Heili Einasto
PhD, scholar of cultural studies
Baltic Film, Communication, and Arts Institute, Tallinn University;
Tallinn Music and Ballet School
E-mail: heiein@tlu.ee
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Censorship in Ballet: the Case Study of *The Master and Margarita* by Mai Murdmaa in the Estonia Theater Ballet Company

Cenzūra baletā: Mai Murdmā iestudējums *Meistars un Margarita* Igaunijas teātra baleta trupā un šī gadījuma izpēte

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Summary In 1985, Mai Murdmaa choreographed a ballet based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*, set to music by Eduard Lazarev. This ballet offers a good example of late-Soviet-era censorship in ballet, as the Communist Party's ideological functionaries interfered in the production of this ballet before and after its premiere. Censorship in the Soviet Union is difficult to research because it was a forbidden subject and there are few official references to it – most suggestions were made orally, and thus information about them is largely based on people's memories. In the case of the ballet *The Master and Margarita* there are, in addition to oral sources based on memories, also a written record of an eyewitness about of the alterations made in the ballet in its first season of production. This article presents an overview of what happened and when, and analyzes the reasoning behind the changes.

Kopsavilkums 1985. gadā Mai Murdmā (*Mai Murdmaa*) veidoja horeogrāfiju Eduarda Lazareva komponētajam baletam *Meistars un Margarita* pēc Mihaila Bulgakova romāna motīviem. Šis baleta iestudējums ir spilgts piemērs vēlīno padomju laiku baleta cenzūrai – Komunistiskās partijas funkcionāri iejaucās iestudējuma tapšanā gan pirms, gan pēc tā pirmizrādes. Cenzūru Padomju savienībā ir grūti pētīt, jo tas bija aizliegts temats un par to ir ļoti maz oficiālu liecību. Lielākā daļa ieteikumu tika izteikti mutiski, tāpēc informācija par tiem balstās galvenokārt uz cilvēku atmiņām. Taču baleta *Meistars un Margarita* gadījumā papildus mutiskajiem avotiem ir pieejama arī aculiecinieka rakstiska liecība par iestudējumā veiktajām izmaiņām pirmās sezonas laikā. Šis raksts sniedz pārskatu par šo notikumu gaitu un analizē izmaiņu iemeslus.

Introduction

Arts censorship has been an issue throughout history, and an example of this kind of censorship in ballet is the case of *The Master and Margarita*, a ballet production that was staged in the Estonia Theater on November 3rd, 1985. It was based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, with music by Eduard Lazarev and choreography by Mai Murdmaa. Before and after the premiere, alterations were made in the production, most of them suggested by the ideological department of the Estonian Communist Party. Suggestions were made orally, as was the custom in the Soviet Union; any reference to censorship was strictly forbidden, and thus there is no record of them. Even though the artistic council of the theater through which censors worked (see more below) made minutes of their meetings, they were very formal, mentioning only the themes that were discussed, but without any details. Moreover, these records have been lost. Thus the only evidence of the events are the memories of people working in the theater at that time. When Mai Murdmaa and myself were working on our book and collecting stories of the dancers who had worked with her, I was using loosely structured interviews, in order to ask questions about the making of *The Master and Margarita*. The former dancers volunteered a great deal of information. In addition to these reports, I have my own testimonies, written down at the time of the production. As a young ballet *aficionada*, I worked at that time in the theater decoration unit – a circumstance which enabled me to see rehearsals on stage and as many performances as I wanted to. I used that opportunity to the fullest, and wrote in my diary of what I observed. These double records offer a unique opportunity to discuss arts censorship during the late-Soviet period: in addition to oral history, there is also written testimony made at the time of the production. The ballet was recorded by an Estonian television company in 1987 and is now available for public viewing.

Notes on censorship in the Soviet Union

Censorship in the Soviet Union and its republics, including Estonia, was an intricate system of control and manipulation designed to ensure the dominance of official ideology. This system was not officially acknowledged, and instead euphemisms like "leadership by the communist party" were used to replace it (Kurvits 2019: 169). Soviet censorship extended beyond just the cultural and educational realms, impacting all aspects of everyday life. Orders, bans, and instructions were often issued orally and not documented, making it difficult to study the full scope of their influence (Lauk 2005: 20–21).

