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The problem of opera drama relevance

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the problem of the depth of the director's comprehension of the opera text. The author considers modern opera in the context of opposing characteristics of relevance and actualization. The stumbling block in the matter of competence is the problem of the boundaries of the author's work permissible in the process of interpretation. Instead of the composer, the key role of the director is majestically affirmed. Instead of mastering, comprehending, developing, deepening, refining the practical and theoretical discoveries of the previous period, the opera direction of the last time, on a new round of the development of expressive means, demonstrated a colossal "rollback" into the past, into professional helplessness and illustrativeness, actively covered by talking about the vanguard and postmodernism.

By the mid-90's the "conditional style", which promised great stage production possibilities, suddenly degenerated, becoming an end in itself for demonstrating the same "planar naturalism", only wrapped in a more modern, pseudo-stage production "wrapper". The scale of personalities of directors and composers, the level of "eternal" questions that they ask themselves and the viewer, are incomparable. Both Tchaikovsky, and Verdi, and Borodin become for the young direction only an occasion to tell the spectator about themselves, whatever the "reformers of the opera scene" of the 21st century declare.

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Keywords

Opera, director, topicality, opera direction, Boris Pokrovsky, theory of direction, musical theater, score, musical drama.

Introduction

Looking back what the Russian opera theater had in the last thirty years, we have to admit with regret: since the death of such prominent opera theater figures as B.A. Pokrovsky, A.G. Ansimov, L.D. Mikhailov, E.A. Akulov, modern opera direction “lagged behind” from itself, from all those great creative achievements that were in Russian direction in the middle and second half of the twentieth century.

The most surprising, perhaps, is that the young “avant-garde direction” also thinks so: “Today, for some reason, we are taking steps back in understanding theater as an independent art form” [Alpatova, 2015, www].

Relevance or update?

We note that there is a significant difference in this agreed coincidence of opinions, based on fundamentally different benchmarks, from which both followers of “traditional values”, steeped in “the general return to pseudo-traditions” [Zhuravlev, 2014], and “author's direction” are evaluating director's professionalism. T. Kulyabin said in an interview: “I am reading in the media about the commission at the Likhachev Institute. And I get the impression that people, who precisely know how to put Pushkin, work there. But I have been doing this all my conscious life, and I cannot say that I know the answer to this question. <...> I have a lot of questions, of course, to their level and competence in the field of theater, in particular, to understanding the essence of the theatrical text” [cit. by: Alpatova, 2015, www].

The authoritative D.F. Chernyakov has the same opinion, explaining the journalist's “intrusive quibbles” to the “author's direction” by usual envy and inferiority of opposition criticism (“... the motivation of some statements is dictated by his not very successful career in the Bolshoi Theater” [Chernyakov, 2006, www]), which “does not even know cult names and does not attend cult events.”

The stumbling block in the matter of competence is the problem of the boundaries of what is permitted in the process of interpreting the author's work: “The director's text may conflict with the author, argue with it, even destroy it, and then assemble it into a new mosaic” [Alpatova, 2015, www]. It is the opinion of T.A. Kulyabin, representative of the “author's direction”, who thereby confirms his understanding of the theater as an independent art form. The sad result of such a point of view is, in fact, the permission to distort the classical work, since the “composer score under the conditions of the “new theatricality” of the director's theater becomes one of the components of a larger complex whole. Staged artistic and cultural projects “based on” the opera classics appeal to the realities of the surrounding world, refracted in historical, social, political and religious aspects. In this sense, the

director's opera is close to the communicative universal in its significance" [Efimenko, www]. In short, as Yu.Kh. Temirkanov sadly remarked about all this scientific gibberish, "... modern directors have made a soundtrack from music of the greatest composers, like in a movie, accompanying the nonsense that they come up with and which has nothing to do with what we hear "[Biryukov, 2010, www]. Instead of the composer, "the key role of the director is majestically affirmed: from the interpreter to the composer's coauthor, from co-author to an autonomous artist, from the artist to the creator demiurge" [Efimenko, www].

Where is the place of B. A. Pokrovsky here, who argued that the main criterion for professionalism is the ability to "reveal the author's intention in impressively vivid images" [Pokrovsky, 1979, 8]? And it's not important that his words are proved by the whole century-old history of the theater, which connects the most impressive performances with the ability to "cooperate" with the author, and by a huge complex of theoretical knowledge accumulated not only by theater studies, but also by musicology, literary, art history, philosophy and aesthetics.

