

Weekend performances return

No one is surprised when 'adult' theatres put on performances for children. The Yakub Kolas National Academic Drama Theatre is currently staging *The Witch and the Little Dinosaur* and *Africa* (a musical fairy-tale)



Yakub Kolas Theatre's *Shishok* revives traditions of weekend performances

By Grigory Semenov

Its *I Will be A Star!* even includes a morning party with a disco. The theatre's interpretation of Alexander Alexandrov's *Shishok*,

is unique; according to the theatre's heads, it should revive the tradition of weekend performances, lost in Vitebsk almost thirty years ago.

All theatrical compa-

nies dream of raising their own loyal audience. One of the former artistic leaders of the Yakub Kolas Theatre, Solomon Kazimirovsky (now over 90 year old and residing in Sweden) took a

serious step in this direction and is now considered to have invented the 'university of theatre art'. This envisaged meetings between actors and spectators, with discussions of roles

and performances. Dmitry Minchenok once attended such classes with his mother and soon developed a passion for the theatre. He later became a playwright, known throughout Belarus and Russia. His *Marlene*, *Marlene* is being staged by the Vitebsk theatre.

"A visit to the theatre shouldn't be an obligation," asserts Svetlana Dashkevich, who heads the Yakub Kolas Theatre's Literary Section. "Sometimes, schoolchildren attending the theatre lessons are bored by what's staged. There's really no point in such visits. On leaving the theatre, children should be keen to discuss the performance with their parents, asking questions," notes Igor Boyarintsev, director-producer of *Shishok* and chief director of city events for the Vitebsk City Executive Committee's Cultural Department. "Alexander Alexandrov's play perfectly suits this goal."

Soviet playwright Alexandrov's city girl Olya visits her granny in the countryside for the holidays. A domovoi (house spirit) called *Shishok*, lives on the roof — like Karlsson but less

naughty. He inspires the growing child to ponder such notions as the nature of good, duty, responsibility, respect for older people and love for our native land.

In 1976, the film *Der evnya Utka* (*Village Utka*) was shot, based on Mr. Alexandrov's script. Thirty years ago, Igor Boyarintsev staged the performance at Minsk's Young Spectators' Theatre. However, according to the director, the current interpretation is far more modern.

"If we compare the story with that of Astrid Lindgren, we see a 'Slavonic' Karlsson," smiles Mr. Boyarintsev. "To achieve this, my actors and I thoroughly studied works by folklore researcher and local historian Nikolay Nikiforovsky, who worked in the Vitebsk Region at the turn of the 20th century. We've included games, fun and jokes: everything needed for a happy childhood. At the same time, we've tried to portray young people's feelings. We'd like them to be less pragmatic, since such practicality breeds fewer Pushkins, Mozarts and Chagalls..."

Tigers are little kinder

Romanian trainer Stefan Plesoianu brings rare animals to Minsk

"I've travelled over most of the world, but haven't seen audiences anywhere that compare with those in Belarus," admits the animal trainer. "I've seen many circus shows where there are only 100-200 spectators. Believe me, it's very sad to perform when you don't feel the emotions created by a full house at the Belarusian State Circus. Where there are few spectators, shows aren't as bright and colourful."

The appearance of Stefan Plesoianu, a star of the Bucharest Globus Circus, always guarantees a full house. He uses dogs, horses, camels, tigers and lions in his shows, which are awaited with great impatience. His white tigers and lions — the rarest animals on the planet — are the biggest draw, of course; only about 36 white lions exist worldwide.

How did you find yourself in the circus?

I'm not from a circus family, being the first among us to choose such a profession. I went to the circus with my parents, as a child, and decided to become an artist. My grandparents had plenty of

animals, including cows and horses, and I always spent a great deal of time with them. However, I never dreamed of becoming an animal trainer.

I left Romania for Germany, searching for a job, and found one with a circus. Circuses always need people, as the work is hard and the salary is low. Anyway, I was glad to have a job and to work with animals. Other workers would come and go but I stayed. I tried to stay close to the animal trainer and, gradually, began to train horses and camels myself. I was always keen on wild animals but was told that it was too early and that I still needed training. It's true that you can't

come an animal trainer overnight.

It's very vital to study the psychology of animals first. Animals are like people, so you need to treat them similarly. For example, someone may appear good natured but might unexpectedly 'bite' you; animals also have good and bad characters. You may become friends with someone as soon as you meet them; at other times, you find it difficult to communicate with them initially, yet become closer over time, finally becoming friends for life. The same happens with animals.

How long have you been working with tigers?

Just 15 years. Prior to this, I was training horses and camels. I can say that this was a time of study, since these animals are less danger-

ous. To work with predatory animals, it's vital to be professionally and morally mature. Working with tigers requires an enhanced level of skill. You need to get to know them for some time. Now I have six tigers and two lions.

Are there any strict rules to obey on entering a cage with animals?

When you enter the cage, your thoughts should be focused. Don't allow yourself to be distracted: physically or mentally. It's dangerous to let your mind wander. When you're in the cage, the surrounding world shouldn't exist for you. You have no problems and no other business, no troubles or pains. All that exists is you and the wild animal. That's all! However, I do have an animal I can kiss.

Do you have any pets at home?

I have a dog and cat.

It's said that you have the rarest animals on the planet.

Yes, you rarely see white lions — even on television. Only three live in circuses: two are mine and one resides in Germany.



Stefan Plesoianu guarantees a full house

Which are gentler: tigers or lions?

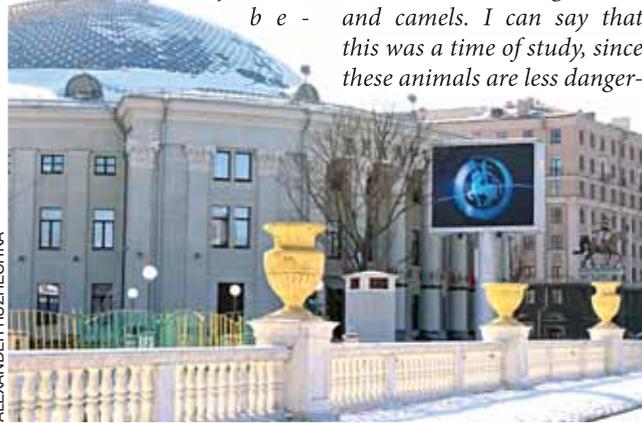
Tigers, since lions always remember that they are king and let you know it. They seem to say: 'Why are you giving me commands?' My show is doubly dangerous, as I combine tigers and lions, who aren't natural friends.

Do your tigers and lions 'make friends'?

No. It's like a schoolroom. One child may behave well while another misbehaves. The teacher must keep a tight rein on his 'pupils'. As soon as

he leaves the classroom, they become very naughty. Our work is difficult and dangerous. If you don't like animals, you shouldn't go into this profession. You might think we do it for money but, really, we love the lifestyle. I'm not just talking about trainers but about anyone working in the circus; the sawdust gets into your blood, like a drug. Do you understand? Once the sawdust of the arena gets into your blood, you become 'addicted' to the circus.

By Viktor Andreev



ALEXANDER RUZHECHKA