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The Artistic Decision-Making Process: Who Influences and Who Decides?

Russian theatre and US theatre are, for the most part, managed in quite different manners from the methods of troupe building and repertoire run to the ways of product distribution and audience development. Russian theatres are, in the main, owned and managed by the state, while theatres in the US are, mainly, NGO's operating at arm's length from the government. Funding sources for theatrical presentations in both countries are, taken together the same and include public subsidy, private donors, and sponsors, but the amounts coming from each source differ.

This explores the process of selecting individual theatrical pieces and the process of putting together a theatre season in Russia and the USA. The study considers factors influencing the selection process including:

Cultural background and policy

Funding sources – government, foundations, other donors, etc.

Market forces – box office, nature of the public attending the theatre, etc.

Role of trustees, governing board

Management structure and style

Data was gathered using interviews, annual reports, and related materials from selected theatres in St. Petersburg and Chicago. The authors are convinced that the vast experience, given in the theatrical pictures of these two cities take in and reflect the main typical features of the US and Russian theatrical life. A preliminary comparative analysis of data reveals the degree to which artistic decision-making is similar or different between the two cultures.

Preliminary work suggests that despite significant differences in management and funding between the USA and Russia, freedom of artistic choice lies with the artist, but is influenced by a variety of non-artistic factors and certain long-held beliefs.

Cultural background and policy

We suppose it is appropriate to remind the reader that the overwhelming majority of Russian theatres have several productions in their repertoire at the same time. As a rule, they perform in rotating repertoire. That is, a different work from the repertoire is performed each night. New productions are developed and added to the repertoire using the same troupe of artists that perform each day. And, repertoire strategy defines which performances are excluded from the repertoire, which remain, and which new ones will enrich the theatre's portfolio.

In contrast, the vast majority of theatres in the United States perform a unique season each year. Typically, the season is performed in sequence – one play after another. One work may run for several weeks and then that production ends and the next begins. The presence of a resident troupe of artists is less common in the United States. In the main, actors and directors are employed as needed.

In the US, the non-profit theatre is a relatively recent phenomenon. In less than fifty years, theatres have sprung up on every state of the union. Some have been founded by an artistic leader; others have been inspired by civic leaders or other motivated citizens.

In Russia, for more than two centuries, the Emperor's and then soviet censorship and ideology limited artistic choices and influenced repertoire selection and structure.

In addition, the soviet system established the general framework within which the repertoire of drama, musical, and other theatres was created. The soviet framework also dictated how often a work should be staged during a season and how the repertoire as a whole should be defined. In other words, each theatre had to have in its current repertoire a specific percentage of classical Russian, Soviet (playwrights from different republics of the country) and foreign pieces. The selection of contemporary work was similarly mandated, with one fifth of such work being "contemporary soviet creations." A final obligation in the soviet time was "anniversary productions -- shows produced in celebration or commemoration of important political or historical events. Each year, the entire repertoire plan had to be approved by a special commission of the Ministry of Culture.

Despite all these regulations, the authorized proportions were rarely followed strictly and classical foreign and Russian dramas and comedies from abroad were often included in the repertoire.

In Russia, another important factor in repertoire selection was the size and quality of the troupe. The chief director was obligated to engage the existing staff and keep in mind its abilities and needs. The director did not have authorization to invite an actor from another theatre or a freelance performer to join the company for a particular production or role. Today, the only limitations on inviting artists from outside a company are budgetary.

Of course, all the historical conditions left little space for real artistic choice or thought-over repertoire policy. Nevertheless, quite a few outstanding theatre leaders managed to develop unique theatres with a unique repertoire profile.

About fifteen years ago, the abolition of soviet restrictions and regulations provoked a mass interest in formerly restricted literary material – some of which was not suited to audience demand or theatrical reality and audience demand. But, over the last few years, a conscious artistic approach to repertoire selection has evolved.

Today, by law, the state no longer intervenes in the creative process. Sometime it tries to direct the process to some trend through grant competitions, specially financed programs and orders. But today, the theatre's ideology and current creative activity are out of state control.

In the US, ideology and government regulation have played a less direct role in season selection. With the exception of a brief period in the 1930's, when the Federal Theatre Program was in existence, government has played no direct role in the artistic process. While censorship has, at times, been an issue, the NGO structure and arm's-length principle have prevented direct intrusion in the selection of a season. Intervention by a government body in response to the content or staging a particular work has occurred occasionally, but a governmentally mandated

artistic framework has never existed in the US. That said, community standards, and the ability to attract an audience have been historic factors influencing the selection of seasons in American theatre.

