

Emotional constructivism is one of the policies affecting the Bolshoi Theater, and can be considered part of a greater project of instrumentalization of the theater and its “commercial securitization”.

The reconstruction of the theater, which lasted from 2005 to 2011 – longer than initially planned, and raising many questions about its final quality and excessive cost – is described in the official sources exclusively in rosy tones:

“The renovation of the country’s main stage was a landmark event in the lives of a large coordinated team of top-level pro-



Left: One of the fifty new make-up rooms. Right: Some of the bricks of this wall date from the 18th century because bricks from the debris of Napoleon's invasion were used in the theater's restoration in 1825.

professionals. Participating in the project were uniquely qualified specialists whose great feat of labor will earn them the undying gratitude of present-day Bolshoi Theater audiences.”¹⁷

THIS DETACHMENT of the official propagandistic discourse from reality, provoking elevated positive emotions, is very characteristic of the Bolshoi. This was and continues to be one of the chief manifestations of the way officials try to influence and control the emotions of spectators and operagoers. Without effective instruments to control the theater's *artistic* production and, most importantly, *its reception*, officials have tried to create festive-like events, such as celebrations of its anniversaries or the reopening of the Historic Stage. The propagandistic force of such events was easy to predict and the elevated emotions are easy to embed in the hearts of a broad circle of spectators. The contemporary Bolshoi Theater repeats to a tee the scenario of the Soviet era's festivities in the Bolshoi – with the same emotional regime and the same attempt to prove that everyone involved in the celebrations partakes of sacred cultural knowledge and is a member of a very special group of connoisseurs.

Thus, in the jubilee-like events, historical traditions of the Bolshoi Theater become something of a fetish, having absolute value; yet the genuine essence of the traditions concerned and their applicability to contemporary society are absent. The traditions of the Stalinist period become just as sacred as the traditions of the Tsarist times, as do the traditions of the late Soviet period, simply because the celebration of them creates a special emotional atmosphere of inclusion; anyone who witnesses these discourses belongs by implication to a “great past of great art”. Their ultimate purpose is to create a very attractive emotional space, which becomes private and expels more personal and uncontrolled emotions from the hearts of people who really do care about opera. The private and unofficial sector of opera lovers is meant to surrender to the official discourse, which offers a sense of exclusiveness, satisfaction, and national pride.

All of the above gives us pause when we consider the instrumentalization of emotions based on the deliberate choice of only optimistic and positive feelings as a vehicle of cultural modernization and the rejection of the very existence of negative ones. This casts doubt upon the objectivity and inclusiveness of cultural modernization and strongly highlights its contradictory nature.

The curtain falls: backstage at the modernization of the Bolshoi

As in the Soviet Union, the retrospective element is very important in contemporary Russia for the creation of a special emotional atmosphere during the Bolshoi festivities. The word “tradition” becomes one of the chief pillars of this atmosphere. Dmitry Medvedev, in his five-minute speech in front of the curtain, mentions the “great traditions” of the Bolshoi Theater several times. The gala concert dedicated to the 225th anniversary of the theater in 2000 was designed to show all the chief characters of opera and ballet produced at the Bolshoi in the past, thus making history the main theme of this celebration. The commemorative meeting at the Bolshoi in 2000 to a great extent repeated the event of 1976, when the 200th anniversary of the theater was celebrated. And the 1976 festive events, in turn, mirrored the 175th anniversary celebration of 1951. Moreover, the design of the grand album about the history and the reconstruction of the theater in 2011, published with the intention to place it on sale at the reopening of the Historic Stage, completely copied the design of the similar volume published in 1951, which celebrated the Bolshoi Theater of Stalin's epoch.

But when mentioning the “great traditions” of the Bolshoi Theater, no one talks about Stalinist times, or about the theater's provincial pre-revolutionary history, as if the Bolshoi had always been a great Historic Stage with a mission. The officials somehow pin the theater's nineteenth-century history onto the history of the “great” Bolshoi. While the reconstruction was going on, an idea persisted in the media that everything would be made “historically accurate” for the reopening. Nowadays, the facts of the nineteenth-century history are combined with neo-Stalinist details in a most peculiar way.

The interior of the Bolshoi Theater is fully reconstructed in accordance with this concept. But the most visible part of this strange mixture is the curtain. Before the theater was closed in 2005 for the reconstruction, it had only one expanding curtain. The general design of this curtain dates back to 1935. There was a contest to design a new curtain as early as 1918, but none of the proposals was considered successful. In 1935, Fedor Fedorovsky, a famous Soviet decorator, designed a red curtain with three dates woven with golden thread: 1871, the year of the Paris Commune; 1905, the year of the first Russian Revolution; and 1917, the



The chandelier weighs two tons and has a diameter of 6.5 meters. It took 300 grams of gold leaf to gild it.



