Between Ordine and Capriccio

Gothic Architecture in the Theatre of the Enlightenment

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Abstract—The perception and rethinking of the "dark Middle Ages" in the period of Enlightenment largely determined the interpretation of the present, and expectations for the future. That was why the appearance of Gothic images and motifs on the theatre stage was not just another phase in the history of art and architecture or a fad for the "Gothic taste", but also a factor of political propaganda geared to public opinion and domestic and foreign policies. What did the 18th-century theatre-goers and stage decorators perceive as "Gothic"? How did the "settings", iconographic tradition and predilections of European playwrights and librettists change over the Age of Enlightenment? The article looks at these and other nuances of Gothic motifs' invasion of the ephemeral architecture of the theatre stage. The grand staging of Catherine the Great's historical play The Early Reign of Oleg, in which action takes place in the "Gothic Antiquity" of the Russian state, is a special theme that graphically demonstrates the political underpinnings of recourse to the national "Gothic". A search for the iconographical prototypes of the theatre images turns out to be no less captivating than the ideologically charged reconstruction of historical memory.

Keywords—Theatre architecture; stage design; Gothic taste; Age of Enlightenment; architectural theory; Francesco Gradizzi

I. INTRODUCTION

Art historians rarely speak of the role of the theatre when considering the architecture of 'Gothic taste'. This is understandable, since 'Gothic' operas and tragedies appeared so much later than Gothic novels and right up to the end of the eighteenth century chivalric subjects and medieval chronicles were presented decked out in Classical forms.

Yet there is reason to pause for thought. We know, for instance, that the first examples of Russian Gothic architecture were preceded by sets in Gothic taste for masques that included decorative structures whose purpose was not only to entertain but to convey symbolic meanings. Providing the point of departure in St Petersburg – clearly a sign of 'highest approval' of the new fashion – were 'buildings in different architecture' erected on the road from St Petersburg to Tsarskoe Selo for the festivities honouring the procession of Catherine II and Prince Henry of Prussia in October 1770. The same role was played in Moscow by the famous backdrop for the Khodynka celebrations of 1775. Although much has been said of their links to real architecture in the succeeding years, almost nothing is known of their previous history on the stage.

By the middle of the eighteenth century European court theatre had developed its own universal iconographic tradition that permitted, in a few strictly controlled instances, the use of Gothic imagery and motifs. It might perhaps be curious to look at them in the context of the symbolic function of Gothic taste within the world of real Enlightenment building practice.

The few scholars of theatrical Gothic [1, 2, 3, 4] (if it can truly be distinguished as a separate object of study) have not agreed on where its origins lie. In medieval open-air theatre, where the urban environment itself was both the location and the setting for improvised action. In the liturgical drama and miracles played out inside or in front of Gothic churches. Or in the first architectural treatises of the Renaissance and the decorative schemes of Leon Battista Alberti and Baldassare Peruzzi.

On closer inspection even the latter – the best argued theory – is revealed as no more than the expression of a natural survival of Gothic motifs amidst later architectural principles and tastes, thus relating to the phenomenon known in architectural history as just that, 'Gothic survival'. It was encapsulated in the first treatise on the principles of theatrical design, published by Sebastiano Serlio in 1545 [5, p.50].

Amidst the canonical types of theatrical sets proposed by Serlio the contrast between 'high' and 'low' scenes is particularly fascinating. Sets for tragedies were bound up with a revival of interest in Classical culture and consisted of an idealised town square framed by public buildings in the severe and 'noble' style of contemporary Renaissance architecture, tectonically correct and classically balanced. Comic scenes, however, were to reflect everyday realities, showing narrow late-medieval streets narrowing into the perspective depths, with numerous stalls and low 'Gothic' houses.

Serlio's treatise was incredibly influential. Its lessons were felt in almost every theatrical project, from the Palladian backdrops of Vincenzo Scamozzi for the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza and at the Gonzagas' ducal palace at Sabbioneta to the early works of Bernardo Buontalenti and Giulio Parigi for the Medici of Florence.

Yet the Gothic reminiscences that reappeared on stage more than a hundred years later, in the early eighteenth century,

surely owed little to these roots. Their main difference from Serlio's Gothic stamp lies in the aesthetic and philosophical distance that sets Baroque theatrical architecture apart from medieval building practice. That keen rejection and mockery of Gothic which is felt on the pages of Giorgi Vasari's bestseller, of Gothic as a symbol of all that is low, coarse, tasteless, archaic, 'dark' and barbarian, i.e. directly opposed to Classical logic and simplicity, was softened in the powerful waves of Baroque ritorica grandezza that were whipped up before dissolving in the all-embracing universal polyphony of individual national ancient histories from Latin America to Russia.

Seventeenth-century Jesuit intellectualism and antiquarian erudition, which played their role in shaping the underlying principles of illusionistic set design over the following two centuries, created a new sense of space for such architectural fantasies. Giovannie Aleotti, Abbé Dubreuil, Giuseppe Viola-Zanini, Nicolo Sabbatini and Andrea Pozzo, authors of the most authoritative treatises on constructing theatrical perspective [6, 7, 8, 9, 10], opened up the stage to everything ecstatically magnificent, whimsically capricious and excitingly 'strange'. The invention of new architectural capricci within the Baroque compositional system of architectural orders became a mark of the theatrical designer's and illusionistic set painter's virtuosity. Therefore each time he sought some characteristic device for his inventions – some monstrous zoomorphic decoration, a pointed arch or spiralling 'solomonic' columns – this was a conscious, deliberate choice, not merely homage to past tradition.

Time was needed for 'Gothic motifs' to acquire their own consistent iconographical repertoire. Any attempt to identify the early shoots of the Gothic must thus inevitably look to formal rather than intellectual characteristics. First, a number of typical structural elements find their way into the illusory vision of ephemeral theatrical architecture: pointed arches and pediments, bundles of half-columns, stepped window frames and sharply bristling mini-obelisks growing unnoticed over the Classical entablatures to recall pinnacles and crockets. Only in the second third of the eighteenth century does their role on stage become fixed, as persistent decorative clichés that personify everything 'unclassical' and 'alien' within the strictly Ancient range of subjects and allegories in use in the theatre of the court.

II. THEATRUM SACRUM

It was in 1719 that Giuseppe Bibiena created the first known set design in 'Gothic style', or rather – since it was not for the imperial stage, where Bibiena, member of a large and ubiquitous European family of theatrical designers, made his name, but for the celebrated Catholic theatrum sacrum at the Viennese court – the first illusory architectural trompe-l'oeil that consciously and deliberately included 'Gothic' motifs.

By tradition, in Vienna the theatrum sacrum was played out on Good Friday in the large chapel of the Habsburgs' court church. It consisted of large-scale musical spectacles, related to Italian oratorios, 'by the Tomb of the Lord' or 'by the Sepulchre' (rappresentazione / azione sacra al Sepolcro). Although the meaning of the sacred drama of Christ's Passion

was markedly different from the eloquent costumed allegories of the imperial theatre, the principles behind these rappresentazione of the Gospels narrative were closely related to the grandiose court masques with their magnificent perspectival sets, while the same authors and performers were responsible for the Viennese Sepolcro and for the birth of the secular genre of opera seria[1].

Even so, the court theatre in the Hofburg in Vienna, teeming with Ancient gods and heroes, and the Augustinerkirche where – after the Sermon on the Cross on Good Friday and the symbolic transference of the bread and wine of the Eucharist 'to the Sepulchre' – the Holy Roman Emperor and his courtiers witnessed the replaying of Christ's road to Calvary, were not one and the same thing.

On the court stage the theatrical architect erected head-spinning perspectival squares and avenues, temples and palaces, or interiors of no less cyclopean majesty, with little regard to the real architecture of the auditorium. His creative outpourings were limited only by terse notes in the libretto, by the size of the stage itself, and of course by iconographical tradition which set out certain canons for particular settings. The designing of spaces for the unfolding of the theatrum sacrum was inherently different. Here the main task was to transform the interior of a Gothic chapel into the illusory architecture of the council-room of the Sanhedrin, of the palace of Jerusalem's High Priest, Christ's prison or Calvary. The only means available for creating such an optical illusion was architectural trompe-l'oeil, the virtuoso use of the scena per angolo effect, built up of intersecting axes, 'invented' by the Bibiena family[2]. Yet the mechanisms used to produce such optical entertainments – confusing the gaze and dimming the reason of the viewer who seeks in vain in the dim light of the chapel to understand the border between real and ephemeral space – were the same as those used on stage [13, p. 212; 14, pp. 99–110]. Sacred scenography was composed of three-dimensional foreground wings, a staircase – of which the first flight was real and could be used by the singers – and a grandiose veduta backdrop that literally grew out of the semi-circular arch of the chapel's sanctuary.

Thus the appearance in Giuseppe Bibiena's designs for the theatrum sacrum of various Gothic elements – of pointed arches and slender paired columns – was dictated rather by a utilitarian need to harmonise real and virtual architecture within the medieval church than by the taste of author or client.

