Information Technologies in the Russian Theatrical Business

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Abstract
This paper is an attempt to shed light on the history of the Russian theater relations with the Internet and to identify some tendencies of their further interaction. There are short review of theatrical resources of Russian Internet and description of new theatre Internet projects, such as Internet Theatre Festival and Cultu.Ru! - retrospective showing of recordings with the best performances by Russian theaters in the article. The part of paper devoted to Internet resources directed to professional theatrical workers. Specific problems and perspectives of development of this kind of projects are described.
Big attention is paid on the educational component of theatrical Internet resources. It's shown that Internet technologies may help theatres to build up well-informed theater-goers. And their proper use may bring about an inflow of new but already trained public to a real and not just virtual auditorium.

Information technologies and their application have their history in Russia now. Programs for most efficient planning of concert tours, of theatrical repertoire and for organization of ticket distribution systems started developing as long as a quarter of a century ago.

Today, all theaters are equipped with computers, a fair number of them having local networks. Regretfully, good use of the technique is by no means always made.

Most Russian theater managers are able to master an elementary or often a more sophisticated software product, but few feel the need for professional software resources. Professional software programs could be classified in accordance with the following types: those that are aimed at data base accumulation and for integration of information in other formats; analytical software products; software products for planning and designing.

Analytical software products are often developed by theaters themselves, while planning and designing software development could be beyond a theater IT engineers' capability. At the same time each theater usually lays out plans with regard to distribution, casting and scheduling new performances. All the above tasks could be resolved with a unified complex for managing repertoire. Unfortunately, theaters, as of today, are lacking software that would be able to meet the problems they experience.

Theaters, as a rule, when they feel a need for such kind of products, start from scratch; they invent the wheel developing highly tailored program, which work only within the framework of a particular theater and is probably unsuitable for general use.

Local theatrical networks in Russian theaters are limited to servicing the needs of accounting and administration departments, thought examples of broader networks existence are quite widespread. In most cases a local network is used as a mechanism for exchanging information in between several subdivisions, though it is desirable to use such local networks for imparting a new dynamics to economic, financial and planning decisions.

Computerized ticket sale is an example of a more efficient network information exchange. In such a case the mission of a network is to provide for a dynamic decision-making approach. It is in this dynamic that the main value of computer technology application is to be found when it concerns ticket sales: it provides for addressing a target group of potential theater-goers and in that way furthering the process of audience attraction with a new level of quality.

To do justice we should note that theatrical community was not the first to start using Internet-technologies in their activity. Unlike theaters, museums and libraries had organized their professional communities before, and these communities developed a unified structure for data presentation within information systems. It is much more complicated for theaters to develop such a structure as, of today, it not only lacks resolution, but also it has not yet been properly formulated. Real life, of course, calls not only for 'riders' – formalized technical passports of performances necessary for a theater to be able to participate in tours and festivals, for providing actors profile description for reference books and files, for theatrical sites description and so on. Still, most often, a new format questionnaire is developed for each new event, but the compatibility of such formats is usually out of the question.

Since the Theater entered the space of the Internet it gained new potentialities.

This paper is an attempt to shed light on the history of the Russian theater relations with the Internet and to identify some tendencies of their further interaction.

Theaters and their Internet-Sites

The story of Russian-language "theatrical" Internet started in October 1996 when the "Piotr Fomenko Workshop" Theater opened its website in the Internet.

Depending on their origin all theatrical websites could be divided into the following groups: those that were created following an order from a particular theater, those that were developed by theaters themselves and those that emerged independently of a theater or theaters desire.

It is interesting to note that while it is easy to come across a Website of first two mentioned groups in connection with any organization, only few types of establishments could be proud of a site of the third group. For the most part, the latter type of organizations involve sport clubs (mostly football and hockey ones), popular groups and theaters. On the one hand, such non-official websites evidence strong interest in theatrical art, on the other hand, they are fraught with wide spread of inaccurate, out-of-date information, or not quite the same one a theater would like to share with its audience.

There was time when three (!) unofficial websites (apart from an official one) of St.Petersburg Mariinsky Theater were enjoying existence in the vast expanses of the Internet. Another example: Akimov Comedy Theater in St.Petersburg has both official and unofficial websites. The latter was set up by a group of enthusiasts under their own initiative. There are plenty of examples of the kind. In the first place, it is practically impossible to counteract non-official Internet-sites just because of the specificity of the Internet structure, which allows everyone to place information and, secondly, there is no need, in our opinion, to interact them. In our view it would be much more efficient to try to establish cooperation with those enthusiasts, who spend their time and often money to create and maintain such sites. Such a website demands immediate intervention only if it becomes out of date or it fails to be upgraded. Not all the managers still recognize the danger concealed in last year's playbills hanging in the Internet, while it's quite a realistic one and is justified by a case study we came across at one of our seminars.

