

Fire Destroys Famous Saratov Youth Theater

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Authorities in Saratov on Thursday opened a criminal investigation into the fire that virtually destroyed the Saratov Youth Theater. It began on the building's roof during a performance on Oct. 2 and burned for some 14 hours before firemen could completely douse the flames. During the early morning hours of Oct. 3 the theater's roof collapsed into the space containing the stage and auditorium. By the time the fire was extinguished, little was left intact but support columns and walls, and the theater's distinctive facade.

Four hundred and fifty spectators and employees were evacuated safely from the burning building.

Early speculation about how the fire began centered on shorts in electrical wiring, the burning out of electrical lamps, or even a possible accident involving young people who, apparently, occasionally climb onto the theater's roof for recreation.

According to [RIA-Novosti](#), no specifics about the case have yet been made public. The agency's unnamed source merely said, "A check into the reasons for the fire is complete. Based on that, a criminal case has been opened due to signs of criminal activity as stipulated in the codex in regard to the destruction or damage of property by negligence."

For the time being, the theater will continue performing some of its productions on a new small stage that was opened a few blocks away less than a year ago. The Russian federal government has pledged 300 million rubles (\$9.7 million) to the reconstruction effort. Contributions to a ruble fund established to help the theater replenish costumes, sets and props may be made by accessing a special [page](#) on the theater's website.

The Saratov Youth Theater, officially 95 years old this season, although the building itself was erected in 1905, is one of the most active and innovative houses in the so-called Russian provinces. It has worked with many top directors from the West, including Lee Breuer of the United States, Paolo Landi of Italy, Matthias Langhoff and Jean-Claude Fall of France. It regularly holds workshops intended to discover and develop new writers and directors. Some of those young artists, such as Dmitry Volkostrelov and Dmitry Yegorov of St. Petersburg, and Georg Genoux of Germany, have had their works included in the theater's repertory.

I have had numerous occasions to write about the theater in this blog space, including this [overview](#), this [account](#) of Lee Breuer's production of Sam Shepard's "The Curse of the Starving Class" and this [report](#) about a Shakespeare workshop.

In an emotional [interview](#) given the day after the fire was extinguished, the theater's managing director Valery Raikov spoke with pride of the way theater employees put evacuation drills into action. "The competent and simultaneously dynamic evacuation did its job. No one was injured in the emergency, not a single employee, not a single spectator."

Raikov also lamented the loss of history that the fire had caused. "It was a huge misfortune that the fire destroyed our beloved stage, a stage that has been a home and a place of spirituality to so many generations of actors. Although, to be honest, everything that was saved yesterday cannot be divided into what has spiritual value and what does not. Every piece of paper was dear to us, every photograph priceless."

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