III. THE IMAGINARY ORIENT

One common idea about the origins of Gothic architecture in the eighteenth century was 'the Saracen theory', according to which, since untamed European barbarians could hardly

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[1] Amongst those creating 'sacred plays' in Vienna were the court poets Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio, the composers Johann Joseph Fux and Antonio Caldara, with court theatrical architect and engineer Giuseppe Bibiena responsible for productions.

[2] The *scena per angolo* was a revolutionary innovation in set design. Replacing the traditional and apparently obligatory scheme built around a single-point central perspective with one built around multiple vanishing points running at an angle to the proscenium and to each other, the *scena per angolo* opened up new possibilities. Ferdinando Bibiena codified his theory in two major publications [11, 12].

have been capable of creating it, the Gothic style was brought back by knights returning from the Crusades in the Muslim East. Proposed by Roland Fréart de Chambray in his Parallele de l'architecture antique et de la moderne of 1650 [15; 16, p. 375], the 'Saracen theory' was given final shape in 1713 by the aged and much-respected Christopher Wren: 'This we now call the Gothick Manner of Architecture… tho' the Goths were rather destroyers than builders; I think it should with more reason be called the Saracen style; for those people [the Goths – AK] wanted neither arts nor learning; and after we in the West had lost both, we borrowed again from them, out of their Arabick books, what they with great diligence had translated from the Greeks… The Crusado gave us an idea of this form; after which King Henry built his church… The Saracen mode of building, seen in the East, soon spread over Europe, and particularly in France, the fashions of which nation we affected to imitate in all ages, even when we were at enmity with it [17, pp. 297–98].

Even those among Wren's contemporaries who did not share his interest in Gothic and the East – who had indeed a despairing, almost disgusted dislike of them – had no doubts of Gothic's Arabic and Muslim. This is clear in Fénelon's Dialogues sur l'éloquence of 1718 3.

Early modern theatrical design, born out of architectural theory and always dependent on it, was guided by such ideas. Now any Oriental decoration on the European stage could quite legitimately claim to be 'Oriental colour', presenting the educated viewer with an array of freely-arranged fragments from theatre's Gothic arsenal. For there were enough subjects requiring such settings even within the framework of the Classical history that dominated the theatre unhindered in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Such individual details were inserted into Baroque spatial and compositional architectural fantasies without apparently changing the overall impression of an abundance of decoration, the stage filled with vast colonnades, magnificent palaces, splashing fountains and endless galleries. They had absolutely no influence on general characteristics, on proportions, on the constructive or formal system of decoration. Yet at the same time they had a strange effect: the presence of some specific element, perhaps not even immediately visible – of a pointed or multifoil arch – immediately turned the whole ephemeral construction into a geographical or temporal fiction that fell outside the space of Classical Greek or Roman Antiquity, even while remaining within the limits of the Hellenistic oecumene.

By the middle of the eighteenth century this new canon had become a commonplace, one carried in the portfolios of theatrical architects from one end of Enlightened Europe to the other.

In 1750 Giuseppe Valeriani designed a set for a palace interior with galleries of pointed arches for the stage at court in St Petersburg. It framed a visit by the Greek mythical hero Bellerophon, protagonist of the opera of the same name by Giuseppe Bonecchi, to the lands of the sly Oriental ruler of Lycia 4. Five years later Giovanni Carlo Sinicio Bibiena similarly resolved a scene in the opera Alessandro nell' Indie by Davide Perez, staged at the royal theatre of Joseph I in Lisbon. On this occasion, however, the 'Gothic hall' richly adorned with sculpture represented the inside of a temple in the Indian town of Oxydracia, which had been seized by Alexander the Great5.

Another favourite theme of theatrical architects was a contrast between the Classical architecture of triumphant Rome and the ruins of overthrown 'Oriental Gothic'. It was employed in the 1720s and 1730s by Giuseppe Bibiena – then enjoying success at the court theatre in Vienna – as the backdrop of Trajan's triumph over the Dacians and Germans. Classical structures in the foreground and a triumphal arch enclosing the proscenium space were set against a backdrop of 'Gothic' fortress architecture, of partially ruined barbarian structures 6. Set before those imaginary fairytale pointed towers washed by the waves, their crenellated battlements and ridged roofs, the triumphal arch is all the more remarkable, since it is an antiquarian reconstruction of the Golden Gate of Trajan erected in the early second century at Benevento in southern Italy to honour the emperor's victory over the Dacians. The arch was well known from numerous prints. Even the inscriptions on the real and imaginary arches are almost identical: 'IMP[ERATORI] CAESARI DIVI NERVAE FILIO NERVAE TRAIANO OPTIMO AUG[USTO] GERMANICO DACICO PONTIF[ICI] MAX[IMO] TRIB[UNICIA] POTEST[ATE] XVIII IMP[ERATORI] VII CO[N]S[ULI] VI P[ATRI] P[ATRIAE] FORTISSIMO PRINCIPI SENATUS P[OPULUS]Q[UE].' 7 The only difference is a small addition in the inscription on the set design – 'Italiae hoc etia addito ex fecunia sua portu tutiorum navigantibus reddiderit' – apparently a reference to the achievements of the client, Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, in taking the Italian lands under his control and extending the empire's shores.

This – along with many similar compositions combining imagined 'Gothic' Oriental and barbarian fortresses with richly decorated Roman triumphal architecture designed according to the rules of the orders – became essentially an everyday rhetorical device giving visual form to the allegory of the victory of civilisation and taste over untamed barbarity.

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3 'Cette architecture qu'on appelle gothique, nous est venue des arabes. Ces sortes d'esprits étant fort vifs n'ayant ni règle, ni culture, ne pouvoient manquer de se jeter dans de fausses subtilitez. De-là leur vint ce mauvais goût en toutes choses' [This architecture, which is called gothic, came to us from the Arabs. Such kinds of people being very lively, having neither rule nor culture, could not omit to throw themselves into all kinds of false details. From which comes this poor taste in all things] [18, p. 76].

4 Giuseppe Valeriani, *Set Design for the Opera* Bellerophon. Pen and brown ink, brown wash, pencil, on paper; 36.3 x 51.5 cm. Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, inv. no. OR 6269

5 Etching by Jean Baptiste Dourneau after Giovanni Carlo Sicinio Galli Bibiena, *The Temple of Bacchus*, Act III, Scene 10 of *Alessandro nell᾽ Indie*, Lisbon, 1755. National Library of Portugal, Lisbon.

6 Andreas Pfeffel after Giuseppe Galli Bibiena, Plate V of *Architetture e prospettive , dedicate alla Maestà di Carlo Sesto Imperador de᾽Romani da Giuseppe Galli Bibiena, suo Primo ingegner teatrale, ed Architetto, inventore delle medesime*, Augsburg, 1740.

7 'To the most blessed emperor, Caesar Nerva Trajan Augustus, son of the divine Nerva, [conqueror] in Germania and Dacia, High Priest, [vested with] tribunician power eighteen times, [declared] emperor seven times, [elected] consul six times, Father of the fatherland, the strongest emperor, the Senate and the Roman people [dedicate this arch].'

In selecting the best of his Viennese set designs to be engraved, Giuseppe Bibiena quite specifically included several similar compositions. He apparently wished to present his whole repertoire of professional skills, from the creation of imposing imperial catafalques (the castrum doloris) and designs for the theatrum sacrum to designs for theatrical spaces and ballrooms and, of course, for performances. Architetture e prospettive [19], dedicated to Charles VI, was prepared for publication whilst Bibiena's imperial patron was already on his deathbed, so before leaving operatic Vienna, which had so welcomed him, the 'first court theatrical engineer' sought to give his magnum opus the appearance of a catalogue that would show off his most striking achievements, the things with greatest potential 'sale value' to other crowned patrons.

This book, for half a century enlightened Europe's model for the use of perspective and set design, was apparently taken up by Vasily Bazhenov when designing the Khodynka celebrations of 1775 in honour of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca with Turkey of the previous year. Even twenty years after the death of the author of Architetture e prospettive the idea of turning the Khodynka Field into a three-dimensional set, with fantastical foreign fortresses brought down by Russian arms and the 'fireworks of two empires' taking place around a single Classical building remained at the heart of the theatrical mainstream.

All architects with any connection to the theatre knew Architetture e prospettive through and through. It was even known in Russia, where it inspired Valeriani, set designer at the court of Empress Elizabeth8. Moreover, Catherine II may even have had similar compositions not just in her memory but literally on the table before her as she considered inviting Carlo Bibiena – son of Giuseppe, author of the Viennese codex – to come and work in her theatre office. Younger member of the great dynasty, Carlo lacked the imagination and virtuosity of his forebears but enjoyed a successful career at various European courts by exploiting the riches in his father's portfolio.