D.F. Chernyakov, the "classic" of the modern author's "personal direction", confidently asserts that "this [opera] theater cannot be analyzed only from the point of view of "aesthetics", one must "read the opera exactly as a theater text" [Chernyakov, 2006, www]. We will take a closer look at this position in order to understand what D.F. Chernyakov actually understands by "theater text" and if he understands anything in the theater and in the director's profession in general. Let us say that listening to such statements by young directors, watching their performances, where there is everything except Wagner or Tchaikovsky, and reading numerous interviews where they present modern theatrical art programs in one form or another, one involuntarily comes to the idea that the new generation of directors doesn't have proper knowledge for full professional competence. It seems that modern direction "lagged behind" (and perhaps never was attached!) not only from the achievements of their teachers, but also from the highest level of theoretical thought of "related sciences" that Soviet literary critics, art historians, philosophers and musicologists achieved in the period preceding the radical breakdown of the social and political structure of our country. As Yu.Kh. Temirkanov noted, "... opera as a genre is now dying <...> Because directors who come to stage an opera do not even really know what it is" [cit. by: Veselago, 2008].

Although representatives of "related sciences" developed, for example, a sufficiently clear and competent principle for analyzing a literary work, defining clear scientific criteria in the 60-80-ies of XX century. But, unfortunately, instead of mastering, understanding, developing, deepening, refining the practical and theoretical discoveries of the previous period, the recent opera direction at the new stage of development of "expressive means" demonstrated a tremendous "rollback" to the deep past, to professional helplessness and illustrativeness, actively hiding behind avant-garde and postmodernism.

“...The fascination with conditional laconism of scenery, the generalizing symbolism of directing decisions in the late 50s of XX century in the drama theater was an organic reaction to the degenerate plane naturalism of some mediocre directors" [Popov, 1979, 11]. However, by the mid-90s, this “conditional style”, which promised great stage productions, unexpectedly degenerated, turning into an end in itself to demonstrate the same “planar naturalism”, only wrapped in a more modern, pseudo-cenographic staged “wrapper”. Despite all the loud declarations and assurances of the commitment of teachers, it nevertheless became just an occasion for young directors to “show off its originality” and “impose its own concept of living musical fabric of the score” [ibid.]. These "pseudo-avant-garde" productions were replicated and have still been replicated from stage to stage for the last thirty years; Prince Igor in lilac commissary leather jackets and Eugene Onegin in jackets continue to roam from town to town. “Having Stanislavsky in opera scenes” is no longer “dusty museum realism”, and avant-gardism “spreads everyday life and verbose credibility” [Mikhailov, 1985, 160]. What L.D. Mikhailov once called the "poetic principle" leaves the opera theater inexorably [ibid, 15].

However, despite all the audience perturbations, it is not surprising that at the beginning of “Prince Igor” the overture is cut, and the performance has an epigraph instead of it that in no way responds to either the theme or the idea of the opera: “To start a war is the best way to escape from yourself”; and when the curtains are opened, the soldiers in the uniform of the First World War come to the scene and surround Prince Igor, who is in a purple coat of the Civil War Commissioner. It is also not surprising that Fevroniya in “The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh” is taken to the afterlife in the besieged sledges, and the stylistic features of the play “Eugene Onegin” at the Bolshoi Theater (staged by D.F. Chernyakov) transfer the viewer somewhere in the middle of XX century to some closed government dachas, more or less associatively referring the viewer to the Stalinist “terrible torture chambers”. Tannhäuser is considered the theater community to be a film director, Othello is not a moor anymore. At the same time, criticism even manages to write that “such a director’s vision is largely justified by the composer’s score sheet itself (!!!)” [Rossi], since the critic doesn’t hear a single “clear national motive” in Othello [ibid.] And from the interview of the director, we find out that the main conflict in the opera is not between Iago and Othello, but between Othello and Desdemona, and that the opera is not at all about cunning and realization of the ambitions of secret power over people's minds, but the main topic is “human history, ordinary people,” and that “it is not the difference in skin color or difference in age that is important between Othello and Desdemona, but the difference in cultures” [ibid.].

However, the opera has all these losses, “not because the director wanted to say some fundamentally “new word” in the interpretation of the plot. It’s just that for Vasily Barkhatov, it doesn’t matter what nationality his main character Othello is” [ibid.], since V.A. Barkhatov “in musical

dramaturgy of G. Verdi transfers all the drama to purely psychological sphere” because he deprives the Moor of nationality, [ibid.]. Apparently, for the more convincing psychology, dissatisfied with the force of influence of the “psychologically realistic” Italian theater of G. Verdi of the XIX century, he produces “a partial transfer of the opera ... into the system, which can be described as a “conditional theater” [ibid.] (which is extremely paradoxical!). At the same time, V.A. Barkhatov, as always, manages to “remain faithful to the spirit of Verdi's drama, having subtly felt the psychological authenticity of the heroes” [ibid.]. And such violence against copyright material is fully compensated by the director’s “very interesting reasoning” in an interview with the Private Correspondent portal: “Quite recently Verdi’s operas were a reflection of reality, like modern cinema. People came out of the opera hall and understood that they watched the play on the topic of the day. So it was, for example, with “Traviata” ... And the opera genre does not at all imply that everything should take place in the costumes of a specific era (although it is possible in costumes, it does not matter). The main thing is that the actor's role is very accurate and modern” [ibid].

