

MONITORING OF AUDIENCE
OF THE KARELIAN REPUBLIC MUSIC THEATRE

The topic of this paper is mechanism of influence of social background and artistic tendency on attendance of theatre. The subject of this research is analysis of changes in the methods and technologies of work with spectators of the Russian theatre during the last thirty years. We chose as the subject of this research one of the numerous music theatres of the provincial Russia which reflects thoroughly all the global past and present problems of the theatre life of the country.

The Music Theatre of the Republic of Karelia was opened in 1955. This time was the end of the epoch that got the ironical name of “socialist renaissance”: everything was exaggerated in the cultural process that took place in the Soviet Union – fundamental structures, significant events, grandiose plans. A classical theatre building was erected in the central square of Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelo-Finnish Autonomous Republic; it was decorated with a monumental sculpture and bas-reliefs. Upholstered with vinous velvet, the two-tier baroque-style opera hall was to house about 800 spectators.

The invited actors were the graduates of musical comedy department of Leningrad State Institute of Theatrical Art. This team became the core of the troupe. Originally the theatre staged both music and drama producing drama performances alongside with the musical comedy and operetta and even ballet. The emphasis was made on the national heritage works, for any autonomous republic being a part of USSR was supposed to have its own music theatre and national musical compositions.

In 1974 the company was split up. The theatre building became the abode of two independent entities: Karelian Republic Drama Theatre and Karelian Republic Music Theatre. Actually, the division was quite nominal: only the troupes were

separated, while the production unit, the administrative and technical maintenance services were the same for the both theatres. The accounting department was as well one structure for the both companies; the accounts and the balance sheet were integrated.

We shall take 1974 as a reference point of our research – strictly speaking, the history of the Karelian Republic Music Theatre is officially traced starting from that year.

Petrozavodsk, the capital of Republic of Karelia, is deemed to be one of the cities having the greatest number of theatres. Having the population of about 270 thousand people, the city has five functioning professional theatres and a lot of amateur companies. All sections of the population may enjoy the theatre performances to fit their preferences and age categories – from Puppet Theatre to Drama Theatre, Finnish Theatre, Creative Studio and Music Theatre. All of the theatres for adults stage as well performances for children, they travel outside the capital and show their performances in different towns and settlements of Karelia. There is a State Philharmonic Society in the city that has its own symphony orchestra and that invites popular performers. Petrozavodsk holds international and Russian festivals of theatrical and music art.

Petrozavodsk audience is proficient in the theatrical art. Having that variety of performance offered, the auditoriums are full with public every evening. We speak here not of the curious visitant public ready to drop in any theatre or club, like in Petersburg or Moscow, but of fastidious local audience of the Karelian capital that has seen quite a lot.

The population of the city has really high cultural demands. This is accounted for by quite a proficient level of education of the city residents: the city has a large State University, Pedagogical Institute, Conservatoire, a number of secondary education institutions, including the School of Culture and the Music School. The proximity of St. Petersburg has its effect as well: many residents of the city got their education at higher-education establishments of Leningrad.

The spectators have always loved their Music Theatre that let them enjoy the music, scenic art, operetta and ballet. The theatre, together with its audience, has gone a long way with its ascents and declines, success and hardships.

The path of thirty years passed through by the Music Theatre from 1974 to 2002 may be conventionally divided into three periods as dictated by the social and political situation in the country and the internal situation in the theatre.

1. 1974 – 1985 – this time may be called the period of stagnation within the scope of the state and in theatre life.

2. 1986 – 1998 – this time was the period of transformation of the whole economic and political regime in Russia, which considerably affected the theatre-related processes in the country.

3. 1999 – 2002 – this time marked the period of creative search in the theatre in the environment when the social and economic situation in the country has become relatively stable.

Let us consider the periods singled out in more detail.

At the time of stable socialist economy (1974 – 1985), in accordance with the then-current legislation, the new productions could be shown to the public only upon permission of a special department of the Ministry of Culture that was in fact the censor. The censure exercised comprehensive control over the creative process. The special department's decision could ban the disagreeable performance and destabilize the work of the whole collective body of the troupe. Let us note, however, that this happened much more often at drama theatres, rather than in music theatres.