Bibiena arrived in St Petersburg from Stockholm only in 1776 [21, p. 34], the year after the magnificent celebrations of peace with the Porte. In the age of Catherine, there was often more than a year between the start of contract negotiations and the physical arrival of a specialist9. Bibiena arrived under the patronage of Prince Grigory Potemkin [22, p. 88] who had probably been responsible for showing his candidate's solid file of theatrical designs to the empress. In any case, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg now has about forty drawings by Carlo Bibiena, the most representative body of his works in Europe10. Each one is carefully finished and signed by the artist in identical manner 11. Most are tinted with watercolour, something extremely rare for eighteenth-century

theatrical designs, perhaps evidence of their function as display works. Such a function is also suggested by the inclusion of several somewhat earlier compositions relating to productions for court theatres at Bayreuth and Stockholm12.

Kazakov's drawings, the only records we have today of Bazhenov's designs for Khodynka Field, truly recall Carlo Bibiena's variations on his father's compositions, repeating Classical portico and obelisk motifs and with the capricious architecture of Gothic fortresses visible beyond an expanse of water dotted with ships.

When he received the commission from the empress [23, p. 56] Bazhenov was already familiar with the principles of set design and was well aware of the main current tendencies (including Gothic). Ten years previously he had brought back from his study trip to Italy two set designs dated 1764, one of them in 'Gothic taste'. To judge by the rapid sketch of Venus's chariot pulled by doves on the back and the hasty scribbles 'Sono fatti da… Allonzo… Allon Antoines… Son Regina e sono …' [23, p. 484-485] it was made under the fresh impression of either some theatrical production or a design by one of his Italian contemporaries.

A pungent Oriental aftertaste continued to make itself felt on stage even after true 'Gothic subjects', rehabilitating the Middle Ages in the eyes of the enlightened viewer, had come into play. Secrets from the depths of time, knightly vows, lost manuscripts, mysterious ghosts, gloomy tombs and family curses continued to be shown dressed up in Oriental costume in the theatre right into the 1780s.

A tendency to blend the Gothic and the Oriental within a common framework of 'exotic taste' became so entrenched that it is hard to say where it was most overtly manifested, in the garden pavilions of country residences, in theatrical capricci or in literature. While architectural theoreticians and practitioners worked, in their writings or in the open spaces of parks, to create a mixture of Gothic architecture with Moorish, Indian or even Chinese, the stage was dominated by the spirit of ordered and attractive Oriental Gothic.

Its last triumph was an entertainment held in 1781 at Fonthill in England by William Beckford. Both programme and design were entrusted to Philip James de Loutherbourg, master of stage effects and author of the celebrated Eidophusikon. Beckford was mad for all things Oriental, revered Piranesi [13] and adored the music of Cimarosa and Paisiello and he had grandiose plans for his event. He demanded from Loutherbourg a physical manifestation of the mystical, visionary images that so entranced his own imagination. Piranesi's prints, theatrical scenes, Gothic novels

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[8] Valeriani's design for the set of the Libyan palace in Act III of the opera *Bellerophon* is thought to have been inspired by plate VI in Giuseppe Bibiena's *Architetture e prospettive...* of 1740 [20, p. 310].

[9] Negotiations with the set designer Pietro Gonzaga commenced in 1789 but he arrived in St Petersburg only in 1792.

[10] The stamp of Paul I in the lower right corner of each shows that they arrived in the Hermitage before 1797, in which year the new emperor ordered that inventories by made of his mother's collections.

[11] *Architetto. Il Carlo Galli Bibiena, il: inventor: il fecit...*

[12] *The Palm Forest* was created by Carlo Bibiena in 1754 for a production of the opera *L'Huomo* in the court theatre of Margravine Wilhelmine at Bayreuth [21, p.164]. Also remarkable is the large number of independent designs. The artist could hardly have created so many independent designs in the bare two years he spent at the Russian court (1776–1778), working under the first theatrical architect and designer Francesco Gradizzi. The fact that when he left the artist did not take with him this impressive portfolio, in which everything is similarly mounted, is evidence that it belonged to the theatre office or the empress herself.

[13] Piranesi dedicated the publication of his prints in the series *Vasi e Candelabri* to William Beckford's father.

and a passion for esoteric Ancient Oriental subjects not only inspired Beckford in how he decorated Fonthill for the entertainment but guided his own way of seeing and feeling. These impressions, images and observations lay behind the description of the underworld kingdom of the demon Eblis in Beckford's own Oriental-Gothic novel Vathek, written the year after the festivities at Fonthill and subtitled 'an Arabian tale'. The setting for Vathek is notable above all in that despite the intoxicating exoticism of the Arabian tale it was so completely dependent on Loutherbourg's theatrical iconography, which literally comes to life on the pages of the novel.

But the independence of the subjects of the new 'Oriental-Gothic genre' from any medieval historical associations soon turned against theatrical Gothic. A new taste for the East, above all for Egypt, inspired by the engraved series of Piranesi, by Napoleon's Egyptian campaign and by the Masonic lodges, intent on reviving ancient mysteries, led to a renewal of theatrical iconography. Henceforth Oriental stage architecture had no need of Gothic support.

IV. THE OLD CASTLE

The Castle of Otranto was the first Gothic novel. It was published by the founder of the genre, Horace Walpole, in 1764 and created in the imagination of the British reader an utterly new setting, not only repulsive in its barbaric anachronism but frightening in its innovation. An ancient Italian feudal castle becomes not just the backdrop for the unfolding surreal drama, not its main hero, but almost a matrix that gives birth to everything that happens. So strong was the effect of 'delightful horror', so great was the number of Walpole's followers and imitators, that descriptions of medieval castles and abbeys poured forth in books and libretti. There seem to be more depictions of castles, Gothic ruins, tombs, underground caves and gloomy monastery vaults than anything else in the output of theatrical designers of the 1780s to 1800s. So many are they that the iconography of stage castles seems as decrepit as the castles themselves. This, however, is but an illusion. There was nothing newer on the stage in the Enlightenment than the Gothic castle.

That might seem hard to believe, since chivalrous tales of the noble Rinaldo, Roland and Amadis had never left the stage throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, at the turn of the two centuries the gallery of medieval heroes was much expanded with a range of barbarian rulers: Alvilda and Ricimero – Goth queen and king; Rodelinda and Flavius – Lombard queen and king; Otto, king of Germany; Tamerlane, Richard I of England, Theodoric and so on[14].

But the nature of the Baroque's precious theatrical culture, ignoring vulgar 'Gothic', was that 'barbaric' characters from medieval history, heroes of chivalrous novels and poems appeared on stage, but castles – as a specific theatrical setting

– did not. Ariosto's Orlando furioso, Tasso's knights Rinaldo and Tancred, Amadis of Gaul – hero of a truly medieval novel that survived in a reworking by Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo – and even the kings of the Goths and Lombards arrived at their culmination on stage, set off to perform new feats or resolved complex romantic intrigues within magnificent palace interiors and vast magical gardens, with prison cells the only 'Gothic' spaces. Amongst hundreds of stage directions in plays and libretti, informing the designer how to create the set, we find barely a single reference to a castle right into the first third of the eighteenth century[15].

We should not be concerned with the few known depictions of castles in set designs of the first half and middle of the eighteenth century: they are but views, pictures painted on a canvas backdrop. Those painted sharp-tipped towers are the same old Oriental-Gothic citadels and city fortifications pushed back into the imaginary depths to create a perspective background for mass scenes of siege, battle or the capture of an enemy fortress. When we look closely at such sheets, time and again we see that the compositions lack the numerous foreground wings that were an obligatory part of eighteenth-century theatre. This is extremely important, for it confirms their role as but part of the overall set, their utilitarian function as background vedute.

The stage iconography of the fortress is older, more varied and richer than that of the castle. One of the oldest theatrical architectural loci, the fortress derives from medieval mysteries and all kinds of Renaissance processions and battles. Fortress towers recall the architecture of Hades (the towers of the burning city of Dis) and Renaissance treatises on fortifications, allegorical firework constructions and favourite military victories (starting with the Siege of Troy), and even the 'hieratic' symbolism of hermetic texts. The images of prisons and castles that spread in the last third of the eighteenth century were mixed in with the old iconography, largely depriving ephemeral theatrical fortresses of their intellectual breadth and depth.

The outwardly hermetic nature of the castle, its 'enclosed' space and heavy sense of might, proved to be simply the 'prison' turned inside out[16]. This was why for so many years theatrical iconography had no need of the fortress as a setting. Its symbolic function was performed (with interest) by prisons and gloomy cells. In eighteenth-century set designs prisons can be said to occupy the place of the Gothic novel in Enlightenment literature.

