

Anatoly Vasilyev's School of Dramatic Art (Now Destroyed)

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One of the great novels written in the Soviet Union in the 1920s was "The Naked Year" by [Boris Pilnyak](#). It is a stunning work about an entire world that disappears before the author's (and reader's) eyes and is replaced by the chaos of life going about its business. The first line of the novel is among the most resonant of any I know:

"On the walls of the city kremlin it was written (now destroyed):

Save, oh Lord,
Our city and Your people
And bless those
Entering this gate."

Let me repeat that: "On the walls it was written (now destroyed)..." Has anything more eternally contemporary ever been written? The present is constantly disintegrating as it

makes way for the future.

I thought of Pilnyak and "The Naked Year" last week as I approached what is now called the [Open Stage Project](#) at 20 Povarskaya Ulitsa. If you know the geography of Moscow theater, you know I am talking about what once was the [School of Dramatic Art](#), founded and nurtured by Anatoly Vasilyev. Another stage run by Vasilyev on Sretenka Ulitsa still bears the name School of Dramatic Art, but the Povarskaya plant no longer has anything to do with its founder or his creative heirs. The story of the city taking that space away from the world-renowned director and prompting him to go into voluntary exile in Europe has been told [many](#), [many](#), [many](#) times.

What I have in mind today is a footnote to that, something of a whimper amidst the din of life going on about its business.

Last week, for the first time since Vasilyev was fired, I attended a performance in what was his downstairs First Studio. This is the space where he premiered most of his famous productions between 1988 and 2007. I went with trepidation. My curiosity, combined with a sense of unease, nagged me as I rode the two subway stops to the Arbat. Walking from the metro and crossing over to the north side of Novy Arbat on my way to Povarskaya Ulitsa, I felt a light sense of nervous anticipation set in.

What's the big deal, you ask? Well, what happened at this theater was a travesty. Vasilyev himself surely provoked much of it. He has never been an easy person to get along with. He is demanding, eccentric and can be unpleasantly aggressive. He can be downright rude and uncouth, although he can be gentle and polite as well. I have seen him be both.

Because of his forceful personality, many in Moscow, fed up with Vasilyev, were happy to see him stripped of his theater. "He had it coming" was a phrase I heard repeatedly as the scandal played itself out.

That horrified me. And it continues to. The man is a brilliant director, an artist with a capital A. What he should have had coming to him was respect, not gloating over his misfortunes, over an artist being deprived of his creative home.

Ever since it became clear that Vasilyev would never again have control over the theater he created, I have wondered how I would feel setting foot in it again. Would I feel like a barbarian? Would I be condoning what was done? Would I feel anything at all?

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The stairwell leading down to the Open Scene Project theater, which is housed in a building that once held the renowned School of Dramatic Art.

I stopped outside the theater and snapped a few pictures. The main entrance from the street is closed while repairs are being made. So I walked past it to the temporary entrance in an archway some 20 meters away. When I opened that door, I couldn't help but take another picture. The pure emptiness of the image that greeted my eyes was too much to ignore.

This side entrance, incidentally, used to be the one that provided access to the famous performances of [Gennady Abramov](#)'s Class of Expressive Plastic Movement. Abramov's dance and physical theater classes were legendary in the 1990s. They arose within Vasilyev's School of Dramatic Art but quickly took on a life of their own. Abramov soon was turning out many of the most important new contemporary dancers and choreographers in Russia. The famous German choreographer Sascha Waltz cast half of one of Abramov's groups into one of her shows and traveled the world with them.

Abramov's success proved to be his downfall, however. Vasilyev, apparently resentful of a new master appearing in his midst, closed down the Class of Expressive Plastic Movement. It was one of his meanest, most destructive decisions, just one of the reasons why some said he had it coming when the same thing happened to him.

The area now used as the foyer of the Open Stage Project used to be off-limits to spectators. But it is just like the rest of the interior, which was reconstructed by Vasilyev and his brilliant designer Igor Popov — the white walls and ceilings, blond pine-floor panels, narrow winding corridors, graceful archways over doors and the small-paned windows placed in some of the walls provide a kind of modern take on a monastery. One of the windowed walls near the foyer still provides a glimpse of the stage on which Abramov's students used to amaze their audiences.

Next to that is something I would never have expected to see in Vasilyev's theater: an industrial-style folding metal door that rolls up with a rattle and a clang when the audience is invited into the hall. I don't know if that is new or old because I had never seen that wall — not from this side, nor from the other, where the coat rack was located

in Vasilyev's time. This coat rack was unlike any in Moscow: two bars stretched across a small room with dozens of hangers hanging from them — and strictly self-serve. There were no little plastic numbers and nobody asking why you don't have a loop sewn into the collar of your coat.

This foyer was always packed before shows. It was much too small for the amount of people gathered in it. The overflow ran back up the stairwell leading to it, while people already in the room were often pushed back beneath the coats hanging from those two rods.

These days, that old foyer is sterile and empty, and you walk right through the area where coats used to hang. Like the empty vision that greeted me when I entered the theater a few minutes earlier, this image of sterility and emptiness seemed to frame my impressions on returning to this storied venue.

As for the performance space itself, it is still the same — the same church-pew benches for spectators; the same eclectic bas-relief and inlaid ceiling; the same spectacular lighting that is ready to transform the simple white-walled, high-ceilinged room into a place of magic. Until you close your eyes, you might even think nothing has changed. But you do close your eyes, and that is when you realize that everything is different.

There once was a theater; now it is gone. In its place is another with another name, one where people work and act and come as spectators. Life goes on. There is something anti-climactic in that. It is just too obvious, one might think, to be of interest. But in the minutes that pass we also detect the insignificant details that bear witness to events that change history. That is less obvious, but it is there to be seen for those who will see it.

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