The Ministry of Culture set the plans for the theatre as to the number of performances, spectators and new productions. The failure to comply with these scheduled figures was quite dangerous: the theatre's funding could be cut, and the workers could be deprived of the bonus that was quite a sizeable addition to the miserable salaries. The longstanding obligation to "meet the targets" resulted in changing the accents in the theatrical process. The number of tickets sold was a

basis of official statistics of attendance and set the revenues of the theatre, so it was considered to be the most important factor. Thus the theatres *nolens volens* were looking for all possible ways to sell their tickets, even realizing that the real attendance would be different from the official statistics. The ticket sold was much more important than the factual spectator.

Thus, for example, there was a practiced system of distribution of tickets through the institutions' trade unions, as well as a subscription system of selling tickets. The cases when the trade union of a large enterprise purchased a great number of tickets through cashless settlement and distributed them among the workers at reduced prices or free of charge were quite frequent. The practice of "target" performances was very popular when large enterprises bought out all the tickets for a particular performance. The people who got the ticket for no money did not feel the proper respect for the forthcoming event and often just ignored the performances. The subscription system did not provide a guarantee of attendance as well – it was not certain that the season ticket holders would visit all the performances on the list.

All of the above-listed circumstances account for the then figures of attendance of the Music Theatre of the Republic of Karelia: the number of performances shown did not deviate noticeably from the figure of 350, while the settled number of new productions was 4 per year (see Chart No.1). The number of spectators was regulated by the scheduled figures as well, so the reporting figures approached all the time the mark of 220 thousand visitors a year (see Chart No.2).

Chart No. 1
Number of performances in 1974 – 1979

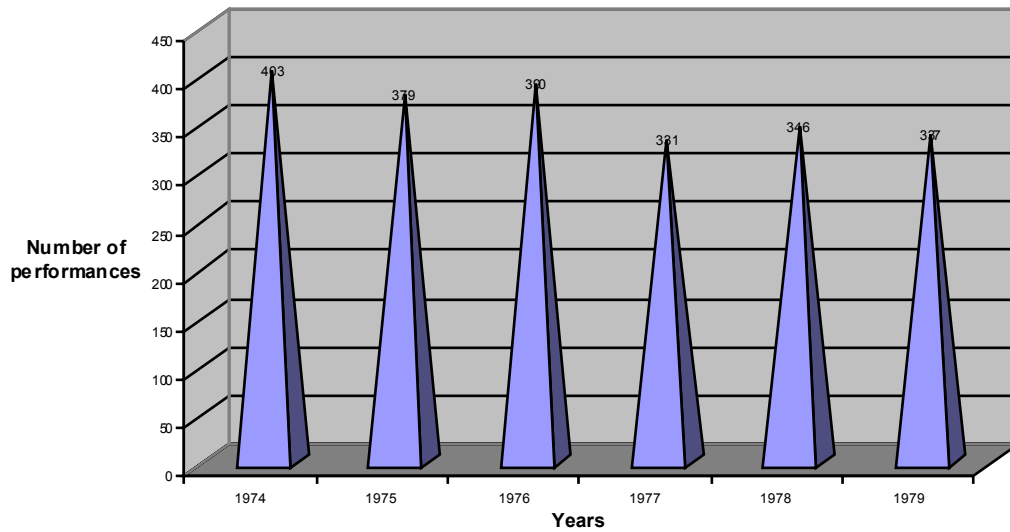
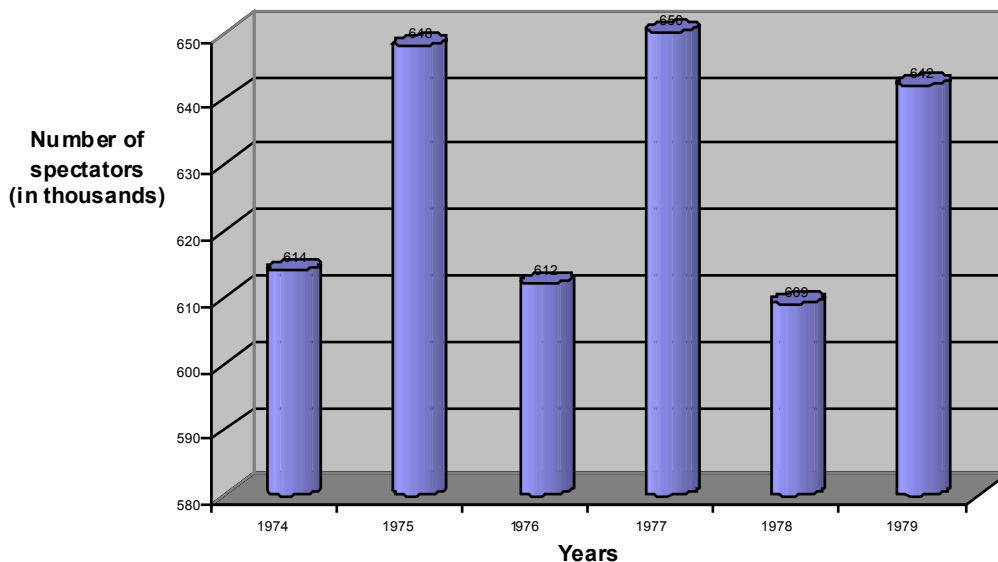