Against the background of Baroque and Classical atriums and palaces that were intended as clear reflections on stage of the majesty of the Classical architectural repertoire, the numerous prisons stood out like Gothic mansions amidst Classical country houses. In 1762 Richard Hurd, arguing the

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[14] Operas: Carlo Pallavicino, *L'Alvilda, regina de' Goti*, 1688; Francesco Gasparini, *Il Ricimero, re de' Goti* 1707; various operas by George Frideric Handel with librettos by Nicola Francesco Haym – *Ottone, Re di Germania* in 1723, *Flavio, Re dei Longobardi* in 1723, *Tamerlano* in 1724, *Rodelinda, regina de' Longobardi* in 1725 – and by Paolo Antonio Rolli – *Riccardo Primo, re d'Inghilterra* in 1727; Giovanni Porta, *Teodorico*, 1720.

[15] The castle as a dramatic setting is not found either at court or in the more archaic amateur dramatic context throughout the seventeenth century or first half of the eighteenth. Ludmila Sofronova, for instance, leading scholar of Russian Baroque theatre, grouped amateur productions by setting and identified – in full accordance with court etiquette – not 'castle' but 'palace and chambers' [24, pp. 190–193].

[16] The archetypal vertical inversion of the 'palace-prison' was analysed in detail by Sergey Khachaturov [25, pp.131–166].

superiority of Gothic invention over Classical for declaimed poetry, used comparisons taken from the stage [26, p. 254].

Literary historians have repeatedly noted the ever-closer relationship between theatrical imagery and the emerging Gothic novel. They have particularly noted the influence of theatrical carceri on Walpole's description of underground spaces in The Castle of Otranto. And although, as the author admitted, he saw his vision in a dream and not on stage, the 'scenography' of his action was painfully familiar[17].

V. THE GLOOMY PRISON

Of course, by the start of the eighteenth century the prison as a theatrical setting had its own iconographical tradition, rooted in the religious drama of medieval theatre and the robbe or props of the Commedia dell'arte.

The prison as an obligatory element of 'the tragic stage' features in Pollux's Onomasticon [27, p.19]. Throughout the seventeenth century, therefore, the theatrical prison chambers in which heroes languished in anticipation of rescue were nearly always an open-air prison courtyard (cortile di prigione) or the inner courtyard of a fortress, like that depicted by Ferdinando Tacca in his design for Ercole in Tebe of 1661.[18] Sometimes the courtyard became the Arsenale or guardroom (luogo d'armi), which might also be used to hold prisoners (arsenale che serve anche di prigione). Only at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do these prisons gain a roof, pierced by a small, usually round, window covered with bars. As they boldly crossed into the new century of Enlightenment which was to see the true flourishing of prison scenography, they had a specific name to distinguish them from the customary open atriums and courtyards, the 'closed prison with a ceiling' (prigione chiusa con soffitto).

Although in his treatise of 1711, L'Architettura civile, Ferdinand Galli Bibiena, founder of Europe's main theatrical dynasty, did not devote separate space to prisons or military courtyards, it is to him that we owe the main type of eighteenth-century prison set, whether the prison itself (prigione, carcere), the fortress (fortezza) or the atrium (atrio).

Perhaps the main defining feature of prisons at the start of the century was a sense of thick, heavy space created by vast stone blocks and oppressive vaults, with thick-set piers straining beneath their weight. Meanwhile, the range of recognisable iconographical elements remained unchanged: piers, arcades, buttresses, corridors, iron gates, steep and twisting staircases, balconies, galleries, chains, windows covered with shutters or wooden boards hung with pieces of armour, lamps and, of course, lots of iron grilles.

But in the second quarter of the eighteenth century the prison space started to grow steadily. In the 1740s the typical seventeenth-century stage instruction, 'then the cramped cell is transformed into a vast open space representing an ancient piazza…',[19] not only became impossible but came to contradict the very essence of the theatrical image of the prison[20].

For two notable circumstances were overlaid onto the general eighteenth-century tendency towards megalomania in all architectural construction – a tendency that encompassed the imaginary illusory squares, palace and church interiors of the stage: the influence of the iconography of the theatrum sacrum and a growing intention to amalgamate images of Hell and prison [31, pp. 457–533].

Firmly entrenched in the libretti of Metastasio and his numerous epigones, prisons literally burst open the stage of court theatres with their colossal spaces, that overflowed on all sides. A need to observe proportions – both metaphysical and physical – led to the unreal, oppressive phantasmagoria of stage-designers. The more magniloquent the production's allegorical rhetoric, the more majestic the palace halls and city squares that succeeded each other on stage, the more grandiose must the symmetrical response be, the more keen the architectural reflection of the fall into the abyss.

Increasingly drawn to a fitting visualisation of the mystery of the tale, the court stage sought to create extremely tangible gloomy prisons, conceived within the categories of horror and the sublime. Which was tantamount to perceiving the prison space as Gothic.

Ruined pointed arches, first seen in the prison sets of Pietro Righini for Milan opera in the early 1730s, were a decade later universally recognised as the 'device' ideally suited for the design of gloomy prisons. European stages were now flooded with hundreds of prisons 'in Gothic taste', while Righini's design – by this time available as a print – was copied and varied not just in Italy but in Paris, Dresden and St Petersburg. Its last embodiment was in the set The Ruins of the Palace of the Inquisition in Madrid, Demolished by the French Army in

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[17] Inspired by the success of the novel and apparently sensing the 'theatrical' nature of his creations, Walpole wrote the drama *The Mysterious Mother* (1769), set on the terrace of a castle. It was never staged. Yet the close relationship between stage effects and the machinery of 'Gothic' horrors was inherent in the whole literary genre. In Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* of 1772, for instance – written nearly ten years after *The Castle of Otranto* – the sudden phantasmagorical transformation of the cave appointed for a meeting with Beelzebub into a banqueting hall took place, or so it seemed to the hero, 'plus promptement qu'une décoration ne s'élève à l'Opéra' [faster than a set change at the Opera].

[18] Attributed to Valerio Spada, *Prison*, scene from *Ercole in Tebe*, Florence, 1661. Etching after an original drawing by Ferdinando Tacca.

[19] 'Allora l'angusta carcere in una vasta apertura cambiatasi, rappresentò la piazza dell'antica Tebe…' [28, p. 148].
[20] Such tendencies also appeared in the 1730s on the Russian court stage, then starting to master European devices and allegories. During preparations for an amateur production of *The Comedy of Joseph*, which Ludmila Starikova has shown to have taken place in 1734–1735, Giuseppe Avoglio was instructed to 'make a prison for three people with a grille and make it all black; width 3, height 4 arshin' [one arshin = 71.12 cm] with doors on iron hinges and fortress walls [29, pp. 42, 374]. This set, with a dark, cramped cell just 210 x 280 cm wide, was thus quite ascetic and in keeping with the tradition of biblical productions in a school theatre or court festivities of a past age. But two years later, in *La Forza dell'amore e dell' odio* with music by Francesco Araja, staged in honour of the empress's birthday, a prison cell was not just one of the main settings but had a recognisable fortress exterior and a vast interior that filled nearly the whole stage. According to the libretto, the set design (by Girolamo Bon) for Act II Scene 7 was to represent 'a courtyard surrounded with banisters and in perspective we see some kind of prison with doors in the middle', while one scene in Act III took place right inside the prison walls that occupied 'the whole theatre', surrounded by 'iron railings' [30, pp. 59, 89].

1809 of 1841[21], which although not a prison was a space that was 'unenlightened' both literally and metaphorically [3, p. 81].

Yet even in those examples of prison iconography where there was no harkening back to medieval architecture the viewer unfailingly felt the heavy breath of the Gothic. In Confessions of an English Opium Eater Thomas De Quincey spoke of what he called Piranesi's 'Dreams', describing them as showing 'vast Gothic halls' [32, p. 324], although just one sheet in the series, Gothic Arch, even hints at such constructions.

The disassociated nature of prison architecture, the impossibility of defining it in spatial categories of internal–external, enclosed–open, even at times underground–overground, became an inherent feature of carceri in the middle of the eighteenth century, whether in Piranesi's etchings or the theatrical designs of his contemporaries. The main, unalterable requirement of stage horror was that it be given physical manifestation, made tangible. The spectator, drawn slowly into this grandiose space by concentrated attempts to follow the perspective points meeting somewhere beyond the stage, was seized by fear and confusion in the face of man's insignificance not only before the disproportional, oversized architecture (as in the palace park scenes of court theatre) but before the kind of constraint inevitably represented by the prison.

In essence, the prisons of court theatre were the first instance in art history of one of the Enlightenment's most topical themes, that of external pressure or violence towards man, being presented in all its depth independently of the action, using only architecture and optical effects.

There is no doubt that the iconography of stage prisons was among the most influential in Enlightenment culture, and among the many 'Gothic' sights of 'a century mad and wise' we will always recall the painted piombi and underwater prisons of Venice, the Bastille in Paris, Spain's Holy Inquisition, the English rationalism of Bentham's Panopticon and St Petersburg's first Gothic castle, the uneven, five-cornered prison building with round towers at the corners erected to a design by Ivan Starov opposite New Holland between 1782 and 1787.

