

Odessa, and its opera house a short history

Earlier this year I took a holiday, cruising on the Dnieper from Kiev to the Black Sea, with shore excursions to some of the cities and towns along the way. Two days in Kiev offered no opera (but on the evening of our departure there was an *Aida*), to come, however, was a visit to Odessa and as a pause in my usual articles I thought that a little information about the city and its remarkable opera house would not come amiss.

The site of the city was anciently a Greek colony and over the centuries it formed part of the Kievan Rus, the Golden Horde, the Khanate of Crimea, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Ottoman Empire. It fell into the hands of Catherine the Great in 1792 as a result of the Russo-Turkish Wars. The city was named Odessa in 1795.

For his services in the victorious Russian army a French aristocrat fleeing the Revolution at home was appointed both Governor of the region and Mayor of the city by Tsar Alexander I. This was Armen-Emmanuel-Sophie-Septimanie Du Plessis de Richelieu, émigré *duc* de Richelieu (scion, of course, of the descendance of the celebrated Cardinal). Under his inspired guidance the port was greatly enlarged and the city prospered, indeed with such an influx of traders and visitors that Richelieu wrote to the Minister of the Interior "*Given the rising population of the city it would be useful to have a theatre*". To many this was incredible, no provincial Russian city had such a theatre, but the Tsar duly accorded a sum of twenty thousand roubles. The building was completed within five years and opened in July 1809¹ In it Italian opera reigned supreme for most of the decades that followed. The poet Alexander Pushkin in exile, from his room in the Hotel Renault, had an excellent view of the theatre. He wrote:

*"But now as the blue evening darkens,
We make haste toward the opera,
Where sings the troubadour Rossini,
Of Europe's entertainer-Orpheus".*

With the restoration of the French monarchy in 1815 the *duc* de Richelieu left for his homeland. In his honour the city council raised a statue to him in 1825; it shows him dressed in a toga, crowned with laurels, manuscript scroll in one hand, the other offering a greeting as he strides towards the sea to welcome his guests. It stands at the very top of the infamous Potemkin Steps which lead down to the waterfront.

Tragedy struck in January 1873 when the theatre was destroyed by the inevitable nineteenth-century conflagration. Two years later the city council started to develop plans for a new theatre - this time consent

coming from Tsar Alexander III. The architects chosen in 1882 were the Viennese partnership of Ferdinand Fellner and Herman Helmer who had already designed theatres and concert halls in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Sofia, Budapest and Zagreb. The new theatre which seats 1,664 people and extravagantly mixing the styles of Viennese Baroque, Italian Renaissance and French Rococo, opened in October 1887. Sadly a geological fault soon made an appearance, the foundations were constantly moving with ever-widening cracks in the walls. Due to this fault, by 1900 the east side of the theatre was thirteen centimetres lower than the west side. By late 1980 it was said that the opera house resembled a rose slowly opening its petals as cracks appeared throughout, from roof to below ground level. The theatre had to close. In 1996 it was decided to save the building. It was pointless to start restoration without strengthening the foundations. This task was undertaken by the Scientific Research Institute of Construction of Kiev. The method chosen was the placing of the building on a raft of stilts. Bore holes were drilled to a depth of between thirteen and eighteen metres, a steel frame was placed and then a first stilt established with concrete pumped-in under pressure. This was left twenty-eight days to harden. The first stilt was placed in September 1998 and the last in October 2001. The theatre is now firmly anchored to the bedrock. The scaffolding surrounding the walls was taken-down in 2006, since then restoration on all five floors took place, the original decor of cream and gold in the auditorium has been retained together with the ceiling-painting of Scenes from Shakespeare's plays. The old heavy stage-equipment has been removed and a new lighter apparatus installed. Air Conditioning has been totally modernised [originally huge blocks of ice and straw were lowered down a thirty-five foot shaft where workers would carry it through a tunnel to the basement of the house where cool air could be wafted upwards through vents below the seats!]

My photograph shows the main entrance façade. The sculpture at the summit displays Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy in her chariot drawn by four panthers. She presides above two divinities: Apollo playing his lyre to a Centaur; and Terpsichore, Muse of Dancing, with a female adept. On either side of the entrance are sculptured groups "The Birds" by Aristophanes and "Hippolytus" by Euripides. The opera house, now, hopefully, will have reopened. A new season was advertised for October 2007 with *Tosca* and *Rigoletto* together with a *Giselle* from the ballet company. As for the city itself with its wide tree-lined streets, parks, statues, fountains and elegant buildings (though a blur of modern brutalism has crept in here and there), it fully deserves the legacy of the noble *duc* as the "Paris of the East"

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1. Some reference books give a date of February 1810. This notwithstanding, the construction of the Odessa Opera House predates the Bol'shoy (1825) and the Maryinsky (1860) and it is the first public opera house in the former Russia.