

# Russian Comedians and the First Theatre School in Russia

For the 350th Anniversary of the First Theatre School in Russia

Natalia Filatova

Russian State Specialized Academy of Arts  
Moscow, Russia  
E-mail: dapertutto-na@yandex.ru

**Abstract**—The work is devoted to the court theatre of Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich establishment in 1672 and first Russian theatre school, which taught comedians. The main attention is paid to preparation of the actors. Documents and research on the history of Russian theatre are analyzed.

**Keywords**—*history of the Russian theatre; Court Theatre of Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich; Gregory; theatrical school; teaching of first comedians*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The court theatre of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, as the first secular theatre event on Russian soil, has repeatedly been the subject of interest of historians and theater critics, but the issues of training of professional actors in the first court theater were poorly researched in the studies. Once established in power, the Russian Tsar Romanovs wanted to see Russia become familiar with European values and, in particular, were interested in the European court entertainment.

Between the 60s and 70s of the seventeenth century can be called the first spring of Russian theater or the first "theatrical thaw" in Russia, and its culmination - the creation of the first court theater and the first comedian school in 1672. The head of the theater and the first performers were foreigners, but the basis of the troupe was formed by Russian young people of different classes.

## II. SKOMOROKHS IN RUSSIA

Theatre performances have always been loved in Russia, roving performers, "skomorokhs" have been known since pagan times.

Games and dancing of "merry men" fascinated everyone, both the poor and the rich. The author of "The Tale of Bygone Years" in the fifth part in the song of year 1068 confirms the universal love of skomorokhs, "the devil is deceiving ... with all sorts of tricks turning away from God, with pipes and skomorokhs, harps and Rusal. We see in fact, how places of merrymaking are trampled, and a lot of people on them push each other, staging a spectacle, conceived by a

demon - and the churches are empty; and when it is the time of prayer, there is not enough praying in the church "[7]

Epics, proverbs and sayings tell about the popularity of skomorokhs:

"Everyone can dance, but not as a skomorokh," "God created the priest, and the devil - the skomorokh", "Skomorokh is not a friend to a priest", "Skomorosh fun is the joy of Satan," "Do not teach to dance - I am a skomorokh myself."

Interest in the fun and entertainment grew at the highest royal level too. In 1571, by order of Ivan the Terrible, the Amusing storeroom was wounded, in the state of which a few skomorokhs have been enlisted, and the tsar loved to walk among the guests in a skomorokh appearance. For the entertainment of the young Tsar Mikhail Romanov, first of the Romanov dynasty, a special amusement chamber with players, dancers and acrobats was built. Russian queens had their own games all this time: durki, crackers, blind musicians "domrachev". Skomorokhs, not only the ones in court but also those who freely roamed cities and villages, felt protected by the tsar, and that was the tsar to whom they wrote petitions complaining about clerks. Here is an excerpt from a petition from four skomorokhs in 1633: "... he invited us, orphans, to his courtyard, and locked us in the bath, and then extorted from us, orphans, from Pavlushka seven rubles, from Fedka twenty five rubles, and five rubles of Artyushka's money. Gracious Sovereign, the Tsar and Grand Duke Mikhail Fedorovich of All Russia, show mercy for us, orphans, order to write down our petition. Tsar and Sovereign, grant us this mercy." [1] (It must be said that it was a lot of money: the chicken was worth 1 kopeyka (one ruble is a hundred kopeykas) a liter of vodka cost about 10 kopeykas, and 80 kopeykas could buy a cow.) Such royal skomorokh entertainment lasted more than 70 years, despite all the political upheavals in Russia.

However, the time was rapidly moving forward. Art of skomorokhs no longer could meet the new requirements of a single state, and a harsh sentence was pronounced. Under the influence of the Patriarch Nikon Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich strictly ordered for everybody to attend "on Sunday and the days of the manor and the great saints during the holy

singing in the churches of God." In the decrees sent through Russian cities it was said: "multiplied in all sorts of people drunkenness, and every rebellious demonic act, mockery and skomorokh behavior with all sorts of devilish games. And from those satanic students, much fury is inflicted in Orthodox peasants: many people have forgotten God and the Orthodox peasants religion, they follow the seducers and skomorokhs, converge on their shameless seduction in the evenings and during all-night disgrace on the streets and in the fields, and listen to ungodly and abominable songs, and all sorts of demonic plays, both men and women and infants and take part in fights they are starting among themselves. "[1] Menacing decrees of the "quietest" tsar were dispatched all over Russia (1648, 1657), strictly prohibiting music, games, dances and masks ("hari"), harps, pipes, "sopelki" were burned on the banks of the Moscow River. But the passion of the Russian people to the theatrical spectacle did not extinguish, but eventually somewhat evolved.