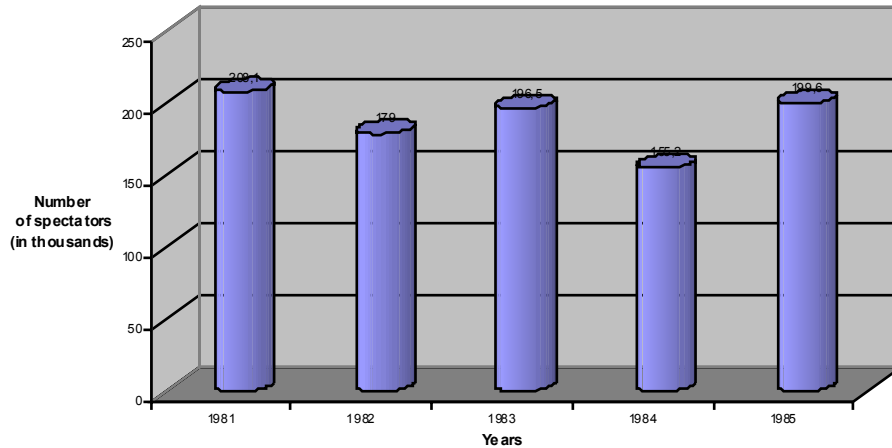
Chart No. 2
Number of spectators in 1974 – 1979



One may easily see that such planned targets were too tense for execution. Simple arithmetic lets one confirm it: having 4 new productions a year, each performance should have been visited by approximately 55 thousand spectators in the city with the population of 270 thousand people. In other words, it was supposed that half of the adult capable population should have seen the new music performance. But let us remember that a drama company worked at the same building, and next to it the National Theatre showed its performances in the Finnish language. It is not hard to guess that the difference in statistical and real figures of

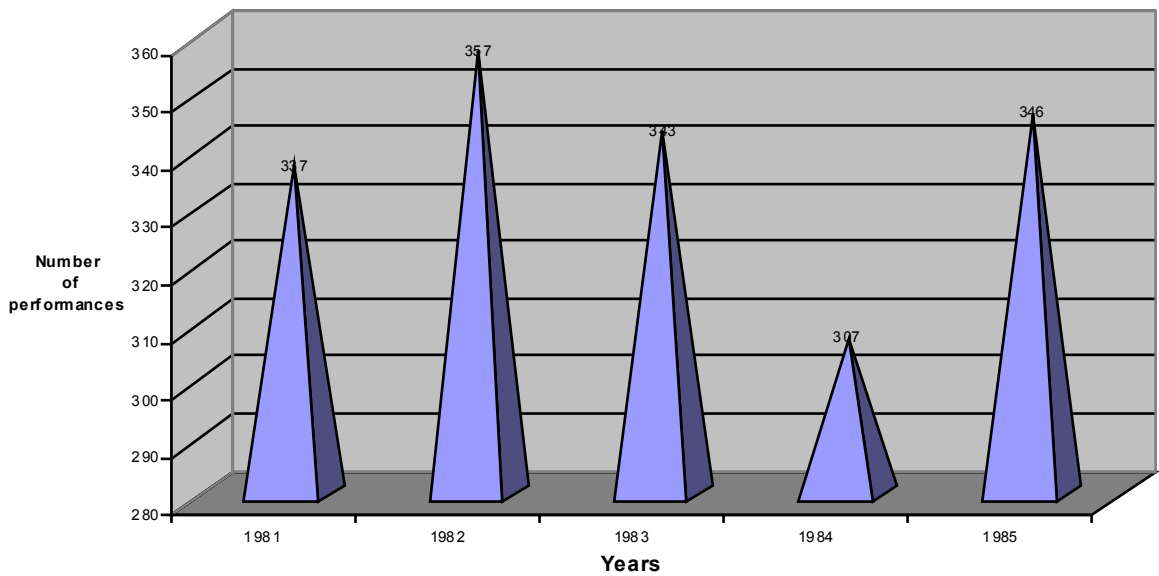
attendance could be great. For that reason the new five-year targets were reduced, fluctuating around the figure of 175 thousand spectators a year (see Chart No. 3).

