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Trial of Russian Playwright and Director Moves Behind Closed Doors

By AFP

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Theater director Zhenya Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk. **Dmitry Serebryakov / AP / TASS**

A judge in Moscow ruled Thursday that the trial of a director and writer charged with "justifying terrorism" in an award-winning play will continue behind closed doors after the prosecution said witnesses were being threatened on social media.

Director Yevgeniya Berkovich and writer Svetlana Petriychuk are standing trial at a military court over their 2021 play about Russian women lured to marry Islamic State militants in Syria.

Judge Yury Massin accepted a request from prosecutors to hold the rest of the trial "in a closed format," the state-run TASS news agency reported, after which journalists were asked to leave.

The prosecution had asked for the court to be closed to the press because of alleged

threatening comments toward trial participants on social media. The women and their lawyers said they opposed closing the trial.

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At a previous hearing this month, a witness who asked for his identity to be hidden to protect his safety said he had secretly filmed the play and taken footage to police.

If convicted, the women face up to seven years in prison. They pleaded not guilty at a hearing last month.

"I staged the play to prevent terrorism," Berkovich told the court as the prosecutor accused the women of supporting "extreme forms of Islam."

The women's arrest in May last year sent shockwaves through Russia's artistic community, which has faced unprecedented pressure from the Kremlin since Russia sent troops to Ukraine.

Their play, "Finist The Brave Falcon," was performed in a documentary style, telling the story of Russian women groomed online to join the Islamic State and then tried for terrorism on their return to Russia. It was awarded two Golden Mask awards, Russia's top theater prize.

Berkovich has also written poems criticizing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Her supporters have said they believe she may be being punished for her poems.

Human rights group Amnesty International has said the two women are "being targeted simply for exercising the right to freedom of expression" and called for their immediate release.

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