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St. Petersburg, City of Literature

By John Freedman

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St. Petersburg is the city of literature. Most of its streets are as straight as an arrow, laid out on a fanned grid like books neatly placed on a shelf. But there are anomalies, too. Its curved, tapered streets lined by beautiful old buildings that hug narrow, wending waterways can actually look like an open book if you look hard enough. At least they always have to me.

St. Petersburg is a city you share with the writers you love. You sense clearly that they — even if they wrote in the 18th or 19th century — sat in the same parks and walked the same sidewalks as you. When you look up at a second or third-floor corner window in a fascinating but slightly forbidding old building, you know the walls and environs still look more or less as they did when Fyodor Dostoyevsky lived there.

You can walk into Alexander Pushkin's house and stand over the sofa he died on. You can actually see the fading blood stain on the deteriorating fabric. That's Pushkin's blood, for God's sake. It drained the life out of him right there on the Moika Canal after he was shot in a duel by a Frenchman who may or may not have been having an affair with his wife.

That's pretty heavy stuff. The literature of life and death.

I was a student in Leningrad way back when. Dinosaurs were no longer roaming the bogs on which Peter the Great raised his great and mysterious city, but ghosts were. I saw one as plain as day and I had a witness.

It was 7:30 a.m., an ungodly hour in St. Petersburg in the dead of winter. It was pitch black. My roommate and I were heading across Birzhevoi Most, or Stock Market Bridge, from our dorm, on what is called the Petrograd Side, to the University, located on Vasilyevsky Island.

Sure we were groggy. Moreover, we were under actual physical attack. A blizzard was buffeting us with monstrous force. The snow, a semi-solid white mass occupying the air in long, shimmering streaks, was whipping across us horizontally. It felt like the snow must be entering the city on its eastern border and would probably not hit ground until it reached the Finnish Bay in the west.

Both my friend and I had our heads down and were plowing across the bridge at about midpoint, our hands stuffed into our pockets, our heads drawn down behind layers of scarves and collars. Our left ears were tucked down even further as we tried to keep the howling wind from blowing in one side of our head and out the other.

It was then that we both happened to look up. There were no cars and no people with us on that bridge. It was not fit for human inhabitance. But we both looked up because a figure was approaching us. And we both gasped immediately.

I'll spill the beans without any drama. It was Nikolai Gogol.

My friend and I held our breath as the figure passed, brushing my left sleeve with his own as he went, and then we both stared at each other and simultaneously hissed the exact same words: "That was Gogol." No exclamation point. As Bob Dylan might have said had he been with us, there was no reason to get excited. Because that, indeed, was Gogol. No mere likeness, no illusion. Nikolai Gogol had just passed us by and we both knew it.

The writer was dressed in a flowing cape that the wind whipped mercilessly. He had a top hat on his head that he held with one hand, and from out of the darkness between his collar and the brim of his hat protruded that most famous of all literary noses.

As I say, it was Gogol. If you don't believe me you can check with my friend, because he saw it too. It's all we talked about the rest of the day. Unfortunately, I don't remember his name, so you'll have to do the research on your own. But when you find him, believe me, he'll corroborate my story. Nobody forgets events like that.

Now all of this came rushing back in my memory when I recently saw a beautiful poster for the upcoming Dostoyevsky Day in St. Petersburg on Saturday, July 6. This apparently is now an annual event that gives Dostoyevsky lovers a chance to strut their stuff. There are activities for children, puppet shows, a procession and even an "intellectual show" called "Dostoyevsky. Version 4." It all concludes as revelers place flowers before Dostoyevsky's statue at 5/2 Kuznechny Pereulok at 3 p.m.

I can't be there this week, working for The Moscow Times is a fulltime job. But if you can

make it, keep an eye out for a man in a flowing cape and a top hat. I'll bet you Gogol will be there.

And now, as long as our eyes are turned toward St. Petersburg, let me add some important news. Milena Avimskaya's ON.TEATR, a feisty small basement venue that has created some great new work over the last two years, has been closed officially by the St. Petersburg authorities.

Clearly, however, this is not the end of the story. Numerous major figures have come out to condemn the city's decision and to support the embattled theater. Rather extraordinarily, the great Lev Dodin, of Maly Drama Theater fame, not only spoke out sharply against the decision, but he offered to provide ON.TEATR the occasional use of his small stage. He explains the historical importance of small, experimental theater by drawing parallels with the work of Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Vsevolod Meyerhold.

Dodin's comments are contained in a short essay that he wrote in support of ON.TEATR, and which is published in full in an account in Izvestia of the developing story.