



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

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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.

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

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From Reader Review Bolshoi Confidential: Secrets of the Russian Ballet from the Rule of the Tsars to Today for online ebook

Danielle Tremblay says

I won this book in GoodReads giveaways in exchange for an honest review.

If I gave my name in the hope of winning this book, it was because I am interested in Russian history and because a member of my family was a ballerina for a few years. I told myself that I should find twice as much interest as most people.

But no, on the contrary, it seems that I found there half as much interest. What was said of Russian history was unsatisfactory because it doesn't go in sufficient depth to really understand what was happening. And what was said of the ballet was interspersed with this general history. Maybe the author should have said more about the ballet company and only use history as a framework, no more than that. I don't know, but there was something to adjust there.

There is no character on which emphasis is really placed and none that one could identify with, which could have constituted a thread of frame to this novel and maintained my interest.

This book is not entirely without interest, but it took me longer than usual to finish it; which is never a good sign. For when I really love a novel, I read it cover to cover in record time. But, in fairness to this book, I must say that I am not a passionate reader of historical stories; it is simply not my favorite genre.

So I give three stars to Bolshoi Confidential.

Marina says

I am a ballet nut, I am also an expat living in Russia (which I love), we chose this book for our expat book club, this was going to be our read of the year, we were hanging out for this book, we talked about it for months before we read it, this was going to be it! And in the end, not a single one of us actually bothered to finish the book :(

Where oh where was the editor?? This book had so much potential, so many interesting facts, so much interesting history, it was fascinating the way that leading figures in the Russian dance, music and political worlds over the centuries all met in one place - at the Bolshoi, if only it had been laid out in a way that was actually readable, let alone enjoyable.

This is the first time in years I have not finished a book.

John Shaw says

Often secretive

Always stunning
The Bolshoi has been one of the
premier ballet companies
for decades
Now we go behind the curtain
to uncover her secrets

Diane says

From 10/10/16 Christian Science Monitor: "Morrison, who is a professor of music at Princeton University, gives the Bolshoi a first-rate historical treatment. Thoroughly scholarly and simultaneously astute and clear-voiced, he sometimes has to carry out what seems like archeology to discover how the business and the art of the Bolshoi proceeded."

Lexi says

What a trial and a convoluted mess of a book/series of disjointed paragraphs forced together. Five stars for the research, but the final product reads like the first draft of a second year history essay, when a student has pulled together absolutely every piece of source evidence in one document and now needs to create a narrative. This work jumps around incomprehensibly. Wonderful topics - Russian history, the history of ballet in Russia, and the significance of the Bolshoi to Russian identity and culture is made dull and confusing. The Guardian's Sarah Crompton put it best: "Yet for all its forensic detail and fascinating facts, this is a flawed undertaking. It has a confusing tendency to double back on itself in terms of chronology, as if the detail has overwhelmed the writer. He loses his thread in the labyrinths he is exploring. Characters appear so briefly you lose track of who's who." Absolutely. Absurdly, the writer will repeatedly mention a character in multiple chapters, then 'introduce' them - hundreds of pages later. Or go into detail about Plisetskaya's foreign posts in the 1980s in Italy and Spain - and then in the next paragraph note "by the 1980s she could accept foreign offers". Well, yes, clearly, as you just spent some time telling us that. Pity any of the author's students who receive advice from him about how to structure a paper. The Notes section - almost a third of the book - is valuable.

Joyce says

I think it would help to know more about ballet and like it more than I do. This history of the Bolshoi from 1776 touches on big moments in Russian history, linking to notable historical figures, but the focus is truly on ballet: the history of the art form in Russia and the particular history and important figures in the Bolshoi. It's a lively account--on stage and backstage--with a great deal of detail about the hall, the personalities and performers, ballet. Rich in anecdotes.

Jaak Ennuste says

Simon Morrison has done absolutely magnificent work. This is a heavyweight insight to Moscow ballet history. Embracing also St Petersburg related stakeholders. He really has deep understanding of history and

also current "affairs".

Zoe says

This is a remarkably researched, sophisticated story of the tumultuous history of the iconic Bolshoi.

It is a journey through its 240-year history, complete with an in-depth look into the scandals, corruption, damage, destruction, violence, and restorations that it has endured over the years, as well as an introduction to the characters that have played an important role its enduring successes and failures, including Tsars, politicians, dancers, directors, composers and choreographers.

This is, ultimately, an expository story about the creation and production of one of the most beautiful art forms the world has ever known, complete with the shady and gritty underworld that plagues its backstage.

Overall, this novel is incredibly descriptive, effortlessly fluid, and highly fascinating.

Thank you to NetGalley, especially Penguin Random House Canada, for providing me with a copy in exchange for an honest review.

All my reviews can be found on my blog at <http://whatsbetterthanbooks.com>

Sarah says

If Russia and the Bolshoi hold any degree of fascination for you, I expect you'll enjoy this book as much as I did. If not, I'm not sure it'll resonate. But maybe! Morrison is a solid, snappy sort of writer and does a wonderful job here of breaking down the density of the subject matter and giving the Bolshoi the compelling narrative it deserves. A solid 4 stars.

Laura Edwards says

Quite a nice and detailed history of the Bolshoi, focusing mainly on ballet but with some information about the opera as well. A good deal of Russian history thrown into the mix helps the reader to understand the effect world and national events had on the artists.