### III. SEARCH FOR THE MASTERS TO "DO COMEDY"

Aleksei Mikhailovich was intrigued by tales of travelers and diplomats about the European court theater. The beauty, splendor, novelty and unusualness of them aroused the interest of the sovereignty of Russia and the closest boyars.

Artamon Matveev, the tsar's closest adviser, suggested to "inflict comedy" in a European way. Matveev was commanding an ambassadorial order, and communicated with foreigners who lived in Moscow, almost as a separate settlement, in its order, faith, and language, even though in a different country and time: in the year 1672, while in Russia was the year 7180.

Since 1664, foreigners organized theatrical performances in the European manner in the embassy building, which had success with the public. Perhaps the tsar heard about these performances or visited them, but twice, in 1660 and 1672, he sent people to Europe to search for the masters to "do comedy," and, at the same time, he searched for such people to organize the court theatre in Moscow.

The choice fell on Johann Gottfried Gregory, the pastor of the Lutheran church and a church school teacher. It was he who got the king's order on the preparation of the play based on the book of Esther from the Bible, according to which King Ahasuerus chose poor Esther over proud Vashti. The hint on Alexei Mikhailovich (the tsar) choosing a modest and not wealthy Natalya Naryshkina as a wife was supposed to give the ancient plot tension and a modern sound.

The task before Gregory was very difficult, and he took assistants. These were: Russian teacher Yuri Mikhailov, translator of the Ambassadors order Georg Gyubner (Hubner; Gibner) (maybe it was one person, "Yuri Mikhailov, son Gibner") [4 p.VII] Johann Palzer, Lawrence Ringuber, Dutch painter Peter Engler, organist Simon Gutovskiy "igrets" (musician) Timothy Gasenkruh.

There was much work to do: the creation of the play (assuming that this was not the original play but the alteration of one of the pieces of European theater, because the biblical story of Esther was widely known among the

Anglo-German comedians of early XVII century); Construction of the first special theater building: comedy horomina. Gibner (Mikhailov) and Johann Palzer copied the text of the play and the roles for the actors. First decorators did "frames of perspective writing" (scenery), led by Engler. Timothy Gasenkruh purchased and set up musical instruments - organ, violins, oboes. Under his leadership, the first Russian prop makers Stenka Yuriev, Yuri Kostentinov, Savka Yakovlev sewed costumes and produced props. [4]

### IV. PREPARATION OF THE ACTORS FOR THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

Yagan Palzer was ordered to come in order to "teach foreign children Artaxerxes comedy". At the same time, Ringuber claimed that it was he who was responsible for the comedians, and that it was under his leadership that 60 children were studying the roles for three months. It is possible that they were working together. These were the first regular classes of performing arts in Russia. They possibly started about 17 June 1672, as the premiere date of "Artaxerxes action". However, some publications say that the start date was on September 21 [1; 5] as by decree of the tsar from September 21st money were issued "to feed the children who are to be in comedy, sixty people from this day, 4 coins for 10 days per man." [2, p.12] Maybe performers practiced for a very short time, less than a month? Or maybe, the Tsar thought that the 10-day payment for students "feed" was enough, because the Treasury also paid for repairs and wood in the German school, where rehearsals took place.

It is known that the secular theater was different from the school theater performances. It was more spectacular and there was more movement. But was the acting any different? So what and how the first comedians have been taught?

The techniques of rhetoric and poetics had been taught by the rules of the school theater because all the teachers - the Germans - were familiar with the school theater. Participation in theatrical performances was mandatory both in church schools, and universities. [4] However, the young comedians of the Tsar, of course, could not learn the practical skills of behavior on stage, that pupils of church schools mastered for at least two years, in three months. Maybe that's why they addressed in the Tsar in the prologue, asking not to judge them severely for "child's play".