VI. THE MODERNITY OF ANTIQUITY: LOCAL COLOUR

In 1759 Horace Walpole imagined his reactions to 'Greek' and 'Gothic' buildings if he had never heard of either style. Which would he choose in this situation, he asked himself rhetorically. His answer was clear: 'I, who have great difficulty of not connecting every inanimate thing with the idea of some person… should prefer that building that furnished me with most ideas, which is not judging fairly of the merit of the buildings abstractedly. And for this reason, I believe, the gloom, ornaments, magic of the hardiness of the buildings,

would please me more in the Gothic than the simplicity of the Grecian' [33, pp. 48–49].

In other words, Walpole preferred Gothic to Classical because for him the style was packed with associations, the meaning of which outweighed the value of abstract Classical architectural standards. Offering a rich range of associations, on the one hand Gothic gifted a certain freedom, a means of avoiding the normative aesthetics of Classicism and the Enlightenment, but on the other it set out or dictated a specific vector for such avoidance. From the general to the specific, from the eternal of the Greek ideal to the twists and turns of individual 'national history'. For any unbending opponent of Gothic taste, whether a theoretician such as Fréart de Chambray or Encyclopédistes such as d'Alembert, Voltaire and Montesquieu, all the 'siècles d'ignorance' [34, p. xx] – the Middle Ages – were as one, an unbroken gloomy period in the history of mankind. For them, therefore, Gothic existed out of time, out of history; it was an 'acultural' phenomenon, something that could not be correlated to culture as a body of norms and rules [35, p. 59]. Thus, in architecture 'the gothic manner is not the manner of any particular people, it is the manner of the birth and end of art'[22].

For apologists of Gothic from Félibien in 1699 [37] and de Cordemoy in 1702 [38] it was, on the contrary, the fruit of a purely national history, the history of a people. We have only to see how French and British eighteenth-century architects cited the origins of the 'Gothic manner' as lying with the Gauls or Celts, while Goethe attributed them to the genius of the German people [39, p.12]; Germain Boffrand mentioned druids when writing about the Gallic roots of Gothic architecture [40, pp. 6–7], while Paul Decker gave visible form to his ideas in a design for a house made of trees and roots for a garden hermit (druid), in a set of prints for Gothic architecture [41, pp.107,109].

Gothic was good not because of some abstract architectonic proportions or symmetries (like the architecture of the Greeks), not because it related to the Platonic ideal, but because of its natural affinity with l'esprit des nations, which – thanks in part to Bishop Bossuet – became the driving force of history as understood by Voltaire and Montesquieu.

For architects of the first half of the eighteenth century, consciousness of the value and 'majesty' of their own national past did not exclude the primacy of the Greek ideal. As a result the idea arose of adapting Gothic to the Classical orders, 'correcting' it through order and classification. The minds of intellectuals were seized with a project for Greco-Gothic synthesis, a dream of uniting under one vault all that was best from both 'manners'.

In Britain in 1742 Batty Langley published 'five Gothic orders' of his own invention [42]. On the continent, in 1753 Abbé Laugier developed a theory of a united Greco-Gothic style [43] based on a combination of Classical decoration and Gothic construction – utterly Utopian but put into practice in

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[21] *Ruines du Palais de l'Inquisition à Madrid, demolépar l'armée française en 1809*. Set design by Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicheri for the first act of the Paris production of *Les diamants de la Couronne*. Pen and India ink, watercolour, pencil and brush on paper. Donald Oenslager collection. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

[22] 'La manière gothique n'est la manière d'aucun peuple particulier, c'est la manière de la naissance et de la fin de l'art.' [36, pp. 83–84].

several buildings[23] – while Francesco Milizia imagined future structures with Gothic interiors and Greek exteriors [44].

In Italy, however, far more important at this time than the dispute about 'Greek and Gothic' was a more stirring discussion of 'Greek and Roman': was Greek Antiquity superior to the Roman? Counterbalancing the Gallic freethinkers, who saw in 'the Greek ideal' a long-awaited liberation from Renaissance canons and the Italian architectural school in general, Italian architects continued to glorify the heritage of Classical Rome. Seeking to protect their great national contribution to the history of architecture from attack by the French – who even managed to see the Renaissance as the result of Greek rather than Roman influence [24]– in their writings Italian scholars and antiquarians looked not to Gothic but to Etrusco-Roman roots and to the Tuscan order.

In Russia too the fashionable polemics around the Greco-Gothic antithesis took on characteristic national features. Here the main distinction lay in that the antimony of 'Greek' and 'Gothic' could not by its very nature exist in Russia in the same way it was defined by European theoreticians. For in the Russian national tradition medieval architecture – what the Enlightenment saw as 'Gothic' – had always been understood as something inherently Greek, inherited directly from Byzantium along with baptism, the True Faith and the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome. This geopolitical and dynastic succession from Byzantium was rooted in the minds of Russian princes and tsars from the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the marriage of Prince Ivan III of Muscovy to the Byzantine Princess Sophia Palaeologus in 1472, and it was given clear form by Philophey, a monastic elder of Pskov, who in 1524 addressed this sacramental formula to Prince Vasily III of Muscovy: 'two Romes have fallen, the third stands; there shall be no fourth' [46, p. 360].

Although in the eighteenth century Moscow, heart of 'ancient' pre-Petrine Russia, was no longer the capital of the Russian Empire (the capital was now St Petersburg), the assertion of historical and cultural succession not only from Peter's magnificent achievements but from the ancient canon remained a central tenet. It was this, in part, that led Empress Elizabeth to instruct her architect Rastrelli in 1749 to rework his design for the Smolny Monastery, to make it 'not in the Roman manner' but five-domed, like the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin. She instructed, moreover, that it be 'with the decoration usual to a Greek church, both outside and in, and brighter' [47, p. 10]. The architect's response was a design in which contemporary Baroque forms were combined with Naryshkin Baroque, and the imposing bell-tower at the gates was crowned with a composition that echoed the bell-tower of the Novodevichy Monastery in Moscow [48, p.107].

This was in essence the first open attempt at conscious interpretation of the national tradition in accordance with new architectural practice and contemporary taste. Although the bell-tower was not built, such a synthesis, applying categories of 'ancient and modern', proved highly relevant from the point of view of mid-eighteenth century 'elegant taste'. At its foundation lay a combination of Byzantine typology and four-pier compositional structure with Baroque decorative form, elegant proportions and elements of the Classical orders.

That term used by the empress, 'the Roman manner' – based on the system of Classical orders – in contradistinction to 'the Greek manner' of the national Byzantine heritage, was not to be taken up.

Indeed, soon the very concept of a relationship between 'Ancient' and 'national' was to undergo change on all fronts.

In 1765, in a new treatise [49], Laugier moved the stress from the idea of Greco-Gothic synthesis to stylistic unity within either style, that style to be selected according to the nature of the building and the demands of taste. Each new project could choose whether to award the laurels to national Gothic or to Ancient Classicism, the key being the principle of stylistic unity. Whilst preparing his book for publication Laugier gave lectures, wrote essays, engaged in disputes with critics and published articles in the press, and could hardly have avoided the attention of the future author of 'Moscow Gothic', Vasily Bazhenov, then studying in Paris.

Even ten years after Bazhenov's return from Europe, Moscow – its old appearance largely unchanged – seemed medieval not only to foreigners but to the Europeanised inhabitants of St Petersburg. Prints after drawings sent from the capital 'for the making of views' by Ivan Sokolov and Mikhail Makhaev convey this sense in the emphatically pointed outlines of towers and cathedrals, turning a view of the Kremlin from the Zamoskvorechye district into a panorama of a Gothic fortress. But that very term 'Gothic', meaning something medieval, old or incorrect, something disregarding all rules and order, the Latin ordo, did not immediately come to be used in relation to the architecture of Moscow – or more widely to Russian architecture. Pronouncing his famous speech on the founding of the Imperial Kremlin Palace in 1773, Bazhenov – fully cognisant of contemporary architectural vocabulary – found himself in a somewhat difficult situation.

That speech, largely the work of Alexander Sumarokov, was intended mainly to glorify the empress as victor in the war against Turkey. It opened with this remarkable text:

'The Church of the East celebrates the revival of Tsargrad [Constantinople], for pious Constantine transferred the throne from the banks of the Tiber to Byzantium and adorned it with majesty and in godly fashion consecrated the site. Today Moscow is revived. You, great Catherine, even amidst bloody dispute… have not forgot the adornment of the first capital!' [50, pp. 104–105].

