

TRAGIC FATE OF UKRAINIAN THEATER

«For judgment shall return unto righteousness --. »

Psalm 94:15

I would like to tell you a story about M. Kropyvnytsky Music and Drama Theater in the city of Kirovograd which is considered to be the first professional Ukrainian theater. The first performance took place there 27 October 1882. On that day, the troupe heralded the era of the professional Ukrainian theatre with the stage production *Natalka-Poltavka* based on a well known play by Ivan Kotlyarevski. This event was recorded in the calendar of UNESCO, an international organization, which celebrated the 120th anniversary in 2002.



For the Ukrainian people this theatre has the same meaning as Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon for the British people, the famous opera house *Teatro Alla Scala* in Milan for the Italian people, or the world known *Grand Opera* in Paris for the French people. All those theatres have gone through numerous face-lifts and restorations but, each time, the restorers tried to preserve the original historic appearance of the premises, the appearance they had when kings and queens of Britain were sitting in their boxes and balconies, while Rossini, Poulencq and Donicetti stood at their conductor's stands.

All these theatres and their buildings are thoroughly preserved and protected by numerous legislations and the government.

M. Kropyvnytskyi theatre also has its rich history. Apart from Marko Kropyvnytsky, famous performers like Mykola Sadovski, Maria Zankovetska, Sadovska-Barilotti, American tragedian Ira Aldridge, Italian actor Ottone Francardi, and -- later -- well known Ukrainian singer Ivan Partozhynski and other notable people of art performed on its stage. Great Ukrainian actor and stage director Hnat Yura also started his theatrical activity on its stage. Also, Volodymyr Vinnichenko, the first President of independent Ukraine, visited that theatre when studying in Elisavetgrad (the former name of Kirovograd). Playwright Oleksandr Korniychuk, writers Oles Honchar, Dmytro Pavlychko and other well know Ukrainian literati attended the theater's 90th foundation anniversary in 1972.

However, can you, ladies and gentlemen, imagine that, for whims of local authorities, Shakespeare Theatre or *Grand Opera* could be turned into a conference hall, assembly hall or a community art centre? It is even hard to image this -- Nevertheless, it is this tragic fate that was in store for M. Kropyvnytsky Theater. How did it happen?

The premises of today's M. Kropyvnytsky Theater were constructed in 1867 by Colonel-Engineer Heorhy Vasyliovych Tramibytski for his own funds. Eventually, the premises of the theater and its hall were built in the style which was much like that of *Teatro Alla Scala* or *Grand Opera* but they were smaller in size. The theater's foyer featured Roman-style columns, the walls of the hall were adorned with lavishly gilded balconies and richly decorated lustre which I remember well

even now. Numerous decanter-shaped resonators were hidden in the hall walls behind the stucco. Larger resonators in the shape of big hektoliter glass jars were also installed under the orchestra pit. All that system provided such an excellent acoustic quality of the hall that microphones would be unnecessary even if they existed. Sitting in the last row of the audience hall, some 70-80 meters from the stage, you could hear any conversation perfectly well, even if actors spoke in whisper.



All of a sudden, in October 1973, the local Communist authorities took a decision on “capital repairs” of the theatre. All gilded balconies and mezzanines had been demolished, while decanter-shaped resonators and other resonators were closed up with building mortar. The larger glass resonators were removed from beneath the stage and the orchestra pit and were carried away on 5-6 construction trucks. The walls of the hall were covered with stucco and cheap wooden lacquered panels. The main entrance doors were replaced with

ones made from steel and glass of the grade which was used for department stores, hospitals and factory canteens. In this way, Soviet-style “capital restoration” had been completed, while the theater’s historic appearance was vandalized, and, in the final count, was lost. The theatre assumed the looks of an ordinary village community centre which were many throughout Ukraine.



It is surprising that the official Resolution about “capital repairs” of the theatre which had regional juridical status was taken on a city hall level,

ostensibly following an initiative of the theater’s management itself and “due to a wrecking condition”.



It is surprising that the unique acoustic devices were destroyed, while the construction materials were suspiciously ordinary and cheap, although any capital repairs, especially of a theatrical building, requires serious funds and effort.

My father Ivan Kaznadiy, Merited Artiste of Ukraine, was the Chief Stage Director of Marko Kropyvnytski theatre at that time. Father was a true patriot of the theater. Possessing a rich talent of a stage director and personally knowing notable Ukrainian actors, theatrical figures and literati (father was the first to direct a stage production of *Faraony* (The Pharaohs – transl.) comedy stage production based on a well known play of Oleksa Kolomiets which gathered thousands of spectators throughout Ukraine and even Russia for decades), my father harshly criticized the decision of the Communist authorities, and he paid dearly for that. That same year, he was dismissed from the position of the Chief Stage Director, and he, a talented stage director, had to work at some small art clubs until his retirement.