Theater managers in one city started complaining that the students of local University, who previously had accounted for a considerable portion of theatrical audience, stopped visiting theaters. The theaters considered that the situation resulted from indifference on the part of the University and Students Club managers, and the theaters tried to do their best to revive good connections. It did not produce any positive results. Analysis of the situation showed that the students out-flow from the theaters' halls coincided with the time when, under support of the Sores Foundation, an Internet-class was set up based in the local university. Let's imagine a person who is visiting the Internet for the first time in his life. What is such an individual supposed to look for? Presumably, he will be searching for something familiar, for something the individual has some knowledge of. For example, it could be information about his native city. At that point in time the city theaters we are talking about had no Internet-sites of their own, and the information about theaters' life was usually placed at one of the Russian Republican Ministry of Culture sites.

As it often happens, the Ministerial site, after it had been created and inaugurated, became quickly neglected and was given up. Playbills kept inviting people to enjoy a two-year old "opening nights". After visiting such a page a young potential theater-goer will surely develop a subconscious feeling of dissatisfaction and irritation, such reaction being targeted not towards the site developers but a particular theater: it becomes quite obvious now that the theater is

moss-grown, that it got stuck in a remote time period, and it does not, for sure, meet the spiritual needs of up-to-date generation Internet-users consider themselves belonging to.

After the pagers with time-worn repertoire had been shut down a new city information portal of an entertaining nature was opened. Among other things the portal was to cover cultural events including current theater repertoire. The portal brought university students back into the theater.

Despite the fact that "a standard model of a theatrical website" does not exist and should not exist, still there is a kind of a standard set of information, which is to be placed there. Better to say, there is a list of basic sections which such a web-site is to comprise. The list could be expanded by the theater, but in any case such sections as "News", "Repertoir", "Playbill" "Theater Company", "About the Theater" and "Contacts" are a must.

A website containing all the above described information would do quite well instead of a traditional paper booklet and even has certain advantages over it. E.g., if a new performance is introduced by the theater or in case of any change, website information updating would cost by far less than publishing a new booklet.

Most theaters have websites structured exactly as "virtual booklets" and unfortunately have been limiting themselves to this while the Internet functionalities provide not only for informing the visitor on the latest developments but for interactive communication as well. The simplest way to start a dialogue between the theater and its spectators would be through setting up a site guestbook or a forum. The difference between the two is that a guestbook basically serves only to publish visitors' comments while a forum is a place for discussions and deliberations.

The themes can be suggested both by visitors themselves and the theater acting as the forum moderator. It can help to discuss performances, ask questions of favorite actors and understand the stage director's message in a particular scene... Using topics "introduced" in due time, the theater can find out the public opinion and influence it. Definitely, continuous efforts are badly needed so that if questions are asked an answer should be provided, and if for any reason the forum gets too quiet discussion should be invited etc.

Whenever the host is not involved with a forum it will die away or will live its own life. In the first case, a web page with one or two topics started a long time ago but never resumed would serve as powerful counter-advertising of the theater. In the second case, the themes being discussed may drift far away from theatrical subject-matter so while promoting visits to the website the forum will stop performing its key function: supporting a dialogue between the theater and spectators.

But even interaction between the theater and the audience does not exhaust the Internet potential. Competent use of a system of hyperlinks and pop-up windows helps to educate a well-informed theater-goer. Just by slightly highlighting the font or the colour of certain menu items the website designers may guide the visitor along the way they consider right. It is most important that the guided person should be absolutely confident that he himself chose this route to navigate the site. Logically outlining and describing the features of theatrical action, it is possible to teach an inexperienced theater-goer to perceive the performance in a more correct and profound way. Adding to the website videotapes of performance episodes and providing them with a commentary such as subtitles it is possible to focus on the key elements of the production and explain its sign system to an unsophisticated viewer.

Unfortunately, we have not yet come across theatrical sites implementing this challenge but there is no doubt tomorrow is with them.

