

## Triumph Over 'Demons' (and a Budget)

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IN a huge former factory that once churned out engine parts for electric trains and is now used for art shows and sundry performances, the director Peter Stein moved among his actors on a makeshift stage area. He was blocking the first act of "The Demons," a complex scene full of exits and entrances, and a square metal column on the left side of the stage was complicating the cues.

Mr. Stein, one of Europe's most renowned stage directors, walked straight into the column, bumping his head, and then shook it in an exaggeratedly clownish motion.

"To avoid any accidents, the column exists," he said. The cast laughed. He proceeded to move the action back a few steps.

Uncooperative columns were a minor inconvenience amid the larger complexity of getting this mammoth production, which will run nearly 9 hours (12 with lunch and dinner breaks), ready for the road. Based on the Dostoyevsky novel, "The Demons" has recently played festivals in Vienna, Amsterdam and Naples. There will be two shows in Athens in early July, and then it arrives for the Lincoln Center Festival on July 10 and 11.

During the two years of its gestation "The Demons" swelled from a bright idea to a minor cause célèbre in the Italian theater world, pitting artistic freedom against growing economic restraints.

Originally the Teatro Stabile di Torino, one of Italy's main public theaters, had asked Mr. Stein to direct Albert Camus's 1959 stage adaptation of "The Demons." After reading the script and the novel, Mr. Stein decided he wanted to write a new version that would give justice to the scope and nuances of Dostoyevsky's novel, which addresses the growth - and perils - of revolutionary movements in Russia.

"Camus's adaptation has its qualities, but he was concerned about length, so he compacted it," Mr. Stein said during a break in the rehearsal. As a result the dialogue "became too declamatory and descriptive and didn't allow for the development of the soul" of the characters, he said.

"I understood that I could only do the play without having to make cuts," Mr. Stein explained. "I said from the first that the aim was to invite the public to participate in the telling of a 900-page novel onstage."

His patrons at the foundation that supports the Turin theater were less understanding, especially as costs, set at one million euros (about \$1.2 million), according to Evelina Christillin, president of the foundation, began to levitate further.

The foundation "faced its own severe budget cuts" last year, Ms. Christillin said, which led to the decision to pull out of the production during rehearsals while honoring the actors' contracts.

Mr. Stein, born in Germany but a resident of Italy for the last 13 years, is no stranger to lengthy productions. Both "The Demons" and his 10-hour 2007 production of "Wallenstein," about a general in the Thirty Years' War, pale in comparison to his 2000 staging of Goethe's "Faust," which clocked in at 21 hours.

Mr. Stein ended up investing directly in the show through a company he originally set up with the profits from "Faust" (though he grumbles often about having to direct operas and other plays to support the costs). "The Demons" had its premiere in May 2009 in a rehearsal space he built in a home in Umbria he shares with his wife, the actress Maddalena Crippa.

The nine-hour production had a limited run - four days - but it was long enough to win him a prestigious Italian prize: the Ubu award for best theater production of 2009. "It was an act of resistance, an artistic and human effort to transform a stab in the back into something positive," said Ms. Crippa, who stars as Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina, the mother of one of the central characters in "The Demons."

"When Peter decided to go ahead, the cast became very motivated," she said. "It goes beyond the play. We are defending beauty, and the validity of our work, which we will not allow bureaucrats to squash."

Italian critics were won over by the staging of this Dostoyevsky novel, which follows a group of would-be revolutionaries in 19th-century Russia and warns of the risk of fanatical ideologies. So was the public.

"People came out of the show with tears in their eyes," said Emilio Russo, the artistic director of Tieffe Theater in Milan, a supporter of innovative work. That was enough to convince him to join the venture as a producer and to organize the 2010 world tour: "I said, 'This has to continue.' "

Yet Mr. Russo admitted there are built-in limitations. For one thing, the play's length relegated it to weekend performances. Then it has a large cast - 26 actors - though Mr. **Stein** said he was saving money by playing one role - Bishop Tikhon - himself. ("He says that's the reason, but I think he likes being onstage," Mr. Russo said.) And the show benefits from a nontraditional stage space, like the unused factory in Milan. In New York "The Demons" will be staged in an industrial warehouse on Governors Island, in the middle of New York Harbor.

The spot was chosen because it is very "separate from the rest of the city," said Nigel Redden, the director of the Lincoln Center Festival. Mr. **Stein** describes it as a break from day-to-day reality that allows for "introspection on important questions that affect all of us."

Mr. Redden said, "Peter immediately told us of the physical demands of the production, of what happens to spectators, how they become complicit in the experience," when they spend so much time as part of a group, and that led the presenters to choose the isolated space.

During meal breaks Italian food will be served at communal tables "to reinforce the sense of togetherness," he said. Though the 934 tickets available were snatched up almost immediately when they went on sale in March, the festival set aside some tickets for sponsors, and they may go on sale before July.

The show is in Italian, with subtitles in English, and Mr. **Stein** has asked his actors to capture the more emotive Russian sentiments. Yet he said that American audiences should not have trouble following along. "As a spectator you either leave or you invest yourself in terms of time, presence and attention," he said. "If theater is done well, it's comprehensible in whatever tongue it is in."