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Raining on Turandot, or, Why Krushchev's Thaw Wasn't Lenin's NEP

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Abstract

This paper examines nostalgia for the NEP period through the 1963 revival of Carlo Gozzi's comedic masterpiece, "Princess Turandot," at the Vakhtangov Theater in Moscow. The original "Turandot," which premiered in 1922, was the crowning achievement of Evgenii Vakhtangov, one of the most influential figures in early-Soviet theater. It was widely seen as proof of the dynamism of Soviet culture in the years before Stalin came to power. Its revival in 1963 spoke to the possibilities of the thaw; according to one of its proponents, "Turandot" would transform an "underlying atmosphere" that had been stultified by Stalinism. Yet this atmosphere proved more intractable than anyone realized. Soon after the revival of "Turandot," the Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, ordered the theater to begin production of the anti-Stalinist play "Rainstorm." Furtseva's meddling struck many at the theater as a vestige of the very politics "Rainstorm" criticized. It was one thing to restage a play; it was quite another to recreate an era.