

# The value of cultural exchange

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MIKHAIL SHVYDKOY was born on September 5th 1948 and graduated from the State Institute of Dramatic Arts in 1971. He gained a Doctorate in 1991. He has held high profile editorships and between 1998-2000 was Chairman of All Russia State TV. He became Minister of Culture in 2000 and Head of the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography in 2004. He is the author of 3 books, 10 films and more than 1,000 papers on culture.

Russia and Great Britain have always had uneasy political and economical relations, even when they had no other choice than to be allies fighting Napoleon or Hitler. Despite dynastic connections, for over half a millennium the two nations' interests collided for diverse reasons and in diverse parts of the Old and New World, Middle and Far East. The first decade of the 21st century was no exception.

However, this time the people living in our countries viewed each other with great interest. This interest, I should say, sometimes bordered on amazement. Every time, I struggle to imagine the feelings of the readers, at the court of Queen Elizabeth I, of the passionate letters of the Moscow Czar Ivan IV, nicknamed "The Terrible" for his deeds, who assured the English Queen of his readiness to renounce the throne of Muscovy and come to London as an obedient spouse. Equally I struggle to envisage the emotions of Ivan the Terrible, as he listened to the translations of the replies from London. Had it not been for the portrait of the fifty-year-old Russian monarch, depicting a bald man lacking teeth, I am sure that the love letters of the Czar, real masterpieces of the epistolary genre, would have made Elizabeth's heart melt. As a result of the failed marriage between the English and the Russian crowns Muscovy received a unique collection of Renaissance silver, still on display at the Moscow Kremlin Museum, and Anglo-Saxon literature was enriched with the fascinating story "Orlando: A Biography." Isn't it an eloquent example of a cultural exchange?

For centuries in Russia there have been first-class scholars of British culture, translators of Shakespeare and Dickens, Bernard Shaw and Byron, Fielding and T.S. Eliot, as well as recent English literature. British painting and music, poetry and drama have always captured the attention of our society, although, admittedly, in the XVIII and XIX centuries Russian humanitarian thought developed primarily under French and German influence.

The Russian culture, music, choreography and painting have been deeply and seriously studied in the UK for the last two hundred years. The great Russian novels by Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky have become part of the school curriculum. And one of the most important philosophical dramas of the 20th century, *Heartbreak House* by Bernard Shaw, was

dedicated to Anton Chekhov. Cooperation between Gordon Craig and the Moscow Art Theatre at the start of the 1910s linked our theatrical cultures forever. The English acting school was hugely influenced by the outstanding Russian director and pedagogue, Theodore Komisarjevsky, who emigrated to Britain after the revolution of 1917. In turn, the works of Peter Brook, world-renowned British theatre guru, who made no secret of his Russian roots, had a huge impact on the Russian theatrical culture of the last decades of the 20th century.

The London tour of the Bolshoi Ballet, during the mid-1950s, unveiled its greatness to the world, and since then the Bolshoi has become a welcome guest in the British capital. The same is true of St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre. Operas by Britten have given Russian musicians access to the delicacy of modern world music. I am sure that based on the number of productions of Shakespeare's plays, as well as those by modern British dramatists ranging from Brendan Behan and John Osborne to Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter, Russia ranks second in the world after Britain. And Russian conductors – Gergiev, Temirkanov, Yurovsky, Kitayenko – have long become integral and important figures of British musical life.

The cultural links between Russia and the United Kingdom could be the subject of a fascinating multi-volume study, which I will definitely suggest for my Russian and British counterparts. I first realised this forty years ago, when during my final year at the Theatre Academy, I was writing a thesis about translations of the famous "petty bourgeois" drama "The London Merchant" by George Lillo into Russian in the XVIII and XIX centuries, and later, while working on a dissertation on T.S. Eliot and Bernard Shaw.

Unfortunately, a short article in *FIRST* cannot cover everything in detail, so it is important to draw the attention of the readers to what has been going on in our relations in the recent years, and what could happen in the near future.

Political tensions which existed between our two countries over the last few years did not impede the active cooperation of Russian and British personalities from culture, science, education. It is symbolic that the famous English theatrical director Declan Donnellan, who produced more than one successful performance in Moscow (Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, Shakespeare's

*Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*), became Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Chekhov International Theatre Festival. And it is no less significant that despite the many legal issues complicating the work of the British Council in Russia, as well as that of the Russian Agency “Rossotrudnichestvo” in the UK, the cultural ties between our two countries have, in my opinion, gained a new quality. World-class art exhibitions from the UK (first of all, those of works by Reynolds and Gainsborough), December Evenings at the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow dedicated to English culture, readings of the plays by modern British playwrights, Alexey Borodin’s production at the Russian Academic Youth Theatre of Tom Stoppard’s amazing trilogy *The Coast of Utopia*, devoted to major events of the Russian spiritual and political life of the XIX century, as well as the exhibition *From Russia* at the Royal Academy, participation of Russian drama companies in the Edinburgh Festival, Russian drama recitals at the Royal Shakespeare Company led by the charismatic Michael Boyd, the annual poetic forum *Pushkin in Britain*, a music festival dedicated to the illustrious Russian composer Weinberg, expansion of relations in the field of cinematography, and much, much more – all this is the reality of present Russo-British relations. In this year 2011 there have also been many events which prove that cultural links exist above any barriers, regardless of the political background. Besides, it must be mentioned that after the elections in Great Britain both sides showed at least the goodwill, if not readiness, to find a kind of compromise on many complicated issues concerning bilateral relations.

Early this year Russia was the Market Focus country of London Book Fair. Fifty writers of different aesthetic and political views – from Dmitry Bykov and Vladimir Sorokin to Alexey Varlamov and Dina Rubina – were representing not only Russian literature, but – what is no less important – the actual life of modern Russia. This detailed and diversified narrative of Russian life – its past, present and even future – has provoked vivid interest among the British reading public, or, to be more precise, British editors, who know the taste of their readers. In July a statue of Yuri Gagarin was unveiled in the centre of London, next to the headquarters of the British Council. The mere fact that the British decided to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first manned flight into outer space in such a manner obviously shows that both Britain and Russia have many people willing to co-operate in various realms of our life.

2012 will see a Royal Shakespeare Company tour, as a part of the Chekhov festival, which will become the core of the British theatrical season in Russia. In 2013 we will celebrate, together with our British colleagues, the centenary of Benjamin Britten and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Constantine

Stanislavsky. At the same time, in 2013 Russia will commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, which had family ties with the British Royal family. 2014 will be the jubilee year of William Shakespeare. The 450th anniversary of the Bard is an event of world importance, but I believe that for both Russians and British it will have particular impact. The preparation of joint Russo-British theatre events for this anniversary has already started. These dates are significant for both our countries and could give a new impulse to the development of cultural links between our nations. Recently I discussed with my British colleagues the possibility of holding in 2014, on the occasion of Shakespeare’s jubilee, a Season of British culture in Russia and in 2015, when we will all celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, a Russian Season in the United Kingdom. I should say that what seemed impossible yesterday is now being regarded as very probable. I believe that with all the contradictions in the sphere of real politik it is nevertheless necessary to make efforts to overcome traditional prejudices towards each other which exist in the public consciousness of Russia and Great Britain. Certainly, cultural links between our countries could develop above any barriers – Russian and British cultural figures have learned to do this extremely successfully. But perhaps an effort to reduce, or at least diminish, these barriers is worth making. Cultural personalities from both countries are ready to make a contribution to this process. ■

**The 450th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth could give a new impetus to the development of cultural links between our two nations**

Portrait of the writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky by Wassilij Perow