Who came up with an initiative of such a destructive decision? It is hard to say documentarily because the Communist powers of Kirovograd left no detailed resolutions on that “reconstruction”. There is only a Resolution of Kirovograd City Executive Committee reading “To grant the management of the Regional M. Kropyvnytsky Music & Drama Theater the permit for capital repairs of the premises”. Who exactly was asking for such a “permit” remains unclear. However, I remember perfectly well the five names which my father repeated daily after his dismissal, when we were sitting at home not knowing how to live without his salary because unemployment allowance in the former Soviet Union did not exist. Those five people were the Communist hierarchy of the city of Kirovograd, namely:

Mykhailo Kobylchak, First Secretary of Kirovograd Regional Communist Party Committee;
Ivan Olifirenko, Chief of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of Kirovograd Regional Communist Party Committee;
Anatoli Pogrebnyak, Secretary for Ideology of Kirovograd Regional Communist Party Committee;
Fedir Tsygulski, Chief of the Cultural Administration of Kirovograd City Executive Committee;
Evgenia Chabanenko, Deputy Chief of the Cultural Administration of Kirovograd City Executive Committee;

Evgenia Chabanenko, lovingly nicknamed *Baba Zhenya* (“Grandma Zhenya”, short for Evgenia – transl.) by Kirovograd Communist functionaries, had been assigned with putting the sinister resolution into practice. Together with the aforementioned Communists, she thoroughly carried out that decision and she took an active part in victimizing my father and in dismissing him.

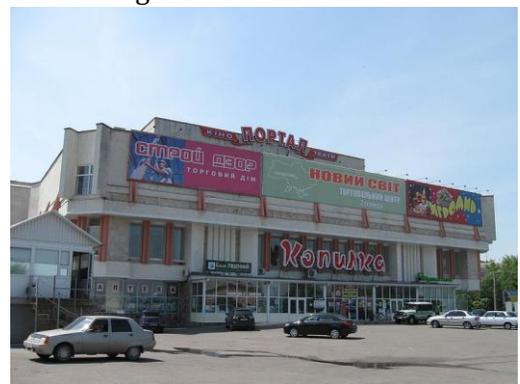
It is noteworthy that the above said lady and gentlemen (Comrades, that is, sorry) were Ukrainians, whereas three of that Communist quintet – Kobylchak, Olifirenko and Chabanenko – were even born in Kirovograd Region. They could not but know about the historical importance of the theater’s building. Nevertheless, they did not spare it.

Who compelled them to take such a barbarian decision? My father said the Communist leaders lacked seats in the theater’s hall where they used to assemble for Communist Party conferences, and this was ostensibly the reason why they decided to “expand” the hall and, obtain some 150-200 more seats in this way, if this was a truly main reason for such a “reconstruction”. And this was why they vandalized the Ukrainian theatrical shrine.

I do not know if too many Communist conferences practically took place in the newly “reconstructed” building and if that solved the problem of seats for delegates of Communist gatherings. However, just 5 years after the ruining (sorry, cannot find a more adequate word) of

M. Kropyvnytsky theater’s building, the designing and -- later – the constructing of another, totally new and larger theatrical building was started in a relatively new area of that same city. However, even that building had a sorry fate. Having erected the walls and having practically approached the building’s finishing stage, the construction team abandoned the unfinished structure which then had stood for some 20 years as a monument to Communist mismanagement and negligent attitude to their own culture. That building was never destined to become a theatre. During the years of Ukraine’s independence, it was transformed into a supermarket.

Today, the premises converted from the audience hall showcase sausages, pastries and other



delicious products, while customers roam the labyrinth of the would-be theater's foyers and conversion partitions decorated with wine bottles and beer cans.

So what did Kirovograd Communists lack in 1974: money, logic or reason? The money seemed to be there: the city had two powerful industrial enterprises: one manufactured agricultural machinery, while the other made hydraulic equipment, and there were a number of smaller factories. Most likely the Communists lacked logic and reason, they always had problems with that. However, I personally believe, they lacked honesty and love to their Ukrainian culture, while the Ukrainian "theatre of luminaries", an honest and outspoken stage director and -- on a more general scale -- the entire Ukrainian culture paid for that.

It is possible that the need for the theater hall's expansion was the main reason for such a decision. However, father said, large funds were allocated for the theatre, while materials practically used for the "reconstruction" were suspiciously cheap, as actually, the overall appearance of the theater after that "expansion". Thus, there are reasons to believe that all that "reconstruction" was a usual corruption scheme and that the difference between the money allocated for the "reconstruction" and the funds practically spent on it got into various private pockets, possibly into the pockets of the above said Comrades.

It is worth mentioning that, way back in 1970-1971, even before the theater's "reconstruction", my father once said some functionaries from Kirovograd Regional administration repeatedly proposed to him to privately sell tickets for the first 5-6 rows of the stalls (the most expensive seats) and share the revenue. My father refused to do this. Then, Comrades Communists obviously decided "to put the theatre on money" in the other way.

