



Horsing Around

by Jonas Bernstein

Moscow, December 23

The mosaic on the side of a building across from Dobrinskaya metro station—where I catch a train each day to my job at *Moscow News*—proclaims “We Are Building Communism” to the oblivious multitudes doing holiday shopping at the kiosks below. In the chaos that is today’s Moscow, just who’s building what—if anything—is difficult to ascertain.

Gregory Kazankov, a young businessman and political consultant who also teaches chemistry at Moscow State University, is an anomaly in a sea of Russian pessimism. Over dinner at Pizza Hut on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, he shrugs off such seemingly negative indicators as the replacement of Yegor Gaidar with Viktor Chernomyrdin, the former energy sector chief and an old-line nomenklaturist, as prime minister. Kazankov believes the disintegration of the state sector and the concurrent march to the market are accelerating “at the micro level”—that is, in daily life—and are irreversible, with the government more a spectator than a player.

After dinner at the apartment of one of my expat friends, an American metals trader, the TV is giving a different atmospheric reading: a live television talk show, with an audience asking questions of a panel of experts, is focusing on the question of land privatization, a problem that has yet to be tackled in earnest. Repeatedly, questioners state their fear that “the Americans are going to buy up all our land.” An hour later, on a “60 Minutes”-like program called “Black Box,” the subject is black-market sales of vital organs to Western buyers: Russia, it seems, is joining Brazil and other Third World countries as a major exporter. A

Jonas Bernstein is an editor for the English-language edition of Moscow News.

crooked doctor is exposed, Mike Wallace-style, on camera. Moments later, a Russian medical specialist opines that the Americans are buying human tissue here in order to study its makeup and to design anti-Russian genetic weapons. This rather astonishing statement passes without commentary.

At midnight, I leave my friend’s place for home. At Leninsky Prospekt metro station, a train pulls in. The door of the car opens to reveal a man covered in blood lying on the floor. Another is sitting on the bench clutching his head. Evidently, these two, who seem to be drunk (a very common sight) as well as injured (an increasingly common sight), started a fight with three young guys (two long-hairs and one short-) and lost. The short-hair is alternately kneading his hand, clearly damaged in battle, and ringing the emergency intercom. The train remains motionless except for its doors, which are mindlessly opening and closing. The car, half-full, is completely silent, and no one appears the least bit interested in what’s happening; some of the riders are reading newspapers. None of the metro employees or the police are particularly interested, either, so after a few minutes one of the long-hairs simply picks up the beaten-up drunk and deposits him, like a Hefty bag filled with garbage, on the platform. A lone militiaman finally shows up, and as the train pulls away a discussion of who did what to whom begins.

December 24

It’s 10 a.m., and I’m chatting with Irina, one of the editors at the *Moscow News* English edition, before I begin my daily routine of editing and hanging out in the magazine’s bar. Three gentlemen walk through the door and into the neighboring office; they appear to be of Oriental extraction.

“I think they’re Chinese,” Irina whispers.

“Maybe Kazakh,” I reply, wanting to appear knowledgeable.

Moments later, the three appear before us, led by Natasha, another editor. “Jonas, these men are interested in hiring your services to edit some English translations,” she says. “But it’s on your own time. They’re from Korea.”

The apparent spokesman of the troop smiles at me beatifically and holds up a package.

“Okay,” I say immediately—South Korean businessmen with contracts written in English. “What is it?” I ask him, pointing to the package.

“It is a chapter from the memoirs of our Leader,” he says in English. “There will be 700 pages in all, due by the end of February, 400 rubles a page.”

Our Leader? Whoops—wrong Korea.

Realizing that such work doesn’t exactly conform to the guidelines of either the National Forum Foundation (from which I am receiving a grant to help build democratic institutions in Russia) or the National Endowment for Democracy, one of its main contributors—nor of the Registration of Foreign Agents Act, for that matter—I improvise: “Thanks very much, but I’m really too busy to take on such a big project.” Being thoughtful, I add: “Maybe my colleague is interested; she’s also a native English speaker.” I run down the hall and quickly tell Lucy, a young British woman right out of journalism school and in search of other media experience and extra money, about this chance for some free-lance editing—nearly 700 bucks at the current exchange rate, I note. “It’s the memoirs of Kim Il-Sung, by the way,” I feel obliged to add.

Lucy talks to the trio and says maybe, and they leave a chapter with her. “We will return tomorrow at three,” says the

smiling English-speaker, who, I later learn, is press secretary at the North Korean embassy here. His smile reminds me of Chairman Mao's.

