

Glasnost satire bubbles up from underground

By Joel Schechter

WHO BUT A SATIRIST WOULD object to the new freedom of expression that has entered Russian theaters? During a recent visit to Moscow and Leningrad with a group of stage performers and writers, I found most were delighted by the

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open discussion Gorbachov's policies allow. But one puppeteer told of a new Leningrad production of Aristophanes' satire *The Frogs* in which an actor asks the audience: "Why have you come here tonight? In the past someone could report you." Now that the risks of satirizing authority have diminished, the need for satire was being questioned. The actor concluded that he would perform *The Frogs* anyway, despite the fact that almost everything can now be said on stage.

Even the Politburo seems to appreciate satire now, judging from the response it gave one sketch last June about the unequal distribution of privilege in Soviet society. According to the performers in the group Panopticon, Gorbachov and all but one of his colleagues laughed at a comic sketch (which the group restaged for me) that showed an ordinary blue-collar worker at an airport receiving the fanfare usually reserved for the elite. Panopticon, composed of steelworkers and acting students, also sang a ditty about Moscow food shortages. The "M" in Moscow stands for meat, its other letters for vegetables, sausage and steaks, in this paean to an imaginary city of plenty.

Jokes about privilege and food shortages also appeared in rhymed couplets sung by the clowns of Cascade, the People's Circus Collective, in Leningrad. This circus, composed

of young non-professionals, rehearses several times weekly and performs for soldiers, hospital patients and the public at large. The clowns Andrei Gavrilov and Alexander Tolkanov are reviving a satiric circus tradition that flourished before Stalin. Accompanying themselves on guitar and concertina, the partners comically pun about the Gorbachov era of *perestroika*, or "restructuring," as they sing about a boss who implements *perestroika* by rebuilding his own garage.

Like the rest of the arts, the circus and the theater suffered under earlier Soviet regimes. One circus clown suggested why there was previously

said that, to a Soviet bloc audience, Godot is true communism, which also never arrives.)

Adventurous returns: Innovative Soviet theater of the '20s, developed by the director Meyerhold, the poet Mayakovsky and others, has resurfaced in recent years, after disappearing during the reigns of Stalin through Brezhnev. In 1922 Meyerhold staged an unflattering portrait of bureaucrats, *The Death of Tarelkin*, and the play by Sukhovo-Kobylin has been revived at a small experimental studio in Moscow.

The new production's director, Belakovitch, said during intermission that the drama's depiction of

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little political humor in the ring when he told a story about a colleague who lost his job. In the early '80s a clown entered the circus ring looking tan and fit. Asked where he acquired his tan, he was supposed to answer that he had been drinking kvass outdoors in hot weather. Instead, he said he had been waiting in line for meat; the audience laughed, and the clown found himself sweeping floors for the next five months.

The lines in which Soviet citizens wait for scarce consumer goods have no doubt increased public interest in Samuel Beckett's vaudevilian classic *Waiting for Godot*, which had its first two professional Moscow productions in the past year.

In the play, two tramps banter about despair and wait for the mysterious Godot, who never arrives. (The Polish-born critic Jan Kott once

bureaucratic corruption is particularly timely now that Brezhnev's son-in-law is on trial for crimes comparable to the bribery and corruption shown in the play. The last two hours of the six-hour performance (the length, perhaps, compensating for years of no performance at all) visually relocates events in contemporary Russia by costuming the grotesque parade of victims, bribe-takers and police torturers in modern dress. This theater is rediscovering and celebrating its lost, avant-garde past.

In Leningrad, the highly regarded humorist Semyon Altov said that he has moved from satire to non-topical, more universal fiction in his recent writing, because newspaper reporters are now providing the public with the news of dissent that only satire could convey previously.

Altov became a public performer



out of necessity in the early '70s, when he read aloud anti-bureaucratic fables for which he could not secure a publisher. Underground circulation of his taped readings and eventual publication in the *Literary Gazette* increased his popularity—thousands now attend Altov's readings—and allowed him to earn a living from his performances.

