



Tolstaya City

by Cathy Young

A page one cartoon in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* shows a bug-eyed, disheveled demonstrator with a banner that reads, *NICHEVO NE PONIMAYU!*—best translated as, WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?

A friend in Moscow tells me the doom-and-gloom mood in the media is so pervasive that when pleasant news—a fashion show or a jazz festival—is reported on TV, it is usually prefaced with remarks along the lines of, “One might say that in our troubled days, there is no time for fun and frivolity. But perhaps we could use some fun in our lives.”

Fun? Well, how about female wrestling? Thirty Soviet wrestlers and boxers of the no-longer-gentle sex appeared in the Moscow show put on by Stallone’s Rock-

ets, the troupe headed by Jacqueline Stallone (Sly’s mom), in late October. An item in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, entitled “Don’t Get Into the Ring When a Woman’s Fighting,” noted that “women’s wrestling is especially widespread in countries where women’s liberation is winning.” I don’t know if Dr. Catharine MacKinnon would concur.

Here’s another sign that the long-suffering Russian woman has really arrived. An ad in the weekly *Kultura* (known, until September, as *Sovetskaya Kultura*), featuring a coyly smiling buxom Venus by Titian, shouts:

WOMEN! Your beauty is up to YOU! Suffering from underdevelopment of the mammary glands? Lost your feminine attractiveness after an operation? WE CAN HELP! Experienced surgeons give consultations and perform plastic

surgery using silicone implants. . . . The money you spend will bring back beauty and confidence!

This being the (ex-) Soviet Union, shouldn’t a customer worry that her new mammary glands might end up on her back or waist? However, the company that does the implants is a joint venture with the Germans, which inspires a certain amount of confidence. But the ad copy could use a zippy punchline, something like: “We can’t give you full shops, but we’ll give you a full figure.”

For serious fun, there is politics. Take Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who wants to restore the borders of the old Russian empire (including “the Baltic province” and parts of Finland and Estonia) and lower the price of vodka; he got about seven percent of the vote in the republic’s presidential race last May and is now running for the Soviet presidency. Besides Estonians, Poles, Finns, and Russian liberals, there is someone else Zhirinovsky may be making nervous: Russian stand-up comedians. The *Independent Gazette* (September 11) reports that sales of their tapes are behind those of Zhirinovsky’s stump speeches. Sample: “Once I’m elected President, you won’t be smiling anymore. You are going to listen for as long as I am going to speak. I am going to issue decrees and everyone is going to obey them.”

Are we having fun yet? Here’s someone who makes Zhirinovsky look like a moderate: writer Valery Khatyushin, whose lengthy essay entitled “Chattels for the European Backyard?” appears in the August issue of the always entertaining National Bolshevik journal *Molodaya Gvardiya* (Young Guard). Khatyushin explains that the integration of Russia into Europe is nothing but a Jewish plot to turn Russians into a slave labor force for world capitalism—a plot in which the October Revolution itself was but one link. Khatyushin’s

Cathy Young is the author of *Growing Up in Moscow* (Ticknor & Fields).



breakthrough discovery is that capitalist democracy ("the unfree, unequal, unfraternal power of commerce and of the golden calf, the god of the Jews") survived the Great Depression by exploiting Russia through "Stalin's five-year plans." Uncle Joe, the American agent.

The problem with the Soviet system, the patriot explains, is not that it was socialist but that, run by "the anti-Russian Communist party team," it worked for "alien and usually hostile interests." These interests even got to Solzhenitsyn: in his essay "How to Rebuild Russia," Khatyushin complains indignantly, the writer said not a word about the role of "Zionist capital" and "Zionization" in Russia's plight:

To really rebuild Russia, the last thing we should do is join the "world market." We must start by outlawing *any* financial activity by the agents of that "capital" in our territory. . . . All flow of raw materials abroad must be sealed off until Russia is really rebuilt. . . . And only then can we start thinking about what we are going to sell, to whom, and for how much. And not at the world cabal's prices but at ones beneficial and profitable to us. We are a world unto ourselves . . . we have all we need for a wonderful, well-organized, full life without any hard currency or imports, for our own ruble to become the world's number one currency.