Lucy and I weigh the pros and cons of her accepting the job (i.e., extra money vs. prolonged unwanted proximity to North Korean intelligence). We then move on to the sample chapter, entitled "The Memory of a White Horse." Thirty-three pages long, it is a boy-meets-horse story, a Communist *My Friend Flicka*. "It was in the spring of 1933 that a horse came into my hands," it begins:

One day officials of the people's revolutionary government in Shiliping and some guerrillas came to see me, driving a horse to me. . . .

"Commander Kim, we wish to present a horse respectfully to you who have to travel many rugged miles. Please accept this," one of the officials spoke for his company.

When Kim later has to part with his horse, he cries into its nape. The chapter is also sprinkled with reminiscences about revolutionary comrades. My personal favorite:

When he was a member of the Children's Vanguard, O Paek Ryong had crossed the Onsong in the homeland with a matchlock pistol he himself had made, and shot a policeman at the custom house and snatched a rifle from him. He was such an audacious boy.

December 25

The day begins with a look at *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, the wildly popular daily that was formerly the organ of the local Young Communist League. These days it's a Russian hybrid of *Spy* magazine and the *National Enquirer*, ideologically all over the map. Russian nationalist, yet it saw its offices attacked by members of the ultra-right Pamyat group (some say as a publicity stunt); pro-gay, yet, in the view of some *Moscow News* staffers, racist (it recently published stories explaining away several racially motivated murders of African students here).

MK reports that earlier in the week several metro drivers were sleeping in an office in one of the city's stations when suddenly one awoke, screaming: "Somebody is crawling on me!" It seems


a pack of large rats, having consumed the drivers' food, had moved on to their clothes. The rats were driven off, according to the paper, after an hour-long battle.

At the *Moscow News*, we are preparing a small party to celebrate Western Christmas—at the request of the Russian staffers at the English edition, who look for any excuse to party. Lucy has brilliantly improvised a Christmas cake, and I've bought some Spanish wine and Stolichnaya at my neighborhood kiosk. Lucy has decided to blow off the Koreans—for the obvious reasons, as well as the fact that, according to various Russian colleagues, 400 rubles a page for editing is a rip-off. Koreans forgotten, we get on with our usual mix of editing and sitting in the bar.


In the afternoon, Lucy and I are chatting in our office with Sveta, a former Soviet junior and world figure-skating champion who now helps out in the BBC's Moscow bureau. Suddenly there's a knock on the door. It opens, and for a split second it looks as if the Three Kings from the Orient have descended on *Moscow News* to convey season's greetings. It is instead the three

Koreans—or rather three Koreans: Mao has returned, but with two different comrades rounding out the threesome. One appears old enough to be Kim Il-Sung's father, while the other is about four feet tall—probably the security chief. (I am later told that the lives of North Koreans in Moscow are indeed organized into "troikas": there must be no fewer than three together at all times.)


Presently, Lucy clears her throat and says, "I'm sorry, but I have to say no . . ." and the atmosphere takes on all the friendliness of Panmunjom on a bad day. Mao is no longer smiling, and terse Korean sentences are flying back and forth. Our excuse about being busy is not bolstered by the cake and booze sitting on the table (though Sveta later swears that the little security guy was staring covetously at the goodies). Finally, Mao speaks: "We expected more from you," he says, clearly astonished that we did not jump at the chance to help convey the thoughts of the Great Leader to an anxiously awaiting English-speaking world. After a few minutes, Mao snatches his Leader's chapter and they shuffle out. "Merry Christmas," I call after them, not knowing what else to say. □



T-Shirts Only \$15



INHAIL TO THE CHIEF



Sweatshirts Only \$25


**GOP # 105
CODE: 1209**

**T-Shirt: 100% Cotton • Style = T • S,M,L,XL (\$15) 2X (\$17)
Sweatshirt: 50/50% • Style = S • S,M,L,XL (\$25) 2X (\$30)**

Postage and Handling: \$3.50 for 1st shirt, \$1.50 each for 2nd and up. 8.25% Sales Tax TN Residents Only.

When ordering, specify: Code #, Shirt #, Quantity, Size, Style, Name, Address & Phone. VISA & MC accepted.