And it is so “exactly and modern” that when watching “Eugene Onegin” in D.F. Chernyakov’s interpretation, you see some infernal herd instead of the heroes of the opera on the stage, as if descended from the paintings of O.N. Tselkov. Quite acceptable life truth of "acting" is that the chaste Tatiana, obsessed with love languor in the process of writing a letter, does not sing at first, but reads poetry, and then, when "a catastrophic degree of psychological stress is pulled out" [Pospelov, 2006], she crushes furniture and jumps on the table. Cartoonist foolishness, as if creeping out from behind the desk of some college near Moscow, is a sign of the realistic behavior of our contemporaries on the opera stage, when Lensky is singing the couplets of Monsieur Triquet, while scattering confetti and shooting from the cracker, while the patriarchal Russian provincial nobility amuses and scandal in the best traditions of the modern drunk youth “party”. Young directing explains such “involuntary revolutions” confidently and with cynical calmness: “It’s movement forward, usual progress accompanying any theater” [Vasily Barkhatov, www].

However, in this case it is more appropriate to remember that everything new is well forgotten old. U.G. Dimitrin wondered when this “transition” first took place in the opera, when characters of ancient days started to wear modern costumes. And he says that it happened for the first time in Russia at the play “Carmen” more than a hundred years ago: “at the play by I. Lapitsky at the St. Petersburg Theater of Musical Drama <...> in 1913” [Dimitrin, www].

However, the cynicism of the treatment of the author does not seem something extraordinary for avant-garde: “For me, cynicism is not something negative. Cynicism is an adequate attitude towards oneself and towards others. Do not wring hands, do not groan and gasp from the beautiful, but try to deal with it somehow, to take a little distance, remove the pathos of false sensuality. All the cynics I

have met are vulnerable, romantic and lovely people. Cynicism is not a cover. Cynicism is today's sincerity when you are sincere with everyone" [Vasily Barkhatov, www].

Actually, such creative work of "author's direction" does not seem cynical, since judgments about the profession they have are very approximate. Well, for example, take the following theoretical passage by V. Velichko: "Often we hear the opinion that plays should be staged only as written by the author. For example, the action takes place in St. Petersburg at the end of the XVIII century, which means that it should be done so" [ibid.]. V.A. Barkhatov answers: "But the fact is that opera is music, not remarks to it. "Aida" is not written about the history of sarcophagi and Egyptian costumes, but about human conflict, love, envy, hatred and so on. The work is about this, and it is in music, in drama. The music of "Aida" has not a single Oriental motive. This is an Italian opera written about people, not about what they are dressed in. Any opera does not illustrate but tells about what is happening" [ibid].

We pay special attention to a certain liberty, which treats one of the most important provisions of the theory of opera direction, the discovery and justification of which B.A. Pokrovsky spent his entire creative life. Apparently, young revolutionaries have no idea what they are talking about when they erected B.A. Pokrovsky on the podium of honor, who insists on attentiveness to the author of the opera. The classic direction "to follow the author" for them is only a guide to what characters should be dressed in! Therefore, nothing prevents the director from arbitrarily proclaiming the absence of Oriental motives in the score (which is quite debatable: are they really there, or does the director lack professionalism to find them there?), change the actors' clothes and create from "Aida" anger of the day, reinforce experiments with the argument of "topicality" for the viewer of "Traviata" from the time of Verdi, as if there is no theoretical literature about all this. It is characteristic of pop: "what is in the newspaper in the morning, it is in a couplet in the evening". The mission of the theater is in a deep philosophical understanding of the facts of reality.

All this critics call the "artistic device", deeply and with the whole arsenal of fashionable theoretical "new language", proving the artist's right to the "author's interpretation" of classic material. From these "deeply scientific" revelations, for example, it turns out that for the modern viewer the times of the mid-XX century is approximately the same degree of antiquity as Pushkin's times for contemporaries of P.I. Tchaikovsky [Rossi].

And the spectator himself, in the eyes of the new creators and the critics serving them, is only the point of application of their efforts, a kind of "flock" that must enthusiastically accept any mockery of the classics. Otherwise, the entire audience in a crowd will be declared cruel "goons": "Why does the audience laugh when she [Lyudmila] passes through this hell? <...> At some point you start to get confused, where is the scene, where is the hall, where are the heroes of the opera, and where are those

who should perceive, accept, understand this opera? After all, these people in the hall behave exactly as wickedly and cruelly as the characters against whom they protest!" [Turov, www].