On the other hand, Gregory's drama is associated with the British comedy, very popular in Germany in the first half of the XVII century, with dancing, singing, music, and magic tricks. These plays were written in simple spoken language, in contrast to the heavy pompous school theater plays; human passions were brought to the stage, dramatic tension alternated with comical scenes. Theater critics believe that in the plays which imitated repertoire of English comedians acting techniques were similar. In the first place was a sight, and the acting was not especially graceful. It was a situation comedy. Jester was the compulsory figure in the play: comic scenes were aimed to win the sympathy of the public. [4, s.72-75] Thus, it can be said that the art of acting of the first court comedian was most likely a mixture of those receptions

of school and secular theaters, which the European teachers remembered from their youth.

The play "Ahasuerus action" was built based exactly on the concepts of English comedians: after some events interludes were inserted, parodying the main events of the play. Participants were the "clownish people": a husband and wife Mops and Gelenka (who played out family quarrels or reconciliations) Traz, Soldier and Mouser. In the clownish warlike scenes with fights, beatings, and taking captives everything usually ended with comic death of one or all of the characters. At the same time instruments of punishment and death (e.g. axes, swords, whips) in the hands of jesters were replaced by animal tails, sticks with bells on the ends, etc. [8] These interludes added excitement to the sedate sight, and brought joy to the audience, while demanded certain comedic artistic skills from performers.

There is no common opinion about in what language newly made German comedians played. Referring to the records of Ringuber, many publications claim that the roles were prepared in German and in Russian, the play was written in German and then translated and performed in Russian. Supposedly, the tsar would not otherwise be able to watch the play in an unfamiliar language for 10 hours. However, doubts about this, too, are quite convincing: teenagers who did not know Russian language (or knew it very bad), could not learn and play the role in Russian in three months [6, p. 394-395], especially because there is no information of the existence of the prompter, for example. Moreover, the biblical story was well known to all the spectators, as the Tsar himself pointed it out as the basis for the play and performance.

L. Starikova says that only one artist, Christian Lawrence, was able to learn two appeals to the Tsar in Russian, and spoke at the beginning and end of the play, and it cost him a great effort. All others were playing in German language. Throughout performance an interpreter stayed next to the Tsar and translated unfamiliar places. [9. 26] According to the records in Ringuber's diary, the tsar watched the show for ten hours straight and was struck by the performance. "Perhaps this will be the beginning of our happiness," concluded Ringuber.

Indeed, the participants of the performance received generous rewards. All of them were "by the great sovereign at his hand and saw his, great sovereigns, most lucent eyes." It was a "great honor" because never before "pastors and foreign children have been at the hand of a great sovereign".

However, according to S.K. Bogoyavlenskii, response and subsequent actions of Alexei Mikhailovich could indicate that he was not satisfied with the first performance of the comedy about Esther, and perhaps precisely because of the actor's play. For the later performances, some performers probably have been replaced, since paper was required to re-write roles. Everybody studied the roles and rehearsed again. . Only three months later, when the young actors have played better, the king gave them his mercy. But not all, some petitions asking for mercy for their participation in the comedy remained without resolution or were not completely satisfied. [2]

## V. TEACHING OF ACTORS IN THE YEARS 1673 TO 1676

The most important fact of the further life of the court theater became the recruitment of a new group of actors-students. This was the birth of the school of acting.

In 1673, Gregory got the tsar's decree on the preparation of "Comedy about Tobias." The play was small in the number of actors, and Gregory only recruited 26 students, and, to fulfill the desire of the tsar to watch performances in Russian, this time, students were recruited from commoners and scribes.

June 16, 1673, classes began with this new group. These were boys and young men supposedly of 12 to 18 years old who were accommodated all together. To do this, Matveev demanded free housing on the shore of Yauza from merchant Vinont. To allow students to learn their roles at any time, they got extra candles. Roles were rehearsed for 4 months, of which S.K. Bogoyavlenskii concludes that the commoners' children were not as intelligent as foreign children. However, no one asked if pupils had interest in comedy. They were taken by force. Boys had to attend classes every day, and "robyaty"(kids) lived in bad conditions. They complained to the Tsar in petitions, and asked for donations for food and clothing. "... Sovereign, order to give us salary for the daily feed, so we, your servants of comedy art, would not die from hunger. Tsar and Sovereign, grant us this mercy." [9]

On the 10th of October the tsar ordered to give a salary to all 26 comedians - 4 coins per day while they learn, however, Sundays were excluded as there were no classes then. [3, p. 61] We can say that it was the first state grant for the whole period of study in the first state theater school. Due to money receipts a few names reached us: Nicholay and Rodion Ivanov, Timofey Maksimov, Luka Stepanov, Vaska Meshalkin - these are the first Russian court theater comedians. The date of October the 10th (New Style October 23rd) in 1673 can be considered the beginning of the existence of the first Russian State Theatre School of the Court Theatre.

