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COLD WAR TENSIONS.

BY JASMINE BUMPERS


DIPLOMACY

On January 1, 1986, members of the Empire State Institute for the Performing Arts (ESIPA) arrived in Moscow to perform an

American musical. *Rag Dolly*, based on the Raggedy Ann book series, told the tale of a dying girl named Marcella, who dreams her Raggedy Ann doll and other toys come to life and take her on an adventure. They look for the doll doctor, whom they hope can cure Raggedy Ann, all while being hunted by the villain General D. After two previews earlier in the week, *Rag Dolly* officially premiered in Moscow on January 8 and was very well received. The Russian audience greatly enjoyed an elaborate style of theater that most were unaccustomed to seeing; one that included not only acting, but singing, dancing, and special effects, such as fireworks and trapdoors. *Izvestia*, a Russian newspaper, called *Rag Dolly* "well produced ... captivating ... (and containing) wonderful music." Each performance ended with several curtain calls, flowers thrown out on stage, and many lengthy standing ovations. ESIPA's highly publicized trip to Moscow was the first time in nearly a decade that an American theater company had performed in the Soviet Union. They were there due in part to a seemingly unrelated event.

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Rag Dolly cast members in Red Square



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Russian audiences enjoyed the elaborate theatrical style of the American production and Rag Dolly cast members found the Soviets to be hospitable.

Sanctions

On Christmas Eve 1979, the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan to provide military support to the country's newly established communist regime. President Carter viewed this move as a major threat to peace and stability and reacted swiftly, imposing economic sanctions on the Soviets and lending aid to the mujahideen insurgents fighting the communists. An additional,

lesser known consequence of the invasion was that it resulted in the US declining to renew their cultural exchange agreement with the Soviet Union. Government and privately funded institution-to-institution exchanges of the arts between the Americans and Soviets, which blossomed under the Nixon era during a brief thaw in icy relations, were halted. This ban on cultural exchanges continued under President Reagan, whose foreign policy doctrine continued to escalate tensions.

In an effort to improve strained diplomatic relations, Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev met for the first time in Switzerland at the Geneva Summit on November 19, 1985. Albeit limited, the Geneva Summit did lead to a small series of formal agreements, including one centered on the resumption of cultural exchanges between the US and Soviet Union. A cultural exchange

between American and Soviet youth theaters, the Empire State Institute for the Performing Arts (ESIPA), and the Moscow Musical Theatre for Children, was agreed upon as the first that would take place.

ESIPA, originally known as the Empire State Youth Theatre Institute (ESYTI), was established in 1974 by the New York State Legislature and was the first theater for young people mandated by state law in the country. It was an outgrowth of the theater program based at the University at Albany and operated under the jurisdiction of the State University system. ESYTI's artistic director, Patricia Snyder, had advocated for the creation of a professional theater for children that would also provide educational services and programs to assist teachers in incorporating the arts into regular school curriculum. In 1982, ESYTI became a joint endeavor between the State University of New York

and the Empire State Plaza Performing Arts Corporation.

The Moscow Musical Theatre for Children was founded by Natalia Sats. The daughter of a composer, she began producing, staging, and directing ballet, puppet, and marionette performances for children as a teenager. In 1918, at the age of 15, she founded the Children's Theatre of the Moscow Soviet, the world's first children's theater. In 1936, she commissioned Sergei Prokofiev to compose a symphony for children, *Peter and the Wolf*. Sats's career came to a halt in 1937, when she was arrested for being associated with a traitor to the motherland. She was sentenced to a Siberian labor camp for five years. After being released, she was exiled to Kazakhstan. In 1957, Sats was "rehabilitated" and returned to Moscow. In 1964, she founded the Moscow Musical Theatre for Children, a professional institute where "children would not be occasional visitors, but masters of the house."

First Exchange

Though selected by both governments for the new agreement's first exchange, similar efforts had been initiated two years earlier by the institutes' directors. Snyder and Sats met in the early 1970s and became friends through their participation with the International Children's Theatre Association. Snyder described her relationship with Sats as one centered on

a shared commitment: "I always felt we were of one spirit in terms of our professional work. We see the necessity of introducing young children to the wonder and enchantment of theater—theater that will provoke them, anger them, [and] excite them." Sats brought up the idea of an exchange between their two institutes and in September 1984, Snyder traveled to Moscow to meet with Sats and Deputy Minister of Culture of the USSR George Ivanov to discuss the idea. All agreed that an exchange of theatrical culture between the US and the Soviet Union would be important. In a letter, Snyder told Ivanov: "I am convinced that if our children can experience one another's culture through theatre, our mutual understanding, friendship, and meaningful discourse can become a reality." Snyder also received support from members of the US government, most notably Reagan's national security advisor, Robert McFarlane.

Snyder, Sats, and Ministry of Culture official Irina Mikheeva held a series of Albany meetings between December 14-17, 1984. During that time, Sats and Mikheeva saw a full production of *Rag Dolly*, ESIPA's newest show. Both Sats and Mikheeva were impressed and expressed interest in bringing the production to Sats's theater. In March 1985, it was tentatively agreed upon that ESIPA would bring *Rag Dolly* to Moscow and the Moscow Musical Theatre would go to

Albany to perform *Peter and the Wolf*, *The Blue Bird*, a ballet; and *Miracle Music*, a comic opera.