Funding sources – i.e. government, foundations, other donors, etc.

As it was mentioned above, funding sources are the same in the USA and Russia, but the percentages of budget derived from each source in the two countries are quite different.

For the state theatres in Russia, the money from the government (federal or regional) is the main part of the budget. On average it covers about 70% of expenses. The remaining 30% of income usually comes from box office revenues, business sponsorship, foundation support and their own entrepreneurship (buffet, brochure sales, space rental etc.). As a rule, box-office income is important and this means that the economic welfare of Russian theatres depends, in part, upon audience support.

Commonly the main funding sources for new productions are state grants and business sponsorship – the state provides partial underwriting and the remainder is provided by sponsorship. Foundations in the Russian Federation do not yet support such activity and, to date, individual donors are quite scarce.

According to the Theatre Communications Group¹, Theatres in the United States had the following sources of income: (the figures represent a “typical theatre.”)

Earned income comprised 60% of total budget.

1. Subscriptions/season tickets account for 21%
2. Single Ticket Sales account for 24%
3. Other earnings from sources such as classes, program advertising, etc. account for 18%

Contributed Income made up the remaining 40% of budget.

1. Government Funding accounts for 6.6%. (16.5% of the contributed income budget.)
2. Individuals contribute 13% of budget. (32.5% of the contributed income budget.)
3. Foundations contribute 9%. (22.5% of the contributed income budget.)
4. Corporations donate 6%. (15% of the contributed income budget.)
5. Other Contributions, such as bequests, come to 2%. (5% of the contributed income budget.)
6. Fund Raising Events account for 5%. (12.5% of the contributed income budget.)
7. United Arts Funds contributed 1%. (2.5% of the contributed income budget.)

Total funds raised equal 106% because income exceeded expenses for the average theatre.

Marketing – i.e. box office, nature of the public attending the theatre, etc.

In the big cities in Russia, such as St. Petersburg, there are many theatres of different genre, different size, different style, and different location. Each of them tries to occupy its own artistic niche and to conquer and develop its own particular audience. As a rule they have succeeded in this efforts. The older companies have inherited their audience from the past; the younger (10-15 years old) ones have been growing along with their audience and now both categories of the theatres tend to keep their existing audience while cultivating a new one. In large cities in the US, such as Chicago, a similar situation exists.

¹ Voss, Zannie Giraud and Glenn B. Voss, *Theatre Facts*,
<http://www.tcg.org/programs/theatrefacts>.

Marketing efforts in both cities include different kinds of advertising (including the Internet), public relations, direct sales at the box office, through retail outlets and ticket agencies; group sales, and sales agents.

Role of trustees, governing board

For Russian state theatres, which are foundations by legislation, the role of the governing board is undertaken by the state through the cultural authorities. Today they never directly intervene or influence the creative process in supervised organizations. The only instrument, which is used, as was mentioned above, is the special order or special competitions, when the government body announces its special creative demand (e.g. for children, for great date etc) supported by the extra financing. Today they never directly intervene or influence on the creative process in the supervised organizations. The only instrument, which is used, as it was mentioned above, is the special order or special competitions, when the government body announces its special creative demand (e.g. for children, for great date etc) supported by the extra financing.

Boards of trustees are quite rare in the Russian theatres. Theatres, which have established charitable foundations for their own support, have a board of trustees for the foundation, but there are few such foundations. At the same time, each theatre has what might be called “informal trustees” – powerful people loyal to those theatres and who render their assistance in some way. However, such “trustees” do not influence the artistic process.

In the United States, most theatres operate as NGO’s and are required by law to have a board of trustees. Such boards set policy and have fiduciary responsibility for the theatre, but as in Russia, board intervention in the season selection process is unusual.

Management structures and style

Executive of the theatre: For decades in the USSR, theatres were managed and administered by a single authority. The executive director was responsible for everything, and this burden influenced his vision, often giving rise to the conflict with the director of a particular production, strengthening the classical theatrical conflict between creativity and producing.

This situation changed in 1991, and now, according to the State legislation, there are no strict indications or limitations of the profession and background of the theatre leader. In short, the idea is that executive is responsible for the implementation of the theatre’s goals (mission) and accurate financial/tax operation. It means that at the head of the theatre might be chief director and an executive director, both of them, having signed a contract, which distributes responsibilities.