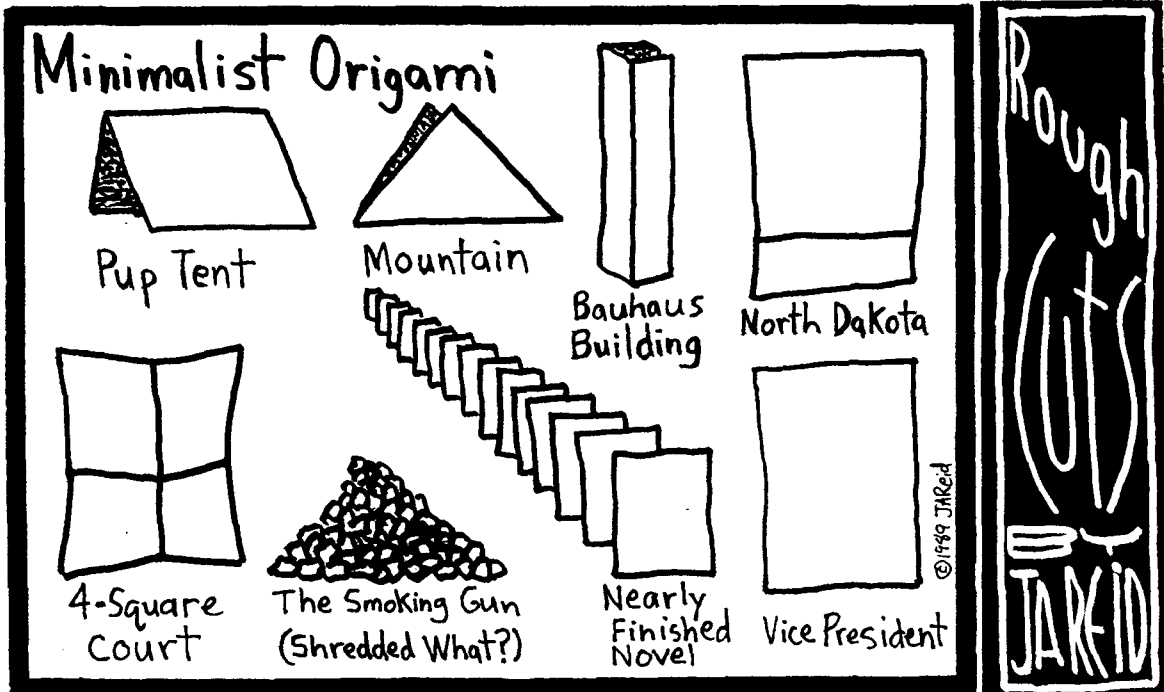
The strangest praise of *glasnost* I heard was a song, performed half in Polish, half in Russian, at the Theater Bouffe. In the middle of a comic cabaret show, a punk-looking chanteuse, wearing a white miniskirt, black blouse and one red star earring, sang about how everyone loves Mikhail Gorbachov in his red shirt. Altov remarked that the song's performance in Leningrad demonstrated "everything is possible in this country, including singing about *perestroika* in a miniskirt."

Another anecdote about circus humor provides a fitting metaphor

for the effect of *glasnost*. Last year when the Moscow Circus visited the U.S., its best clown act showed a trio of musicians destroying an orchestra, instrument by instrument. In Moscow a clown told me that act was first directed in 1952 by a Soviet trombone player, Dumas, who had been a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. As a prisoner the trombonist was forced to join a band in which any musician who made a mistake was shot. He survived the torture and now modestly calls it "excellent training."

Ironically, his famous clown act consists wholly of musicians making mistakes. Perhaps a similar process is occurring in Soviet theater and circus today, as past mistakes and repressed ideas are transformed into critical and celebratory art. ■

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By Karen Rosenberg

Documentary chic: the *glasnost* vogue

WHEN YOU ASK SENIOR SOVIET filmmakers about the effects of *glasnost* on their medium, they are apt to start talking about younger colleagues not bent to conformity by years of censorship. Thus it may not be surprising that fully half the works in the Glasnost Film Festival, which is touring the U.S., are by directors in their 20s and 30s. Generally critical and topical, these 22 documentaries, most from the late 1980s, show that the Gorbachov era has already affected Soviet screens.

Short documentaries are among the first film genres to react to the changes sweeping Soviet society, because, like magazine and newspaper articles, they can be produced and distributed quickly. In the USSR, full-length feature films take an average of two and a half years to complete, and the first features conceived, written and directed in the *glasnost* period are just beginning to appear. So the films in this touring festival can probably be viewed as harbingers of features to come.

But they are also significant in their own right. For many years, the Soviet documentary was in decline, compromised by its subservience to the reigning ideology. The genre failed to attract many talented directors; 63-year-old Hertz Frank, whose

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film about a murderer on death row plays in this series, is a notable exception. But with *glasnost*, the documentary is gaining not just attention, but respect.

Documenting renaissance: American documentary filmmaker Alyson Denny, who attended the first international non-feature film festival in Leningrad last January, discovered that documentaries are "in" now in the USSR. "People would say, 'Oh, you're a documentary filmmaker. How wonderful!'" Denny writes in the May issue of the U.S. monthly film and video magazine, *The Independent*. Producer-director Robert Stone, who also went to the festival, reports in the same magazine that Soviet documentary filmmakers are planning "to produce films with such titles as *Demon of the Revolution*, about Trotsky; *Near the Tyrants*, on Stalin and his pals; *Gulag Archipelago*, based on the book by the exiled Alexander Solzhenitsyn; *Chernobyl Is Near*, about that disaster and the global ecology; and a history of Russian monasteries."