One big disappointment. I was hoping for a lot more information on the dancers. While Morrison provided a good bit of detail regarding the lives of artistic directors, composers, conductors and choreographers, very little information was given regarding the dancers in the Bolshoi company. The one exception is Maya Plisetskaya, probably because the author was able to reference quite a bit of material from her autobiography. Any high hopes I had of getting a more nuanced portrait of, say, Natalia Bessmertnova (one of my all-time favorites along with Margarita Kullik, a Kirov ballerina) went for naught. I think he mentioned Bessmertnova, a prima ballerina for many years with the Bolshoi, in about two short sentences. I got absolutely no sense of her as a person. By contrast, the personality, etc. of her husband, Yuri Grigorevich, one of the Bolshoi's ballet masters, is gone over in great detail, though excluding his marriage to Bessmertnova. Strange oversight and very disappointing.

I did like how the political climate, et al, was weaved throughout the narrative, giving decent insight into the way the Bolshoi was formed and evolved.

Jennifer says

This starts with an acid attack, and circles back through the two hundred year history of the Bolshoi theater to explain, at least in part, why such a thing would happen--the thwarted ambitions, unhealthy relationships, and towering egos. And yet in the end the subtitle seems like puffery. There aren't that many juicy secrets here, but it does convey some of the artistic changes and challenges as the Bolshoi has experienced over the years.

Angela Chen says

Review originally posted on: <http://angelachenwriting.blogspot.ca>

Albeit this book was evidently well research, I feel that as someone who closely follows—and greatly admires—the Bolshoi Ballet, **I cannot fully support something that was created as an effort to cash in on the infamous acid attack incident on its ballet director, Sergei Filin in 2013.**

First off, I went into this book really intrigued, for Simon Morrison had listed the names of some of my favourite dancers in the notes, at the back. Seeing Olga Smirnova, Svetlana Lunkina, and Nikolai Tsiskaridze... well, I thought the book was going to shed a little light on their views and opinions of the incident, because these three dancers are all on different sides of the fence. However, **Morrison has just used the acid attack as a hook.** Other than the prologue, the entire book was on the history of the theatre, which I didn't mind—had it been well written.

Morrison has obviously done a great deal of digging to compile all the information, starting from the ignoble beginning of the Bolshoi all the way to the theatre becoming the crown jewel of the Soviet Union and its successor. This is why I decided to give this book 2 stars instead of 1. However, other than the effort I could see that'd gone into this book, there isn't really any other reason to bump up the ratings.

The way Morrison wrote the history is very confusing. It twists and turns and it reads not like a Princeton University professor's writing, but perhaps a high school student's. Maybe it was just me but I found his style quite verbose and from time to time, my mind would wander as I was reading a paragraph until I was skimming and thinking of something else entirely. Not good.

All in all, this book had potential. It really did. Had it not used the acid attack as a hook, had the writing been structured a different way. Now, to end this review off, a beautiful GIF of Olga Smirnova.

Melissa says

Overall, this is a well-researched book detailing the history of the Bolshoi ballet in Moscow from its early origins as a motley troupe pre-Napoleonic invasion through the nearly \$700 million renovation of the

Bolshoi theatre in the 2000s (and the acid attack on artistic director Sergey Filin in 2013). Of particular interest are the Soviet years, when political ideology forced art to reject "formalism" (a work's artistic value is determined by its form) for glorification of the realism of the Soviet people (which was ever shifting, uncertain, and hard-to-perfect since that doesn't particularly lend itself to art and could land the artist in hot water/unemployment/worse). And it really is this push-pull between the Imperial and Soviet histories that creates a lot of the friction that makes for good reading.

However, it is very obvious that Morrison is not a dance writer, or even a dancer. His descriptions of dance steps or clarifications between the major evolutions of ballet (the introduction of blocked pointe shoes, for instance, or differences between French, Italian, Russian, Bournonville, Cecchetti, and Vaganova styles) are muddled or stilted. The section discussing the struggles of Prokofiev, Shostokovitch, and Katchaturian - all major composers of the 20th century is extremely well-written and wonderful to read - Morrison is a professor of music and it shows. But in a book marketed as an inside look at the Bolshoi BALLET, there needed to be more about the actual dancing and dancers. A good read overall, but needed more.

Dianne Landry says

I really enjoyed reading about the history of this amazing ballet company but I was struck by something as I did. Of all of the dancers we think of as legends, Nijinsky, Nureyev, Baryshnikov, Pavlova, Makarova, not one danced for the Bolshoi. Yes, Misha was dancing for them when he defected but it was only as a guest artist. All of these greats danced for the Mariinsky/Kirov or the Ballets Russes. Even the great choreographers, Petipa, Diaghilev, Balanchine and Fokine only did the occasional piece for the Bolshoi but worked almost exclusively for the Mariinsky/Kirov or the Ballets Russes.

Realizing this makes me wonder exactly why the Bolshoi is the company that has captured our imaginations rather than the Kirov. It's fascinating.

Ellie says

Thank you to Net Galley.com for perusal of this book. Bolshoi Confidential opens with the acid thrown into Filin's face in Moscow by a thug hired by a ballet dancer from the Bolshoi (and as I write this, Pavel has been released from prison in Russia after serving three years of a six year sentence)..., and it just gets grittier with each chapter (7 in all)..This was a quick read, and for anyone interested in Dance history..THIS IS the book to read. It's loaded with Russian history, and all the drama at the Ballet...! And I do mean drama..from the ballet of the Tzars, affairs and all, through the Russian revolution, the fear of Lenin and Stalin, and the subjecting of artists..Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and others to brutal censorship and brutality. There is even a full chapter on Maya Plisetskaya, 60 wonderfully written pages all about her.. This book covers 240 years of Bolshoi history. The building has been bombed, burned and rebuilt a few times..Simon Morrison has done incredible research into the Bolshoi. Thank you to W.W. Norton and Company, Publishers..This is a terrific book..However, I would have loved to have read more about the famous dancers that came out of the Bolshoi in much more depth.