However an Internet-based Representative Office can target not only visitors. Many theaters justly believe that the Internet is a perfect place to look for partners, arrange concert tours and communicate with sponsors. To address such objectives the theater website should contain a section with information for professionals. If a theater offers its premises for temporary engagement it should release its stage layout, provide descriptions of make-up rooms, characteristics of its light and audio equipment etc. If it would like to go on a tour itself - play riders, selected media reports and possibly brief videotapes of its performances are needed.

Theatrical Portals

Next step the theaters took into the Internet after website-building was setting up theatrical portals. The first and most well-known of them is the Theater.ru project ("Pages of Moscow Theater Life"). A large number of portals are based on the geographical principle i.e. uniting the theaters of the same city or region ("Theater & Arts in Ekaterinburg," "Pages of Voronezh Theater Life" etc.). Theatrical portal functions are often performed by a section of a major regional news server. In such cases, in addition to brief information and possibly a playbill, the theater page may provide links to theaters' own websites with more detailed information.

In 2000, the first virtual box-offices were launched on the Russian Internet (Parter.ru project). Today by their attendance theater ticket reservation and sale portals and sites occupy the first 10 to 12 positions in the "Theater" section of the Rambler rating system. It may be noted that a large share of those ticket distribution systems in fact only suggest the visitors send an order in writing while some systems even invite them to … make a telephone call. And only two portals (Kontramarka.ru and Parter.ru) really support user's interaction with the system.

Even though the Internet is probably the most handy means of ticket-booking – first, you can take your time reading the repertoire, performance descriptions and reviews; second, you can save time and nerves it takes to buy tickets standing in a queue; third, the tickets can be booked at any time that suits you best – in today's Russia this method is not so widely-spread because the system for paying and obtaining tickets booked in this way is not well-developed yet.

Another problem with box-office portals is that there are good and bad plays, popular and less popular performances so every theater would gladly give away for distribution the less tradable tickets but would rather sell the good ones itself. Why should it care to pay a commission to anybody if the theater itself can sell them equally well if not with more success? Thus, box-office sites get into a vicious circle: the theater would not let them sell "good" tickets; the viewer visiting the site does not find them there so before going there next time he will think twice if it makes any sense at all. And the theater, observing that nothing interesting would sell through the site, stops supplying any tickets to the system.

The second problem is that in Russia the ticket price may grow immensely if bought on a website. Thus, for instance, on certain sites it exceeds the normal rate by five (5!) times. In a situation when the theater has the right to fix the price by itself it is not quite clear why it should need the services of such costly go-betweens.

Nevertheless, the very fact that box-office websites do exist and enjoy popularity shows that such systems are needed and have a future.

Professional Theatrical Internet Resources

A separate group of Internet resources directly related to the theater is sites and portals targeting the professional community. Unfortunately, the quantity of such resources is extremely small on the Russian Internet. Detailed information on a theater, its building, equipment and creative personnel is only available on the theater's own site and not in every case either.

The catalogue of Russian cultural institutions on the portal of the RF Ministry of Culture and Mass Media (http://www.roskultura.ru) only provides theater addresses and telephone numbers, the RF Theater Union's site (http://www.stdrf.ru) features nearly the same information but on a smaller scale. Information on theater actors is available on the sites of numerous "actors' agencies" but apparently almost all such organizations are only looking for actors to perform in commercials or at Christmas parties because the actor's personal details are limited to sex, age, height and hair colour.

To address the vital problem of supporting the theatrical process with professional information, the Theater IT Centre (TsIT) has developed and placed on the Internet various databases (http://www.theaterinform.ru).

For instance, "Russian Theaters." Currently, this database contains the details of over 600 theaters of different ownership types located in Russia and the former Soviet Union republics. In addition to its name and address, the information on each theater includes detailed characteristics of the theater site and the auditorium, list of key administrative officers with contact telephone numbers and additional narrative information. The search system used makes it possible to get a sampling for practically any parameter and find a site meeting the requirements made. For the future, it is planned to include in the database the auditorium and stage layouts including their light and audio equipment and information on the theater's current repertoire.

The "Russian Theatrical Festivals" database was developed with the assistance of the RF Theater Union. It provides detailed information on festivals: venue and time, terms of performance selection, financial terms of participation, contact addresses and telephone numbers. A search system helps to select only the activities the visitor is interested in. If there is a link to the festival's homepage more details can be found there.