The Constitution of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic stipulated that citizens have the right to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but only on the

condition that these freedoms be used for "the consolidation and development of the socialist order" (Põhiseadus 1988: 15). People found guilty of abusing these rights to spread ideas or materials deemed detrimental to the Soviet system could face imprisonment of up to seven years, or deportation for a period of two to five years (Kriminaalkoodeks 1990: 77).

The censorship structure of the USSR and Estonia was similar, with the Secretary General of the respective Communist Party at the apex, followed by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the respective Parties and the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the respective Parties. Memoirs of editors, journalists, and authors provide a rare and valuable insight into the workings of the total censorship machinery, as documents alone do not depict its full influence (Lauk 1999: 23).

The KGB structures and its Fifth Department had the power to determine which topics were to be banned in publications, as well as lists of names, roads, factories, and educational establishments that could not be mentioned publicly (Veskimägi 1996: 329). The Chief Administration for the Protection of State Secrets in Print (*Glavlit*) was responsible for censoring print media and other material from 1940 onwards, and was supervised by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the KGB (Lauk 1999: 23).

In Estonia, the List of Forbidden Topics was a document containing facts and data that were prohibited from being discussed or printed in Soviet Estonia. This list was regularly updated and included topics such as the presence of the Soviet Army, anything that could remind people of Estonian independence, and the Soviet annexation of 1940 (Lauk 1999: 23). Prohibited topics included religion and Jewish-themed topics, ethnic relations, and Christmas; non-mentionable groups of people included former defense league members, women guards, those who had served in the Nazi Army, those who had been deported, and Estonians who had fled abroad. Additionally, individual words and symbols referring to prohibited topics were also forbidden, such as the cross, flower with six petals, and the colors of the flag of independent Estonia – blue together with black and white (Kurvits 2019: 159). Copies of the list were destroyed when a new version was brought into use, and were kept secret to conceal any inefficiency and misdeeds during the Soviet occupation (Lauk 1999: 23). Research on censorship is hampered by the fact that it was predominately oral and based on phone or face-to-face conversations, and corresponding documentation has been systematically destroyed (Saro 2018).

The KGB utilized a system of curators, appointed to institutions across the Soviet Union, whose role it was to collect information and to ensure the institutions' compliance with Soviet ideology (Karjahärm, Sirk 2007: 283). In the Estonian

Communist Party, censorship was an institutionalized system that was highly specific and nearly impossible to argue against. Through the Glavlit institution, the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party would make corrections and edits to any artistic works in the name of the publishing house or editor, never mentioning *Glavlit* (Lauk 1999: 22). Institutionalized censorship was a powerful tool for the Estonian Communist Party until the late 1980s, allowing it to maintain ideological taboos and to control the spread of information (Priidel 2010: 645).

In the Soviet Union, ballet was an essential tool in constructing a positive impression of Soviet cultural variety; it served as a means of expressing the country's artistic, nationalistic, and identity-related ideals, as well as its sense of cultural superiority (Ross 2015). In addition to content, Soviet censorship also controlled the way works of art were presented, i.e. their form and style. Socialist Realism tended to be the main creative method in the Soviet Union, while modernist currents were stigmatized as formalism (Saro 2018: 301) – in ballet, this translated into an avoidance of abstract dance, Western dance styles (such as jazz and modern dance), and acrobatics. When used, they were frowned upon or downright forbidden with charges like "deviant technique" and inappropriate "eroticism" (Nikulina 2019: 194).

In different places, the amount of censorship varied depending on the location or significance of the theater or publication. For example, the regulations for ballets were stricter in Moscow than in smaller or peripheral cities, and the Bolshoi had stricter rules than the Nemirovitch-Danchenko Musical Theater (according to personal testimony from dancers of that time). Therefore experiments that would have been impossible in major ballet companies of Moscow and Leningrad could be practiced in Estonia, in terms of both the content and the form of the ballet. Texts that were unprintable in big Russian-language publications could be published in small languages like Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian, in particular when the publishers were small academic journals with limited circulation (Venclova 1978).

