

volume 10 no. 2

summer 1990

soviet and east european performance



drama

theatre

film

SEEP (ISSN # 1047-0018) is a publication of the Institute for Contemporary Eastern European Drama and Theatre under the auspices of the Center for Advanced Study in Theatre Arts (CASTA), Graduate Center, City University of New York. The Institute Office is Room 1206A, City University Graduate Center, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036. All subscription requests and submissions should be addressed to the Editors of **SEEP**. Daniel Gerould and Alma Law, CASTA, Theatre Program, City University Graduate Center, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036.

responding to the changing world in which it exists is more effective than a hundred new plays on "contemporary themes."

Despite its unquestioned popularity among a small circle of influential admirers, Baliev's *Bat* was never more than a star in a firmament of suns. It is true that one play does not make a theatre. But assuming that the new incarnation of the *Bat* is able to develop freely, it has the potential of linking small- and large-form aesthetics in a way that could make a genuine contribution to the development of Russian and Soviet theatre.

NOTES

¹Until 1987, the All-Russian Theatre Society (VTO).

²See: Bernard Genies, "Cabaret," *Nouvelle Observateur*, No. 15 (1989); Natan Eidel'man, "V podvale doma svoego," *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 26 (1989); Francis Klines, "Russian Life is a Cabaret Again: With New Chums," *New York Times* (August 16, 1989) (Reprinted as "Glasnost is a Cabaret" in the *International Herald Tribune* [August 19-20, 1989]); Anatolii Smelianskii, "Cabaret? Kabare!" *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 33 (1989); Cicilia Bertolde, "Rossiia noch'iu," *Amika*, No. 39 (1989); "Spustia vosem'desiat odin god," *Teatral'naiia Moskva*, No. 35 (1989); Katia Glüger, "Die Rettung liegt im Lachen," *Stern*, No. 49 (1989); Aleksandr Minkin, "Kabare," *Ogonek*, No. 11 (1990).

RED FISH IN AMERICA

Alma Law

On April 21 and 22, the Collective for Living Cinema in New York offered American audiences their first opportunity to see the work of young, independent film and video artists from the Soviet Union. Curated by Marie Cieri of the Boston-based Arts Company and Moscow independent filmmaker, Igor Aleinikov, it presented fifteen works by thirteen artists, all dating from the period 1985-1990. Following its New York showing, the program traveled to eleven other cities during a month-long tour of the United States.

A part of the new youth culture, the parallel cinema movement, as it is known in the Soviet Union, has up until now worked entirely outside the State film production and distribution system which does not recognize either 16 mm film or video as legitimate art forms. As Boris Yukhananov, perhaps the leading theoretician of the movement, has explained, "We're neither for nor against the official system of film making; that's why we reject the term underground which suggests some kind of protest. We merely want to be free to work on our own terms, nothing more."

This small, but growing band of young media innovators (most of them are under thirty) has been working since the pre-glasnost days of the early 1980s. At the first festival of parallel cinema held in Moscow in March 1987, some twenty-five film and video artists from Moscow, Leningrad, Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius took part. By the time they held their second festival in March 1989 the number had grown to fifty. Some sense of the radical change in attitude toward this form of art over the past several years is evidenced by the fact that while the first festival brought accusations of "damaging the state monopoly on cinematic production," the second festival was held in the Union of Cinematographers' Dom Kino and was sponsored in part by the Leningrad Komsomol which footed the bill for the participants' travel and living expenses.

The representative selection of 16 mm films and videos included in the U.S. exhibition reveals a wide-ranging exploration of styles and subject matter ranging from music videos (represented by Latvian video artist, Ilze Petersone's *Damn It* (1989) featuring the Latvian punk rock group Zig Zag) to the freewheeling Leningrad style of "scratch animation" as in *Supporter of Olf* (1987) by Inal Savchenko, Evgenii Kondratyev, K. Mitenev and A. Ovchinnikov.

Among the best known of the independents are the Leningrad founders of *nekrorealizm* (deathly realism), twenty-nine year old Evgenii Yufit and Andrei Mertvyi (*mertvyi* is the Russian word for "dead"). Their films, filled with images of violence and death, represent some of the most vivid and extravagant manifestations of parallel cinema. They

are represented in the program by Yufit's first film, *Orderly-Werewolves* (1985) and Yufit and Mertvyi's *Spring* (1987), a nightmarishly humorous tale reflecting the brutality of former Soviet regimes.

The Aleinikov brothers, Igor (28) and Gleb (24), who are accompanying the program on its tour around the United States have been making 16 mm films together since 1986. Their film, *Tractors* (1987), one of the most interesting of the works shown, co-opts one of the icons of Soviet cinema, the tractor (Eisenstein's *The Old and the New* is the classic example), and presents it parodistically using the swollen rhetoric and overblown style of the typical Soviet documentary, in much the way that Sotsart parodies the conventions of classical Socialist Realist painting and sculpture.

