



Bolshoi Confidential: Secrets of the Russian Ballet from the Rule of the Tsars to Today

Simon Morrison

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An enthralling, definitive new history of the Bolshoi Ballet, where visionary performances onstage compete with political machinations backstage.

On a freezing night in January 2013, a hooded assailant hurled acid in the face of the artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet. The crime, organized by a lead soloist, dragged one of Russia's most illustrious institutions into scandal. The Bolshoi Theater had been a crown jewel during the reign of the tsars and an emblem of Soviet power throughout the twentieth century. Under Putin in the twenty-first century, it has been called on to preserve a priceless artistic legacy and mirror Russia's neo-imperial ambitions. The attack and its torrid aftermath underscored the importance of the Bolshoi to the art of ballet, to Russia, and to the world.

The acid attack resonated far beyond the world of ballet, both into Russia's political infrastructure and, as renowned musicologist Simon Morrison shows in his tour-de-force account, the very core of the Bolshoi's unparalleled history. With exclusive access to state archives and private sources, Morrison sweeps us through the history of the storied ballet, describing the careers of those onstage as well as off, tracing the political ties that bind the institution to the varying Russian regimes, and detailing the birth of some of the best-loved ballets in the repertoire.

From its disreputable beginnings in 1776 at the hand of a Faustian charlatan, the Bolshoi became a point of pride for the tsarist empire after the defeat of Napoleon in 1812. After the revolution, Moscow was transformed from a merchant town to a global capital, its theater becoming a key site of power. Meetings of the Communist Party were hosted at the Bolshoi, and the Soviet Union was signed into existence on its stage. During the Soviet years, artists struggled with corrosive censorship, while ballet joined chess tournaments and space exploration as points of national pride and Cold War contest. Recently, a \$680 million restoration has restored the Bolshoi to its former glory, even as prized talent has departed.

As Morrison reveals in lush and insightful prose, the theater has been bombed, rigged with explosives, and reinforced with cement. Its dancers have suffered unimaginable physical torment to climb the ranks, sometimes for so little money that they kept cows at home whose milk they could sell for food. But the Bolshoi has transcended its own fraught history, surviving 250 years of artistic and political upheaval to define not only Russian culture but also ballet itself. In this sweeping, definitive account, Morrison demonstrates once and for all that, as Russia goes, so goes the Bolshoi Ballet.

16 pages of illustrations

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