Estonia Theater Ballet Company and Mai Murdmaa The permanent dance company in the Estonia Theater was founded in 1926 to support opera and operetta productions, but its artistic director, Rahel Olbrei (1898–1974), envisioned far more for the company: She wanted to create full length dance productions, and in 1928 she succeeded with the production of *The Green Flute*. Though Olbrei had studied classical ballet, she felt the style was too limited as a means of expressing the wide variety of human experience; therefore, she built her first productions on a German expressionist dance technique, and later devised a synthetic

dance form that combined ballet with modern dance and character dance. She was convinced that the subject matter of a production dictated the movement style, and she believed in creating pieces that were not solely aesthetically pleasing, but also meaningful and left a lasting impression on the audience. To ensure that her company fulfilled this goal, she trained her dancers to be her collaborators (Einasto 2018: 215–220). Although Olbrei was forced to flee Estonia for Sweden in 1944 and later went to Canada, her ideals lived on in the dancers she had trained. And even though Mai Murdmaa (born 1938), choreographer of *The Master and Margarita*, had never met her, she claimed to have been influenced by Olbrei's ideas via the older colleagues with whom she shared a dressing room.

Mai Murdmaa, trained in Tallinn Choreographic School, sustained a major injury during her second year as a dancer which ended her dancing career in the Estonia Theater Ballet Company. As a result, she went to study at the Moscow State Institute of Theatrical Art, commonly known as GITIS, graduating as choreographer. The late 1950s and early 1960s was a time when the Soviet Union was visited by many Western artists and dance companies, and during her studies in Moscow Murdmaa had a chance to see dance forms and styles other than the Soviet drama ballet. Upon her return to Estonia in 1963, she began working in her home theater as a choreographer, becoming its Artistic Director (Ballet Master-in-Chief) in 1974. Her vision of ballet was similar to that of Olbrei: the dance form should be shaped by the content of the ballet and express the themes and characters instead of being merely aesthetically appealing. Murdmaa's choreographic language and ideas were also impacted by different dance styles that became known in the Soviet Union via Western dance companies (Murdmaa, Einasto 2018). At the time of the production of *The Master and Margarita*, she had achieved fame and acclaim throughout the Soviet Union, having worked with celebrities such as Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova before they fled to the West. In the Soviet Union, the Estonia Theater Ballet Company was seen as an avant-garde company full of creative potential and bold choreographic ideas, staging ballets that were often considered too risky for other venues (Murdmaa, Einasto 2018).

Making of *The Master and Margarita*

Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* was written in 1940, but it had to wait over twenty years to be published (in 1966 and 1967) in a censored form and with a limited number of copies; its translation into Estonian was published in 1968. It was only in the mid-1980s that it reached the awareness of the Soviet intelligentsia as well as that of the Soviet

ballet community. Eduard Lazarev (1935–2008), a composer from Moldova, had written ballet music based on the novel to the libretto by Boris Eifman, an experimental choreographer working in Leningrad (Gromov 1985). How the score and libretto reached the Estonia Theater Ballet Company is not reported, but Lazarev's *Anthony and Cleopatra* had been staged in the Estonia Theater in 1976 and Murdmaa certainly knew both Lazarev and Eifman, so it must have been via direct contact. The Estonia Theater Ballet Company production of *The Master and Margarita* was Lazarev's ballet's world premiere – Eifman's version premiered in 1987 (Eifman Wikipedia 2022). About that time (in 1986), *Mosfilm* released a musical feature film *Fouetté*, which centered on making a ballet version of *The Master and Margarita* with Vladimir Vassiliev and Ekaterina Maximova in leading roles.

The fact that the ballet premiered in Tallinn and not in Leningrad can be attributed to the tendency of Soviet censorship to be less stringent at the periphery, providing chances to criticize society in ways that would have been impossible in the cultural hubs of the USSR. By the late spring of 1985, the newly elected Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev had begun his reform initiatives of *perestroika* (rebuilding) and *glasnost* (openness), which enabled gradual discourse on formerly taboo topics, thus encouraging the Estonia Theater to take a risk with this ambitious venture.