Chart No. 3
Number of spectators in 1981 – 1985



The situation inside the theatre was uneasy: chief producers were changed, as well as the repertoire policy of the theatre. Starting from 1982, when L. Mospan became the chief producer, the theatre determined on chamber opera performances, which was unusual for Petrozavodsk audience. But as far as the theatre administration had the established practice of achievement of indices prescribed by the Ministry, all the changes in the creative policy of the theatre were not shown in the official statistics (see Chart No. 4).

Chart No. 4
Number of performances in 1981 – 1985

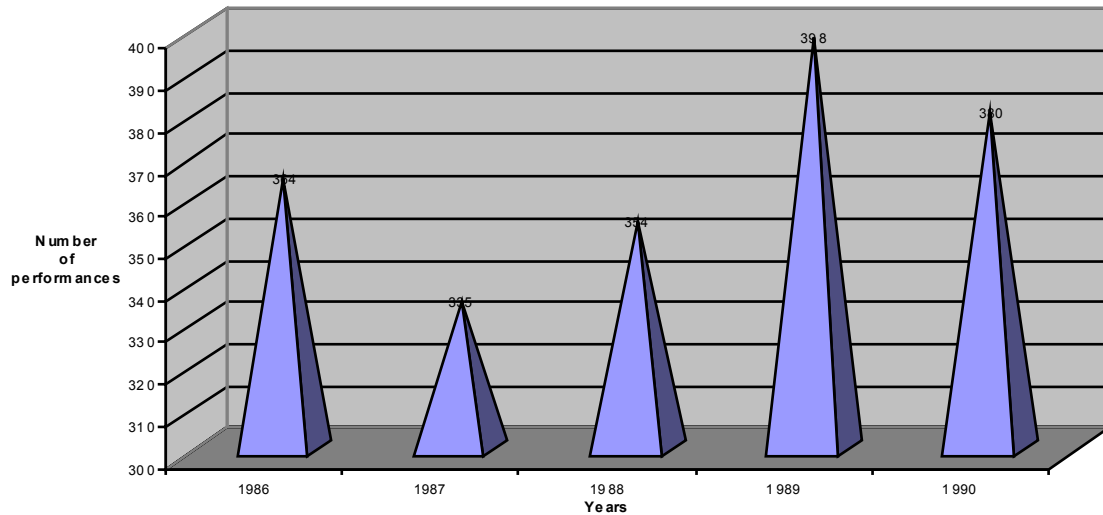


Thus the Music Theatre of Karelia developed in the extensive way during the first 15 years of its existence. The administration took great efforts to have the maximum possible number of spectators visit the theatre at least once a year. But at the same time no work in fact was carried out to form the dedicated audience, that is, to bring up devoted theatre-lovers who would have a permanent need to be in touch with the musical scenic art. The circle of real connoisseurs of the Petrozavodsk Music Theatre had taken shape, but it was rather scanty and ensured the full house at two or three first-night performances. This is well demonstrated by the statistics of unrestricted sale of tickets through the theatre's booking-offices and permanent distributors. To sell the remaining tickets, the administration made use of the other ways of distribution described above.

In the course of economic reform of 1986 – 1990 the censorship was cancelled, the freedom of speech changed the repertoire policy of theatres in a trice. In addition to creative freedom theatres got economic independence, the right to set the number of performances and premieres to be shown without recourse to scheduled figures. The indices of theatre activities show clearly that the company was in the long process of learning how to use the gained independence: if in the

