



Photo courtesy of Jack Devant ballet photography

Dancing towards Revolution in Kyiv

Blair A. Ruble

The rhythmic hip-hop-like chants of protest exploded just as the final curtain came down on the flower-laden ballet dancers and the musicians who had performed with them. Within seconds, the bright lights of TV crews who had forced their way into the orchestra seats overwhelmed as-yet-dim house lights when suddenly – as if on a cue from a cameraman – four white banners poured out of the fourth balcony enveloping the hall below. To ever louder chants of “*Handba! Handba! Handba!*” (“Shame! Shame! Shame!”), the banners demanded that the National Ballet of Ukraine retain their artistic director Denys Matvienko. The sumptuous Kyiv Opera House exploded in chaos after a stunning performance on April 13, 2013.

The Kyiv theater has seen more than its fair share of politics-inspired disruptions since opening in 1901. Most notoriously, on September 12 (September 1 Old

Style), 1911, Nicholas II’s unforgivingly conservative Interior and Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin stood up after the second act of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, turning his back to the stage next to a ramp between the parterre and orchestra seats. Perhaps the Prime Minister had decided to use the intermission to check out the Royal Box, where Nicholas and his two oldest daughters, the Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana, had been watching the luxurious production. His personal body guard evidently viewed the break as an opportunity to sneak off for a surreptitious smoke. More than two score security guards posted around the hall similarly disappeared just as Dmitry Bogrov – the son of a local Jewish merchant family, secret police informer, and self-proclaimed anarchist revolutionary – determinedly approached Stolypin. Bogrov raised his gun and fired; two shots hit Stolypin in the arm

and chest. The Prime Minister died a few days later with the assassin's execution coming shortly there after, leaving behind a tangle of conspiracy theories which continue a century later.

Nothing so dramatic or lethal occurred after the ballet performance in April 2013; yet an act of intrigue once again presaged regime collapse. In this instance, a weak, incompetent, and corrupt Ukrainian regime would be run out of the country a scant ten months later.

The National Ballet of Ukraine has managed to remain a national treasure despite all of the political, financial, and artistic upheavals of the past quarter-century. Like many other Soviet companies, the Kyiv Ballet needed a dusting off once the country fell apart and cultural institutions long dependent on state munificence were tossed into the international arts marketplace. The company's ballet school continued to produce a steady stream of world-class performers – especially male dancers – who headed out across the globe. Oftentimes they signed with international companies. New York's American Ballet Theater has hired numerous Kyiv-trained soloists and Corps members of note. Kyiv dancers nonetheless return home whenever their schedules permit them to take time away from leading companies in Moscow, St. Petersburg, London and New York. The company has become, as former US Ambassador to Ukraine William Green Miller, once quipped, "the best company money can't buy."

Denys Matvienko was among those who chose to return. A native of Dniepropetrovsk, Matvienko spent his career dancing in Kyiv, while also serving as a leading soloist in Moscow, St. Petersburg, New York, Tokyo, and Milan. Approaching his mid-

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thirties, he was lured back to Kyiv in November 2011 to serve as the company's Artistic Director and to perform whenever possible. He quickly set out to introduce more contemporary ballets to the company's repertoire. Moving on two fronts, Matvienko added new verve to the company's standard repertoire. For example, he replaced the Pitipa's well-worn choreography for Minkus' *La Bayadère* with a more modern and energetic 1980s version choreographed by the incomparable Natalia Makarova for London and New York audiences. Simultaneously, Matvienko invited exciting contemporary artists to bring their works to Kyiv, including Edward Clug, a Romanian dancer whose striking choreography has made the Slovene National Theater one of the most exciting companies of its size anywhere. Clug quickly added the Ukrainian capital to his global network of partner companies.

The April 13 program combined two of Clug's most successful and beloved works: *Radio and Juliet*, a retelling of the Shakespeare love story to the music of Radiohead; and *Quarto*, a striking abstract chamber piece featuring two pairs of male-female dancers on stage with a pianist and cellist. Matvienko and his wife Anastasia, who was born in Crimea, made *Radio and Juliet* their signature piece, while Kyiv's astonishing young dancers performed *Quarto* (a piece which has won praise from around



Photo of Radio and Juliet. <http://www.parter.ua/en/event/42/51/3546.html>

the world including a prestigious Russian Golden Mask Award) as handsomely as any company to be found. Kyiv audiences embraced Matvienko's vision, making the ballet a magnet for the expanding younger post-independence generation of professionals and entrepreneurs.

