



NEWSLETTER

No.4 (June 2006)

SPECIAL EDITION

For two days (May 15-16, 2006) the 2nd Russian National Theatre Forum under the title of “Theatre. Time of Change”, called on the initiative of the Theatre Union of Russia, worked in Moscow. About 500 delegates (actors, directors, art managers, theatre critics) from different parts of Russia were in attendance. The Forum followed the public discussions on upcoming reform in the budget sphere in Russia in the end of 2004 – 2005. Being a part of the reform of the social sphere Theatre Reform was prepared without theatre or cultural experts. Authorities also tried to avoid bringing the reform into discussion with the theatre professionals and wider public. Meanwhile the elaborated draft reform may lead to very negative consequences for the majority of theatres in Russia to the extent that a number of theatres will have to shut down. Given that the reform will determine not only the legal and organisational form of theatres but also the future development of performing arts in Russia, we dedicate this Newsletter to this issue.

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The 2nd Russian National Theatre Forum “Theatre .Time of Change” (Comments)

The official agenda included two items:

- **The legal status and social security of theatre workers.**
- **Models of existence of theatres in the context of changes planned in the course of the administrative and budget reforms in Russia.**

The definition *administrative and budget reforms* have to do with the bill *On the Autonomous Institutions*, prepared by the Ministry for Economic Development and Trade and the Finance Ministry of the Russian Federation. The changes the document proposes concern the budget sphere. According to it, institutions financed from the state budget”

(theatres, museums, schools, educational institutions and so forth) are to make a choice of whether or not to retain their position within the framework of budget financing (which means that they may not be able to dispose of their revenues), or to become “autonomous institutions” (devoid of state guarantees).

But even though the need to reform the theatrical sphere is quite clear and meets with all-round support, what causes apprehension of the theatre professionals over the government’s plans is the inadequacy of the guidelines of the reforms. The bill *On Autonomous Institutions* was worked out by financial bodies’ officials without participation in that work of the Ministry of Culture and “sector’s experts”. In the situation whereby the institute of sponsorship (philanthropy) is absent in Russia and corporate sponsorship is only beginning to develop in major cities and in the absence of the relevant legal base, with state funding in the budgets of theatres amounting to 60% to 90% of what they actually need, an abrupt transformation of state-run institutions into autonomous ones without clear-cut guarantees of the financial support by the state appears to be problematic, all the more so that the bill has no mention of such guarantees.

The bill does not guarantee that after theatres turn into autonomous bodies, they will continue to own their property, including buildings, workshops and equipment required for their normal operation. The document does envisage potential financial support by the state, but it does not have even a brief identification of conditions for that.

The bill states that in their capacity as founders of different theatres, municipal or regional authorities should place with them a state order for rendering certain services; however, solving the issues of both volumes of funding and frequency of such orders is to be done by local bureaucrats. In the absence of precedents of such a reform in Russia, bodies of local authority have no professional decision-makers capable of making such decisions.

One of the significant drawbacks of the draft guidelines of the reform is it is obscure where concrete schemes of its implementation, and obligations of the local administrations are concerned (the decision about the transformation of theatres into self-sufficient organisations will be made by their founders, that is municipal or regional authorities rather than theatres themselves).

The draft raised a wave of protests among Russia’s theatrical community. It became evident that should the reform be implemented in the way set forth in the draft guidelines, many theatres, primarily provincial ones, would be forced to close down. In 2004 the Theatre Union of Russia together with the Association of Russian Museums held public debates on the issue, succeeding in obtaining the right to make conceptual amendments to the bill. A working group was set up, whose experts worked on the bill throughout 2005. Results of the work (conceptual amendments to the bill) were to be discussed and approved at the May 2006 at the National Theatre Forum in Moscow.

Invited to the Forum were heads of the ministries that had initiated the bill to clarify the gist of the reform they plan for the Forum participants representing a cross-section of Russian theatres, but they ignored the invitation and never turned up. Moreover, it became known on the second day of the Forum’s work that the bill had already been tabled at the State *Duma* (Russian Parliament) for the first reading (without taking heed of the *corrigenda and addenda* made by specialists of the Theatre Union of Russia and the RF Ministry of Culture).

The forum participants resented such behaviour of the government officials, thinking that their rash and ill-conceived decisions could lead to the destruction of the Russian repertory theatre.

