

"Black Square" Becomes an Opera

The premiere will be surrounded by the works that inspired it

By [Andrei Muchnik](#)

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Ilya Demutsky has composed operas and ballets for such prestigious stages as the Bolshoi Theater.

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Next week a new opera entitled "Black Square" will premiere at one of the exhibition halls of the New Tretyakov Gallery. The original "Black Square" painting by Kazimir Malevich will be part of the stage decorations. The libretto was written by Olga Maslova and Igor Konyukhov, a founder and artistic director of New Opera NYC. The music was written by Ilya Demutsky, known for his work with director Kirill Serebrennikov. Demutsky wrote the original score for the award-winning film "Student," as well as both of the ballets Serebrennikov produced at the Bolshoi Theater, "A Hero of Our Time" and "Nureyev." The Moscow Times talked to the composer about "Black Square," his other work, and collaboration with Serebrennikov.

Q: What is the opera "Black Square" about?

A: The opera is based on "Victory Over the Sun," an opera produced by Russian futurists in

1913. Karyimir Malevich was the stage designer, and the opera inspired him to paint his first “Black Square,” which became part of the decorations. But we did not want to simply recreate the opera, we used it as a starting point from which we pushed off and created a new work. Although some of the characters migrated to our production, and we stuck to the concept of “Victory over the Sun” as a whole – the notion that the world was turned upside down. And of course, some “avant-garde” elements are present in our production.

Q: What paintings will be used as the set for “Black Square”?

A: My idea was to use one of the original “Black Square” paintings in this production, and it all worked out when the director of the Tretyakov Gallery, Zelfira Tregulova, agreed to provide us with the first versions of the “Black Square.” The painting will be displayed during all of our performances here. It’s a working gallery, and our opera will be performed within the exhibition space, in hall 16. It’s a large hall with good acoustics, plus we’ll have complete freedom to choose what paintings will be exhibited there from the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery. But the main thing, of course, is the presence of the original “Black Square.”

Q: Who came up with the idea for the “Black Square” opera?

A: Initially I was contacted by Igor Konyukhov, a well-known promoter from the U.S. “Black Square” was his idea and he found a wonderful playwright, Olga Maslova, also from the U.S., who teaches at the University of Chicago. The original idea was to translate “Victory Over the Sun” into English. The text was by avant-garde poet Kruchyonykh. The text doesn’t always make sense. There are many invented words and the reader has to guess what’s going on using linguistic markers. The libretto was rewritten four or five times. I started working on it, but then I quit and said, “Guys, why don’t you give me a final libretto, and then I’ll start working on it, because every time I find it difficult to rewrite it.” Almost four years passed until they had cleaned up the libretto.

Q: So the opera is in English?

A: Yes, the opera will be in English. We didn’t write it for the New Tretyakov Gallery. This premiere was an absolute spur-of-the-moment idea. Half a year ago I was sitting in a cafe with Vitaly Vilensky, our producer. He said, “Ilya, let’s arrange a concert of your music, let’s do something interesting in an unusual setting.” I told him I was about to finish writing an opera -- why not try to perform it at the Tretyakov Gallery? We started poking around in our smartphones, trying to figure out where to get one of the “Black Square” paintings. And then it dawned on us that there is one literally across the road, at the New Tretyakov Gallery. And that’s how it all started.

Q: This isn’t your first opera – you wrote one before, “The Last Word” about Pussy Riot’s Maria Alyokina and her final statement in court. Could you tell me about it?

A: Perhaps “The Last Word” could be called a mono-opera. It is less of a stage production, more of a concert, with a soloist who sings. It’s not being performed now. We had one show in Italy, then one show somewhere in America, which was more of a chamber version. This is a rather complicated piece -- you need a very large orchestra.

Q: How did you start working with Kirill Serebrennikov?

A: A few years ago Serebrennikov wrote to me on a social network, saying that he needed a composer for the ballet “A Hero of Our Time” and that he listened to some of my pieces on the Internet. He had just seen “The Last Word” and my work for a symphony orchestra, which was dedicated to Tchaikovsky, who’s very important to Serebrennikov. He proposed my candidacy to the Bolshoi Theater and I, of course, agreed. Since the idea for this ballet belonged completely to Serebrennikov, he wanted to do it from scratch, sit with the choreographer, sit with the composer, make a new work out of nothing.

Q: How did you like working with him?

A: It was great! We were all on the same page, both with Serebrennikov and with choreographer Yuri Possokhov. We understood each other, I quickly wrote the music and Serebrennikov liked it.

Q: And then they called you to work on a second ballet?

A: Possokhov chose “Nureyev” for the next ballet and told the Bolshoi management that he wanted to work with Serebrennikov and with me. This is choreographer’s purview, not the theater’s. Possokhov is one of the top choreographers in the world, so he is invited to do a project and then he decides on the specifics.

Q: What do you think about the problems with the “Nureyev” premiere?

A: It was very unexpected. I can't say it was a pleasant surprise. I was very tired. I'd spent a whole month and a half there, all the time, every day, day and night. I rehearsed with the orchestra, and at the same time there were ballet rehearsals in several halls. And then “Bang!” You don't know whether it will be performed or not anymore. But, nevertheless, the general rehearsal was brilliant. For me it was like an actual premiere. Of course, for the general public, the premiere took place a little later. What was the reason for the delay? Unfortunately, we don't know. But there are various rumors.

Q: What do you think about the criminal case against Serebrennikov?

A: Well, what is there to think? I'm just waiting for the time when he finally comes out and we'll continue to work. We have plans that have not been canceled, both for films and theater productions. We feel comfortable working with each other. There are many plans, many ideas, I hope all of them will be implemented. When the trial began, a couple of weeks ago, I came to court and stood there. But it's clear that it's useless. On the other hand, I am very impressed that while Serebrennikov is under house arrest, he has been releasing new productions. He hasn't given up. He has premiere after premiere in completely different formats, from the movie “Leto” (Summer) to the opera “Cosi fan tutte” now playing in Zurich. It inspires me, because I understand that his work will continue and that you can be engaged in creative work under any conditions.

Q: So despite everything, you can work in Russia?

A: Yes, of course. That is, I believe that the times are difficult, but then it is also interesting for art, because we have something to talk about. This is important. If there is nothing to talk about, then art is bland. We now have a theater boom, and reality is reflected at the theater as

in a mirror.

Q: On the one hand, there is a theater boom, and on the other hand, theaters constantly face problems of some sort or another.

A: Yes, but the theater scene is very lively, there are some new developments all the time. It is clear that there are some negative moments, but this is all interesting. History is being made in front of our eyes.

Q: If you got an offer to write an opera based on the libretto of Vladimir Medinsky [Russia's Minister of Culture], would you agree?

A: Well, no, but not because I don't appreciate certain authors, but because from now on I will work on librettos myself. I no longer want to collaborate with anyone. For my next project at the Bolshoi Theater, I wrote the libretto myself. It will be an opera this time, based on Alexander Grin's novel "The Glittering World" about a man who can fly.

"Black Square" will premiere on November 27 and there will be three additional shows every evening from November 28 to 30. Opera will be shown in English with Russian subtitles.

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