

# Winter magical night when breathtaking wonders happen

‘Kalyady Tsars’ ancient custom, preserved only in the village of Semezhevo near Minsk, recognised by UNESCO as cultural treasure of all humankind

By Viktor Korbut

The unusual festival annually takes place on the night of January 13th to 14th, some 150km from Minsk. Young people dress in white clothes, with red belts tied across their chests and high caps adorned with ribbons, carrying torches. They visit every house in the village of Semezhevo, in the Kopyl district, celebrating the last day of Kalyady. It's an ancient Belarusian holiday, celebrating the period from Catholic Christmas (December 25th) to Shchedry Vecher (Generous Evening). ‘Kalyady Tsars’ evening is now on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. It is under UNESCO protection and is also included on the State List of Historical and Cultural Treasures of Belarus.

The 4th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Abu Dhabi from September 28th to October 2nd, 2009, agreed to place the custom on its list. Natalia Khvir, the Chair of the Historical and Cultural Heritage Protection and Restoration Department of the Culture Ministry, notes that the list of Belarusian intangible treasures is ever expanding, with others to be put forward for inclusion on the UNESCO List.

The participants of the ‘Kalyady Tsars’ have always made their own costumes, with Semezhevo being noteworthy as a large centre of traditional weaving. People in



Unique ‘Kalyady Tsars’ ancient custom continues to baffle historians

Semezhevo are able to construct a house or weave cloth with their own hands. At the local folk crafts centre, children work with machine tools while young men in festive costumes wander through the village visiting residents and singing songs.

It remains a mystery as to how the ‘Kalyady Tsars’ custom gained its name and no one knows why it only

exists in the village of Semezhevo. Its mystique and unique nature are good reasons for it being registered on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Alla Stashkevich, from the Culture Institute of Belarus, adds, “I must stress that the custom is performed by young, unmarried men, which is also unusual. Traditionally, elderly people would be the

ones to carry forth customs in Belarus. In contrast, it is young people who keep the traditions of our ancestors alive in Semezhevo.”

Some of the village residents recall taking part many decades ago. In the 1950s, Ivan Matskevich daringly took the major role of the performance, Tsar Maximilian, despite the custom being viewed as a

‘non-progressive religious remnant’. It was largely forbidden. He never imagined that, in the 21st century, young people would still wander freely through the village, celebrating the custom which has become a universally acclaimed cultural treasure.

Everyone in Semezhevo looks forward for the holiday, when the ‘Tsars’ parade through the village with torches. Celebrations begin in the morning, with songs, dancing and jokes in each house. A table is placed in the village's main square, loaded with various dishes and delicacies. I was lucky enough to taste local sausages and cakes and, even, took part in fortune telling, which is an obligatory ritual of the evening.

This year, there is another reason for celebrations: the *Tsari* group from the Semezhevo Culture and Leisure Centre has been awarded a special Presidential Award for its study, restoration and preservation of folk traditions. According to Tatiana Shauro, the Director of the Semezhevo Culture and Leisure Centre, they began to revive the custom back in 1996, collecting documentary materials and asking elderly people to share their songs and stories while conducting scientific investigations. In 1997, the *Kalyady Tsars* film was shot. Soon, UNESCO should release funds to help promote knowledge of the custom, encouraging more tourists to travel to the village to celebrate this wonderful festival. We invite you to join in the fun next year.

## Why do we need to reinterpret classical stories from years ago?

Contemplation over film which angled itself as global cinematic event

By Valery Pimenov

On January 1st, 2011, Minsk's Tsentralny Cinema (which only recently gained 3D equipment) hosted a VIP-premiere of Andrei Konchalovsky's new film: *The Nutcracker 3D*. No doubt, people were wondering why this film had received negative reviews and had been a flop at the US box office. Apart from interested representatives of the cinema industry, Belarus' Honoured Artiste Inna Afanasieva and designer Ivan Aiplatov tried to look into the matter.

The film has evident shortcomings, being stylistically indistinct, with rather stale humour and allusions (for a post-modern joke) and excessive narration (espe-

cially for a fantasy). Clearly, *The Nutcracker 3D* aimed high, targeting the American box-office on the eve of the New Year and Christmas celebrations. Such scheduling is really only suitable for true blockbuster releases, or independent films with no illusions of grandeur. If the 40 year old Soviet émigré had shot a B-type thriller featuring Stallone or a drama about asocial elements starring Whoopi Goldberg, the film's agenda would be clear. However, Mr. Konchalovsky has dared to compete with such giants as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* and American audiences are clearly not ready to accept him in the same way.

Perhaps this is why the film has been trampled down with such furious and, even,



A scene from *The Nutcracker 3D*

sickly satisfaction, with critics searching out its deficiencies. It may be fairer for the film to be judged according to its director's intention; he originally said that *The Nutcracker 3D* would be a mixture of styles, ideas and philosophies, revealing the madness and chaos of the 20th century.

In fact, the film is not as bad as reviewers would have

us believe; it is even rather fascinating, if you are in the right mood. Every year, Hollywood releases many films ‘weaker’ than *The Nutcracker 3D*, with few criticised so harshly. Moreover, an impressive \$90m was spent on its production — no small amount, even by Hollywood standards. No doubt, many colleagues of Mr. Kon-

chalovsky will feel envious at the sum.

Being a sophisticated man, the director probably foresaw how his film would be received, despite his previous Hollywood successes: 1985's *Runaway Train* (scripted by Kurosawa) received two ‘Oscar’ nominations.

It seems Mr. Konchalovsky has chosen fantasy in his desire to explore different styles. No doubt, he has professional ambition and personal passion behind him but has never before shot a fantasy film.

It's true that the actors in Mr. Konchalovsky phantasmagoria perform exclusively decorative functions, seeming to step carefully around the set as if concerned that something may fall on their heads. Hollywood star John Tur-

turro plays the Rat King with fervour but it is hardly a great professional achievement for the man who played Barton Fink and chess player Luzhin. Elle Fanning plays her role sincerely but her charming, empty face is forgotten as soon as the film ends. Yulia Vysotskaya — the director's wife — appears in cameo roles: as a New Year glaze-covered fairy and a nervous lady.

“I loved the costumes, the appearance and visual imagery,” says famous designer Ivan Aiplatov, adding, “However, it seemed disjointed: a mere demonstration of costumes. It was rather like those films which look better in the trailer!”

As for myself, I felt that the film was overly drawn out and that it targeted adults rather than young children. If we compare *The Nutcracker 3D* with famous films such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (each touching on philosophical matters while indulging in fantasy) the comparison is not to Mr. Konchalovsky's advantage.