Years passed. In 1991, Ukraine proclaimed independence. In 1996, Ivan Kaznadiy was re-established in his position of the theater's Chief Stage Director which he occupied for 3 years. At that time, the city's new authorities took a decision on restoring the historic appearance of M. Kropyvnytsky Theater. However, all kinds of problems awaited even that progressive decision. The reconstruction had been procrastinated for almost 15 years. Finally the historic appearance of the hall and the facade were completely restored in 2012, while the general shape of the building was changed, even though the theater look more imposing today. During that period, the theater's troupe had been dragging a wretched existence, playing their performances at various community centers and the local Philharmonic Society. In response to the protests of the troupe, local authorities explained the lengthy restoration by lack of money (???). In the meantime rumours were spreading all over the city about stealing of the funds. It is in place to remind that all that was happening already during the time of Ukraine's independence. I do not know how much time is needed for restoring a building the size of M. Kropyvnytsky theater but the general restoration of the Italian *Teatro Alla Scala* lasted only two years (2002-2004). Thus, ladies and gentlemen, judge for yourselves...

Talking about the troupe's entire artistic performance level, a number of stage directors worked at the theater after the 1974 dismissal of Ivan Kaznadiy who strove to transform the theater into a strictly "European-style" theater, having totally forgotten that the first professional theater in any country is, first and foremost, the guardian of the historic theatrical repertory on which the theater of a given European nation is based. Talented Chief Stage Director Mykhailo Illyashenko had worked in that theater for several recent years who, just like Ivan Kaznadiy, restored and maintained the tradition of combining the historic repertory (plays by V. Kropyvnytsky, M. Startytski and others) with modern stage productions and musicals. However, he too was pushed out of the theater not so long ago. The current local authorities provided no explanation,

the decision was taken “by decree” (how else?) without asking the troupe about their opinion. However, when you visit the web site of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre you will see how modern productions and operas (even Russian *Boris Godunov*) co-exist with a complete list of classical plays by W. Shakespeare. For, it is on Shakespeare’s repertory British theatrical culture is based and, eventually, continues to develop.

What are the reasons, you may ask, for such a tragic fate of M. Kropyvnytsky Theater and the hereditary tradition of negligence from 1974 up to now? I think the reasons are very simple. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the huge Soviet empire collapsed only geographically. However, Communism, as a system of government, economic management and the general spirit of society survived. It just underwent a kind of “self-mutation” in the republics of the former Soviet Union and hid under the guise of so-called “market” economy and “democracy” which cannot be regarded as market or democratic in Western sense.

Take, for example, the Nazi Germany of 1945. When the British and American Allies and the Soviet Army won, the then totalitarian Germany underwent a complete de-Nazification. That meant all the Nazi symbols on the streets and at institutions and establishments were completely destroyed. Most Nazis received lengthy prison terms and some were even executed. Economic system of West Germany was transformed into a truly market pattern, together with its economic legislation. This is why the new free West Germany achieved great successes in economy, culture and living standards of its people.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet totalitarian system just changed names and terminology into ostensibly “market” ones. However, no essential changes occurred. Monuments to Communist leaders, Red “heroes” of the Russian 1917-1922 Civil War and KGB leaders and their names still lavishly “adorn” city streets of the former USSR, including Ukraine. Communist Party and KGB leaders who deserved lengthy prison terms, if not death sentences, and their relatives simply changed into armchairs of presidents and owners of companies, consortia, corporate presidents and executives, expatiating on democracy, while doing their best to strangle it. Eventually, the city of Kirovograd (original historic name Elisavetgrad) itself received its current name after Stalin’s favourite Sergei Kirov who was the first in the Soviet Union to propose creation of the notorious concentration camps, and who never visited the city, and who maybe never even heard about it. When Sergei Kirov was shot in 1934 for the reasons which remain unknown until today, Stalin named several Soviet cities in Kirov’s name, among them today’s Kirovograd. Monuments of Kirov with his arm stretched out were designed by sculptor Manizer, manufactured in a conveyer style and erected in various cities of the Soviet empire, Kirovograd included. Apart from Kirovograd, those “xerox-copied” monuments tower in the Russian cities of Petrozavodsk,



Pskov and others even now, reminding its residents that the collapse of the Soviet Union does not mean much. Pity...

Frankly speaking, there are not many reasons for optimism. But I believe that the Ukrainian Orange Revolution still bore its good fruit. A certain part of Ukrainians became more active because they

understood they can live better. Hopefully, an absolute majority of Ukrainians will also understand that you cannot build a strong economy without a complete removal of Communist symbols, historic lies, pseudo-market economy and pro-Communist managers. Neither can you build a strong national economy without this.

I would like to hope that, as years go by, M. Kropyvnytsky Theater will occupy its place in the Ukrainian dream. For, I think it was Goethe, who once said "If you want to build a nation, build its theater first..."

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