Only in the last decade has the artistic director appeared as an executive in the Russian theatre. The background of these individuals varies widely. One can find among them theatre directors, actors, literary advisers, management professionals, and even production managers. In the other words, they are artists with entrepreneurial qualities or managers with a deep understanding of the arts and a strong sense of taste. Whoever they are, regardless of their background, these artistic directors have in common a high level of professionalism, an understanding of the nature of the theatre, and a clear idea of their organizations’ mission and history. If they are not brilliant in finance or other management disciplines, they try to gather at reliable and skilled that supports their strategy and undertakes its tactical implementation. However, they retain undivided authority to make strategic decisions.

Non-Profit theatre in the US has rarely been led by undivided authority. Traditionally, authority for the overall operation has been shared by an executive director, an artistic director and by the president or chairman of the theatre's board of trustees. Policy decisions have been led by the board leader, with the executive director playing the role of chief administrative officer and the artistic director serving as chief artistic officer. The historic tension between creativity and production management has also existed in the US system, though cooperative teams of collaborators are, more and more, the norm.

For our research, out of all Russia we have chosen St. Petersburg. And in the US, we have selected Chicago. In both cities numerous theatres exist. In part, the selection was dictated by the place of residence of the researchers.

For our research we have selected and questioned six of the most advanced artistic directors of St. Petersburg theatres: two from operas and four from drama. They represent the following theatres: Chamber theatre "St. Petersburg Opera", musical theatre for children "Zazerkalye" (Through the Mirror), Lensoveta Theatre, Theatre "Comedians", Academic drama theatre named after V.Komissarzhevskaya, and Youth theatre on the Fontanka river. All of them are the state run and one founder – the City of St. Petersburg. All, therefore, have the same funding, governing board, and environment. Five of those artistic directors are drama and opera directors by profession and one – literary adviser and theatre critic.

In Chicago we selected five theatres known for artistic quality, but with different size budgets. These theatres are the Goodman Theatre, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, the Court Theatre, Northlight Theatre, and Famous Door Theatre. For a preliminary study, we suggest, that our sample is representative and reflects the general picture. In this group, artistic directors or their close associates were questioned.

Opinion polling gave the following results:

Q. What is the mission of your theatre?

In St. Petersburg:

No one provided a real written mission statement. Each theatre in its Statute has a sentence that states "The purpose and the main goal of the theatre is to produce and perform theatre productions...".

Yet each leader has a kind of credo for his theatre. The variations suggest:

Spectacular theatre - intermediate between the high elite art and mass culture given by the enthralling interpretation of the high quality dramaturgy with efficient use of the creative potential of the troupe; creation of the artistically significant and enthralling repertoire for the theatre patrons and perspective spectators.

Arts for the harmonization of life. Light, sunny and kind theatre. "Spectator, we also seek this, you are not alone, come here and don't be embarrassed!"

Through the mirror space – vision of the world. Staging of masterpieces of world literature in an amusing and musical form mostly for a young audience.

Confession and psychological chamber theatre with actor in its center, talking to the intelligent middle aged audience.

Theatre for people. For different levels of the citizens, understandable to all and public on the base of the qualitative literature.

From the beginning the main idea – the raising and formation of a skilled autonomous troupe. Now - chamber musical theatre as a way of existing and desire to overcome the barriers.

We can see that these credos demonstrate the individuality of each theatre and, if not in an open way, but indirectly each has a vision of their own audience. This section of questionnaire gives the most diverse picture.

In Chicago:

All but one of the artistic leaders stated a specific mission for the theatre.

“We are committed to the principle of ensemble performance through the collaboration of a company of actors, directors, and designers. Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s mission is to advance the vitality and diversity of American theatre by nurturing artists, encouraging repeatable artistic relationships, and contributing new works to the national canon. The company was formed in 1976 by a collective of actors dedicated to perpetuating an ethic of mutual respect and the development of artists through on-going group work.”

“Court Theatre exists to celebrate the immutable power of classic theatre.”

“Northlight’s mission is to serve the people of the North Shore and Chicago – young and old – with work that reflects and challenges their values and ideals.”

“The Mission of the Goodman Theatre is to create extraordinary theatre productions and programs that challenge, entertain, and stimulate the imagination of audiences and enhance the quality of life in our diverse community.”