With his opening words the architect thus not only compared the Russian empress to the Roman emperor, ruler of Constantinople, but directly and in a manner comprehensible to all present gave new relevance to the idea of Russia's succession to Byzantium. The allusion to the Church's 'revival

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[23] Above all the Church of Saint-Geneviève in Paris (architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot), Arras Cathedral (architect Pierre Contant d'Ivry) and the Church of Notre Dame at Guebwiller (architect Louis Beuque).
[24] Lyolya Kantor-Kazovskaya cited Pierre Jean Mariette as asserting that the arts, which had declined in the West in the Middle Ages, survived amongst the Greeks, and that it was Greek refugees fleeing the fall of Constantinople who brought artistic skills to Italy once more [45, p.26].

of Tsargrad' at the start of the speech by Bazhenov/Sumarokov gave rise to a whole chain of historical associations and connections[25].

The foundation of the Kremlin Palace was thus built into a narrative demonstrating that the authors of the speech saw the old capital as the new Tsargrad and centre of the Third Rome. After such a beginning, to contrast Moscow's old 'Gothic' architecture with the correct 'Greek' manner would be strange, even for the most devoted adherent to French theories.

Bazhenov therefore chose to compromise. In keeping with the spirit of the times he called the Kremlin structures, and indeed late-seventeenth-century Moscow architecture, 'Gothic' but avoided the concept of 'Greek', using rather the euphemism 'straight', implying an architecture built according to the system of the Classical orders. Rejecting Rastrelli's principle of a synthesis of 'Ancient' and 'modern' form and construction based on the five-domed Baroque Church of St Clement on Pyatnitskaya, Bazhenov was thus forced to speak of the blending of 'straight architecture with Gothic'.

Following Laugier, he gave priority in his aesthetic preferences to monuments in pure style, their architecture 'is created according to the single will of the builder' [50, p. 107] rather than the result of aesthetic compromise. He particularly identified works in the Naryshkin Baroque style, the kind of building that later became for him the very model of national Gothic.

That same year, 1773, Bazhenov produced designs for marble vaults over the tombs of Metropolitans Pyotr, Iona and Philip in the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Moscow Kremlin. Through their combination of elements of European and Muscovite decoration these compositions clearly demonstrate the architect's declared principle of purity in 'the Gothic order of building'. Catherine's order to Bishop Samuil Krutitsky, in charge of the holy sites in the Kremlin, that the structure retain its original appearance – 'that the old, however simple, be not reworked, but all that is necessary should just be corrected' [51, p. 56] – determined the direction of the architect's thoughts.

This composite antiquarian 'Antiquity', used to adorn the tombs of Russia's first metropolitans based in Moscow, proved to be unexpectedly relevant after the proclamation of Catherine's Greek Project. 'Old Russian Gothic' became the programmatic expression of the antiquity – both religious and political – of Moscow's metropolitan seat and of the very idea of Russia's progress 'from the Varangians to the Greeks'. It was with good reason that Bazhenov's designs were long kept with the collection of Grigory Potemkin, intended for the future university in Ekaterinoslav. That new southern Russian centre of the empire, founded as part of the Greek Project, was

– in Potemkin's mind – to become Russia's 'third capital', rooted in the concept of Greek succession[26].

But even while the ideas of Catherine's Greek Project were in the air Bazhenov built an imperial residence at Tsaritsyno that hinted, with its 'gentle Gothic', at the ruling dynasty's feudal history, and the mighty inspiration behind both put her own hand to creating the most complete and consistent manifesto of Greco-Gothic taste of her reign.

VII. FROM THE VARANGIANS TO THE GREEKS

In 1786 Empress Catherine the Great completed two plays of a trilogy devoted to Russian history[27]. The first, about Ryurik and the Varangians, proved unsuitable for the stage and was never performed, although it was published twice and translated into French and German, [53, p. 17] while the third was never written at all. But the second, central part of the trilogy, The Beginning of Oleg's Reign, enjoyed a happy fate on stage. Not only did it mark Catherine's triumph as a playwright but it became a programmatic work for the age, embodying the Russian state's Greco-Gothic ideal.

In her subtitle, Catherine defined the genre of her composition as 'an imitation of Shakespeare, not adhering to the usual theatrical rules', which liberated the empress from the three Classical unities and allowed her to present numerous characters, one of whom even represented 'the people'. Most importantly, thanks to Shakespeare Catherine dared to try her hand at 'historical chronicle', each successive play a consistent expression of the author's underlying concept. The historical concept for which the crowned dramatist conceived the whole cycle was Russia's geopolitical succession to Byzantium. To maximise the intelligibility and clarity of the theme of Moscow as the Third Rome the Empress was even ready to be a little careless with historical fact and to present Prince Oleg as the founder of Moscow[28]. This little ruse allowed her, over the course of the mere five acts of The Beginning of Oleg's Reign, to set out the main vector of Russian history of interest to her: 'Moscow – Kiev – Constantinople'. The culmination of the spectacle – as of her Greek Project – was to be the triumph of the Russian prince in Constantinople, ceremonially honoured by the Byzantine emperor.

As usual the grandiose nature of the idea justified certain costs. Above all it was necessary to sacrifice Voltaire's opinion of Shakespeare, whom he saw as a brilliant 'barbarian', utterly lacking in taste or proportion [53, p. 20]. Catherine, while grateful to her learned correspondent for his 'carelessly' expressed dream of living to see her crowned in Constantinople, consciously chose a barbarian, Gothic form

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[25] The feast of the founding of Constantinople, marked by the Greek Church on 11 May, is the day that Constantine dedicated his new capital to the Mother of God in 330. In commemoration of this event Princess Olga ensured that the Church of Sophia of the Holy Wisdom in Kiev in 960 was consecrated on the same day. Both these events were then celebrated by Prince Vladimir on 11 May 996 when he consecrated his new stone cathedral – built in stone by Byzantine architects – to the Dormition of the Mother of God. Kiev, then capital of the Russian lands, thereby symbolically followed Constantinople in coming under the protection of the Queen of Heaven.

[26] The idea of 'the third Rome' played its role here too: on 9 May 1787, in the presence of Catherine II and Joseph II, the foundation stone was laid for the cathedral church at Ekaterinoslavl, intended as a replica of St Peter's in Rome.
[27] Published the same year in a volume of the almanac Russian Theatre… [52, pp. 107–166 and 167–248]. Catherine's authorship is not mentioned.
[28] In her own introduction, Catherine wrote: 'In "Notes on Russian History", under the heading "Grand Duke Igor I", we read that "Oleg commenced his regency reign by travelling through all the Russian lands: arriving at the place where the rivers Moskva, Yauza and Neglinnaya come together, he built a small town, called it Moscow, and gave it to one of his relatives". Based on this truth, the foundation of Moscow opens the first act.' [54, p. 261].

for the expression of that dream. Her political and literary purpose was the creation of a 'Gothic' act in Old Russian taste with a triumphant Greek finale.

The form chosen for the performance was that of a magnificent court masque, a musical and dramatic production with ballets, choruses, long monologues, athletic hippodromes and ritual folk scenes.

Organising such a spectacle required much time, careful preparation and vast sums. When a report on the staging of Oleg was presented to the empress at Tsarskoe Selo on 24 July 1789, with a 'request for fifteen thousand roubles for the said play in addition to the costumes in hand', Catherine wrote on it her resolution: 'have everything ready by the end of 1790, the dresses and money to be taken, the first from the treasury, the second by degrees from the Cabinet.' [55, p. 114]. She was particularly concerned with historical veracity in the production unfolding on stage. Both 'Gothic Rus' and 'Greek Byzantium' were to be shown with maximum authenticity and conviction.

According to Alexander Khrapovitsky, the empress took an interest in all the details: 'she looked through the Encyclopédie' in order to select Greek rituals and games for the fifth act of Oleg [56, p. 16], insisted on reworking verse and, unhappy with the music of Domenico Cimarosa, ordered that all the 'Greek' choruses be written by Giuseppe Sarti. Costume designs for the 'historical performance' were specially chosen on the empress's instructions and were based on available depictions of saints, monarchs, boyars and other historical types [57, p. 52]. Khrapovitsky wrote that the empress herself selected 'designs for costumes for Oleg. They were taken from chronicles and from the icon of the Virgin's Veil with depictions of Leo and Zoe, since these events took place in their reign.' The scene of Oleg's meeting with Byzantine Emperor Leo the Wise and Empress Zoe was prepared 'extremely carefully', as was only fitting for the central episode.

After many rehearsals the premiere of Oleg took place in the Hermitage Theatre on 22 October 1790; it was marked by 'great luxury and taste' [58, p.162]. The following week, starting from 27 October, performances were given in the large Stone Theatre where the cast was joined on stage by another '600 extras from the Jäger Life Guards', their costumes 'taken from Her Majesty's Carousel' [55, p. 115].

The symbolic meaning of this grandiose premiere was no secret even to the Austrian ambassador, Count Esterházy, although he understood not a word. He wrote home: 'I am unable to judge the details of the performance but they tell me that there was much of great complexity in the play… So I understand the admiration of the spectators who knew just who had written it' [59, p. 426].

