

Can contemporary Versace suit transform those of royal blood?

The National Academic Drama Theatre has hosted a premiere of *Lion in Winter*, based on American playwright James Goldman's play and staged by producer Valentina Yerenkova. The premiere inspires us to ponder whether historical performances still have relevance today. Ms. Yerenkova is confident that history provides answers to contemporary questions and addresses eternal themes, while setting the professional bar high and allowing actors to show their deeper talents. Famous stage producer Sergey Kulikovsky would argue the opposite, preferring to stage contemporary works in Minsk, Vitebsk and Tomsk, alongside classical pieces. He believes that historical performances have had their day, with meaning and relevance taking second place to elaborate costumes. He views the genre as a museum exhibit.

By Vladimir Peplov

Bringing back taste and serious contemplation

"In the 1990s, the theatre experienced a crisis, surviving by drawing audiences with comedy and musicals," stresses Ms. Yerenkova. "At that time, few could afford 'masterpieces' so, over the past two decades, audiences' tastes have shifted from tragedy and historical drama. However, in my opinion, serious repertory academic theatre can't exist without them. They are the foundation stones of stage producers and actors. We should grow together with the passing years, gaining wisdom, as well as stage, intellectual and life experience."

The action takes place in medieval England — rather far from contemporary society.

I think that people made the same mistakes in the 11th century as they do in the 21st century. It may seem strange but history doesn't teach us anything. Humanity has a tendency to destroy itself: it's a statement which is as true today as it has ever been. Historical truth neighbours artistic fiction in *'Lion in Winter'*. The protagonists of the play did exist and played a key role in British history from the 11th-12th century. The King of England, Henry II, created a powerful British Empire, with his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine. They fought constantly through their 31 years of marriage, although he loved her deeply. He also endured confrontation from his ambitious sons, who angled for the throne.

The theme of family loyalty seems as relevant today as ever. In building our careers, we can forget our responsibilities towards children, failing to notice that they have grown and may not be content. It's a topic which has relevance through history. Impatience and greed are ever with us, as seems



Actors of *Lion in Winter* richly express their emotions

obvious to me today. It frightens me to think of it.

Attending a rehearsal, I saw that you consider every movement of your actors. Is it difficult to be so exacting as a stage director?

The material itself brings everything to order; it can't be otherwise. The play was written in the language of rhetoric and metaphor, so any falsity is obvious. Actors aren't just playing royal figures. They are revealing the character

of their roles and the motivations guiding them, while relying on history. Actors need to dig deep within themselves, while working together and delivering each line carefully, bringing their character to life through gesture and word. Unfortunately, the trend today is for words to be secondary to gestures and facial expressions. The ability to deliver speeches has been overshadowed, with audiences forgetting the old school. The light touch of *commedia dell'arte* (Italian com-

edy) and farce reign, though I don't wish the old school to disappear.

Entertaining audiences

"The most awful thing for theatre is for the audience to be bored, feeling that they've wasted their time," muses stage producer Sergey Kulikovsky. "People come to the theatre to laugh or to cry. I admire my colleagues' attempt to shape this material but, speaking of the advantages and disadvantages of this performance, I believe

that this genre has many hidden dangers."

What are these dangers?

This genre was at its height during the pre-revolutionary period, when the true Alexandrinsky Theatre existed in St. Petersburg and the true Maly Theatre operated in Moscow. At that time, everything was well, with actors pronouncing the text in a certain way. The attitude towards theatre was quite different. That time is behind us and I'm not sure we should return to it. This genre bores me.

What about the importance of sets, costumes and recreating the age? Is this not reason enough?

Do we need complete historical authenticity and the recreation of an age on the contemporary stage? It's a big question. Look at the Lithuanians, who stage stylised performances, not artificially re-creating any particular time or being precise with details. They use images, metaphors and implications; sometimes, it's impossible to say exactly in which age the action takes place. Their performances are set apart from time.

Complete historical authenticity is an art in itself, with folk museums existing for this purpose. Theatre is a living art, which requires no basis in reality.

Perhaps our actors are unable to perform high tragedy and drama because they've become estranged from them.

Unfortunately, this may be true. I often face this in my work. Commercial comedy inevitably places its stamps on actors, regardless of their number: 8 or 18. The result is always the same: actors become so accustomed to this genre that they fall into a rut of making audiences laugh, always eliciting the same reaction. I'm convinced that we need to escape from this rigidity, harmonising the best of the past with the present, in the spirit of modern times, rather than slavishly following the canons of the past.

Multi-dimensional Japan able to surprise

A Million Scarlet Roses song performed in Japanese at closing ceremony of charitable exhibition of 17th-20th century china, at City History Museum

Minsk collector Vitaly Zhukov instigated the exhibition and performed the song. He admits that his choice of Raimond Pauls' song was no accident, as it used to be extremely popular in Japan. "The song is about love, faith, beauty and the fragility of our world," Vitaly explains. "It's a symbol of friendship between countries, also indicating Belarusians' solidarity with the Japanese

following the disaster in which over 15,000 people died in March, as a result of the earthquake and tsunami."

The exhibition featured expensive vases, decorative plates and elegant sets. Over 60 unique artefacts were on show, with some having no analogues even in Japan. All the money taken is being sent to support Minsk's twin-city of Sendai.

"I've been seriously studying China for over twenty years," says Vitaly. "It's a wonderful land. When people speak of the existence of three-dimensional space,

it becomes ten-dimensional with regard to Japan. Initially, you see its first dimension, then the second, and so on. Eventually, numerous dimensions become apparent, allowing you to understand the essence of the unique messages left by the Japanese via art."

"What do we know about Japan? You may have heard of Wabi-Sabi [a Japanese aesthetic world outlook characterised by modesty and inner strength — editor], geishas, samurais, kabuki theatre and sushi... In reality, there is so much more to the

country. My family collection of Japanese china spans many years, starting before WWII. Almost no china of the kind is found in Japan now. The country used to sell it abroad, making money, so all the best articles are spread worldwide. When the Japanese Ambassador saw the vases, he exclaimed, "No-no. This is bad for Japan. They are golden." Such fine china was fit for royalty, whereas, in reality, everything is much more modest. Ordinary Japanese people prefer to use cheaper and more practical ceramic and lacquer tableware," Vitaly notes.



Beautiful and elegant vases