Critics (as, in fact, the "directors" themselves) in the greatness of their elite illiteracy simply does not understand that "all these people" who fill the hall and even more unexpectedly do not agree for some reason after the "Golden Mask" that this creation is brilliant, can be simply more educated than those who take the courage and the right to proclaim what is good and what is evil from the stage, from the pages of newspapers and magazines, from TV screens. Perhaps, for the critic, the times of Onegin are the same as the deep Middle Ages, and, perhaps, for the critics, these "exercises" "add meanings" ... However, for those who fill the hall of the Bolshoi Theatre, the meaning of the word seems to be something more understandable and therefore they vote against this "device" that makes the classical work senseless.

But the most surprising thing is that this "method" turns out to be a way of creating the very philosophical "generalization", for which supporters of traditions beat the moth-eaten history: "This approach reflects the very clear position of the director: the desire for synthesis" [Rossi]. Moreover, such a decision of the performance also acquires a deeply symbolic meaning thanks to this "reception": "with such a director's interpretation <...> the features of symbolism in directing are connected" [ibid.].

Viewers are forced to put up sometimes with a very peculiar directorial choice of performers of main roles. Thus, when staging the opera *Benvenuto Cellini* at the Mariinsky Theater, the role of Cellini was given to ... Sergei Shnurov, a man who, firstly, has no relation to professional opera art at all, and secondly, he is a musician for whom the glory of the country's main fighters. The action of "The Flying Dutchman" for some reason takes place on the beach in Nice; film director Tannhayzer is at the film festival, instead of the author of the written contest of singers he "goes crazy <...> and allows himself to insult colleagues" [Alpatova, 2015, www], Othello stops to be a Moor, because the director levels all signs of the ethnicity of the characters, so that "the main semantic load of the opera falls on the psychological aspect of the drama (!), giving the opera action dynamism and concentration" [Pospelov, 2006, www]. As if the "national traits" of Othello ever slowed down the stage action and even more distorted the "semantic load" that suddenly fell on the "psychological aspect of the drama"!

Conclusion

It is difficult to understand that in the "author's direction" today means the concept of "psychological aspect". The problem lies in the fact that the words about psychologism, modernity and truthfulness of the character motivations of avant-garde direction are quite correct. However, the pronouncing of words about "adding meanings" and understanding of the meaning of these words are strikingly different from the generally accepted scientific content that was originally put in them.

Therefore, a kind of semi-literate mass-culture “hybrid from Sorokin and Dostoevsky” is obtained from their psychologism [Volkov, www].

Their personal psychology, unfortunately, is very silly and strongly “does not reach” the psychology of composers who created classical works. The scales of directors and composers' personalities, the level of “eternal” questions that they ask themselves and the viewer are incomparable. This personal theme is applied by all representatives of the “author's direction” to practically all classical ones without exception. They use this “cherished” key for everything - from Mussorgsky to Wagner. Tchaikovsky, Verdi, and Borodin become for young directors only an occasion to tell the viewer about themselves, whatever the “reformers of the opera scene” of the XXI century declare, whatever the words about the need to establish communication between the “opera dust” and contemporaries.

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Проблема актуальности оперной драматургии

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена проблеме глубины режиссерского постижения оперного текста. Автор рассматривает современную оперу в контексте противоположенных характеристик

актуальности и актуализации. Камнем преткновения в вопросе компетентности является проблема границ дозволенного в процессе интерпретации авторского произведения. Вместо композитора величественно утверждается ключевая роль режиссера. Вместо усвоения, осмысления, развития, углубления, уточнения практических и теоретических открытий предшествующего периода оперная режиссура последнего времени на новом витке развития «выразительных средств» продемонстрировала колоссальный «откат» в глубокое прошлое, в профессиональную беспомощность и иллюстративность, активно прикрываемую разговорами об авангарде и постмодернизме. Уже к середине 90-х гг. «условный стиль», обещавший большие сценические постановочные возможности, неожиданно выродился, превратившись в самоцельный прием для демонстрации того же «плоскостного натурализма», только обернутого в более современную, псевдосценографическую постановочную «обертку». Масштабы личностей режиссеров и композиторов, уровень «вечных» вопросов, которые они задают себе и зрителю, несопоставимы. И Чайковский, и Верди, и Бородин становятся для молодой режиссуры лишь поводом рассказать зрителю о себе, что бы ни декларировали «реформаторы оперной сцены» XXI в., какими бы словами о необходимости налаживания коммуникации между «оперной пылью» и современниками не прикрывались.

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Ключевые слова

Опера, постановщик, актуальность, режиссер, оперная режиссура, Покровский, теория режиссуры, музыкальный театр, партитура, музыкальная драматургия.

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