PHOTO: ENGLISH RUSSIA

The Gobelin tapestries were so old that it took five years to restore them.

year of the October Revolution. In 1950, before the celebration of the theater's next "jubilee", the decision was made to create a new curtain with new symbols because the idea of global revolution was outdated, and more recent values had come to the fore.

The 1950s changes to the curtain were applied by the designer Petrovsky, who slightly altered the symbolic patterns but preserved the overall image. The new ornament included a golden star, a red banner, a hammer and sickle, the abbreviation "USSR", and a lyre against the background of the musical phrase "Glory, glory to the native land!" (from S. Gorodetsky's libretto for *Ivan Susanin* by Glinka). The ornament also included ribbons of the Lenin order, which the Bolshoi had been awarded, as well as oak and laurel wreaths (probably just to make it more presentable). This curtain was restored in the 1990s, but a completely new one was produced for the reopening of the theater after reconstruction in 2011.

LIKE THE CURTAIN OF 1955, the new curtain was also a replica of the first Soviet curtain made by the artist Sergei Barhin. "Russia" appeared instead of "USSR", and the double eagle with the imperial crown and St. George on its chest replaced the hammer and sickle. The musical phrase from *Ivan Susanin* was the same, but the text now from Rosen's libretto for *A Life for the Tsar*, and read: "Glory, glory to the Russian Tsar!"¹⁸ Thus, the Soviet symbols were easily adapted to the imaginary monarchist, imperial symbols.

The evolution of the Bolshoi Theater curtain is reminiscent of the fate of the Soviet hymn, which at first glorified Stalin, then the friendship of the peoples of the USSR, and, finally, the democratic freedom of the new Russia, with the same music and even with rhymes by the same poet, Sergei Mikhalkov.

Significantly, the discourse surrounding the appearance of the new curtain of the Bolshoi Theater in 2011 centered to a great extent on the technological advancement of the production, not on its symbolism. Andrey Galkin, the chief director of the company ES-Design, which won the tender for the production of a new curtain, explained in an interview:

"First we studied the old curtain fabric. We did a spectral analysis and examined all the weaves. And then we started the restoration. Our restoration is characterized by the fact that the new one was made with the

application of new technologies, yet rooted in the old product. ... The new curtain will last longer than the old one because it is made of synthetic material. ... The old curtain was made of silk with metallic thread coated with a very thin layer of gold; the new one out of upgraded acrylic."¹⁹

Thus the Bolshoi Theater acquired a perfectly "authentic" imperial symbol in place of the Soviet one, made of upgraded, up-to-date synthetic materials.

But one curtain, which was the tradition in the Bolshoi, was not enough. After the reconstruction, the theater acquired a second curtain, a rising one. This curtain depicted the entrance of Minin and Pozharskiy into Moscow after its liberation from the Polish troops. Originally, a curtain with this image was produced in 1856 by the now forgotten Italian painter Cozroe-Duze. This curtain was used in the Bolshoi for only 30 years, and then replaced with a different one. None of those around later knew what the original curtain had looked like in color. The curtain of 1856 was re-created by the artists Vladimir Cherny and Evgeny Kravtsov, after an engraving made in 1859, and then painted by hand, guided by black-and-white archival photographs from the Museum of the Bolshoi Theater. Since the engraving did not reveal the details and liveliness of the poses, the artists tried to reconstruct them from the photos. Another guiding source was the large painting of the Alexander Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace, made in the same year, 1856. It helped the artists reproduce the artistic style of that era.²⁰

The press praised the curtain for "historical authenticity", but, in reality, the historical context of 1856 was quite different from the contemporary presentation. In 1856, the Bolshoi Theater was provincial, and its art and design could not have served to represent imperial grandeur and luxury. The elevated position of the Bolshoi Theater only became established in the Stalinist period, and the curtain depicting the entrance of Minin and Pozharskiy into Moscow now reminds us of that epoch, not of the unknown period around 1856. The famous opera *Ivan Susanin* by Glinka, transformed from *A Life for the Tsar*, performed with a new libretto and a new meaning in 1939, was one of the most significant musical events in the theater of the Stalinist era. This production has opened every season since then. One scene with Minin and Pozharskiy from *Ivan Susanin* could even be considered

a climactic episode, an apotheosis of the whole “grand Stalinist style” of the theater. The scene depicted on the new curtain, although painted in 1856, produces the strongest associations with another era and another production. The red Soviet curtain in turn looks monarchist today, and does not remind one of 1935, the year in which it was originally designed.

THE BOLSHOI THEATER IS, charged with “primordial” dualism. Modernization has left it reconstructed at the cutting edge of technological progress, yet at the same time charged with uncanny associations, historical parallels, and overpowering traditions. The history of the curtains raises questions about the success of cultural modernization in general. The resurrection of forgotten or fictitious traditions leads to an illusory “authenticity”. The artificial combination of monarchist and Stalinist traditions is proclaimed to be both a spiritual national treasure and a luxury “brand”. Notwithstanding the fact that this putative authenticity is recreated by means of the latest technologies and the most advanced equipment, it still does nothing to stimulate any further development of the arts. Real progress is possible not in the development of “sacred national traditions” and their “brandization”, but in openness to universal accomplishments, competitiveness, and the exchange of ideas with the world’s best stages. And in the Bolshoi’s case, the newest technologies lead to stagnation, which puts an end to the efforts of cultural modernization.