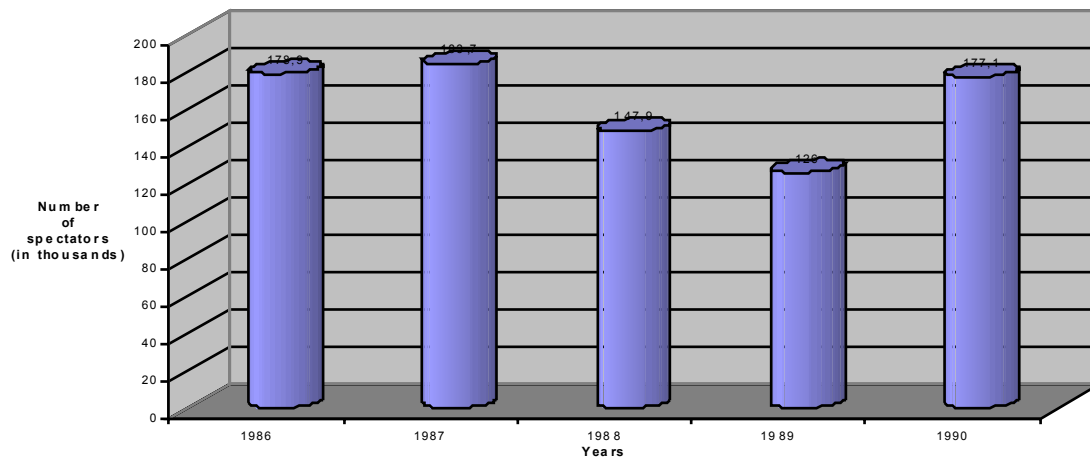
first two years of planned activity one could see the obvious increase in the number of performances shown annually (from 335 in 1987 to 398 in 1989), subsequently this figure declined continually reaching the figure of 380 in 1990 (see Chart No. 5).

Chart No. 5
Number of performances in 1986 – 1990



The theatre identified the specific pattern of repertoire to be offered through its own experience involving faults. In the situation of increase in the number of performances a year the attendance figures started declining. It was especially evident in 1989 when the peak of performance numbers (399) matched the peak of decline in attendance (126 thousand spectators or 317 visitors at one performance). This is because the people willing to go to the theatre in a provincial city like Petrozavodsk are not numerous, as we mentioned before. The permanent theatre audience was small in numbers; however, it was in late 1980-ies that the social and economic changes in the country undermined the methods of ticket distribution which the Soviet theatre was accustomed to by practicing them for many years (see Chart No. 6).