Local audiences were not alone as the excitement surrounding Matvienko's presence electrified some of the world's leading stages. In February 2005, for example, Jennifer Dunning wrote almost breathlessly in *The New York Times*, that:

Denis and Anastasia Matvienko, married dancers from the Kiev [sic] and Bolshoi Ballets, provided more than enough excitement. She is a stylish dancer, but it was he who stirred the crowd to noisy delirium in the "Diana and Acteon" *pas de deux*, hurling himself about like a throwback to the days of wildly exhibitionistic star dancing by the likes of Rudolf Nureyev and Alexander Godunov, whom Mr. Matvienko resembles slightly. Dressed in what seemed to be an animal-skin loincloth, blond hair flying, he partnered his ballerina as if she were prey

whose flesh he was about to devour and ended the piece by looking as if he were going to jump into her arms for a final, unconventional ballet catch.¹

Matvienko's leadership symbolized everything that post-independence Kyiv youth wanted for their country: something that was fresh, high energy, edgy, and internationally appreciated, especially in the West. They embraced his regime as a symbol of a new Ukraine that would be within their grasp if only their country's boorish, traditional in a Soviet-sort of way, and corrupt leaders would just get out of their way.

A couple of days before the April 13 eruption inside the Kyiv Opera House, the leadership of the theater and their masters at the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture – run by particularly distasteful cronies of the country's convicted criminal-turned-president Viktor Yanukovich – "fired" Matvienko as the company's artistic director. Citing artistic and personal differences, the Opera Theater's management revealed in a bizarre announcement that Matvienko had never been "hired" at all. Evidently, once Matvienko signed his contract in November 2011, management sent his employment

documents to superiors who never had been bothered to countersign.

In a press conference on the eve of the April performances Matvienko told reporters:

*At the beginning of February, I found out that I am not the artistic director of the ballet company of the Kiev [sic] Opera and never have been. It was just before the premier of *La Bayadère* and I did not say anything immediately to not cause a stir. The Director of the Kiev [sic] Opera confirmed this fact. It turns out that my contract, submitted in November, is not signed. During this time I was leading the company, giving statements on tour, while not knowing that I didn't hold the role. This is a flagrant violation, cheating me and my artists.²*

The Matvienkos decamped for St. Petersburg, where they continue to dance as among the renowned Mariinsky's most popular Principal Dancers. But they did not do so before Denys Matvienko appeared in the mutinous audience assembled on April 13 to watch substitutes Aniko Rekhviashvili and Anastisia Shevchenko (the latest in a long line of Kyiv-produced rising global ballet stars) exquisitely perform in the Matvienkos' signature roles in *Radio and Juliet*.

The world of post-Soviet ballet has been marked at times by as much drama off-stage as on. Just weeks before Matvienko's "dismissal" in Kyiv, the Bolshoi attracted its share of unwanted headlines after an attacker paid by disgruntled soloist Pavel Dmitrichenko threw acid into the face of artistic director Sergei Filin in a dispute over performance assignments. Only a few years earlier the Bolshoi

attracted further notoriety when management terminated the contract of prima ballerina Anastasia Volochkova for being too tall and heavy. Matvienko's conflicts with management, however, assumed meaning beyond personal and artistic differences.

Under President Yanukovich, a number of key educational, scientific, and cultural appointments had been turned over to strikingly incompetent supporters and party members who appeared to be more interested in collecting tribute than enhancing standards. Within this context, the public humiliation of a hero of Kyiv's western-oriented youthful elite instantly became entwined with growing anger over what they saw as an illegitimate regime. The shouts from the top balcony of the opera house, the flying banners, and carefully orchestrated appearance of television cameras to record the fiasco – and its retelling in social media and at city coffeehouses in the days and weeks to follow – was about more than the ballet. It was an early salvo in a growing rebellion against the Yanukovich regime itself. Protests erupted a few months later in November 2013 after Yanukovich refused to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union, touching off weeks of at times bloody civil strife which ended with the President and many of his minions fleeing the country in February.