FAST FAX ORDERLINE: 615-242-7509 24-HOUR ORDERLINE: 615-259-3298



Pellican Promotions Incorporated

Mail Order: P.O. Box 158141, Nashville, TN 37215-8141
 Call for wholesale or fundraising pricing: 615-242-7456. Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery.
 Designs © 1993, 1990 Owned or licensed by Pellican Promotions, Inc.



Alive and Dead

by James Bowman

One of the simplest ways to judge a film is on the basis of its truth to life. Last month I wrote of Hollywood's neglect, as I see it, of the elementary requirements of verisimilitude in some recent fictional works, and I can only regret that the new Madonna film, *Body of Evidence*, was released too late for inclusion as an example of that neglect. A hypocritical middle-class establishment's putting "a beautiful young woman" on trial for screwing a man to death is obviously a vehicle for the authoress of *Sex*. But in the Madonna world the preposterousness of such a premise might have passed almost unnoticed if it had not been for the preposterousness of everything else about the film—especially the leading lady's performance.

"Real Life," however, from which more and more films these days seem to be taken, is no guarantee of a lifelike quality. The simulated reality of fiction has to try hard to look real, while real reality often manages to look quite unreal. A good example is *Alive*, Frank Marshall's film based on the real-life experience of members of a Uruguayan rugby team who, their airplane having crashed in the Andes, were forced to eat flesh from the bodies of their dead teammates in order to survive. The extreme circumstances give rise to an interesting problem in practical morality, but the problem carries with it little dramatic resonance because we can so easily detach ourselves from it. We know that, whatever happens to us, we are most unlikely to have to choose between death from starvation and cannibalism.

Whether for this reason or because it would have been bad for box office to

show the teen heartthrob, Ethan Hawke, tucking into a plate of man-meat, Marshall downplays the cannibalism and makes his film into a story of survival scarcely distinguishable from any other. Oh sure, they eat some guys, but they're very discreet about it. There are a few anonymous stiffs on the ground from whose backs the lads cut their lunch with shards of glass, but it is easy to forget that they were people. We don't even see their faces, just the meat, which looks like any other meat. For the most part we are kept firmly focused on the physical rather than the moral perils that the survivors must confront, and we have to take it on faith that they'll "never be the same again" once they are forced into cannibalism.

This is the stuff of an interesting television documentary, maybe, but not really a feature film. Or at least not this feature film. That it is based on fact may add a piquancy to the flavor (people *tartare*) that the drama cannot supply but is otherwise irrelevant—as it is too in the cases of *Chaplin* and *Hoffa*. Does it matter that the subjects of both of these films really existed? Yes, but only because the films wouldn't have been made otherwise. Their being real people turns out to be the filmmakers' apology for the otherwise unjustified claim they make on our attention. If we didn't already know why Chaplin and Hoffa are important historical figures, the movies of their lives would not tell us. Or rather, they would tell us but not show us.

Consider the contrast between Charlie Chaplin's reputation and what we see of his life in Sir Richard Attenborough's film. We come to it predisposed to believe that here was a great man, a comic genius whose legend still survives. A fictional work could never create such

a towering figure, because he would bump his head against history and so call attention to his fictional status. But although he has so much audience good will to draw on, Sir Richard does not take enough trouble to explain what was so great about him. We see too little of him at work, and even his colorful private life comes off looking sketchy compared with the political material. J. Edgar Hoover has a bigger part than those of Chaplin's first three wives put together.

A man from Mars who saw this film might take away with him the impression that Chaplin's greatest achievement was refusing to shake hands with a Nazi or expressing (obliquely) left-wing views in the presence of J. Edgar. It is sad to reflect that, even in Hollywood, where you would expect Chaplin to be remembered for his films, the story of his life is more an occasion for yet another self-congratulation over the "creative community's" resistance to the McCarthyist terror. Of course it all *happened*. Or something like it happened. But a lot of other things happened in Chaplin's life that didn't make it onto the screen, and the audience must be left with the feeling that among those other things was whatever it is that makes Chaplin a great man.

If you admire anybody after seeing the film it is Robert Downey, Jr. for being such a splendid mimic that at times you can scarcely tell him from the real Chaplin. This too is typical of the narcissism of the "creative community": the subject of the film takes a back-seat to its star and so is diminished even further in our estimation. Who cares about Chaplin when we've got Robert Downey, Jr.? And who cares about Jimmy Hoffa when we've got Jack Nicholson? Indeed, who cares about Jimmy Hoffa even if we didn't have Jack Nicholson? This is another unimpressive

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