Mai Murdmaa recalled that she was not very enthusiastic about the score, but the theme offered an outlet to her for "purging my system of all my hatred of the Soviet life, internal negativism and disharmony" (Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 180). She claimed she was not deeply interested in the characters of Margarita or Woland, but was triggered by "the Master and the nameless mob antagonizing him". So for Murdmaa this was "a political pamphlet," not a psychological drama (Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 180).

The process for the creation of the ballet was far from smooth. Murdmaa, who was used to work with high-quality musical scores, considered Lazarev's to be too primitive; the dancers struggled with creating the required characters, and scenographer Kustav-Agu Püüman had difficulties in perceiving Murdmaa's vision due to technical issues with the stage. The red-and-black costumes for the mob referred back to Soviet New Economic Policy (NEP) era of the 1920s; this created controversy (Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 180-193) which will be discussed below.

Part of the "Censorship Body" deciding the fate of theater productions were the theater arts councils, which were responsible for repertory development and the acceptance or denial of new productions. This body was comprised of the theater management (director, chief artistic director, head of the literary department), representatives of the actors and theater departments, and outside Tallinn also members of the Arts/Theaters Government (a subsivision of the Ministry of Culture). Additionally, public

figures were invited by the theater, such as representatives of the press or the working class. The last word was exercised by the functionaries of the Cultural Department of the Communist Party, who visited all the control performances and sometimes also the re-enactments, but the influence of this institution on directing and its control of the theater work had to be kept secret by both the theater management and the Ministry of Culture (Saro 2018: 287). If something of "dubious content" was found, it had to be altered or removed, otherwise the production risked being banned.

The protocols of the Estonia Theater artistic council meetings have not been preserved, thus any information about the debates and discussions over Murdmaa's *The Master and Margarita* are retrieved through later memories of some of the participants – often slightly inaccurate[1] –, or some indirect references published in newspapers, photos taken at dress rehearsals and later performances, and my personal recollections and recordings in my diaries.

The question of whether to allow this ballet to have its premiere arose already before the dress rehearsal, as recounted Tiiu Randviir, an Estonia Theater prima ballerina and coach at the time, who was also a Communist Party member. Randviir told me that having heard the rumors of a possible ban, she and Arne Mikk, the general artistic director, and Eri Klas, the chief conductor of the theater, went to discuss the issue in the Politburo. The greatest concerns of the Communist Party were religious references. According to Randviir, "they said there that you have Jesus on stage. I said: yes, but he is also in the book. 'And his hair is too long' [,was the complaint by the party functionary]. I said that we can cut the hair, no problem! [..] All these were minor issues" (Randviir in Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 184). So for the premiere, Jeshua's dark, long-haired wig was replaced by a reddish, shorter-haired wig, while his make-up no longer included a beard.

Randviir also remembered that one of the scenes that caused complaint was the depiction of a drunken mob, but that scene could be explained away with references to the novel (Randviir in Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 184).

Kustav-Agu Püüman remembered that someone from the theater had invited a party functionary from Moscow to the dress rehearsal, who "was shocked and claimed that the production offended her as a Russian" (Püüman in Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 193). It turned out that the red color in the costumes was deemed unsuitable and had to be changed, so the costumes were dyed black and only red stripes on the sleeves referred to the original idea of the costume designer. "The general image,

1 When I conducted interviews in connection with the book on Mai Murdmaa, I noticed that some separate, but similar events connected with alterations made in the ballet had merged into one event in the memories of the people.

therefore, was much poorer, and the movements lost part of their sharpness because of this," regretted the artist later (Püüman in Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 193). However, the ballet's premiere went ahead. That was common at the time: the Arts Council did not ban productions, but made prescriptions for lines and required cuts of scenes or imagery (Saro 2018: 293).

