

WILL AMERICANS ENJOY FILMS FROM THE RUSSIAN STAGE?

Reviewed by Susan Welsh

Eugene Onegin, by A.S. Pushkin

Adapted for the stage and directed by Rimas Tuminas, Director of the Evgeny Vakhtangov Theater, Moscow

Founder of the Stage Russia HD film project: Eddie Aronoff

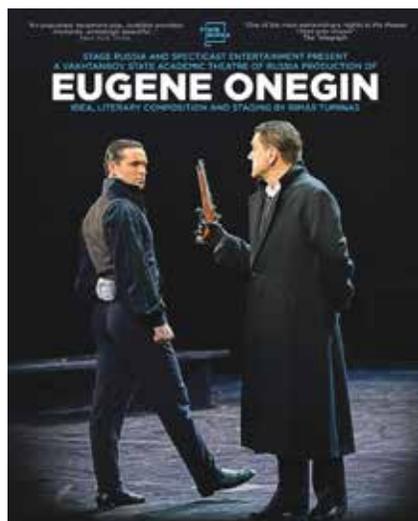
Cinematographer who filmed the stage production for Stage Russia HD: Aleksei Shemyatovskii

In Russian, with English subtitles. 3.25 hours



Stage Russia HD is an incredibly bold project, a wager that the answer to the question in this article's headline is "yes." It is bringing films of stage productions from Moscow's most famous theaters to English-speaking audiences abroad, "on the big screen," with subtitles. This, while relations between the United States and Russia have reached the lowest point since the breakup of the USSR, and without funding from either government, or from corporate sponsorship.

The project will bring eight plays to U.S. cinemas this season (September 2016 through June 2017). The first was *Eugene Onegin*, a three-and-a-quarter-hour film of a stage adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse. The play has been selling out at Moscow's Vakhtangov Theater for three years and was wildly acclaimed by critics during a tour of London, Toronto, Boston, New York, and other cities two years ago. (Serena Davies, writing in the London *Telegraph*, called it "one of the most extraordinary nights at the theatre I've ever known," and Laura Collins-Hughes of *The New York Times* wrote that it was "arrestingly



The film's publicity poster shows the young Onegin (played by Viktor Dobronravov) and the older Onegin (Sergey Makovetskii) before the duel with Lensky. Credit: StageRussia.com

beautiful... an anguished, exuberant play with music and dance.")

But will the gamble on a film version of this and future plays prove justified?

I asked project founder Eddie Aronoff, an American who has been teaching English in Moscow for eight years, and he admits that "getting Westerners

in is tough." But he is nothing if not determined and optimistic. Although he claims not to know more than a few words of Russian, he got to know some people in the Moscow theater community and was enchanted by plays he saw. He approached theater directors with a proposal to film their productions for viewing in the English-speaking world, and they were thrilled. "The Russian theater community here in Moscow quickly embraced the concept and off we went," he informed *Russia Beyond the Headlines*.

Aronoff told me that what amazes him is that "the Russian theater directors have complete control. In London, Kevin Spacey is in charge of a theater, but he doesn't direct or write anything. In Russia, it's the theater director's vision from beginning to end, at least in Moscow. They're putting out work that is, at least in most of the theaters, 80-90% their own. It's so visionary!" And the Stage Russia HD project has drawn support not only from the directors of the relevant theaters, but from many other participants. "Everybody looks at this as a labor of love," Aronoff said.

Some people apparently are skeptical that even Russian émigré audiences in the United States would want to see a Russian stage play as a film. But the filming was so beautifully done by Aleksei Shemyatovskii and his six-camera crew that I can hardly imagine anyone being disappointed in that respect. And some American audiences, at least, have grown accustomed to enjoying Metropolitan Opera productions at the cinema ("Live in HD").