The history of the performing arts overflows with demonstrations and conflicts which often are about clashes well beyond the interior of any theater. Paris was rocked between 1752 and 1754 by the *Querelle des Buffas*, a struggle between proponents of comic Italian *opera buffa* and defenders of French *tragédie lyrique*, a genre favored by supporters of the royal court. The conflict began with a riotous attack on itinerant Italian comic actors (*buffoni*) during

a performance of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* at the Académie royale de musique. Paris quickly divided into defenders of a national French style led by Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Friedrich Melchior Grimm, and Christoph Willibald Gluck, and champions of Italian music such as Niccoló Piccinni. Opera served as a surrogate for a conflict between an emerging new French statist-nationalism on the one hand and cosmopolitan embrace of European cultural styles on the other.

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About a century later, in May 1849, one of the worst riots in New York City history exploded as Irish and American working class supporters of the native actor Edwin Forrest surrounded and attacked the Astor Opera House where the English actor William Charles Macready was performing *Macbeth* before an audience of upper class Anglophiles. The three sided-melee pitting immigrant, nativist, and upper class New Yorkers against one another left some 25 dead and 120 injured before the city police and state militia restored order. The immediate cause may have been the serendipitous appearance of the era's two leading Shakespearean actors performing the same role in theaters just a few blocks from one

another on the same night. More importantly, New York was a city increasingly divided by class, race, and national origin; divisions that would continue to disturb public order in the decades ahead.

More legendarily, the premier of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* by Diaghilev's Ballet Russes at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on April 2, 1913 erupted in shouting and derisive laughter even before conductor Pierre Monteaux took up his baton. Protests became ever more intense as the dancers on stage began to perform Vaslav Nijinski's choreographed rites of maiden sacrifice. Anger grew as mockery turned into physical attacks throughout the evening. The uproar lasted until Maria Piltz's final "Sacrificial Dance," spilling over into the city's most fashionable neighborhoods. Class and incompatible visions of the future collided; pitting fashionable traditionalists against modernists wishing for a new order throughout a Europe perched on the edge of a cataclysmic century ahead.

The raucous upper balcony protestors in Kyiv and their sympathetic supporters in lower tiers of the Kyiv Opera House were going far beyond showing support for their dismissed idol, Denys Matvienko. They were proclaiming their collective disgust with the incompetent and corrupt state officials who forced him to leave. Unlike other more famous theatrical clashes, the audience warmly embraced the evening's performances of both *Radio and Juliet*, and *Quarto*. Instead, they saved their ire for, to their minds, the illegitimate decision-makers who were stealing their world from them. While there is no way of knowing for sure, many if not most of the evening's protestors undoubtedly appeared on the city's streets during the Euromaidan protests

that eventually dispatched Yanukovych and his foul hangers-on from their country months later.

French economist and former President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Jacques Attali has written that music often has presaged broad social, political, and ideological shifts.³ Music and other performing arts, he argues, reflect a future that is being born because they give form and structure to people's deepest fears and hopes about the world around them.

The Matvienkos continued to thrive in St. Petersburg despite a string of nasty injuries and the growing Russian-Ukrainian conflict of the past year. In November 2014, Denys Matvienko had a triumphant return to Kyiv to lead a reformed National Ballet of Ukraine in an imposing new production of *The Great Gatsby*. Described as the most ambitious ballet project ever undertaken in Ukraine, Matvienko managed once again to place his artistry at the center of the on-going drama of Ukrainian transformation.

Endnotes

- 1 Jennifer Dunning, "A Night of Fun as the International Stars Turn," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2007.
- 2 "Denis Matvienko is 'fired' as artistic director of the Kiev ballet," *Gramilano. Ballet. Opera, Photography*, April 9, 2013.
- 3 Jacques Attali, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France], 1977, as translated in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

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-  202.691.4100



Blair Ruble

Vice President for Programs
Wilson Center
blair.ruble@wilsoncenter.org

Blair A. Ruble is currently Vice President for Programs at the Wilson Center, Director of the Urban Sustainability Laboratory, and Senior Advisor to the Kennan Institute. He served as the long-time Director of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies (1989-2012) as well as of the Wilson Center's Comparative Urban Studies Program (1992-2012).

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027