Rag Dolly

After several more months of negotiations, the new agreement was signed and *Rag Dolly* finally arrived in Moscow. Rehearsals ran from January 2-5, 1986, at the Moscow Musical Theatre for Children. All the actors and actresses in the production were American, but most of the stage technicians and half of the orchestra were Soviets. The performances ran from January 6-12. In addition to

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Rag Dolly, the musical's composer, Joe Raposo, held a special concert where he performed songs he had written and composed for Sesame Street. The children at the show happily sang along to "C is for Cookie" and the show's theme, "Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?"

Snyder (left) and Sats (right)

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Miracle Music, a comic opera, was one of three productions offered by the Russians during their visit.

“LET ME HOPE OUR EXCHANGE IS ONLY THE BEGINNING...AND LET THE RICH FLOWERS OF OUR FRIENDSHIP BE FLOWERS FOR OUR CHILDREN.”

In their off time, the ESIPA troupe went to Vladimir Lenin's tomb and most were able to catch a ballet or circus show toward the end of their busy trip. Some cast and crew members, however, felt they had few opportunities to explore Moscow the way they would have liked and that their movements seemed too orchestrated. Others voiced different frustrations. Actor Gibby Brand, who played Marcella's father, thought he wasn't given the opportunity to interact with Soviet actors: "I came here to find out how Soviet actors work, how they live, but I haven't had a chance to do that. So far the only Soviet people I've really talked to are our interpreters." Musician Sam Farkis believed they were always being watched: "I get the feeling the Big Eye is on us all the time." However, most of the ESIPA cast and crew viewed the exchange favorably. Scott Schafer, who played Raggedy Andy, called his time in Moscow "fabulous" and said the Soviet

crowds were "the most appreciative audiences I ever worked in front of." Raposo said he found the Soviets to be extremely hospitable: "I haven't been so well taken care of since I left my mother." ESIPA production manager, Bonnee Scott Alexander, felt the exchange was a success. She said, "Seeing our Soviet peers has broken down barriers caused by a lack of information."

Albany Trip

The Moscow Musical Theatre for Children's trip to Albany occurred five months later. Showings of *Miracle Music*, an operetta involving a quirky detective and his dog in search of a stolen gem; *The Blue Bird*, the company's signature ballet piece centered on the magical journey of two children seeking the Blue Bird of Happiness; and *Peter and the Wolf*, the classic symphonic fairytale narrated in English by Natalia Sats, were held between June 4-16 at ESIPA's home base, The Egg. *The Blue Bird* and *Peter and*

the Wolf received rave reviews, though some local newspapers were a bit critical of *Miracle Music*. However, the crowds of Capital Region-area children were less judgmental. They cheered and presented gifts to the troupe.

Members of the Russian company not in rehearsal traveled to various local elementary schools during the visit. One noteworthy trip was to the Maplewood School, the only area school offering Russian classes. For the students, interacting with members of the Moscow Musical Theatre was a once in a lifetime opportunity that allowed them to see that they weren't "like Martians or something." These visits were also eye-opening for the performers, who commented on how similar American and Soviet children were. Rokšana Sats Karpova, Natalia's daughter, who moderated the Maplewood visit, told the students that it was "nice to see you are so much like our children in Moscow."

The Moscow Musical



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Sats considered the exchange a wonderful opportunity for people from different cultures to interact.

Theatre showcased three different productions that did not include the whole troupe in each one. As a result, they had a lot of downtime. Many enjoyed Thatcher State Park hikes, Lake George cruises, and mall visits. Meeting the Pointer Sisters after the trio's concert at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC) was a highlight for the Russians, who were big fans. The troupe's impressions of Americans and the United States were mainly positive. Several commented that they found the landscape to be similar to theirs and American

food to be not much different from the food back home.

Regarding the idea of cultural exchanges, the Soviets said it was a wonderful opportunity for people from different cultures to learn from each other and see they share more similarities than differences. At the Moscow company's farewell party, Sats told those in attendance: "All of us here stand forever for peace and friendship. Let me hope our exchange is only the beginning ... and let the rich flowers of our friendship be flowers for our children."

Return Trip

The visits resulted in more exchanges between the two companies. ESIPA returned to Moscow in 1988 with a production of *Peter Pan*, and the Moscow Musical Theatre conducted two additional tours in Albany in 1989 and 1990. Cultural exchanges between the two theaters ceased with the Sats's death in 1993, her friendship with Snyder being the main impetus for the exchanges, but tours between other American and Russian cultural institutions continued to flourish throughout the nineties and still take place today.

For several years ESIPA, renamed the New York State Theatre Institute (NYSTI) in 1992 after it was reconfigured as a public benefit corporation, continued to introduce children at home and abroad to theater through original and adapted classical productions until its closing in 2011. The Moscow Musical Theatre for Children, renamed the Natalya Sats Musical Theater in honor of its longtime director, continues to serve as one of the world's leading theaters for children. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Several collections of records generated by NYSTI and its predecessor entities are at the New York State Archives. *Travel Abroad Records* include correspondence, cargo lists, technical requirements, itineraries, contracts, budget information, and other records. Correspondence between Snyder and officials in Washington and Moscow were used to trace the origins and progress of the 1986 exchange. Daily itineraries were especially useful, as they outlined the movements of each troupe during their respective tours. *Press Releases*, which cover the years 1984-86, contained information on the history of ESIPA, provided biographical information on Natalia Sats, and gave detailed descriptions of the *Rag Dolly* musical. *News Clippings* is a compilation collected by ESIPA which document the exchange.

For classroom activities related to this article, see our Educator Guide at www.nysarchivestrust.org/education/educator-guide-new-york-archives-magazine