

Moscow Authorities Give Controversial Theater the Boot

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An avant-garde Moscow theater known for its edgy repertoire and political satire could be evicted from its iconic basement premises after municipal authorities terminated its lease.

Teatr.doc's artistic director, Yelena Gremina, wrote on her Facebook page Wednesday that the city's property department had prematurely terminated the theater's lease without providing an explanation for its decision. Gremina said the theater had always duly paid rent and taxes, and had strictly complied with fire and other city regulations throughout its 12 years of existence.

"We found out about this accidentally," Gremina told The Moscow Times in a telephone interview on Thursday. "We were submitting documentation to have our lease extended because it was going to expire in December. Then we were told that the property department was terminating the lease."

Moscow's property department told the Interfax news agency on Wednesday that it had terminated Teatr.doc's lease because of the theater's "illegal remodeling" of its premises, located in central Moscow. Authorities say the theater did not seek their permission to remodel a part of the building.

Gremina said that her theater, which occupies a small basement in an upscale neighborhood, had converted a window into a door to comply with the fire department's orders.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin told the liberal-leaning Ekho Moskvyy radio station on Wednesday that he was not aware of Teatr.doc's predicament, but he added that "there are many theaters in Moscow that do God knows what."

In an e-mail to The Moscow Times, representatives of Teatr.doc said they would not be canceling any scheduled performances in light of city authorities' decision.

"The current decision is mobilizing us," their message read. "It is forcing us to find different options to solve this current problem."

Gremina said the city had not provided any details about the implications of the lease's termination. She also declined to comment about the possible motives behind the city's decision.

"We don't have any action plan at this point," Gremina said. "We are pondering what we can do. We will certainly be writing a letter to the Property Department, and we'll see what they say."

Founded in 2002, the independent theater has built its reputation on an audacious repertoire that addresses Russian politics and the country's social issues.

Ahead of presidential elections in 2012, Teatr.doc put on a satirical play called "BerlusPutin," which showcased President Vladimir Putin's cordial relationship with former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Its plot revolved around the bizarre fusion of the two world leaders' brains.

Last year, Teatr.doc hosted an event in support of then-imprisoned members of female punk group Pussy Riot, who were convicted of hooliganism for staging a protest in Moscow's Christ the Savior Church in February 2012. Disgruntled members of a Russian Orthodox organization disrupted that performance.

The theater has also staged a play about the life of migrant workers from Central Asia. The play, which featured builders and janitors from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, won a prize at this year's prestigious Golden Mask theater festival.

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