

# Lifestyle

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2019



A camel performs during a 'dance competition' held during the Pushkar Camel Fair in Pushkar, in the western state of Rajasthan. — AFP

## Bombs and blasphemy: The risks of watching gay art in Russia

Whenever the play "Out of the Closet" is performed, Russian drama company Teatr.Doc has to take extra precautions: the audiences' passports are checked to ensure everyone is at least 18 and the process is filmed to prove the law has been followed. There is no nudity and few obscene words in the play, which is about Russian gay men coming out to their parents. But it is an offence to distribute "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships" to minors under Russian law.

"Teatr.Doc is like a besieged fortress today," Anastasia Patlay, director of the documentary play, told the audience before the lights were dimmed to start the show in Moscow. "We are not happy about it. But, apparently, it's a symptom of the situation we live in." Fearless Teatr.Doc is no stranger to controversy. In 2014, the theatre was evicted from its site after staging a satire that lampooned President Vladimir Putin and a production about the death in jail of whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky.

Its latest battle is to tell lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) stories in Russia, where homosexuality was a criminal offence until 1993 and classed as a mental illness until 1999. LGBT+ plays, films and books have been censored and attacked and violence towards gay people has increased since 2013, when the Kremlin adopted the "gay propaganda" law as part of a drive to defend what Putin called Russia's "traditional values". "We comply with the law," Patlay said. "The play is marked as appropriate for 18+, and we check people's passports every time. But I never rule out getting in trouble with it."

Trouble came in August, when anti-gay protesters attempted to disrupt "Out of the Closet" by repeatedly calling the police to the theatre and picketing the event. One evening performance was interrupted when a minor with a fake ID was planted in the audience and hecklers accused Teatr.Doc of breaking the law, said Patlay, who was taken to the police station for questioning, along with the 15-year-old.

SERB, a vigilante group that describes itself as "pro-Kremlin", said on Russian social network VK that it disrupted the play, which its leader Gosha Tarasevich said was "a cancerous abscess on the body of Russia". "We don't want Russian culture to be associated with garbage, and Teatr.Doc is promoting garbage," Tarasevich said in a phone interview. Such incidents are not unusual in Russia. Russian Orthodox religious activists invaded the stage during a performance in 2013 of gay Irish playwright Oscar Wilde's "An Ideal Husband", which they said was blasphemous for featuring a gay priest.

Three years later, demonstrators in St. Petersburg tried to disrupt "All Shades of Blue", a play about gay men, first by urging the audience not to enter the theatre, and then by reporting a bomb in the building after the show had started.

While the "gay propaganda" law does not require LGBT+ content to be removed from films and plays - merely for them to be clearly marked as suitable only for over 18s - film distributors

sometimes choose to delete provocative scenes. In May, Russian film distributor Central Partnership edited out all the gay sex scenes in "Rocketman", the Elton John biopic, following its general release in the country. In a statement, the company said it did so to "comply with the Russian legislation".

### Risks

A spokesman for the ministry of culture said it screens all films for compliance with Russian law before issuing a distribution certificate. "The ministry does not hand out instructions to cut any specific scenes out," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. But companies often decide not to take the risk with LGBT+ content, said film critic Ksenia Ilyina, a judge at Russia's independent LGBT+ film festival, Side by Side, which has taken place in Moscow and St. Petersburg since 2008.

"They know that if anything goes wrong, their operation may be suspended or fines may be imposed, and no one wants that," she said. "It's all about taking fewer risks and inviting fewer troubles." Side by Side's founder Manny de Guerre said it is targeted by pro-Kremlin and religious groups almost every year. "This year, we had a really difficult festival... Three bomb threats, several nationalist Orthodox groups causing problems, gathering outside the cinema theatre, threatening to throw green dye on to people," she said. "Two young men got into a screening and threw liquid ammonia - and we had to evacuate everyone."

