



VLADIKAVKAZ JOURNAL

# A Russian City's Wounds Are Dressed in Opera Garb

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VLADIKAVKAZ, [Russia](#) — As couples walked arm in arm down this city's sleepy main drag earlier this month, the news was more of the same. Suicide bombers in Nazran, Islamic extremist camps in Kabardino-Balkaria, 30 arrested in the broad-daylight assassination of the mayor. Built as Russia's southernmost stronghold, this city of about 300,000 still has the feel of an outpost, permanently braced against the turmoil of the Caucasus.

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James Hill for The New York Times  
Seamstresses picked buttons for an outfit at the Mariinsky Theater costume workshop in Vladikavkaz, 1,400 miles from its stage.



The New York Times  
Vladikavkaz is braced against the turmoil of the Caucasus.

But inside the storefront at No. 14 Prospekt Mira was another world entirely.

Sixty-four costumes were needed for the [opera](#) "Iolanthe," in time for an April premiere at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater. A designer had arrived on the morning flight carrying fine black wool for tailcoats and specifications for gold brooches and chiffon scarves in wine and deep gold.

Thirty seamstresses bent their heads over a sheaf of drawings, and the clock began ticking toward another deadline.

A decade ago, the Mariinsky's artistic director, [Valery Gergiev](#), decided to open this unlikely branch office of his theater, best known in the West as the Kirov. Mr. Gergiev, an ethnic Ossetian from Vladikavkaz, has gone to extraordinary lengths to project his good fortune onto the troubled region where he grew up.

Some of his efforts have been clamorously public, like the concert he conducted amid ruins in Tskhinvali, Georgia, after the war last August. Others are quiet, like this tiny workshop, located in a far corner of Russia 1,400 miles from the Mariinsky's stage. It is as if the [Metropolitan Opera](#) were commissioning tutus from Birmingham, Ala.

The Vladikavkaz seamstresses throw themselves reverently into their work. In 2004, when more than 1,100 schoolchildren and parents were held captive by Chechen militants in the nearby town of Beslan, the seamstresses had relatives — in one case, a child — among the hostages. When a bloody explosion of gunfire left more than 300 dead and life halted all over the city, they stayed in their chairs. "Turandot" was due to premiere in St. Petersburg.

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“We put a television in the workshop, and we worked and wept,” said Zhanna Khetagurova, 46, an embroiderer. “The first night at the theater is something sacred.”

In 1999, a search began for the region’s most talented young seamstresses. After six months, the initial group of 20 was culled to 7, who were sent to St. Petersburg to study with the theater’s legendary seamstresses. The St. Petersburg tailors raised their eyebrows at the newcomers, whose experience centered on traditional Ossetian wedding dresses and national costumes, said Izolda Gogichayeva, the studio’s first director.

“Not one person in St. Petersburg believed we could do it,” she said. Over time, though, the provincial cousins were brought into the circle of confidence. They learned “things that seem totally impossible,” said Tatyana Filkevich, 38, a tailor’s cutter — how dried buckwheat can be sewn into an unsatisfying bust line, or apron strings made to hover inexplicably in midair.

“In theater,” Ms. Filkevich said, “there are secrets that are not taught in institutes.”

They live the rhythm of a distant curtain. When a deadline approaches, they sometimes work three days straight, fashioning headdresses that look like birds’ nests, or affixing gilded pears into the folds of a tutu, or sewing bells onto a 15-foot flame-colored robe, rushing them to the airport in boxes. That, Ms. Filkevich said, is when “panic sets in.”

“Whether or not you want it, the plane is leaving,” she said. “The posters are up. They’re not going to postpone the show for you.”

On ordinary days, the workshop is an island of quiet and focus, qualities in short supply in Vladikavkaz. Ms. Khetagurova, bent over a skein of gold thread, said she never learned to sew as a girl, to her mother’s frustration. She was in her 20s when a tragedy occurred in her family — she would not say exactly what — and needlework gave her relief.

“Maybe embroidery had been sitting inside of me, and that woke it up,” she said. Many of the seamstresses have similar stories, Ms. Gogichayeva said, and it has made them all the more valuable. “Work saves us,” she said.

And then, on the worst days in North Ossetia, beautiful objects offer relief, Ms. Filkevich said. Beside her was a gown made for “Nutcracker,” of cognac-colored satin overlaid with copper lace and aquamarine ribbon. Jet buttons sparkled in a row down the bodice, and lace spilled down the wrist like thick syrup.

“If someone needs a dress like this,” she said, “all is not lost.”

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