The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

St. Petersburg Audiences Watch Live Theater in Their Cars

You've heard of drive-in movies. This is drive-in theater.

By Yulia Skopich

October 05, 2021



Courtesy of Leningrad Center

When the show starts, the audience greets the actors by beeping their horns and flashing their headlights. All over the world, this would be a drive-in movie.

But not far from St. Petersburg, the drive-in theater is a real theater with a stage, set decorations and actors.

The theater is a joint project of the show space Leningrad Center and the Igora Drive complex.

Felix Mikhailov, the artistic director of the Leningrad Center, told the Moscow Times that he got the idea in 2020 when all entertainment and sporting events were canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic. “I read about a circus performance in Italy where the audience was in

cars. I thought: Why not a theater that performs outside? I knew that there were drive-in movies in the U.S., but I only heard about a few live theater performances in this format."

Mikhailov and the Igora Drive center decided to give it a try. They adapted a Leningrad Center love story called "Timeless. Love Me Tight" and put it on stage outside to an audience sitting in their automobiles.

The audiences loved it. So next year they put on "Beautiful M. In Search of Lost Love," also an adaptation of a production at the Leningrad Center. In the theater the play is a dramatic story about the life of a ballet dancer. In the "Drive Show" it's a comedy that follows the dancer through different countries as she searches, and eventually finds, love.

Stay seated, please

The drive-in theater has its own rules. The audience can arrive at the show only by car. To give everyone a good view of the stage, the cars are arranged in a semicircle. Sound is delivered on the theater radio channel, and the quality is excellent.

Everyone can order food and drink, but no one is allowed out of the car unless it absolutely necessary. The reason for this is simple: parts of the performance take place among the cars in the parking lot. Last year, a giant toy elephant climbed up on one car and actors washed other cars with the audience inside. This year a garbage truck with a piano on top drove around the lot and the actors arrived in a limousine. Most people can see what's happening from their cars, but this live action is also filmed and projected on the backdrop of the stage.

Mikhailov thought people would come because it was the only way to see theater during the pandemic, but this year proved him wrong. Even with all indoor theaters and cinemas open, the Drive Show productions won two awards and were sold out, with audiences driving from as far as Moscow.

A night out on the town

Theatergoer Yulia Grinina said that she thought the unique format expanded the possibilities of traditional theater. "It's an unforgettable show. Drive-in theater lets them push the boundaries of the stage, move the theatrical action right up to the audience and create a unique experience that they couldn't do within the walls of a traditional theater.... It's a new theatrical reality in a world of limitations and social distance," she said.

"I've been to the show twice," another member of the audience named Anastasia told The Moscow Times. "The artists from the Leningrad Center are really talented, doing not just acting but acrobatics, dancing, and singing."

The shows are put on at nightfall from July to late August. Mikhailov says that next year the third season will open with an adapted version of the show "Favorites of the Moon. Kiss." "At the Igora Drive complex we can see a moon in the evenings, and it will perfectly match the action on stage," he said.

In the meantime, theatergoers will have to attend theater the old-fashioned way until next summer.

For more information, see the sites Drive Show *and* Leningrad Center*.*

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/05/st-petersburg-audiences-watch-live-theater-in-their-cars-a75221