The chemical compound can cause burns and blindness. De Guerre was shocked because Side by Side was on a list of international film festivals officially approved by the ministry of culture under a new vetting system introduced last year. "But apparently that made our opponents even more enraged," she said. Tarasevich told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that SERB was one of several groups that protested outside the festival. "LGBT people don't irritate us as long as they don't promote their inclinations," the activist said.

"If they just quietly make their same-sex love, God bless them, because one can't go against their nature - even though it is against traditional Russian values. "But when they're trying to impose their views through their so-called art on others, we protest." While there is no evidence that anti-gay groups have ties to the authorities, LGBT+ activists believe they are encouraged by the Kremlin's stance. "The homophobic policies Russian authorities implement essentially breed these conservative groups," said Svetlana Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian LGBT Network, a campaign group.

"No one orders them (to disrupt LGBT+ events), but they feel like it's their duty to defend Russia, to defend traditional values... It's a scary situation to be in - when you go to a movie and can end up being attacked." — Reuters

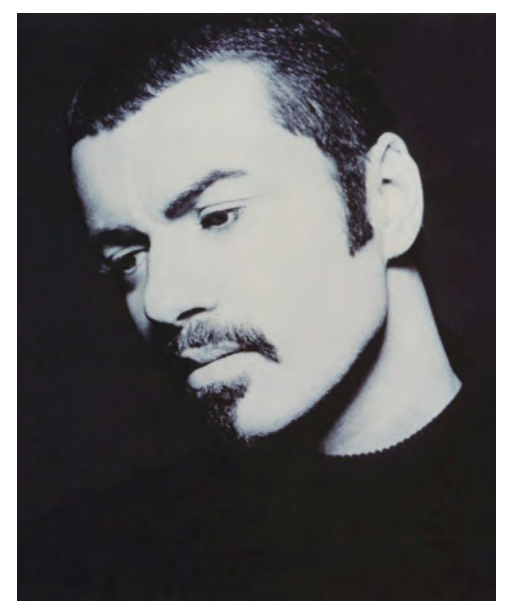
### Late pop idol George Michael returns with new song

A new track recorded by George Michael in his last studio sessions before his 2016 death was released yesterday, in which the late British pop idol sings about social ills. "This Is How (We Want You To Get High)", his first original material since 2012, will play at the end of upcoming festive film "Last Christmas", itself inspired by Michael's solo tunes and hits from his Wham! days. One of the best-selling artists of all time, Michael, who rose to fame in the 1980s as part of duo Wham!, died at his home on Christmas Day 2016, aged 53. A coroner said he died of natural causes.

"The previously unreleased track, which was recorded during George's final studio sessions, is his first original material to be shared for seven years," a press release said. "The lyrics, written exclusively by George, see the star addressing society's ills with his trademark blend of self-deprecation and wry humor." Against a catchy melody, Michael's distinctive vocals belt out lines like "Your daddy was a drinker", "My daddy was a toker", "I will always try to get my life together" and "This is how we want you to get by on your sorry lives".

An accompanying lyric video features animation of Michael over the years. The Grammy Award-winner, who had several drug-related run-ins with the law, began working on the song in 2012. It was finalized in the studio in 2015. Born Georgios Kyriacos Panayiotou to Greek Cypriot immigrant parents, Michael was known for Wham! and solo hits like "Last Christmas", "Careless Whisper" and "Faith". The "Last Christmas" film, starring Emilia Clarke and Henry Golding about a woman working as an elf in a Christmas shop, takes its name from the 1986 Wham! festive tune.

The soundtrack for the romantic comedy,



co-written by Oscar winner Emma Thompson, features 12 Michael solo songs and three Wham! tunes. "Emma had a meeting with him and he was intrigued because... the intention was never to make his story, it was to make a story inspired by a song," David Livingstone, a producer on the film, told Reuters, referring to a meeting Thompson had with Michael to discuss a screenplay.

Thompson heard the new tune and three other unreleased Michael songs last year when working on the soundtrack. "It's not like a song that's been dug out of the vaults, that's been sitting there unused because it wasn't good enough. It was a song that he intended to do something with and this is its new home," Livingstone said. "(It) does feel like it's tailor-made." — Reuters