The most sophisticated and large-scale project of the IT Centre is the "Russian Actors" database designed on the instructions of the RF Ministry of Culture jointly with the Russian State Theatrical Agency. Detailed questionnaires were developed to provide formalized descriptions of the actors of ballet, drama, puppet theaters, opera, musical comedy, orchestra and chorus. The descriptions include the actor's physical (sex, height, build) and creative features (theatrical character, voice type, command of musical instruments etc.), basic professional background (educational institution, department, master's name) and additional training details. There is a whole section covering the actor's artistic biography (list of theaters he has worked at, list of stage directors in whose productions he has taken part, list of parts played). Search can be carried out for each one of the parameters. After reviewing the actor's profile the stage director can decide if it would be appropriate to invite him to play a part.

At present, the database contains information on over 7,000 professional stage actors which accounts for roughly a half of their actual number.

The next stage in development of formalized descriptions and gathering of real information on creative workers of Russian theaters being carried out by the Theater IT Centre deals with designing the "Russian Stage Directors" database. In the framework of this project it is planned to gather information on the existing stage directors and for the future – on scenic designers, ballet-masters, choreographers etc. This unique information array fitted with cross-references and a search system will give quite a full picture of the current status of theater life in Russia both to an interested viewer and a professional worker.

The stage director's profile in the data retrieval system includes CV details, information about the educational institution where he studied, the teacher whose course he completed, and the year of graduation from the educational institution. In addition, it will include information on the theaters the director has been cooperating with, and a list of his most important (from the respondent's standpoint) productions. The database will also include a list of plays, stagings and other projects the director would like to suggest to theaters for production. A separate set of questions such as the preferable type of scenic art (drama, opera, ballet etc.); the genre he feels with most (drama, comedy, musical etc.) and the like serves to provide a formalized description of the director' creativity potential. Additional details about the director such as experience with large-scale mass shows, concert programs and folk art festivals, teaching activity and command of foreign languages will help to considerably increase the number of interested database users.

The development of a database containing information on theaters and people working there has made it necessary to revise the whole information system and design a unified All-Russian Theater Information Database. It is intended to unify information from all of the databases gathered up to date, which describe the theatrical process in Russia, and will be updated on a regular basis. Within the unified database all information regarding, for instance, a performance will have links to descriptions of the stage director, scenic artist, actors engaged etc. From actor's description it should be possible to get linked to information about stage directors in whose productions he has been engaged, theaters he has worked at, festivals he has taken part in etc.

In the new structure the data on all the persons concerned will be kept in a unified table while the affiliation of a specific person to the actors', stage directors' or managers' group will be determined by corresponding attributes. This will help to do without data reentry in case of a stage director performing in actor's capacity or manager-cum-artistic director. The new system will address problems resulting from cities and entities renamed. It will make it easier to set up a cross-reference system.

As mentioned before, the major difference between Internet publications and printed matter is the simplicity and prompt updating inherent in the former. It would be appropriate to give a chance to the theaters and actors themselves to update the data but the scenic community first has to realize that it is the community itself that needs a public database. A unified data retrieval system will help an artistic director or theater manager to find a stage director for a production or a partner for exchange tours, it will help a stage director to find an actor to play a part in a new play etc. Unfortunately a whole lot of theater managers underestimate the opportunities available which results not only in delays with getting updates but sometimes even refusals to furnish the data.

There are two more databases relating to the purely managerial stuff and staying somewhat aside from the "creativity" component of the theatrical process but just as indispensable for its existence: "Culture Authorities" and "Cultural Legislation." The first database is a kind of

directory specifying the local culture authorities and their contact details. The second one contains statutory acts of the Russian regions in the field of culture.

Performances on the Internet

Over a few recent years the quality of Internet connections has dramatically improved. Most of the organizations, and in major cities many a "home" user, are in a position, both technically and financially, to use dedicated high-speed channels so they do not stop short of downloading Internet files of tens and even hundreds of megabytes.

The qualitative leap in the connection rate has evoked response from the Internet: sites started displaying first videotapes with fragments from performances and then more voluminous video materials.

In summer, 1999 as part of the White Nights' Stars festival, the Mariinsky Theater carried out live broadcasts of several performances on the Internet. They were shot using one fixed camera; the signal was encoded with two different resolutions: for Quick Internet users and those who use slow-rate dial-up channels.

In December, 2000 28-year-old Frenchman, Jeanique Bressan spent three nights performing a 15-minute play entitled "The Martyr" in front of cameras broadcasting the production to the Web. The actor himself held that the performance organized by E-toile Association of Strasbourg was a world Internet Theater premier. Evidently, he meant there was no other audience but the Internet. The play providing a brief biography of St. Etienne life story to the Web visitors was interactive. The viewers could express their attitude to the actor's performance by taking part in a poll conducted on the site. Moreover, the actor was informed about the poll results four times during the performance. For technical reasons hardly more than 60 users managed to become spectators of the first Internet Theater in the world.