Since the reopening of its Historic Stage, the burden of the theater’s “symbolic mission” and its closeness to Kremlin officials seem to have prevented it from developing artistically, and instead have caused many scandals, criminal prosecutions, and controversial, if not scandalous, appointments and dismissals. The change of theater management in the summer of 2013 seemed inevitable. ✕

references

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- 2 <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en/about/mission/>, accessed February 12, 2014. The frequency of mentions of the Bolshoi Theater increased significantly in the 2000s, the years before and after the reconstruction, which suggests that the role of the theater in mass consciousness is greater now, in the turbulent years, than in the years of its artistic glory. Information from the site www.ruscorp.org.
- 3 “The usefulness of binary schematization in depicting and understanding Russia’s symbolic reality is not, of course, to be underestimated. Dualism in propaganda, literature, and texts of all kinds is ubiquitous ... Dualistic analyses of Russian culture are therefore not without foundation”. *Russian Cultural Studies*, ed. Catriona Kelly & David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.
- 4 For a description of the new stage equipment on the official Bolshoi website, see <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en/about/reconstruction/>, accessed February 17, 2014.
- 5 For a description of the restoration accomplished, see on the official Bolshoi website, <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en/about/reconstruction/>, accessed February 17, 2014.
- 6 Dmitry Medvedev, “Rossia, vpered!”, in *Gazeta.ru*, September 10, 2009, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2009/09/10_a_3258568.shtml, accessed February 15, 2014.
- 7 The term “conservative modernization” has a long history. It was first used by the 19th-century German economists Gustav von Schmoller and Friedrich List. In Russian history it was introduced in connection with nineteenth-century studies by, for example, Alfred Rieber in his *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982), and by Mikhail Suslov, “The Lost Chance of Conservative Modernization: S. F. Sharapov in the Economic Debates of the Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century”, *Acta Slavica Japonica* 31 (2011): 31-54.
- 8 Official site of one of the branches of “*Edinaia Rossiia*”, <http://www.fryazino-edro.ru/?p=919>, accessed January 30, 2014.
- 9 In his 2014 “Presidential Message [*poslanie*] to the Federal Assembly”, Putin openly proclaimed conservative values to be the core of Russian culture, as opposed to the “evil-West tolerance”: “And we know that in the world more and more people support our position on the defense of values, the values of the traditional family, human life, including religious life, the values of humanism and diversity of the world. Of course, this is a conservative position.” See <http://oko-planet.su/politik/newsday/22281-itogi-nedeli-poslanie-putina-zdorovyy-konservatizm-i-moschnaya-oborona.html>, accessed May 19, 2014.
- 10 V. Papernyi, *Kul'tura* “2”, (Ann Arbor, 1985), 207.
- 11 D. Medvedev’s speech at the ceremony of the opening of the Historic Stage of the Bolshoi Theater, October 28, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViCCF4mulNc>, accessed February 16, 2014.
- 12 On this issue see Ilya Kalinin, “Dig This: Why the Russian State Wants Culture to Be Like Oil”, *The Calvert Journal*, March 12, 2014, <http://calvertjournal.com/comment/show/2161/oil-culture-russia-hydrocarbons-kalinin>, last modified June 11, 2014.
- 13 A. V. Lunacharsky, *Pochemu my sokhraniaem Bolshoi Teatr* [Why we preserve the Bolshoi Theater] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Upravlenia Akademicheskikh Teatrov, 1925).
- 14 On April 10, 2014, a seat for the ballet *Bayaderka* cost 10,000 rubles (€207) in the stalls and 9,000 rubles (€187) in the amphitheater. The monthly minimum wage in Moscow in 2014 was 12,600 rubles (€261).
- 15 <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en/about/mission/>, accessed September 15, 2013.
- 16 <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en/about/mission/>, accessed September 15, 2013.
- 17 <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en/about/reconstruction/>, accessed September 15, 2013.
- 18 In 1939, the poet Sergei Gorodetskii rewrote the libretto of Glinka’s opera *A Life for the Tsar*, which had originally been written by Egor Rosen, and the new version of the opera was performed at the Bolshoi Theater under the title *Ivan Susanin*.
- 19 “Bolshoi Theater: ‘Golden Curtain’”, in *Loveopium*, online magazine, <http://loveopium.ru/rossiya/bolshoj-teatr-zolotoj-zanaves.html>, accessed February 17, 2014.
- 20 The curtain depicting Minin and Pozharsky’s entrance into Moscow is mounted in the Bolshoi Theater. See <http://wmcbank.com/releases/62864/13.html>, accessed February 17, 2014.