Chart No. 6
Number of spectators in 1986 – 1990

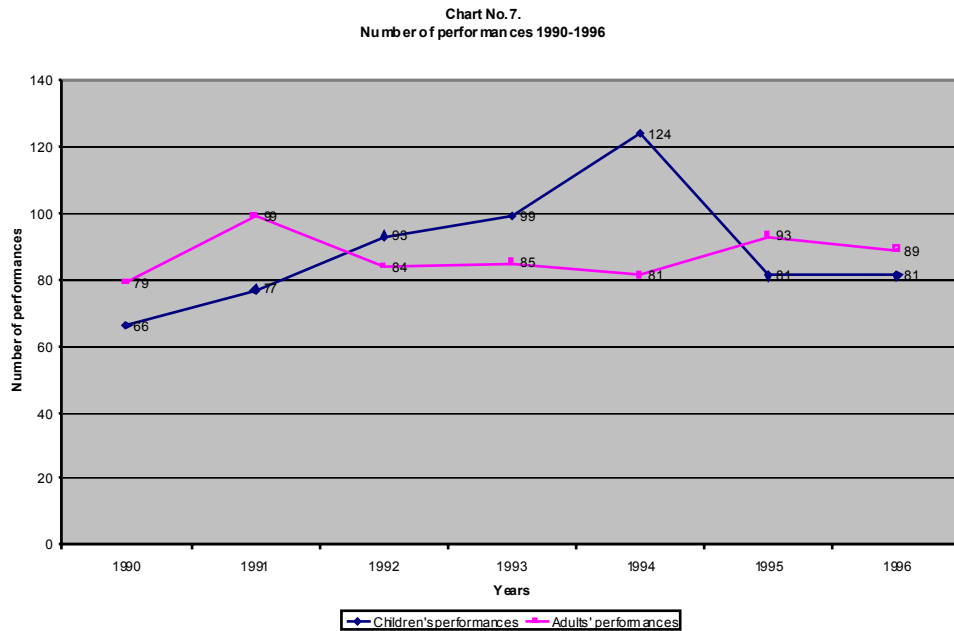


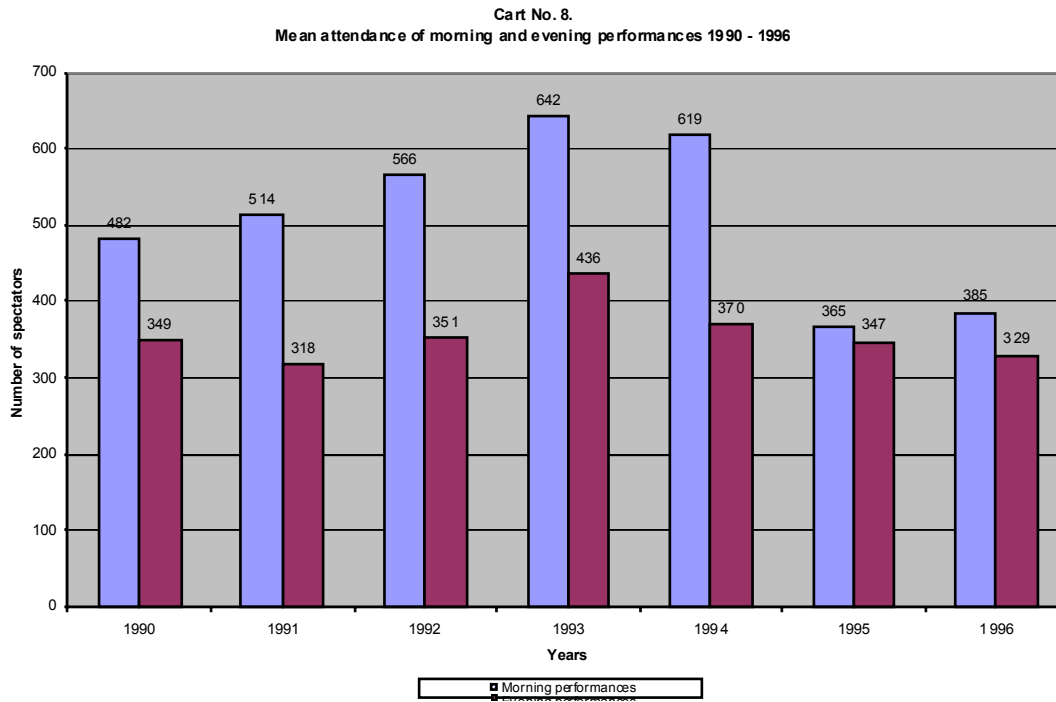
The drop in attendance was as well accounted for by the social and economic cataclysms that were taking place at that period in the society. The people were immersed in entirely different problems; their interests lay within the sphere of social and political life: access to formerly banned literature, disclosure of some tragic pages of Soviet history, appearance of first shoots of market economy, change of the political system – all this moved the theatre art aside, into the background. Life itself was much more dramatic than the theatre.

The first reaction of the theatre administration was to preserve the scope of attendance at the expense of expansion of number of performances played. However, in a city with limited audience the number of persons present at one performance decreases pro rata with the increase in the number of performances. To change this situation, it is necessary to involve some other means of attracting spectators, to extend the established audience of theatre-goers. In the period under review the administration of the Music Theatre did not yet have such skills and technologies.

The Music Theatre of Karelia had some permanent artistic preferences at that period. The chief producer V.A. Shestakov, coming to the theatre in 1985, worked here till 1999. So all fluctuations in the attendance, repertoire and number of new productions may be regarded to have been dependent on the social, political and economic situation in the country and in the city of Petrozavodsk.

In 1990 the theatre changed its policy with respect to repertoire. If the adults had become thoroughly engrossed in politics, the emphasis must be made on children, they decided. The number of performances for children and for grown-ups became commensurable from 1990 to 1996, and at times the number of productions for children exceeded the number of plays for adults, say, 66 children's versus 70 adults' performances in 1990, 124 versus 81 in 1994, 81 versus 89 in 1996 respectively (see Chart No. 7). The attendance of performances for children broke all records: in 1994 the average number of spectators at a single production was 618, with further growth of this index for children's plays (see Chart No. 8).





It seems, the theatre has taken the right decision. Really, it is not possible to extend the audience of spectators in a moment, in the conditions of social cataclysms. The theatre made for thinking about the next day, educating the potential audience. Besides, the expansion of the number of performances for children yielded a momentary effect as well. This was one of the most practical ways to earn money. This is, in the first place, accounted for by the fact that the theatre had shifted to a new system of work with children, which made it possible to increase the earnings and to cover in fact all of the children's population of the city and the environs. At that time the theatre was actively setting up its own stock of vehicles, so it took the children to its performances in its own coaches, sometimes covering the whole body of school – so all the city's schoolchildren had a chance to watch a new production for children, with no exclusion. The theatre organized performances for kindergartens as well. Trips to the theatre were especially popular with the schoolchildren of near-by towns and settlements. One may say that in fact all schools within the radius of 40 kilometres from Petrozavodsk were introduced to theatrical art.