***The Master and Margarita* ballet** This ballet was a metaphorical representation of Soviet society and, on a deeper level, a reflection of spiritual struggles and the complexity of human relationships. The ballet, like the novel, is composed of three intertwining plot lines which represent mundane social life, the love story of the Master and Margarita, and the spiritual journey of Jeshua and Pilate. The social line which, as mentioned before, was closest to the choreographer's heart, sharply satirizes Soviet reality, as the dances contained caricatured gestures and movements from everyday life. The spiritual line of Jeshua and Pilate is less worked out, featuring a lexicon of modern ballet movements full of rhetorical, but often somewhat empty pathos. Finally, the love line is composed with a sure choreographic hand but using well-known Murdmaaesque tropes.

As the curtain rolls back for Act One, the audience is presented with a chaotic and dark world full of fear and anxiety. This feeling is expressed by the percussionist soundtrack that frames the first act (added later, in the spring of 1986), and in the frantic bustle and haste of the mob, who are desperately trying to overcome it. They are eager to follow the satanic powers (that enter the scene) – any power – that can subjugate and control them. We see the mob bowing, following the gestures of Woland, eager to please. The Master, in contrast, is shown as a solitary figure, trying to express his existential anxiety and to escape the faceless mob. In a scene when the two stand before each other, the Master in his inner struggle and the mob in its drunken excitement unable to consider anything except its own physical comfort, Jeshua approaches the Master, offering solace and an invitation to follow him and to bear his suffering. Fears and anxieties are banished, and the Master is given blessing as he kneels in the spotlight reminiscent of a baptism ceremony. Afterwards, the scene shifts to an orgy of the mob, a frenzied attempt to escape from the emptiness of life. The choreographer emphasizes the mob's robotic existence by their jerky movements, deprived of any recognition of higher authority. The mob creates a wall that the Master and Margarita must break through to reach each other. The duet of searching and finding each other begins as the two lean towards one another. Margarita makes a hesitant, exploratory stretch of the leg, expressing a mixture of questions, fear of

disappointment, and potential hurt. Despite apprehension, they still opt to take the risk. The duet of the two individuals gradually grows in intensity until it transforms into one being.

When Woland arrives, the mob is quickly transformed into human logs that are used as building blocks for Woland's desires. However, when Jeshua appears, Woland retreats, leaving the mob in the Savior's hands. Jeshua lifts up his arms and the human stacks disintegrate, allowing the people to stretch and breathe freely. The previously tight and tense movements of the mob gradually become more fluid and expansive. It is Jeshua who is now seen as a leader, one that is to be followed as blindly as Woland was. But rather than demanding slaves and obedient servants, Jeshua wants independent thinkers, friends, and collaborators. Pilate's entrance into the scene brings in the critics, introducing a sense of threat that can be interpreted as: "We will destroy you, Jeshua! And you, Master!"

Jeshua stands in the middle of the stage, his back to the audience, when the critics begin to approach. They evaluate him with a mix of ironic contempt, beginning the process of debasement by targeting Jeshua first and then fueling a derogatory public opinion in the form of the mob. To underline the role of critics as ideological functionaries of the Party and thus either directly or indirectly as agents of the KGB, they wear militia hats (forbidden after the premiere), and have ropes in hand which are used to harness the mob in front of invisible carriages and to whip them to move. The Master watches in despair as the destruction of Jeshua (here representing both his work and Christianity as a religion) unfolds before him, but that is not enough. In the Soviet system the creator has to be crushed as well – first the critics throw invisible mud (or stones) at the Master, befouling him, then push him between their legs (referring to a punishing squad), and afterwards kick him. To ensure his total destruction, they place a straightjacket over the Master and triumphantly carry him away, afterwards leading onward the robotic mob that seems to shout: "Down with the Master, down with religion!" The space opens up: a black circular back curtain is lowered, emphasizing the cosmic dimension of the event. This is not just a moment in the Master's life – it is the destruction of all independently thinking people and their creative work. This scene was transformed on January 12th, 1986: in the original version it was the critics who on their own initiative beat the Master and Jeshua (the obedient servants of the Party do not need any external instigation); it is they who carry the Master to a lunatic asylum (a direct reference to the KGB's practice of sending dissidents to psychiatric wards where they were "treated" to become obedient servants of the state). After January 12th, the ropes were removed, and Woland and his minions enter the scene; now it was the satanic forces that drove the mob into a feverish frenzy of destruction, with the Master reacting to it by putting on the

straightjacket himself and staggering away. Over the destructive and dumb mob, Satan tramples victorious and gleeful. The curtain closes, and the last thing the audience sees is Satan enthroned on human backs, arms exultantly raised.

