

ALL THE NEWS...

NEW ORLEANS SCENE OF RUSSIAN WINTER FESTIVAL

by Irene Perloff McCullough

Sunday, January 24 the New Orleans French Quarter was the scene of that city's First Russian Winter Festival. Organized and produced by Natasha O. Ramer, the event took place at O'Flaherty's Irish Channel Pub. That's right. A Russian festival in an Irish bar in the French Quarter! An unlikely concept? Not under Natasha's direction. This gypsy singer/actress/theater director created one of the most colorful and entertaining events I've ever been part of, and all put together in just a few weeks' time. Invited to come down and play some balalaika/guitar duets, David and I had the time of our lives.

Natasha's organizing abilities were evident as we looked over samples of her pre-concert publicity. A Russian artist friend had created some exquisite watercolors--impressions of Russian winter, quickly turned into posters and invitations. Natasha knows the Russian community, the arts community, the media. All bases were covered; the word was out. "I want to give people the flavor of Russia," Natasha said. And so she did, with a magical blend of music, song, theater pieces, dancing, and a Russian bazaar.

Guests were invited to celebrate the New Year in the Russian spirit, encouraged to show up before the two shows to sample the food bazaar and art exhibit. Greeted with bread and salt by a Russian maiden in white sarafan, guests wandered through the old building's entranceway to a charming back courtyard to mingle and revel. Thanks to Ray Kane, America's most sought-after bass domra player, guests were never without trays of warm piroshki. Ray (whose Irish father was the chef at Detroit's Russian Bear Restaurant) made sure the piroshki kept arriving from the kitchen. The vodka kiosk was quite active as well, and tables overflowed with Russian sandwiches and delicacies. Local artists from the Russian community had their paintings and jewelry creations on show, and the Pub's Celtic Store was, for the day, a Russian boutique.

Above the wandering guests, the Komenka Ethnic Folk Ensemble strolled out on the balcony. As they started up a Piatnitsky-style song, I began to wonder whether we were in pre-Mardi Gras New Orleans or Old Russia! Looking up at the singers, I noticed a strange sight, again making me wonder where I was. Up and down the pub's three-story courtyard wall was an array of stuffed teddy-bears, open-armed, hanging from each window. Ray explained that Danny

O'Flaherty himself, the pub's owner, had ordered them up that morning. Danny had fretted that the pub's resident family of pigeons might spoil the afternoon by dropping their white paint splashes on the festivities. So he called the Salvation Army who came around with a van of teddy bears. Whatever the origins of this folk remedy, it worked! Teddy bears on window sills: no pigeons.

But let the show begin! The non-smoking pub was filled with chairs, and all the chairs were filled for each show. In keeping with the Mardi-Gras flavor of the town, our M.C., local actor Mikko, invited Eva Earls and her Kiddie Kats to front stage, small kids in cat costumes prancing and welcoming the audience to strains of balalaika music. Then, out came our new friends from the Komenka Ethnic Folk Ensemble, presenting a lively, polished rendering of Boris Moiseyev's choreography of the dance, Karusel.

Next, us with "Play My Bagpipe". Then (us again) playing "Malchiki", but not alone! Natasha had given our rough demo tape to Barbara Haley, choreographer of the New Orleans Dance Collective, who liked "Malchiki", and decided to choreograph a dance to it. After a short rehearsal, there they were, dancers from this contemporary dance company, leaping and twirling to the tune we'd always known as the "theme song" of the Balalaika Orchestra of Detroit.

Then up to the stage come Natasha and Mikko. We begin "Ya V'Streitl Vas." The tremolo vibrato section starts, and they begin reciting the Pushkin poem, "I Loved You," her to him in Russian, him answering her in English, taking the audience along, a love duet on top of a love duet, ending together with the last note of the song. Then the world of Russian drama; a scene from Gogol's "Inspector General," and another dance by Komenka, this time the beautiful "Khorovodnala." Again, drama, with a scene from the play "Shadow" by E. Shvartz, then more from Barbara Hayley and the New Orleans Dance Collective. Then, at last, was Natasha, herself, who again, this time with song, took hold of her audience, first with the romance, "The Chrysanthemums," then the rousing "Those Were the Days,"

and "Yamschik." Backed up by her band on guitar/bass, violin, and keyboard, Natasha's gypsy fire truly lit up our little tavern!