The tumult at home has not made all Russians turn a kinder eye to the United States. A September issue of the Moscow weekly *Stolitsa* carries an interview with Tatiana Tolstaya, currently teaching in the United States and a frequent contributor to the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books*.

Tolstaya makes a discovery to match Khatyushin's: everyday life in America is no better than in Russia. You see, "first you rack your brains: What is more to your advantage, to buy or rent a house or apartment?" Furthermore: "Let's take heating. You have a boiler in the basement—all you have to do is press a button. But, like everything else, it costs money. What a wonderful choice: freeze or pay up." (Apparently, she prefers freezing as the only option—which may be the case for her compatriots in the coming winter.) "Every second your air conditioner works, you physically feel your money oozing away."

The Russian writer further reveals that she has to spend inordinate amounts of time sorting through junk mail: "I have to read it all, analyze it, see if I really need any of these offers. . . . And that's how it is

with every trifle." And then there are all the grocery coupons one has to clip, because how can you pass up an opportunity to save five bucks on your monthly grocery shopping? At least she, as a Russian, is sufficiently spiritual to hate herself for such avarice: "Americans simply adore these coupons. They can just sit there for days going snip, snip, snip. And getting a tremendous kick out of it." They also adore watching commercials.

Some of the things Tolstaya enumerates are at least partly true, but in her enervated state she can discern no shades of gray:

I simply cannot describe the extent to which American students are naive, simple-minded, ignorant, uneducated—and indifferent. . . . You have to patiently elucidate to them things that every first-grader knows in our country.

And I used to think Allan Bloom was a grouch. As a recent (1988) college graduate, I can attest that things may not be good but they're not nearly as awful; and, as someone who attended school in the Soviet Union, I have reasons to suspect that the intellect of the Soviet first-grader is vastly exaggerated.

While Tolstaya also sneers at the silly misconceptions many Americans have about life in Russia, she has some fairly strange notions

about American practices—and she's been here for all of one year. She says, for example, that if you want to buy a house, you can't pay the entire price at once even if you've got the money, "because that's not profitable for the banks": they won't let you put more than 20 percent down. If you own or rent a home, you need liability insurance in case "some drunk" slips and falls in front of your door and winds up suing you. (Russia has its drunkards, but at least they're not litigious.)

Tolstaya laments: "It's so boring. . . . You go to a store, and there are no surprises awaiting you: you know exactly on what shelf in that store this or that product can be found. And encountering that product brings you no joy at all. Of course it's much easier and much more fun over here." The average Russian woman—who increasingly finds no surprises awaiting her at all at the store—can surely empathize.

There is, however, one dictum of American origin that Tolstaya has clearly taken to heart: Emerson's "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." In the middle of the interview, we learn that she is going to return to stupid, boring America for at least another year. "Over there, we don't have enough money, but here we have zero. . . . [Here] you're like a hamster on a treadmill, running around till you drop. What kind of creative work can you do in such conditions?"

Emerson did say *foolish* consistency. □





Post No Billings

by James Bowman

"In lapidary inscriptions," said Dr. Johnson, "a man is not upon loath." He might have said the same about movie advertising. The poster for Robert Benton's *Billy Bathgate*, however, offers us a menu of "Power, Ambition, Seduction, Betrayal," and proves to be right on the money. Dutch Schultz (Dustin Hoffman) is a powerful man; Billy Bathgate (Loren Dean) is an ambitious boy; Dutch's girlfriend (Nicole Kidman) seduces the boy, and at least two of Dutch's henchmen betray him to a rival gangster. Got that? So what does the film have to say about power-ambition-seduction-betrayal? Ah, now *that's* a mystery. But they do exist. As if you didn't know.