In Act Two the focus is on Margarita's story: her transformation into a witch and her reunion with the Master. The internal tensions of the first act now give way to despair and then a bittersweet reconciliation with the Master. However, the climax of the act is the crucifixion scene, which serves as a powerful reminder of the consequences of the mob's choices. Pilate, representing the Power, attempts to break Christ the Spirit (jumping onto Jeshua's back and trying to mold him to his wishes), but is unsuccessful, and therefore hands Jeshua over to the crazed mob. It is the same people whom Jeshua had previously liberated from fear and freed from Satan's clutches (in Act One) who now crush Him, and He dies for their redemption. At the end of the scene the space opens again as in the end of the Act One (the backdrop is lowered); this imbues the show with a cosmic dimension. The cross with Jeshua rises above the mob, symbolizing resurrection and eternal hope. (The cross, being a too-strong religious reference point, was replaced by letter X after January 12th, which was later – at the beginning of December 1987 – reverted back to the cross.)

The final scene of the ballet featured Jeshua standing on one side of the stage, Pilate on one knee on the other side, with the Master and Margarita in the middle, swaying hand in hand – all in a light-blue light. This conveyed a sense of peace and underscored Bulgakov's belief that manuscripts (the Master's novel about Jeshua and Pilate) cannot be destroyed. However, from January 12th, 1986 the scene was altered to exclude Jeshua and Pilate, leaving only the Master and Margarita in the forefront. Though the scene still conveys the idea that love is powerful and can conquer even a great deal of evil, the idea of indestructible ideas – "manuscripts don't burn" (Bulgakov 1968) – is lost.

Post-premiere alterations in *The Master and Margarita*

Records of *The Master and Margarita* indicate that alterations in the ballet did not end with the premiere but were also done during the first season, reminding one of the fact that in addition to pre-performance censorship there existed also a post-performance one. The latter was necessary to correct mistakes in case the political climate outside the theater had changed, or the censors had been too careless, lenient, or sneaky, or if the actors' performance had started to amplify the implicit meanings of the production (Saro 2018: 288). In the case of *The Master and Margarita* both forms were practiced, though in the memories

of dancers these have merged into one. The first alterations, done already before the so-called artistic council dress-rehearsal, consisted of coloring the costumes: formerly red-black costumes were "put into the dying vat" (Püüman in Murdmaa, Einasto 2018: 193). After that dress rehearsal the modifications targeted religious references to Christ, and thus Jeshua's make-up and wig were changed to make his appearance more neutral. After the premiere on November 3rd, 1985, militia hats and the ropes carried by the critics were removed, but the scene remained the same. However, from December 5th, 1985 the scene was modified. Tiiu Randviir remembers the ideological secretary of the Communist Party claiming at a meeting concerning the ballet: "And then there's one terrible thing: the Master is carried to a madhouse. Why is he taken? He should go there himself. I said: 'Let him go himself! Sure, let him go himself!' [..] When I told Mai of this after the meeting [..], she was so angry! I said that these are minor issues [..] 'You can modify the scene so that the Master himself starts going to the madhouse and is arrested in the end. The performances are taking place, Mai!' And [they] did" (Randviir in Murdmaa, Einasto 2018, 184). Thus it was not the critics but the Master himself who pulled the straightjacket on, and he was not carried away but staggered offstage himself. The cross in the crucification scene was replaced by a letter X, to weaken the religious reference.