An excerpt of the remarks made by Aleksandr Kalyagin, Chairman of the Theatre Union of Russia at the press conference at ITAR-TASS May 18, 2006

- We hoped that the designers of the bill would come to meet with us. We thought it is important to give the floor to our opponents who could explain to us the strategic goal of the reform of the social sphere they conceived, regarding theatres, the cultural sphere as such, and the sphere of activity of schools, hospitals and kindergartens, etc. Please, explain what do you expect to reach by launching your reform? What would the consequences for the social and cultural spheres rather than those lying in the purely economic realm, be? What is going to happen to hospitals and schools? Will they all engage in paid-for services, or, as it is common to tell now, partially paid-for? What would become of theatres and museums? Would our constitutional rights of freedom of creativity and of access to the cultural heritage be ensured to a greater degree? Or would they be curtailed? **How could we support state-planned reforms if we do not know what their immediate consequences might be, not to speak of long-term perspectives?** As most of the people here at the Forum I'm under the impression that our reformers are simply afraid of having a dialogue with the people. Or - what is worse – they view us, people, as an obstacle to their reforms? **We are not against reforms, but we do not want to be plunged into reforms in the manner of being plunged into still waters that run deep.**

PRESS DIGEST

Russia's media extensively covered the Forum. Here's a selection of publications representing different opinions about the Forum, Russian repertory theatre and the proposed reforms.

On the Forum...

The conflict between theatrical community and a number of government departments is of the national rather than the strictly sectoral character. It is not about the lack of money (whose quantity in Russia is bigger than ever before), but about the crisis of trust that is sweeping the nation. The high-ranking officials are distrustful of their subordinates, who distrust legal entities. Legal entities have no trust in physical entities, and the latter are distrustful of all the above-mentioned categories. The theatres are not denied money- feel the difference! – they are going to be deprived of the right to dispose of their money freely. The bureaucrats disregard the fact that **the method of control of the budget sphere has long been turned into a means of its liquidation.** (Newspaper *Izvestia*, 22.05.06, article *A Mutual Distrust Society*)

For the first time in the post-Soviet history a professional community is taking up to fighting on such a large scale — not for its own interests. The fate of their cause is at stake, and in the end, the image of Russia-2050. Does anyone believe that without municipal libraries, children's sports schools, local museums, puppet theatres, Pushkin and Brecht's names on theatres' billboards Russia's population would become healthier, more professional or kinder? The culture community is putting up fight for the human face of the image of Russia in 2050. They aren't asking too much – they just want to have **an intelligible of strategic social consequences of the "reform of the budget sphere".** (Newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, 22.05.06, article *Standing on the skirt of a wild field*)

On Law-Making...

In an interview for *Mayak* radio (May 17, 2006) **Tamara Gudima**, adviser to the RF Minister of Culture explained the gist of the proposed reform, and held forth on apprehensions related to it. If the bill *On Autonomous Institutions* is voted into law, theatres and other bodies operating in the cultural and educational sphere would be asked to make their choice within 2 years of whether they remain budget-funded institutions (being thus stripped of their right to dispose of finances themselves) or to become

“autonomous” (thus losing state guarantees). She mentioned that **94.6% of all the institutions in the realm of culture in Russia, including theatres, were state-funded.** The scale of the planned reform is colossal, so it must be thrashed out thoroughly. For example, according to her, a special budget article has to be provided for institutions that should not be left without the responsibility of the state, like institutions catering for children. **“The bill tabled for adoption is not thoroughly thought-out. That’s why the concern.”**

In her article titled *Petrushka’s Folding Screen* (newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, May 18, 2006) **Elena Dyakova** reminds that there were other bills to be voted into laws that were prepared without taking into account specificity of the activities of its addressees. Starting from January 2006, in line with the intentions of financial agencies, state budgeted theatres in Russia must observe Law 94-F-3, stipulating that **expenditures in excess of 60,000 roubles (less than EUR2,000) are to be the subject of a tender with the participation of not less than 3 parties.** Due to the need to have all the bureaucratic approvals and other procedures that can last for months, the life of a theatre can be paralyzed. “The result is quite evident: someone would not be able to pay copyright fees to heirs of a choreographer (there’s no talk of a three-party tender), somebody would be hinted that their theatre could ask a military uniform tailor, who charges less, to make costumes for their next production”. **It’s really the theatre of the absurd...** The military ministry follows the footsteps of the Finance Ministry bureaucrats, adopting its decrees in the area of culture, annulling postponements of military service that were previously available to young artists and musicians. **“But a year outside the profession for a young ballet dancer is tantamount to a disqualification”.**

The article *Theatre: Time of Change* (Newspaper *Culture*, May 18,2006) has the opinion of **Elena Drapeko**, Deputy Chair of the Commission on Culture of the RF State Duma (the Russian Parliament), who has been quoted as saying that the proposed bill is totally devoid of guarantees of preservation of the Russian repertory theatre, **“because the principal objective of the present-day government is to shake off its responsibility for the social sphere... even the state can at present both preserve the amount of financing of Russia’s culture-related organisations and bodies and even increase it.”**

On the Repertory theatre ...