In the wake of the first performances, a magnificent publication of the libretto was prepared at the printing house of the Mining Institute, with a dissertation by Sarti on Greek music and engraved scenes from the production. This was utterly unique in eighteenth-century Russian theatrical culture. While such publications were well known in Europe the practice had never spread to Russia. That the only production

in the history of the Russian theatre to be found worthy of this exceptional practice was Oleg, and not one of the numerous magnificent performances on great victories or honouring the empress on her name day, surely speaks for itself. The magnificent in folio book, glorifying Russia's successes and her might, was intended as a 'reminder' of Catherine's triumphs, as a propaganda weapon accessible to Russian and foreign readers, putting theatrical spectacle on a par with events of state significance.

Historians of the eighteenth century have often written about this publication and there is a superb study of the authorship of the prints [60, pp.241–248], but no one has ever asked if the prints truly accord with the actual sets used.

Indeed, paradoxically, the scenography of Oleg overall remains unstudied: the only play in Russian eighteenth-century theatre for which our information about the staging comes not only from descriptions but from extremely detailed reproductions of five of eight sets mentioned in the libretto – and yet those sets have not been linked with any specific theatrical architect or designer.

Neither the name of the designer, nor the author of the engraved depictions (Nikolay Lvov) are mentioned in the book itself or the documents relating to its preparation, although Catherine undoubtedly attached huge importance to the 'historical precision' of the settings for her play. This is made clear in the detailed stage instructions that reflect the empress's requirements for every change of scene.

Thus the first act, relating how Oleg founded the city of Moscow, 'presents the place where the Rivers Moskva, Yauza and Neglinnaya come together… Priests with fire… the first stone for the foundation of Moscow is brought to Oleg… The priests lay the stone and fit it into the foundation; an eagle flies amidst them.' [61, pp. 267–268]. In 1837 the almanac Northern Bee [Северная пчела] published the impressions of those present at a performance in 1795, who recalled their 'admiration in the scene where the city of Moscow was founded' and the thunderous applause 'when the eagle flew by' [55, p. 115].

Of far greater interest to us here, however, are the following scenes, which allow us to recapture how the Gothic princely apartments and streets of ancient pagan Kiev looked in the eyes of Catherine's contemporaries.

In the second act 'the theatre shows a meadow on the bank of the Dnieper; on the opposite bank we see part of the city of Kiev, beyond which in the distance Ugrians are crossing the mountains; in front are the prince's tents'. To judge by the published print, no less care and attention was paid to the set designs than to the choice of historical models for the costumes. Beyond the foreground set-up we clearly see the city of Kiev spread out on the hills beyond the Dnieper. The very structure of the urban panorama across the river, with a tree to one side in the foreground and the characteristic hilly relief, is redolent of eighteenth-century engraved views of Kiev. But in the search for authentic originals the author of the original scenography seems to have been inspired by depictions of Old Russian towns by Nicolaes Witsen (1660s), published to

illustrate the writings of Adam Olearius[29]. Certainly the domed structures of pagan Kiev recall the whimsical forms of the wooden churches of Tver and Murom as depicted by the Dutchman. In essence, the artist's 'Gothic originals' dated from the second half of the seventeenth century, contemporary to the 'Moscow Gothic' that was interpreted by Bazhenov, although themselves not views of Russia's former capital.

Another Kievan set reproduced in the publication shows the 'princely halls' of scenes five to eight in Act III. It is here that the wedding rite of Igor and Prekrasa (future Princess Olga) unfolds before the spectators, rich in ethnographical details: 'The boyar, in place of her father, with the bread, and the boyar's wife, in place of her mother, with the hops, wheat and coins on a golden bowl; the bowl surrounded by sables and laid on three corners of the bowl are hops; both wear sables with the fur outwards, they enter the inner chambers and greet Igor and Prekrasa coming from the church with bread and salt, and sprinkle them with hops as they enter… The horns, shawms and drums are blown and beaten. The marriage procession. Igor leads Prekrasa by the hand… The boyar, in place of her father, takes an arrow, approaches Prekrasa and slightly lifts her veil; the boyars' wives start to take off her shawl and veil; then Igor takes Prekrasa by the hand and leads her to Oleg.'

Demanding our attention is the architecture of those 'princely halls', a fit setting for the pagan Gothic ritual. With pointed arches, slender twisting columns and decorative rosettes. The interiors of the princely home, lacking any historical model (unlike the set with its view of Kiev – but then where might such a model be found?), are simply typical 'Gothic' sets without any hint of national colour, and probably derived from prints of European sets rather than Russian prototypes.

Indeed, in the theatre directorate's report to Catherine on preparations for Oleg we read: 'in all, eight sets are required for this play, of which the following are ready: the Princely apartments in Kiev; the Princely halls and Magnificent Chamber in the imperial palace at Tsargrad; and five sets must be made anew. They are: 1. The place where the Rivers Moskva, Yauza and Neglinnaya come together, 2. The meadow on the bank of the Dnieper with part of the city of Kiev and with the prince's tents, 3. The square in Kiev, 4. The walls of Constantinople, before which are Oleg's arms and some of his tents, 5. The hippodrome in Constantinople. All these are estimated to cost from 4500 to 5000 roubles.' [62, ff. 117, 118].

It is thus absolutely and unambiguously clear that the interiors were 'standard', both those showing 'Tsargrad', i.e. designed according to the principles of the Classical orders, and the 'Gothic' interiors of the princely halls in Kiev.

Going through the repertoire of the court theatre at this time there is no difficulty in identifying sets for some 'Greek' palace hall, but it is worth looking a bit harder at the question of finding two suitable Old Russian Gothic halls (more modest ones for the 'princely chambers' and more luxurious for the 'princely halls').

In all probability such Gothic halls could be found left over from previous productions, stored in the workshops of the court theatre. Such settings are not too hard to find as we look at the plays in the Russian Classical repertoire. Above all, when we look at the settings for tragedies by Alexander Sumarokov or Yakov Knyazhnin, and even the earlier plays by Catherine herself. In most of them – Khorev, Semira, Yaropolk and Dimiza by Sumarokov[30], Knyazhnin's Vladimir and Yaropolk[31] – the action unfolds throughout observing the principle of unity of place, 'in Kiev in the princely house'. In others – Sinav and Truvor, Vysheslav by Sumarokov[32] and even Catherine's comic opera The Bogatyr Boeslavich of Novgorod[33] – the action is set in 'the princely house in Novgorod'. The sole setting for Sumarokov's Mstislav[34] is 'a princely house in Tmutarakan'. If we widen our search to include Gothic that is not specifically Russian then Sumarokov's works provide us with settings in 'the royal house in Denmark' for a staging of Hamlet by the 'barbarian' Shakespeare and in 'the royal house in Persia' for Aristona[35].

Author of most of the sets for the court theatre between 1762 and 1792 was court theatrical architect Francesco Gradizzi.

Gradizzi was never to visit Russia's first capital, although he designed a number of firework displays for celebrations in Moscow, so he was guided in producing his Old Russian sets not by his own observations from life – unlike his contemporary Giacomo Quarenghi – but by models offered by the theatre directorate. We might hypothesise that it was he who was responsible for the sets for Oleg. Amongst the drawings by Gradizzi in the State Hermitage Museum are two sheets which can be related to the production. The first is a 'design for a set of an Old Russian town', probably that same 'square in Kiev' of Act III, the setting for the 'princely procession' from palace to church for the wedding that is described in such detail[36]. Carefully worked up, it presents a

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[30] Alexander Sumarokov, with dates first presented (all at the imperial theatre in St Petersburg): *Khorev. A Tragedy*, 1750; *Semira. A Tragedy*, towards the end of 1751; *Yaropolk and Dimiza. A Tragedy*, 1758.

[31] Yakov Knyazhnin, *Vladimir and Yaropolk. A Tragedy*, written in 1772, first presented at the Petrovsky Theatre in St Petersburg 9 November 1784.

[32] Alexander Sumarokov: *Sinav and Truvor. A Tragedy*, first presented at the imperial theatre at Peterhof in early 1750; *Vysheslav. A Tragedy*, first presented at the imperial theatre in St Petersburg 3 October 1768.

[33] Catherine II, *The Bogatyr Boeslavich of Novgorod. Comic Opera*, first presented in the Hermitage Theatre 27 October 1787.

[34] Alexander Sumarokov, *Mstislav. A Tragedy*, first presented at the imperial theatre in St Petersburg 16 May 1774.

[35] Alexander Sumarokov, *Aristona. A Tragedy*, first presented in the imperial rooms in the Winter Palace, St Petersburg, in October 1759.

[36] Many tiny ethnographical details are revealed in a dialogue between two onlookers at the back awaiting the appearance of the procession. 'One gives the other a description of the procession: Firstly, *stolniks* will lay purple and yellow brocade before the sovereign; at the head is the wedding pair… Who comes after them?

First Man. The witnesses, and after the witnesses the boyars, the *okolniches* and the counsellor boyars. The *tysyatsky* leads the grand duke by the hand and the master of the horse beside him...