The fact that the theatre collected good money this way probably did not justify the effect achieved by the whole school-class visiting a performance. The theatre did not become the children's theatre, even though over a third of performances on the repertoire of that period were represented by productions for children: 9 of 23 in 1994. The title of Children's Theatre supposes the proper education of its visitors, the introduction to the theatre world, while the collective trips just turn the people away from theatrical art, which is well known. The schoolchild's attention and interests in the auditorium extend anywhere except for the scene. The schoolchild is interested to make impression, to stand out against the other mates. In the junior age, in kindergarten and the first forms at school, the child watches quite attentively what is going on the scene, but his/her concentration can not be durable: he/she gets tired and starts looking aside. The teachers are not able to watch everyone, and the attention of the whole auditorium gets broken. If the child comes to the theatre accompanied by his parents, the above situation does not take place, as during the performance one can always draw the child's attention to something interesting, excite his interest, make necessary explanations. The work with little spectators must be started not in the auditorium, but much earlier, in the class or in the kindergarten group. This is not only the educators' and teachers' concern, as is well known, but the concern of the theatre as such, for the children are the future audience of adult performances. Subsequently, after 1996, the theatre ceased such practice realizing the lack of its prospects.

The number of new productions during that period was quite stable – 4 - 6 items. Normally they included one ballet, one children's play (not counting the New-Year festive performances), one musical (or modern musical comedy) and one classical operetta – both premieres and remakes of former staging.

All that time the theatre had a balanced creative existence. Before 1993 it used to go on grand summer tours of 3 - 4 cities of Russia. The trips to Murmansk Region were permanent: the theatre's attitude to it has been quite special; one can hardly remember a year when the Karelian Music Theatre would miss the visit to

this region. However, in the course of development of the market economy the tours of this large theatre company ceased as they proved to be economically impracticable. It was impossible to recoup the trip at the cost of collection of proceeds from sale of tickets, as far as the residents of the other Russian cities were as insolvent as the people in Petrozavodsk, and the company was not able to find any sponsors to cover such broad-scale projects in their small city. The absence of fresh spirit brought by tour performances affects negatively the life of theatre collective: stagnation starts penetrating the creative work. Of course, this is not the sole reason for destruction of the theatre, but is of great importance.

The other reason for stagnation was the protracted permanency of the directorship. During the fourteen years in his position of chief producer V.A. Shestakov staged over a half of all premieres. It is curious that originally he used to say that the producer should not work in one theatre for more than 7 years, after which his “ageing” takes place; however, he was reluctant to change his way of life bringing the same artistic style in virtually every performance. He worked as well as an administrative director during several last years of his work, which also did not favour the theatre’s development. The administrative activities must be professional, and the former actor – the functioning producer is not able to cope with the huge financial and organisational burden represented by the music theatre.

All the listed circumstances resulted in replacement of artistic director in 1999, in the change of the theatre’s creative credo, staging style and manner of work with the audience. From 1999 till now the Music Theatre of the Karelian Republic is in the process of artistic search.

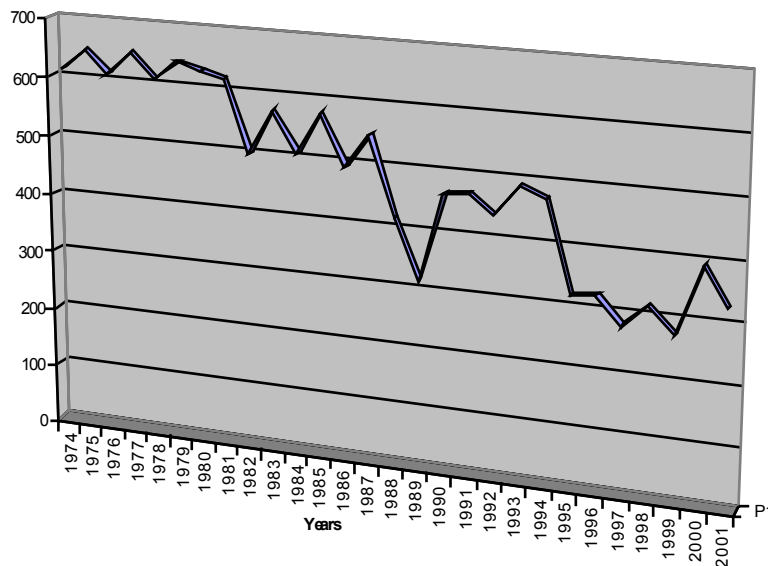
The Russian economy has been stabilizing. We can already see some shoots of the civilized market economy; the legal foundation of cultural activity has strengthened. Though this is a lengthy and complicated process one may talk of predictability of the next day, which is especially important for engaging in business.

