

Rebecca Davis – Journey in Russia
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**Going To the Theater in St. Petersburg:
Поход в театр в Санкт-Петербурге**

St. Petersburg is home to 28 theaters, opera houses, and music halls. Over the course of my first three months in the city, I have been fortunate to visit six of these “cultural palaces” and see various dance and theater performances. Each time, it has been a full house, or very near to a full house, and I have enjoyed observing the nuances of the Russian theater-going experience.

Perception of The Theater: Восприятие театра

I think it is still true that regularly attending the theater and buying season tickets is a leisure activity enjoyed by the middle and upper classes in the United States. However, here in Russia, this is not the case. Practically everyone gets to the theater at some point during the year. There are several possible reasons for this, including: accessibility and price, varying repertoire, and audience appreciation

Who Goes to The Theater: Кто ходит в театр?

Relative to the US, the theater is much more accessible to the ordinary citizen in Russia. Although the average monthly income is just \$150-200/person in St. Petersburg, theater tickets can be purchased for as little as 50 rubles (\$1.75). Students often attend for free by simply showing their student card (студенческий билет) at the door. I paid 50 rubles to see the play *Antigone* at The Big Drama Theater (*Большой Драматический Театр*) and sat on the orchestra level with a perfect view of the stage.

That being said, it is also common to hear Russians claim that *The Bolshoi Ballet* and *The Mariinsky Ballet* are merely tourist attractions because locals cannot afford tickets. The prices in high season (summer) can be exorbitant, up to \$150 for an orchestra-level seat to *Swan Lake*. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that foreigners are charged different prices than local residents. My dream is to one day speak Russian well enough to order tickets at a box office (театральная касса) without being charged the foreigner price!

What's Playing? - Что ставят?

In the US, theater houses and companies usually produce a season that consists of four to six different plays. Some shows might be old repertoire while others are premieres. In St. Petersburg, productions change nightly. I frequently attend performances of *The Mussorgsky Ballet* (formerly called *The Maly Theater*) where I train and study (ie I can go to the shows for free – even as a foreigner!). One night I saw a very old ballet that is rarely performed in the United States called *Esmeralda*. The next night, I saw the world-famous *Giselle*. The breadth of the performance schedule reveals the breadth of the artistic talent. A ballerina playing *The Dying Swan* in *Swan Lake* one night might play the *Ugly Step Sister* in *Cinderella* the next. These schedules increase the appeal of the theater and encourage repeat attendance throughout the season.

What Does The Audience Think? – Что думают зрители?

Audiences can be very expressive here. One of my instructors gave me a ticket to attend a special evening at *The Hermitage State Theater*. The evening was a tribute to a legendary ballet teacher, and consisted of short dances performed by artists of *The Mariinsky* and other notable Petersburg companies. During some of the solo performances, the audience burst into applause on three or four different occasions, acknowledging exceptionally well-performed ballet steps. There were up to three curtain calls. On the other hand, during that same evening,

some performers received only *very* light applause. They could barely exit the stage before heavy silence fell in the house.

From my perspective, the most interesting part of this evening occurred at the very end. The dancers had gathered to take their final bow, and a managing director came on stage to deliver a speech. I'm still not exactly sure what this speech was supposed to be about. He started by talking about the great dancers who had performed, and then rattled off a mixture of compliments and anecdotes about the ballet master for whom the night was dedicated. This was followed by a preaching tangent about the meaning of Russian ballet today. After 5 minutes, the audience started to get restless. After 10 minutes, people started to leave while he was still talking. After 12 minutes, people started to loudly bang the door as they exited the theater. After 15 minutes, the audience was half-empty. The Russians, and myself included, were more than happy to sit attentively during the first two hours of dancing, but a 15 minute speech lacking in content and purpose held little appeal. Consequently, the audience had no qualms about openly expressing their feelings!

Encore! - Бис!

I have only just begun to explore the depth of the theater scene in St. Petersburg. But, I can say that I truly admire the importance and value it is given, and I look forward to experiencing the nuances that make Russian theater a unique and world renowned art form in the future.

To Learn More About Rebecca Davis' studies and travel experiences, visit The Rebecca Davis Dance Company website at www.rebeccadavidance.com or email davis@rebeccadavidance.com

To Read About Rebecca's dance experiences at The St. Petersburg Conservatory, join "The Journey in Russia" listserv. Sign up for the listserv at www.rebeccadavidance.com.

To see more photos of Rebecca training in Russia: <http://www.rebeccadavidance.com/studio.html>