Second Man. See how the sovereign is dressed.

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[29] Some of Nicolaes Witsen's drawings of Russian towns were published in Amsterdam by the Dutch publisher Pieter van der Aa in 1719 and 1727 to illustrate Adam Olearius, *Voyages très-curieux & très renommez faits en Moscovie, Tartarie, et Perse*.

generalised ancient city with old-fashioned onion domes, a round tower recalling a minaret and stone chambers. The deep perspective of the single central street is absolutely perfect for the procession which, according to the stage directions in the libretto 'goes through the theatre [i.e. the stage], with many people'. The fairytale forms of the city buildings do not directly relate to the panorama of Kiev in the second act but their 'Gothic' tripartite and pointed arches and the domes without crosses are utterly in keeping with the fantastical iconography of ancient pagan Kiev.

The second of Gradizzi's theatrical designs under consideration shows another palace hall with pointed arches and a decorative strip of tripartite arches running in a frieze above double columns; it is largely of interest for the unusual order and its tectonic expressiveness. In composition this is an almost direct quotation of the 'Gothic order' from Paul Decker's popular work of 1759, and we would hardly know this was the hall of some Kievan prince were it not for the faint pencil inscription below, Scena terza in chiewo – 'Third scene in Kiev'. Written in another hand (and breaching the rules of Italian grammar), the inscription probably indicates that the design was not originally created for the third act of Oleg (which opens with a scene in the 'princely chambers in Kiev'), but was chosen from suitable ready sketches and annotated at that point.

Gradizzi's surviving works include no other designs that we can link with the staging of Catherine's opera. They were perhaps given to Lvov by the theatre directorate to be engraved and reproduced in the 1792 publication, with the addition of the figures and props on stage. Such was the typical practice for publications of this kind in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: engravers took the designer's sketches and turned them into full-blown pictures of the action. That this was also the case here is supported by another version of the engraved composition for the 'wedding rite' in Act III that was not included in the publication (now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow). There Lvov leaves the architectural setting of Gothic halls unsullied, utterly omitting the meeting of Prekrasa, the feast and Russian dances, apparently following the designer's original idea to the letter.

First Man. He is robed in gold and silk velvets lined with sables, and with a fur coat of Russian sable covered with golden velvet.

Second Man. The sovereign comes, his hem sweeping the floor behind him…

First Man. And the sovereign's belt is wrought of gold.

Second Man. And the boyars and *okolniches* and the *stolniks* and the counsellor boyars are all in gold…

First Man. And in black hats and in collars both turned down and standing proud…

Second Man. Here comes the promised bride; led gently by the arm by her relatives…

First Man. Then come the lesser relatives and other honoured guests.

Second Man. Who are those youths walking to either side?

First Man. Those lads, see you, are guards, there to see that none cross the path of the sovereign prince and sovereign princess; they are the sons of boyars.

Second Man. And the tuffet, and the forty sables?

First Man. The bride and groom shall sit on the tuffet and they shall be fanned with sables, such is the custom…' [61, pp. 282–283].

Contrasting 'Gothic' valour and 'Byzantine' political wisdom, the fourth act ends with a 'glorious peace' showing Oleg's entrance into the lap of Greek civilisation. His magnificent reception is illustrated through a series of symbolic actions: a ceremonial banquet in the emperor's palace, an athletic competition in his honour, with a performance of Euripides' tragedy Alcestis marking the culmination of the fifth act. Here each of the 'Gothic' elements has its symmetrical 'Greek' response. The pagan traditions of Kievan Rus are matched with Greek rituals of which the empress read in the Encyclopédie; Lomonosov's Russian verse is counterbalanced by the first translation of Euripides' tragedy; Russian folk songs arranged by Carlo Canobbio by the Ancient melos reconstructed by Sarti, who applied his considerable erudition to the task.

Since the image of the 'magnificent chambers in the imperial palace' of Leo the Wise in Constantinople is not known, our main source for judging how the Greek part of the production was decorated is the fourth scene of Act V, when Oleg is first present at the 'ballet of athletes' and then enjoys the Greek tragedy. 'The theatre presents the hippodrome in Constantinople: Leo, Zoe and Oleg are on the raised tribune made ready for them, opposite which should be the stage for the theatre within a theatre for the theatrical performance; that stage is hidden by a curtain. With trumpets and drums the sign is given, then the ballet and games begin, that is: sprinting, wrestling, jumping, unarmed and armed combat, amidst which the curtain rises revealing the stage and there shall be played out… the third act of Euripides' Alcestis…' [61, p. 298].

Throughout this scene the set shows the hippodrome in Constantinople, symmetrically flanked by two Classical Greek porticoes and a triumphal arch closing off the central space in the background, silhouetted beyond which are the dome of the Pantheon in Rome and Trajan's Column.

It is hard to imagine a more intelligible visualisation of the very idea of Byzantine architecture as a mixture Greek and Roman, encompassing Greek colonnades and architraves and Roman triumphal arches and vaults.

In the theatre, Catherine turned Oleg from a purely literary phenomenon into an artistic manifesto, and in the published book she made it the historical underpinning for her own political project. Her actions, playing for the long game, were consistent. After the magnificent Russian military victories of 1788–1789 and the triumphant journey to the banks of the Dnieper and to Taurida in the company of Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, literally every scene in the production seemed to have prophetic meaning. The longed-for Greco-Gothic synthesis seemed to be within her grasp. And the final combination of three alternative building styles – the Greek, Roman and Gothic – rang out like the programme behind imperial architectural policy …

Even when the political allusions were long a thing of the past, looking back from the new, nineteenth, century, Gavriil Derzhavin could not restrain his enthusiasm: 'Nothing so captures the mind of the people and guides them towards some purpose of their government as varied, changing spectacles of this type. Such is the political finesse of the Areopagus, the true purpose of opera… Catherine the Great was fully aware of

that. We watched and listened, each act had its heroic musical accompaniment, composed by her in time of war under the title Oleg' [57, p. 57].

VIII. CONCLUSION

Last of the succession of great theatrical architects and designers on the Russian eighteenth-century stage was the celebrated Pietro Gonzaga; ironically, he was extremely unhappy with his role as creator of ephemeral scenic illusions and temporary urban decorations for various festivities. Author of fresh sets for The Beginning of Oleg's Reign in 1795 and of hundreds of virtuoso squares, palaces, prisons, castles and tombs in 'Gothic' and 'Classical' taste, from the moment he arrived at the Russian court he dreamed of a career not as a paper architect but as an architect-builder. Gonzaga put forward designs for theatre buildings large and small on every occasion and was just as ready to create park follies such as the Bip Fortress at Pavlovsk as architectural symbols of the empire. Amongst the latter were two designs for churches in St Petersburg that he proposed without success. The first of these, employing Classical forms with a round colonnade portico, an internal glass dome 'for warmth' and amphitheatre steps around the internal walls to allow 'those spectators standing at a distance to see the rites clearly'37 was intended to 'surpass the cathedral of the Smolny Monastery' but was rejected. Then the theatrical architect placed his hopes in his own independent interpretation of a Greco-Gothic synthesis. His plan for St Isaac's Cathedral, which Gonzaga, in his own words, 'dared to offer up to the judgment of the wise', included the peristyles on all four sides dictated by the rules of the competition, two of them semi-circular in order to better 'echo the apses'. At the same time, to give the composition both harmony and majesty, the architect proposed that the entablature above the vast columns be raised higher than the tallest of the neighbouring buildings and that the triumphal structure be crowned with 'a stepped pyramid' of seven domes that would make it possible 'to identify the building as a cathedral even at a distance'. We should add that Gonzaga also sought to introduce 'Gothic elements' to the interior space: 'tinted stained windows' and reflected light that would prevent the thoughts of the flock from wandering. Particularly touching in this context was the architect's note, in which he stated that 'this manner in which I have designed the church's outer appearance and for which I have been accused of barbarity, is in fact on the contrary utterly Greek, or at least such are all the old churches in Moscow, Greek Orthodox churches, and those of Italy of the age of the [Ravenna] exarchate, when they were built by Greek architects. Those who know about Antiquity call this Constantinian architecture …' [63, p. 204].

This design, from the pen and compass of a court theatrical architect, was the last and perhaps most unexpected reminiscence of the Greco-Gothic theme. The theatrical Gothic of the Enlightenment brought to the new century obvious evidence of growing historical awareness, a romantic interest in national history and its physical remains and an increasingly

well-founded approach to how it was presented on stage, but it also brought its own increasingly archaic stereotypes.

Thus, starting with Joseph Marius Babo's opera Strelizi, staged at Covent Garden in London in 1790, subjects set in 'medieval Russia' became popular. Right up to the end of the century Moscow featured in European theatres embodied in gloomy Gothic sets showing the Kremlin's squares and cellars, suffused with the spirit of conspiracy and revolt, and where even the murky genius of Napoleon was doomed to a tragic finale.

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