The notion “the repertory theatre” is the form of theatrical activities that were consolidated in the years of the Soviet Union. This is a theatre with permanent premises (as often as not specially built for it in a city’s downtown) and a permanent staff (sometimes more than one team), administrative and supporting personnel, production workshops, etc, which enable such a company to mould its repertoire and have a permanent audience. The attitudes to the “repertoire” theatre are ambiguous. Some take it as a national asset, while the others call it an obstacle to the development of theatre life in Russia. Quoted below are excerpts from different publications.

- Happy to be free from the Communist diktat, we go on holding forth on how well they live in the free Europe and America. They can do everything right, so we should also do it this way. But, maybe not all that was started under the Soviet power should be axed? We’d better consult specialists to avoid doing harm. **The Russian repertory theatre has always caused envy of many world’s celebrities, so is it worth putting it up for sale so mindlessly?** (Magazine *Itogi*, May 22, 2006, article *Missing the Box Office*)
- There aren’t enough theatres in this country... With population our size and the gigantic

territory – it's too little. In previous years I used to cross the country appearing in concerts, and whenever I got to say, the N-city I could bet, that by the look of the audience I could tell whether there was a theatre in that town or not. I never made a mistake. Even if the company was beyond any criticism and in trouble – just the same. **Audiences where there is a repertory theatre are one storey above the rest.** They do comprehend the words of a human being and the idea expressed in these words. (From interview of **Konstantin Raikin**, actor, the artistic director of the Moscow theatre *Satirikon* to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 18, 2006). The article continues as follows:

“Only 20% of Russian cities have theatres at all. In 6 major cities there are theatres following various genres. France has 10 theatres per one million spectators. Britain has 9. We have 3.5. The biggest savings in Europe.”

- In the market economy we have made quite a few unexpected discoveries, including in the areas that at first sight are far from the base money interests. In particular, it became evident that theatre is more than just “a temple of the arts”, but also a large building, standing on a very expensive patch of land, an affair that does not make profits and needs to be supported by the state. But the state cannot offer much money, even though actors want to be paid adequately... **The problem is that currently even the most successful theatre companies can earn about one-third of what is needed to cover their expenses.** And if they happen to become financially independent, they would have to give up their classical repertoire for the sake of commercial productions, turning their pristine-looking foyers into casinos and strip-tease bars. (Newspaper *Trud*, May 19, 2006, article *The Theatre begins with ...*)

- **This is the way of life for the entire world.** Like the rest of the civilised world we will face the same situation – searching for reliable terse contracts with a remarkable legal base. (From the interview of theatre director **Andrei Zhitinkin** to **Centre TV**, May 15, 2006)

- What exactly do we mean by mentioning the Russian repertoire theatre, which in one case shares its premises with a restaurant, and in another - a nightclub? When all this is going on with state financing unchanged? Others do not lease their premises, but then they get nothing, even being able to continue to go about their “dull” theatrical trade. Sometimes the theatre is almost non-existent, all but ruins, but its fashionable restaurant does well, acting as the company's bread-winner... As is typical of other art forms, theatre has ceased to influence social life, and there are no such ambitions – almost not at all... **So is there any link between our present-day theatres and the phenomenon that made itself famous as the Russian repertory theatre?** Some say that to lose it is like dying. But has it not been lost already? This is not an affirmation – it's a question. (Newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 15, 2006, article *The Social Mission and Social Security*)

- The theatrical system we are part of is indeed outdated, surviving a serious crisis. It is hardly possible to come out of this situation without losses. If for their normal operation state-owned Russian theatres need 48,000 actors, with only 25,000 actually engaged, and if young people take flight from this profession, then **the very system of the Russian repertory theatre needs to be re-modelled.** The problem is not getting better funding, which would not be provided anyway, but organising the theatrical life on new terms that can be ruthless at the start. (Newspaper *Vremiya Novostei*, May 22, 2006, article *The Changeability of Changes*)

POST SCRIPTUM:

Several days after the Forum ended it became known that the first reading of the bill “On Autonomous Institutions” at the State Duma was suspended...So, the Forum called by the Theatre Union of Russia played its role, and the voice of the theatrical community was heard and taken heed of.

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