Another part of the poster tells us that Billy was looking for a hero and he found Dutch Schultz. Another tip-off! Impressionable youth, it seems, finds a role and a role model with an evil gangster. But why the youth should have chosen Dutch Schultz as his hero instead of, say, Fiorello LaGuardia or Douglas MacArthur or St. Francis of Assisi is never made clear. It may be (hint, hint) because he is poor and ill-educated and beaten down by a sense of powerlessness, but the film isn't telling. We've got to provide the political subtext for ourselves.

It's a fine state of affairs when the poster tells you more of what the film is about than the film does. Occasionally, you get the idea that the picture is attempting to make an ironic point about the connection between legitimate business and gangsterdom, as when Dutch complains about taxes and government interference by saying: "It's not fair! What does a man have to do to enjoy the fruits of his labor?" But it doesn't insist even on this idea, which was pretty thoroughly explored in *The Godfather* anyway, and you walk away wonder-

ing what it was all about. The other thing the advertising says is "The movie event of the year is here." There it lies.

Power-ambition-seduction-betrayal is also the theme of Norman Jewison's *Other People's Money*, another film that doesn't quite know what it wants to do with them. Or rather, that changes its mind about what it wants to do with them halfway through. It starts out with Danny DeVito speaking to the camera about how much he loves money. He loves it more than he loves what it will buy; he loves it because it doesn't care if he snores or picks his nose. Only dogs and doughnuts can compare in terms of that kind of unquestioning acceptance, and money doesn't poop on the floor or make you fat. The only thing he loves more than money is *other people's money*. Since Edmund first bounded onto the stage in *King Lear* to say "Nature thou art my goddess," few villains can have proclaimed themselves so unashamedly.

By the same token, the Chairman of the Board of New England Wire and Cable, doddering, lovable old Gregory Peck with his cornball reminiscences of Harry Truman and paternalistic concern to keep open the obsolete factory his father (or was it his grandfather?) founded, is equally obviously the hero. He even has a beautiful stepdaughter (Penelope Ann Miller) who is also a crackerjack lawyer clearly destined to save the plant from the clutches of Larry the Liquidator, DeVito's unscrupulous corporate raider. Here we go again, it seems: eighties greed is going to get it in the neck from nineties compassion.

But that's not the way it happens. Maybe Danny D. doesn't like playing bad guys, or maybe Jewison just got bored with such a predictable adventure and changed his mind, but Larry turns out to be a lovable rogue with a secret passion for the violin and charm enough to win over not only New England Wire and Cable's stockhold-

ers but the beautiful lawyer as well. Maybe greed is good again. Wouldn't that be extraordinary? The only trouble is that whoever decided to cross us up hopelessly entangled the film's emotional energies in the process. The opening soliloquy violates the first rule of soliloquies by being a lie: DeVito has a soul after all.

It pains me to find fault with any Hollywood movie-maker independent enough to recognize that closing down obsolete factories is not necessarily a bad thing, and in another context the juxtaposition of DeVito's and Peck's speeches to the stockholders could have been a real dramatic tour de force. Here, however, there are just too many loose ends: the comparison of American with Japanese industry, the fate of the workers, the treachery of the company's president, Peck's concern about living in a country that makes nothing but hamburgers and sells nothing but tax shelters—all are brought up but left unresolved. It's nice that Larry the Liquidator is a mensch after all, but the dramatic conflict is merely shunted aside by the decision to concentrate on his personal discovery that there is more to life than money.

That neither of these two films is able to get anywhere may be connected with their almost elegiac quality. What would seem to be such promising material as power-ambition-seduction-betrayal is in both cases set against nostalgia for a simpler world where these highly individualistic abstractions are somehow contained, if not rolled back, by a sense of community, of belonging. Billy's desire to belong in the Dutch Schultz gang is what makes Schultz himself almost sympathetic, and even his eventual expulsion from it comes about because of his mentor's desire to protect him. Larry the Liquidator is a lonely man who has felt excluded (presumably because he was short and fat) since he was in high school, and he doesn't know anything to do about it but make money so that people will have to respect him.

James Bowman, The American Spectator's movie critic, is the American editor of the Times Literary Supplement.