A "Visionary" Production

Russian native-speakers who once memorized *Eugene Onegin* in school, will immediately perceive that this is not a stanza-for-stanza rendition of Pushkin's text. Indeed, it could not be, for a novel (and certainly not a novel in verse) is not a play. Director Rimas Tuminas said, in an interview for Stage Russia HD, "I am a devotee of the author's original text. Not adapted 'to a theme,' not changed 'because of...,' no



Vakhtangov Theater
Director Rimás Tumanis.
Credit: StageRussia.com

editing, no rewriting. This is our fundamental principle. We remain, and we must remain true to it.” That’s not strictly true in this case. The play starts off in French, with an elderly ballet mistress instructing her young dancers—a scene not in the novel. The dancers become a kind of chorus, reflecting the dramatic events of the play. The

narration is divided among various characters, some invented for the purpose, like the retired hussar (played with great verve by Artur Ivanov), a character who does not exist in Pushkin’s novel. There are two Onegin and two Lenskys (one young and one older, looking back on what has transpired). The text is rearranged, starting with stanza XLVI of Chapter 1, and large portions are omitted. There is at least one instance where stanzas from a different poem by Pushkin are inserted (“Поэт и толпа”). Dancing, singing, mime, and even a dancing bear in the finale serve to dramatize the story for the stage. “We mainly used the principles of montage,” said Tuminas. “I mix emotion with word, word with light, light with smell, smell with a gaze. The beauty in Russian literature must be used, and that is what I am doing.”

Overall, I found it powerful and beautiful. Most of the acting was excellent, especially Eugenia Kregzhde (Tatyana), Sergey Makovetskii (the older Onegin), and Artur Ivanov (the retired hussar). The poetic delivery of the final interchange between Tatyana and the older Onegin, in which Onegin belatedly declares his love and Tatyana refuses him, was stunning, with more than one person in the audience weeping. To my surprise, nowhere in the play did Pushkin’s strict

rhyme scheme (aBaBccDDeFFeGG, known as the “Onegin sonnet form”) seem obtrusive or tedious.

I do have some quibbles: The play is too long. The celebration of Tatyana’s name day, in particular, seems endless, with songs to honor her from some fine singers and some dreadful ones. (Was that intended as satirical? If so, I fail to grasp the point.) The scene in which the Larins’ coach, en route to Moscow, meets a rabbit that prances about and then seduces their security guard, should have been cut, although I understand that there’s a Russian “in joke” about Pushkin and rabbits (there’s no rabbit in the novel). The shenanigans with the aging ballet mistress (she’s not in the novel), who keeps keeling over and eventually lies down and dies, also seemed pointless. The musical themes are repetitive.

But speaking to an elderly Russian-born woman as we left the theater, I asked how she had liked it. She was ecstatic and said that if the next film in the Stage Russia HD series (Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*) does not come to our theater in Reston, Virginia, she will go “wherever it is playing; but I have to see it.”

Future Plans

Films to follow *The Cherry Orchard* are listed at <http://www.stagerussia.com/program>, along with the cinemas where they will be shown, as this information becomes available. In future seasons, Aronoff plans to bring in films from other Russian cities, not just Moscow.

The project is in need of much more publicity. *Onegin* did well in cities where Aronoff’s team had “boots on the ground,” such as Chicago, Boston, and Denver, he told me. Local supporters posted flyers and got the word out. But the performance I viewed was poorly attended. I encourage *SlavFile* readers to spread the word, particularly to university Slavic Departments and the Russian diaspora. The cost for a university or a cinema to screen the films is very reasonable.

Before the end of 2016, Stage Russia HD will begin streaming Russian film productions with subtitles on university library streaming platforms, accessible for free to anyone with a university password. This project is designed as a teaching tool, initially featuring archival theater works and avant-garde productions. Eventually, Stage Russia HD will put up their own works, but for now, Aronoff says, he wants to let those works spread their wings “on the big screen.”

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A storm of agonized dancing after the death of Lensky. In the foreground are the older Lensky (played by Oleg Makarov) and the older Onegin (with pistol; Sergey Makovetskiy).
Credit: Elena Saltevskaaya