Central to the film is the narration which starts out with an account of the history of the tractor and an explanation of how it works. Up to this point one could easily mistake this for the typical Soviet documentary. But as *Tractors* takes off into flights of rhetoric, the voice of a tractor operator is heard enthusing over how she "leaps out of bed in the morning, quickly gulps down her breakfast and rushes out to her dear tractor." This paean to the tractor culminates in a song likening the tractor to a space ship: "Our own dear Chelyabinsk tractor/Is in orbit as high as the moon,/And at night, next to the sun's partner/The best metal in the world makes me croon."

Video and theatre director Boris Yukhananov (33) is represented in the program by excerpts from two of his works, *Game of HO* (1987) and *Crazy Prince Kuzmin, Part II "Actor"* (1989). Yukhananov's videos have for good reason been called "slow," and at times even that's an understatement. *Crazy Prince Kuzmin, Part II "Actor"*, for example, is a single chapter from an extended work in progress ambitiously titled, "Video Novel on a Thousand Cassettes."

Working very much in the style of "cinema verite," *Game of HO* is built, as Yukhananov explains, on an inductive game which his performance group Theatre-Theatre invented in the mid-1980s. The game, whose rules are made up in the course of play, and which has no winner or loser, is based on the two letter-symbols comprising its name--"H," in Russian "X" (pronounced "kh"), combining the meaning of the crossing out of life, the symbol of the cross and the multiplication sign, and "O," representing the meaningless of the life crossed out.

In its uncut version *Game of HO* runs for three hours, focusing mainly on the interaction between the youth culture of the eighties and the dissident culture of the seventies as seen through an argument between two friends, Mark and Nikita: to leave, or to stay, that is the question. The shortened version shown on the U.S. tour ranges from an angry monolog by one of the heroes about how lousy life is, delivered in the courtyard of an apartment house as the actual, unsuspecting inhabitants go about their business, to an evening with a pair of prostitutes (again the genuine article) in a hotel overlooking Red

Square, and finally, a visit to the studio of a Leningrad artist.

Dreams (1988), a 16 mm film by Evgenii Kondratyev (31), presents a grim panorama of Soviet reality in Central Asia, which by being run at fast speed takes on an almost surreal quality. Riga video artist, Dainis Klava is represented by his short video *Homo Rullis*. Based on the theme of the legend of Salome, it stood out as one of the best examples of experimental video art in the program. Like many of the other works included in the program, *Action in Kabul* (1989), by Riga filmmaker, Andrejs Ejtis, draws on documentary associations, this time of the Afghanistan war. It won first prize at an international festival of amateur films held in Leningrad last year.

The ideological center of the parallel cinema group is the independent film journal *Cine Fanton*. Begun in 1985 by Igor Aleinikov as a serial artist's book, it took its present form two years later as a journal featuring criticism, theory and reporting. The journal has also been a principal source of information about Western directors, including German filmmakers, Wim Wenders and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, both of whom have had a strong influence on the independents. In addition to Aleinikov as editor-in-chief, and an editorial board of ten Moscow and Leningrad critics, the journal also draws on the services of some twenty regular contributors. *Cine Fanton* was initially distributed in a typewritten edition of thirty copies, but beginning this year it will come out in a regular printed edition with a planned circulation of several thousand copies for distribution in the Soviet Union and abroad.¹

As uneven, and at times even primitive, the work of this growing number of independent film and video artists is given the primitive state of their technology, it is nevertheless quite remarkable. As I have observed from my contacts with some of these filmmakers over the past several years, what they lack in finances and facilities they more than make up for by the fertility of their imagination and the energy they give to their work. For anyone who is interested in exploring where Soviet art of all forms, from painting (and many of these independents are artists as well) to film, video and theatre is heading, it seems to this writer that this is the place to start looking. For as Boris Yukhananov has remarked about the already established film and theatre culture, "It's history."

NOTE

¹The catalog which accompanies this exhibition of independent film and video from the Soviet Union includes translations of several articles from *Cine Fantom* as well as an iconography of the artists represented. It is available by sending a check for \$6.50 to The Arts Company, Inc., 43 Linnaean St., Suite 25, Cambridge, MA 02138. The Soviet art journal, *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* has also launched a special pull-out section of their journal, *Rakurs (Point of View)*, dedicated to the "unofficial" art movement. *Rakurs* No. 10 (*Dekorativnoe iskusstvo*, Oct. 1989) was devoted to the parallel cinema.