The subsequent set of changes were made before the January 12th performance: the critics' scene was further revised, so that now Woland and his assistants were brought in as forces driving the critics' actions, and in Act Two, again because of the religious content, Jeshua and Pilate were removed from the final scene. These modifications might have emerged from the knowledge that on this date the performance was watched by Yuri Grigorovich, the Bolshoi Ballet's artistic director, invited there by one of the dancers in the theater who opposed Mai Murdmaa and who wanted a "second opinion" on the ballet. Although it remains unknown what Grigorovich thought of the production, it went on without any ideological changes, suggesting that he found the ballet both artistically and ideologically sound.

The final round of changes was made by Mai Murdmaa herself in the spring of 1986, and those consisted of adding some soundscape to the existing music. As mentioned before, she considered Lazarev's music mediocre and not fully expressive of the ballet's thematic richness. As she had befriended composer Kuldar Sink, she asked him to write additional percussion music; that music was recorded, and the recording was added to certain scenes with Woland (the beginning of the ballet, the end of Act One, plus the end of Act Two where a recording of seagulls was used) to add a touch of different emotions and feelings she felt were missing from Lazarev's score.

Afterlife of the ballet and conclusive thoughts

The ballet was popular with the audience (almost a full house every time) and praised by Estonian critics. It was restaged in 2015 in Joshkar-Ola, Russian Federation. Mai Murdmaa herself was sure that it was the final version because the ballet had lost its actuality, and that this kind of political comment was unnecessary: "It is the child of its time. [..] I replaced all Woland's theme with electronic music by Rainer Jancis that added a new dimension to the ballet by lifting Woland and his court out of reality. [..] The production was sharply political. Political was also the fact that my Russian visa ended three days before the premiere and no power could extend it," said Mai Murdmaa in 2018 (Murdmaa, Einasto 2018, 193).

When looking at the events taking place in the theater and outside in the society during the 1980s, it is clear that staging Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* would not have been possible earlier, and that it was only Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to reform the USSR with *glasnost* and *perestroika* that made it feasible to produce the ballet and to display the corrupt nature of the Soviet mob. Despite this, censorship was still a point of concern, as the censors in the Communist Party's ideological offices became increasingly apprehensive about what to permit and what to suppress. References to Christianity were among those censored, and Jeshua had to be less Christlike than the way he is depicted in Western art. The clothes of the mob, as they were partly red, a color that in the Soviet Union alluded to the socialist revolution and communist ideals, were changed (to black). Such alterations were made prior to the premiere; however, as was usual, post-premiere censorship was required to attend to matters that had evaded the vigilance of the censors.

The second round of alterations addressed references to Soviet authorities – references to the militia and KGB in the hats of the critics, as well as their oppressive and violent actions such as locking people in mental institutions and exploiting public opinion and the press to tarnish dissidents or anyone unfavorable to the Soviet power. All of these were made to placate the state officials in the local Politburo.

However, not all grievances concerning the ideological nature of artistic works stemmed from official censors or even members of the theater's artistic councils. They could also originate from jealous colleagues who could launch anonymous complaints – in the case of *The Master and Margarita*, from a dancer who invited trustworthy party servants (Yuri Grigorovitch) to view the performance and give their opinions. Therefore, a third round of modifications was made, this time to the entire critics' scene, as well as to the ending of the ballet, further reducing religious and political allusions.

Gorbachev's reforms opened a new avenue to discuss, albeit mildly, the crimes of the Soviet power. Hence the ballet's criticism of the system, via the portrayal of

the mob's nature and the allusion to the critics as ideological servants of the repressive state, was feasible. After a few years in the repertory, it was even praised by the authorities and awarded a theater prize for best ballet. In 2018, Mai Murdmaa was confident that the ballet was outdated in its criticism of the system; however, the invasion and bombing of Ukraine along with the ideological war in the media demonstrate that the old Soviet mentality of the mindless, mute mob easily manipulated by evil powers is still very much alive. This ballet, which might have been considered outdated in 2021, has become relevant again – not only in Estonia and former Soviet republics and their satellites, but potentially across the world. Again we are witnessing Woland and his servants playing their games, seeing Masters imprisoned and destroyed, the power of critics in the media (the Moscow propaganda machine), and the need for love and the Savior helping us to stay free and independent as individuals and as nations.

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