From 15 to 22 October, 2004 the first Internet festival, "Theatrical Web" was held at the initiative of Theater.ru Internet project, INTERSTUDIO and Theater IT Centre. The key objective of the festival was to develop a methodology for live broadcasts of stage productions on the Internet. Seven theaters were invited to take part in the festivals with their performances representing various scenic arts: drama, opera, modern dancing, musical theater, avant-garde, buffoonery and puppets.

Performances were shot with three cameras from three different angles, and the spectator was free to choose the point of view. Those who so wished could watch images from three cameras at a time. Non-Russian-speakers could watch performances with English subtitles and the use of the RealVideo technology made it possible for all viewers regardless the speed of their Internet connection to watch performances of a pretty acceptable picture quality.

The analysis of the Internet audience of "Theatrical Web" was quite interesting. The results of the pre-registration on the festival site showed that before the festival started about 1,000 people were willing to watch it. By the end of the festival, the number of those registered reached 2,139. The greatest interest was shown by residents of Russia (748 people), the USA (458) and Israel (185). Only 1/5 of the viewers used a modem to get connected to the Internet, the others had fast enough channels.

It should be noted that in addition to ground-based Internet cable networks used to broadcast festival performances, satellite networks of the Main Data Processing Centre under the Ministry of Culture and Mass Media and those of the Interregional Financial and Economic Development Centre were used. The access points provided by these organizations had review rooms open to all those who wanted to watch the festival. The great interest taken in such events was confirmed by the fact that even in the eastern regions of Russia where the time difference with Moscow is several hours, people visited review rooms. And the keenness of theaters themselves became evident when after the festival a number of them suggested the organizers should include their productions in the next festival program.

To take part in the 1st Internet Festival all the participating theaters got together in Moscow. However practically in every Russian city today there are providers technically capable of implementing Internet broadcasts. So for the future it is planned to have performances broadcast directly from theater auditoriums. Such approach will make Internet broadcasts even cheaper, and consequently, more accessible both for the theaters and spectators. Even at the previous festival broadcasting costs were at least by an order lower than in case of TV broadcasts. Besides, the potential Internet audience is incommensurable with any TV channel audience because access to Internet broadcasts is possible from virtually anywhere on the globe. E.g., the "Culture" channel does not even cover the whole of Russia (77 out of the 89 subjects of the Federation, according to the reports of http://www.tvkultura.ru/zones.html), to say nothing of the former Soviet Union states and foreign countries.

Another positive aspect of Internet-broadcast performances also related to the audience expansion is that the organizers of large international festivals unable to reach the most remote parts of Russia and therefore unaware of exciting theatrical developments there will now have a chance, upon watching a broadcast, to form a preliminary opinion about a theater yet unknown to them.

Further evolution of "Theatrical Web" is planned using several avenues:

- annual Internet festivals with live broadcasts of performances;
- broadcasts of the best plays from other scenic festivals (the "Golden Mask" festival has already contacted "Theatrical Web" regarding it);
- retrospective showing of recordings with the best performances by Russian theaters. This idea is being currently implemented in the Cultu.Ru! Project – http://cultu.ru/ – which was launched on March 23, 2005. Since then, once a week, every Wednesday the best Russian theater performances of the 2nd half of the 20th century are broadcast. Six shows are held over 24 hours thus giving a chance to all those who wish to choose a suitable time for screening regardless the time zone. Just like in "Theatrical Web," the broadcast is provided with English subtitles.

The last of the avenues listed in addition to purely informative functions should also have an educational component. It is proposed that in the future theater scientists' comments or extracts from theater critics' reviews popping up in a window next to the video picture will prompt an inexperienced spectator what to focus on, how to interpret a particular episode, why it is that at some point the audience freezes holding its breath. A mouse-click will let the user into additional information needed to get full-fledged perception of the show. All of the above and many other features of interactive performance viewing are technically quite feasible. And their proper use may bring about an inflow of new but already trained public to a real and not just virtual auditorium.

As a follow-up to the project, modern productions will be shown and coverage will be given to other important cultural events.

It goes without saying that performances are best watched in a theater. Neither the Internet nor TV or videotapes can replace the natural aura of an auditorium. But the Internet may and should turn into an active helper to the theater not only for promoting performances but also to educate its knowledgeable spectator.