After the death of Gregory Givner became the head of the theater, and court theater was revived. New comedies that were played by both German and Russian actors were prepared. In the autumn of 1675 he was going to perform six comedies (restore the old and perform new ones), and actively set to work: "The artists were trained in two schools separated by estates: foreign children, 63 total, studied Artaxerxes action from 3 to 14 November under direction of Dr. Blumentrost at the embassy courtyard, and 70 commoner children rehearsed from October 8 to November 6, under the supervision of bachelor Ivashka Fedorov Volosheninov at the Meshchansky Sloboda. They rehearsed three comedies: the Temir-Aksak action and comedies of Joseph and George The actors learned with diligence and used out quite a few tallow candles for evening classes." [2]

A certain Stephen Chizhinsky was the last teacher of dramatic art. Previously he taught Latin language in the Kiev Theological Academy. Chizhinsky presented to the Tsar the play "David and Goliath" and taught "the comedy job to 80 people of all ranks."

The life of the first Russian court theater and drama school ended unexpectedly: in 1676 Alexei Mikhailovich died, and his heirs told to throw away all the decorations, and to disperse the comedians...

Only Peter the I will make an attempt to continue and develop theatrical undertaking of his father, but it will be much later.

## VI. CONCLUSION

- The secular theater business in Russia had its origins in the European secular and school theater and European music and dance art.
- Teaching of the first comedians was closely associated with the practice of the release of the performance, i.e. it was reduced to learning the roles, specific tricks and musical numbers.
- Theatre at the royal court and the theatre school had state basis, "a state order": That way the upkeep of the students, the provision of classrooms and the necessary equipment: musical instruments, props and costumes was ensured. The money for the release of performances and for the upkeep of the students was also dispensed from the treasury. Differentiation in payment "to feed" existed, but it was based not on the creative qualities of students, but on the basis of estate.
- Theatrical school carried out several recruitments of students. For each performance a new group was formed, which could contain old artists as well. Teaching was "split" by estates. There was little care about the inclination of students to the comedy art. The differentiation in the requirements cannot be seen, but judging by the royal favor, the best artists were noticed and rewarded. Subsequent plays left the best of the old groups and recruited new students.
- Within three years of teaching, albeit often interrupted, the theater received a sufficient number of trained actors. In the last new plays were rehearsed in 19 days. About 300 people went through the theater and the school, and much more, if you take all the employees.
- Despite the fact that the theater and theater school only existed for three years before the death of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, their work was the basis for a new theatrical business, organized by his son, Emperor Peter I and had an impact on the further development of theatrical art in Russia.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Belkin A.A. Russian skomorokhs. M.: Nauka, 1975. URL: [http://svitk.ru/004\\_book\\_book/5b/1196\\_belkin-skomorohi.php](http://svitk.ru/004_book_book/5b/1196_belkin-skomorohi.php)
- [2] Bogoyavlenskiy S.K. Moscow theater under the tsars Alex and Peter - M.: 1914
- [3] Warneke B. History of Russian theater XVII - XIX centuries. - Third Edition. - M.-L.: Art, 1939.

- [4] Vsevolodsky-Gerngross V.N. The history of theatrical education in Russia. Volume 1. (XVII - XVIII centuries) - Publication of the directorate of the Imperial Theaters, 1913
- [5] Ekaterinskaya A.A. Court Theatre of Alexei Mikhailovich: organizational bases of activity Autoabstract of the dissertation for the degree of candidate of art - St. Petersburg, 2012
- [6] History of the Russian Drama Theatre 7 volumes - Vol.1 M.: Art, 1977
- [7] "The Tale of Bygone Years» URL: <http://old-rus.narod.ru/02.html>
- [8] Starikova L. theatrical life of old Moscow: Period. Daily life. Morals - M.: Art, 1988
- [9] Filatova N.A. They could see the Tsar without falling down before the Tsar ... (acting school of the first Russian court theater) // Education and Science № 5. - 2015