There is reason to believe that these are not vain hopes. Among the once-taboo topics treated in the Glasnost Film Festival are widespread apathy and cynicism (*The Tailor*) and neo-fascist tendencies among some alienated youth (*This Is How We Live*). Archival footage revealed aspects of the past that were long kept hidden. The evils of Stalin and subsequent Stalinism is a major theme, as shown by *Black*



This Is How We Live, a documentary about neo-fascist tendencies in some Soviet youth, is part of the Glasnost Film Festival.

Square, on the repression of artists; *And the Past Seems but a Dream*, on the resettling in the '30s of entire population groups; *Marshal Blücher: A Portrait Against the Background of an Epoch*, on a so-called "enemy of the people"; and *The Trial: Part Two*, about the show trials of the '30s.

Of course government-sanctioned criticism of Soviet society began before *glasnost*. In the '70s, Soviet fiction writers sounded warnings about the environment, and the government itself has launched many campaigns against alcoholism. But concrete information about disasters, both natural and man-made, were kept under wraps. So Leonid Gurevich's *Scenes at a Fountain*, concerning an oil spill, represents a new kind of reporting in the USSR.

Cleaning the mirror: The importance of such documentaries to the health of Soviet society has been emphasized by writer/director Gurevich, vice president of the American-Soviet Kino-Initiative, the Soviet organization that sponsored the festival with the Citizen Exchange Council of New York. "It is impossible to make *perestroika* work if we don't have an accurate mirror of our society in front of us," he told American documentary filmmaker Lyn Goldfarb recently.

While many of the films in this festival are significant within the Soviet context, some chart new territory in international filmmaking as

well. Nadezhda Khvorova's *Are You Going to the Ball?* is a poignant exposé of Soviet gymnastics. Girls too young to make informed choices about their lives are shown to have been pushed by parents and coaches into training that damages their bodies and neglects their minds. Like some other Soviet documentaries, this one sidesteps a few issues. In this case, the unasked questions concern feminism, anorexia and other eating disorders, and the use of drugs among athletes.

But we in the West have also been loath to demystify the beautiful movements of lithe little girls. Critical books like Suzanne Gordon's *Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet* and Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave* are rare, and *60 Minutes* produced one of the few documentaries on ballet that goes beyond "Gee, isn't it lovely?"

At least as significant as the themes of the films in this festival is their style. The absence in many

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works of the traditional narrator with a voice of authority suggests that a number of Soviet filmmakers today want viewers to make up their

own minds about what they see. *The Evening Sacrifice*, by a much-hailed fiction film director, Alexander Sokurov, shows the resurgence of visual experimentation in Soviet filmmaking. According to Soviet critic Mikhail Yampolsky, television in the USSR now has more programs featuring on-location reportage, rock music or a "collage" format.

Chernobyl—not coming clean: Some of the films in the Glasnost Film Festival will seem so stylistically familiar here in the West that preachy phrases about dedicating oneself to the improvement of society stand out all the more clearly. Unfortunately, *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks* is shot through with old-fashioned propagandistic platitudes. The man who heads a team that is supposed to restore the soil around Chernobyl to agricultural use is a state prizewinner, says the male narrator. But all the prizes in the world can't bridge the credibility gap in this film.

In fact, the Soviet Union has been reluctant to extend *glasnost* to the Chernobyl tragedy and its aftermath, and this news brownout has touched the cinema as well. *The Threshold* (1988), a Ukrainian documentary by Rolan Sergienko about the health effects of the nuclear accident, has had a curious fate in the USSR. It was approved for distribution by Goskino, the central Soviet film agency that, before *perestroika*, often shelved films or demanded cuts. The

documentary was shown out of competition at the Leningrad film festival in January, at the Soviet Filmmakers Union and elsewhere in the USSR. But recently screenings have been stopped. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on March 6 that this action was taken by "Ukrainian censors," but Ukrainian filmmaker Yuri Ilyenko, in the U.S. at the end of March, clarified that the powerful forces behind the ban are the ministries of public health, defense and energy and electrification. The film is accused of exhibiting an emotional bias and distorting facts. Apparently the most controversial scenes are those in which seriously ill people, who lived or worked in Chernobyl at the time of the accident, are interviewed in hospitals. The diagnoses on their medical charts indicate that they are suffering from the most ordinary ailments, not radiation-related conditions. So *The Threshold* is a film about more than Chernobyl; it concerns the continuation of old methods of hiding and doctoring information.

Let's hope that the next retrospective of Soviet documentaries will boast *The Threshold* among its offerings. The Soviet Filmmakers Union and Kiev's Dovzhenko Film Studio are reportedly arguing for its release. *Glasnost* cannot yet be celebrated—it must still be fought for.

Karen Rosenberg writes frequently on Soviet culture.