The artistic director of Famous Door reported, “our mission is evolving but we are committed to staying close to our mid-west roots. We are also committed to our ensemble of actors, directors and designers.”

Q. Do you keep the mission in mind while building the season?

Russia:

Since none has this mission statement nobody keeps it in mind. But each one undoubtedly proceeds from his theatre vision and credo.

Chicago

All reported being guided by the mission in season selection. Other interesting comments included, “The mission influences our season selection, but regional theatre should be in dialogue with its community and the mission should reflect the audience.”

Our mission is large enough to allow real flexibility. We want to appeal to as wide a variety of Chicago audiences as possible.”

Q. Season / new productions / old productions: how you select this year portfolio

St. Petersburg:

Old productions stay in repertoire as many years as possible. The most common reasons for withdrawing the piece are: physical wear of the sets, props etc.; departure of the leading actor; moving into the other building/reconstruction of the stage and, therefore, unsuitability of the new space for the old production; and finally – becoming morally old-fashioned and not actual.

New productions get into the repertoire from the ideas and imagination of the artistic director under the influence of the factors, viewed below.

Chicago:

Unlike the Russian theatres, the artistic direction of the Chicago theatres all reported that they create a completely new season each year. The “portfolio” concept does not exist and works are seldom revived or restaged.

“Most choices are dictated by ensemble participation. Every season is influenced by the artists in the company.”

“We seek classical pieces that resonate with contemporary culture.”

“We are artist driven and talent does affect season choices. We also take ideas from local artists.”

Q. Who else participates in making the decision?

St. Petersburg:

Some of the questioned answered that they “try” the idea on the different members of the organization; one (from the musical theatre) responded that he always adjusts his plans with the chief conductor. But finally all respondents declared autocratic decision making on repertoire.

Chicago:

The directors in Chicago did not report autocratic authority in the process of season selection. Indeed, each of the theatres is committed to collaboration in the selection process. In each theatre, the artistic team and the executive director all played a role in the season selection process.

Q. How do different factors (internal and external) influence decision making?

St. Petersburg:

a) artistic

- artistic choices/aesthetic choices

The main criterion for each one is original repertoire. Some of the artistic directors consider that the season should be balanced from the point of genre, national – foreign, classical – contemporary etc. But for the majority of the artistic directors – active theatre directors their creative potential, dreams, ambitions and desires play the main role in the repertoire choice for their theatres.

Chicago:

Each of the respondents spoke of trying to balance a season. As in Russia, the artistic vision of the directors and the ambitions of the artists play a primary role in play selection.

- *available talent : have and don't have*

St Petersburg:

The power of this factor depends on the artistic leader's credo for his theatre: those, who care much about the employment and development of the troupe, tend to build the repertoire on with the company in mind, which sometime provokes the choice of a play and sometime limits the choice. On the other hand, those who do not care too much about the integrity of their companies or, what is more, desire to bring fresh blood into them, invite single performers for the particular roles – from other theatres or free-lanced, if necessary. In the other words, in our case this factor is important but not crucial.

Chicago:

Three of the companies interviewed are committed to an ensemble of artists. For these theatres, the participation of company members is an important factor. All reported that available talent plays a role in timing the timing of when a particular work might be staged.

b) other factors

- *budget and available resources*

St. Petersburg:

Only one respondent complained on the lack of money for the new productions, or rather for the complete realization of his artistic ambitions. All the others answered that it is an issue, but if their intentions are really strong, the money appears. And very often, if you in fact do not want to implement your idea, this financial question supports the excuse of inactivity.

Other resources, such as space and facilities influence decisions more than the size of the budget. Almost all of the respondents admitted that the size and style of their theatres' spaces define not only the directing manner, but the repertoire choice as well. For instance, chamber stage requires smaller cast plays; fine decoration of the auditorium does not allow ugly, dark and hopeless stories, demanding comedies, tragicomedies and melodramas.

Chicago:

Every one of the artistic leaders interviewed spoke of budgetary issues.

“Until 2002-2003, money has not been an issue. The administration found the dollars. But now, the climate for funding has shifted.”

“Our season must fit the budget!”

“Every play must balance financial viability and merit.”

“Fiscal responsibility is very important”

“There is always a tension between our aspirations and what we can afford. Sometimes this is painful.”

“Budget does play a role in season selection. Production size and audience appeal both affect the selection process.”

