

# St. Petersburg's ON.TEATR Not Ready to Close - Yet

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Since moving into a basement space at 18 Ulitsa Zhukovskogo in 2011, St. Petersburg's ON.TEATR has fostered something the city on the Neva River has not had for decades — a strong and viable youth movement.

Gathering around the energetic and visionary Milena Avimskaya, the theater's founder, young St. Petersburg directors, actors and writers began creating new work and having an impact on the city's mainstream venues.

All of that now is in danger of being lost.

Complaints about noise from upstairs neighbors, followed by inspections from St. Petersburg's safety regulators, have nearly brought the theater to a standstill. A second court date on Tuesday ended with the city closing ON.TEATR temporarily. It was ordered to stop all activities for 90 days, after which the court will determine whether safety irregularities have

been solved.

According to a [report](#) on 100 TV, ON.TEATR's attorney Ilya Chernyshyov stated that he would file an appeal so that the theater may continue to perform through the end of April. In fact, on the evening of the trial the theater unveiled its newest production, Konstantin Steshik's "A Time to Be Ashes." Only time will tell whether that title proves to be prophetic or not.

Speaking to me by phone on Friday, Avimskaya sounded a frustrated but defiant note. She has heard rumors through back channels that officials have given the order to "destroy" the theater and yet, she said, "like pioneer scouts we stand strong and do everything we can to fix the problems."

These problems are relatively small, but nearly insurmountable since the configurations of the basement space do not correspond to basic city regulations. As Avimskaya stated in an [interview](#) with St. Petersburg's Argumenty i Fakty, there is little that can be done. The ceiling, for example, is ten centimeters lower than what is allowed for public organizations. Door apertures are smaller than the prescribed minimum, by a total of 12 centimeters in width and 15 centimeters in height. Major structural changes that could do irreparable damage to the 130 year-old building would be required to bring the space into accordance with the law.

(I would like to correct an error I made in my blog report about this incident three weeks ago. Relying on numerous internet sources I stated that following the first court case in March ON.TEATR was ordered to pay a fine of 20,000 rubles [\$635]. In fact, Avimskaya confirmed to me, the fine was for 200,000 rubles [\$6,357], which comes due at the end of April.)

The basement was originally granted to ON.TEATR by the city's culture committee, apparently without any thought being given to whether or not it was suitable for a theater.

In the two years since the theater opened its doors, the collective of artists benefitting from the theater's appearance has spent countless thousands of hours and hundreds of thousands of rubles, cleaning and renovating the space. Avimskaya noted that, in order to show building occupants that the theater could be a good neighbor, the theater has done much to improve shared space around and in the building, including cleaning the courtyard, putting up good outside lighting, rebuilding a broken gate, installing an intercom and electronic entry system, as well as repairing faulty water pipes in the building.

However, at present, Avimskaya admitted on Friday, it increasingly looks like ON.TEATR will have to occupy a new space if it is to be kept alive. She is actively searching for a possible replacement venue.

"I have looked at many places, but have not found one that fits yet," she declared.

Still, one possibility is Lenfilm Studios, which has recently undergone major renovations. Avimskaya toured the studio grounds recently and believes it could be a potential match. "These are people who understand that developing new talent is important, and they can also benefit from it," she stated. She said she can imagine moving performances to a location at Lenfilm and keeping Ulitsa Zhukovskogo as a rehearsal space.

Avimskaya's natural optimism is tempered by the harsh reality of the situation that has arisen. She has been told repeatedly by officials at the St. Petersburg Culture Committee that she should "keep going" and that she has their support. Even after the court order to close the theater on Tuesday an official repeated his exhortation for her to "keep going." Yet she suggests that real support from culture bureaucrats has been lacking.

"I'm not doing this for myself," she told me. "I am not a director defending my own shows. I represent 25 directors and 200 actors who work at ON.TEATR. We have made an impact, thank God. I can now take cover behind the back of Dmitry Volkostrellov, who just won a Golden Mask award this week. Dima is one of the many young artists who began working at ON.TEATR. The city must understand that this is to their advantage. I won't do it alone."

In an apparently unrelated development, Moscow's Teatr.doc has also been visited by safety inspectors. Theater co-founder Yelena Gremina posted a note on her Facebook page Friday evening, stating that fire inspectors had gone through the Teatr.doc basement space earlier in the day and had found some violations. One was that the new door which the theater installed just months ago was found to be unlawful — its width of 110 centimeters fell 10 centimeters short of the required 120 centimeters for a public organization.

A court hearing on the violations was set for Thursday morning and an undisclosed fine was levied, although Gremina stated the amount was reduced significantly when she convinced the inspectors to fine her personally rather than fine Teatr.doc as an organization.

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