A unique personality was invited to be a producer of the Music Theatre. It is a producer who had never staged music performances before, but was engaged in

puppet and drama theatre. The controversial performances, those leading to discussion of the audience, attracted more public to the theatre. The fresh-manner interpretation of the well-known works by I.N. Larin caused wild excitement of some spectators and puzzled irritation of the others. In a small city like Petrozavodsk the hearsay is a well-developed system – people convey rumours and news through their acquaintances and friends. Interested by public excitement, people who had visited the theatre very seldom started frequenting its performances. The attendance went up drastically: the average number of people visiting a performance grew from 278 to 394 within one year (it is over 100 persons!). The next year this figure went down a little: on the average 331 persons were present at each performance, but still this figure exceeded the indices of the past 5 years (1994 – 1998). This fact confirms again the assumption that the circle of theatre-goers is rather scanty and gets exhausted in a short time (see Chart No. 9).

Chart No. 9
Attendance of the theatre in 1974 – 2001

Average number of spectators
of one performance



At the same time the theatre administrative team changed. The new-comers specialists decided to make use of the replacement of the art directorship for the organisation of a large-scale campaign to popularize the theatre. The mass media

started burst into discussion of the new producer, as the theatre's marketing service guided by modern theoretical developments proceeded to realizing active advertising campaigns relating to new productions, and successfully popularized the young producer's image, which had its effect on the rise in attendance of the theatre. It is remarkable that at the period being described the theatre, still realizing the importance of bringing up its own spectator, took up the task of its education differently. In 1998 the company started organizing "excursions round the theatre" for schoolchildren where the latter were acquainted with the work of different shops, organisational structure of the theatre and the process of staging. After such excursions the teenagers traced the course of performance more attentively and expressed their willingness to visit the theatre again. This of course was the very beginning of the work that was to be continued.

By 2000 the scantiness of the audience of the Music Theatre became obvious. The permanent spectators came to watch the performance they liked several times, and that served the basis of daily attendance. It was important to draw young people to the theatre.

The Karelian Music Theatre was one of the first in Russia to use the new information technologies for this purpose. This decision of the administration was accounted for by the fact that Petrozavodsk University had a very good Internet-class since 1996, one of the most proficient in the country, so the young people were aware of their being a new progressive generation due to the very fact that they mastered information technologies.

Internet and other computer technologies may and must become the efficient mechanism of exciting people's interest in theatrical art by way of delivery of the urgent topical information to potential spectator's home. The result was the increase in attendance of the theatre by both regular spectators and new comers. The internet audience is represented mostly by young people. Tomorrow they may become the new audience of the theatre. However, this is but a small part of the advertising

resources of Internet. Maintaining its web-page or site in Internet, the theatre may tell a lot about itself to the theatre-going public and broad audience.

The global information networks are mostly used today for transmission of concrete messages. This concerns not only E-mail: most Internet pages are built according to the principle “What? Where? When?” or have a promotional character. At the same time the potential educational resources of Internet are unlimited. It is possible to develop an information complex introducing some domain of knowledge to the user in the available and even entertaining form. The extent of detail here in terms of education realized as a system of references may be as extensive as possible.

Internet and other information technologies (in particular, CD disks) may become the most efficient form of theatre-related advertising; they may be used for teaching perception of artistic culture and not only for creating messages announcing cultural events.

All this has been added to the arsenal of means undertaken by the Karelian Music Theatre that opened its site www.komart.karellia.ru. During the two years of the site's active functioning the attendance of the theatre by the University students has increased five-fold. The border-line of centuries engendered new active interest of Petrozavodsk residents in their Music Theatre (see Chart No. 6).

I.N. Larin left the theatre in 2002, and the Karelian Republic Music Theatre found itself at the cross-roads again. But the creative team, like the Phoenix from fairy-tales, is rising from ashes again despite any collisions. The theatre is a living organism, and the obsolescent is always being replaced by something new; it is quite probable that some new entity will take shape, having a new look not resembling the previous one.