- *marketing: the need to fill seats*

St. Petersburg:

Almost in each case the answer is: “Theatre is very popular and is usually full, it’s difficult to buy a single ticket for our performances...”

Chicago:

While some of the theatres enjoy very large subscription audiences, all of those interviewed talked about marketing and the need to fill seats.

“We don’t take direction from marketing, but any programmer must consider the audience and balance. We try to avoid the ‘suicide’ season.”

“Finding a work we know we can sell and even extend is a huge consideration.”

“Community interest and ‘what is hot’ play a role.”

“The arrogance of affluence is not a choice. I must care about what the audience thinks!”

“Marketing and audience development make some difference, but we never selected a play simply because the audience would like it.”

c) audience considerations

- *respecting the old one*

- *development of the new one*

St. Petersburg:

Each theatre desires to keep the old audience and develop a new one, but few really take this issue into consideration. So, the attitude varies: “Yes, naturally we think about our patrons and future spectators, designing the season.” “We need to treat our audience properly.” “Yes, we have to produce more pieces for children by request of the local community.” “If it is interesting for me, it will meet the thoughts of our audience.” “We are so unique and the common audience is too wide, that we will undoubtedly meet each other.”

The nature of the answer depends, in part, on the extent to which the particular artistic director is involved into the marketing process, how the artist and executive are balanced in terms of personality. If the first part prevails over the second, executive does not think at all about marketing and audience in particular. On the other hand, quite often, artistic directors rely on the efforts of the managing directors and in the successful cases even don’t notice those efforts.

Chicago:

As in St. Petersburg, each of the theatres reported trying to maintain an existing audience while developing a new one. Several of the theatres reported engaging the audience in “active conversation” through a variety of methods such as post performance conversations or focus groups. Others stated that they were seeking ways to attract younger audience. For example, one leader stated, “We will host a singles evening.” Another said, “An engaged audience perceives you as their theatre.”

d) other external factors

- *political situation*

St. Petersburg:

Does not influence at all. But the social, public and historical environment (like 300 anniversary of St. Petersburg) might provoke some particular ideas.

Chicago:

Each of the respondents was acutely aware of the political situation in the US and in the world and each reported that this influenced their artistic choices.

“We respond to the political moment without doing political theatre.”

“We always try to respond the world situation.”

“We are responsive to the world around us and we try to make important statements in response to reality.”

- *outside funders*

St Petersburg:

They influence as much as the destiny of the future production depends on their money. But none has told - even if it is not always true - that outside funders intervene or dictate something concerning the artistic choice and creativity.

Chicago:

All of the theatres depend upon fund raising to supply a significant percentage of the operating budget, but none reported being influenced artistically by a funder. One respondent did state, “If funds are available for a certain kind of activity, a Latino Theatre Festival, for example, and we are already interested in such a thing, we can be encouraged with money.” None reported being pressured by funders to make particular artistic choices.

- *competition (competitive situation)*

St. Petersburg:

Two out of six respondents admitted that they keep in mind the competitive situation in the city and seek pieces that provide high visibility. But, it is not always a struggle for spectators; sometime it turns into a fight for the glory and recognition.

The other four, which undoubtedly also deserve glory and recognition, are convinced that their theatres are unique, occupy their unique niches and cannot worry about competition. By this theory, single creators compete, while theatres do not. We suppose that these respondents are not completely frank, and each of them thinks much about competition.

Chicago:

Most of the respondents defined competition broadly and included not only other theatres, but also other art forms and even the cinema. Only one reported that their company was unique and had no real competition. Several viewed their company as a part of the theatre industry as a whole and saw that industry competing for consumer attention with other entertainment choices.

Conclusion

Despite significant differences in outlook, season structure and funding, artistic leaders in both St. Petersburg and Chicago seem to have high level of artistic freedom. In every case, the personality of the artistic leader clearly plays an important role in artistic decision making. Significant differences appear to exist vis-à-vis attitudes toward the audience and regarding marketing. This may well be caused by the higher need for box office revenues in the US, but there may be more here. The effort to engage the audience in dialogue suggests something more than an interest in ticket sales.

The general picture is colorful and monochromatic at the same time. On one side, each of the theatres in both countries has its bright individuality and vision. Yet in 2003, despite politics, funding issues, and a variety of regulations, the theatre thrives and artistic expression seems to be almost unencumbered by political or financial factors.