

The Bolshoi Theater in Moscow

PORTFOLIO

# Bolshoi Babylon

PHOTOS AND ESSAY BY  
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WITH HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS



DMITRY BELIAKOV



Anastasia Meskov, first soloist, applies her own makeup before going on stage.

Maria Alexandrova, principal dancer, prepares for a comeback after a full rupture of her Achilles tendon.



Nick Read is the director of "Bolshoi Babylon," an HBO-produced documentary that will preview at the Toronto Film Festival and air in the United States on HBO in December.

MOSCOW—It's January 2013, the end of the national holidays. The shops are groaning, and for most Muscovites, the living is easy. The city center is a magnet for disposable wealth and conspicuous consumption. At its heart, and increasingly out of step with its commercial surroundings, is the Bolshoi Theater—older than the United States itself, and more recently, a symbol of everything communism did right, built by the state for the people. It is just 500 yards from the Kremlin, and reportedly a secret passage below ground connects the two institutions.


For ordinary Russians, every child's first visit to the theater is still a rite of passage. For their parents to see and be seen before the curtain rises is a ritual in upward mobility. The ushers—all ladies, all of a certain age, some of them with 50 years service for the Bolshoi behind them—call the new, upwardly mobile Russians "chandelier gazers." Disdainful of the new generation's lack of culture and respect, these *babushkas* know every act of every ballet or opera. They have seen it all. Or so they thought.

#### ACID ATTACK

On January 17, 2015, word spread that Sergei Filin, former lead dancer and current artistic director of the Bolshoi's revered ballet company, had been attacked. Acid was thrown in his face. Police identified the main suspect as well known male ballerina Pavel Dmitrichenko.

As filmmakers, we worked quickly to gain never-before granted access backstage at this Russian landmark during this complicated and dramatic time. Even in a Russia steeped in lurid tabloid headlines, this was a story that commanded the nation's undivided attention. Speculation intensified as to Dmitrichenko's motive. Wild stories of political conspiracy and underworld influence began circulating. Inside the theater there was first disbelief, then shock, then anger.





OKSANA YUSHKO

Bolshoi dancers wait in the wings, watching the performers on stage.

Before a trial had begun, police investigators gathered the ballet company together on the sacred main stage to tell them they knew the culprit.

The dancers were outraged at their presumption, but inside the *corps de ballet* there was also a resignation, a sense that an accident was waiting to happen, sooner or later. Factionalism, favoritism, patronage, political interference, allegations of bribery, and sexual favors being granted by dancers for prime roles in top productions, were all part of a toxic mix. The attack on Filin came after a long saga of ego clashes and dysfunction.

#### THE BACK STORY

Filin had arrived at the Bolshoi in 1988 as a dancer and became head of the company in 2011. Well known as a lead dancer with matinee idol looks, he came with a reputation for artistic dedication to the classics and an empathy with the dancers. But he lacked management experience and the skills needed to knit together diverse, often clashing, egos and ambitions into a coherent unit, let alone the world's best dance company.

Filin surrounded himself with loyalists, and rewarded these lesser dancers with lead parts, alienating not only the com-

pany's stars, but also those who spoke for the company. Indeed, Dmitrichenko was the company's union representative, leading negotiations with management. Before long, to the dancers, Filin was neither manager nor artist.

And there was one world-class ego Filin failed to contain, the force of nature known for his extravagance on and off stage, Nikolai Tsiskaridze. "I am the Bolshoi," Tsiskaridze was known to boast. Even before Filin's appointment, Tsiskaridze felt the job as head of the company should have been his. By 2013, after a series of bitter clashes, Tsiskaridze was getting impatient.

Like sportsmen, the curse of dancers is their limited shelf life—12 good years if they are lucky. Tsiskaridze was 39 and already taking on the role of "pedagogue"—ballet master and tutor, leading the *corps de ballet* through the endless rehearsals and classes they endure. Tsiskaridze was much loved in the studio, and nurtured a fiercely loyal coterie of admirers and acolytes, among them Dmitrichenko and his girlfriend, Angelina Vorontsova.

DMITRY BELIAKOV

Maria Allash, also a principal dancer, awaits her entrance backstage.

In early 2013, their affair was in its first flush, and Dmitrichenko was in awe of her beauty and talent. But Angelina was not getting the parts, and there appeared little Dmitrichenko or Tsiskaridze could do to influence the casting process which was within Filin's fiercely protected grip. When Dmitrichenko orchestrated the attack on Filin (he delegated the actual attack to a couple of local thugs he had only recently met), the perfect storm was unleashed.

Former dancers quickly stepped forward to describe the Bolshoi as an enormous brothel. Vorontsova left the

Anastasia Meskova, sits in the wings, crushed, after learning she'd not been asked to go on tour with the Bolshoi.



Maria Alexandrova performs, flawlessly.



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Ballet master Sergei Filin chats privately with a dancer backstage.



Filin, in treatment following acid attack.

Filin returns to the Bolshoi and is mobbed by reporters.

Putin's designated general director, Vladimir Urin, watches the audience assemble in the Bolshoi's main theater.



Accused of master-minding the acid attack on Filin, principal dancer Pavel Dmitrichenko behind a glass wall in court.

company immediately, followed by others. Tsiskaridze's contract was not renewed. He was effectively sacked. In court, Dmitrichenko claimed Filin was taking bribes, Tsiskaridze sued for wrongful dismissal, and the prima of primas, Svetlana Zakharova, disappeared for a week when overlooked for a part—all before the new season had even begun, and while Filin was undergoing complex medical procedures to save his sight.

#### ENTER PUTIN, STAGE LEFT

Finally the Kremlin stepped in and ousted the theater's much loved director, Anatoly Iksanov, in a stage-managed act of blood-letting that ended his 12 years at the helm. Vladimir Putin and his Minister of Culture appointed Vladimir Urin, a veteran of Moscow's Stanislavsky Theatre, where he had

worked with Filin previously—and not easily. When Filin left to join the Bolshoi, Urin accused him of betrayal. When Urin was appointed as his new boss, “it was not the happiest day for Filin,” observed Urin, who himself clearly had doubts about his new and monumental task—and his boss who was observing his every move.

“If it had not been a top-down decision, I would have [refused],” Urin told Putin in an extraordinary dialogue, the transcription posted on the Kremlin website beneath a photo of the two across an ornate table. “Because I worked in another theater for years. I think, and of course it’s hard to evaluate oneself, that we built a very nice theater there.”

“If it were otherwise, you would not have been put forward,” Putin shot back.

On September 17, 2013, the curtains opened for the Bolshoi's new season. Both men—Filin and Urin—stood shoulder to shoulder to meet the company, smiles pinned on, barely concealing their mutual dislike. For nearly two more years they navigated a tense coexistence. Finally, on July 30, 2015, Urin announced that Filin's contract as artistic director will not be renewed, though he'll be staying on in a purely ceremonial position.

And so the stage will be set for another chapter of a uniquely Russian drama. With the Kremlin, as it has since the rule of Catherine the Great, very much in charge.

Welcome to the Bolshoi. ●

The Bolshoi is eternal.