More, more, the audience yelled as they wandered back to the courtyard for a last piroshki and vodka. Final stage farewells were said by Danny O'Flaherty himself, the pub's owner and resident Celtic musician, who co-produced the show with [on to p. 4]



A member of the Komenka ensemble greets guests with traditional bread and salt.

Natasha, donating the space. O'Flaherty's is a famous spot on the Celtic music map, but Danny is a great promoter of different cultures, and loved showing an audience a bit of Russian culture.

As David and I wound down over the Pub's famous Irish stew (and me over a portly Stout), we reflected on the evening, and started fantasizing about an O'Flaherty's BDAA convention cabaret. Memories of Bibs' cabaret evening at the Vancouver convention came back. New Orleans? Why not? Natasha had said she'd like to help us organize a convention sometime. Then, there's the wonderful Komenka Ethnic Folk Ensemble (more about them in a future newsletter). And Ray Kane! Ray would love to have an ad hoc balalaika group in New Orleans, and we'd love to help! 'Mr. Bass Domra' has travelled all over to play in so many orchestras...it's time things started happening in New Orleans....at least in time for next year's Russian Winter Festival!



↑ *The Kolmenka Ethnic Folk Ensemble performs at the cabaret in New Orleans.*

photos courtesy of Natasha and Sam Ramer



1999 Convention Update



WHITE NIGHTS' TOUR AND 'ROAD DINER' MUSIC CAMP OFFER VARIETY FOR 1999

Listening to the questionnaire responses along with other member input received since the last Newsletter, the BDAA Board at its January meeting completed plans to sponsor a BDAA 'White Nights Study Tour' in St. Petersburg, Russia, June 27th through July 5th, 1999, with an optional pre-tour visit to Sweden and Finland June 22nd - 26th.

At the same time, plans are proceeding very nicely for the 'Road Diner Balalaika and Folk Dance Camp' in Lakewood, New Jersey under the sponsorship of a committee headed by Steve Wolownik, July 7th - 11th, 1999. For further details, see the article on page 9.

The timing and variety of these events offer BDAA members and friends a unique opportunity to join in either of these festive occasions, and those who just can't get enough of Russian folk music, dance and fun may decide to participate in both!

The Board made the decision not to feature the St. Petersburg trip as a BDAA Convention, so there will be no formal Convention in 1999 — but plans are already well underway for a spectacular Millennium Convention in Pittsburgh in 2000.

The St. Petersburg tour will include many of the features we have come to expect at BDAA Conventions, however, including 'workshop' instruction in balalaika, domra, bayan,

folk winds and percussion as well as Russian language, luthiery, costuming and choral singing, and the opportunity to participate in a BDAA orchestra. Concerts, planned sightseeing, a welcome party and our traditional 'zakuski' evening will all be a part of the St. Petersburg experience. The Sweden/Finland 'front-end' option will include its own concert in Stockholm, evening parties with our Swedish balalaika friends and an overnight boat trip to Helsinki before flying on to St. Petersburg.

Tour participants will have plenty of time to participate in sightseeing and outside activities, as the schedule of workshops will not be as comprehensive (or demanding) as that of a BDAA Convention.

The enclosed tour description and registration form will offer more detail on the content and schedule of the 'White Nights' tour as well as the optional extension to Sweden and Finland. A separate mailing sent last week by the organizers describes the activities of the 'Road Diner Balalaika and Folk Dance Camp', which sounds like a terrific opportunity as well.

We encourage you to read through the enclosed material and think about joining us for what promises to be a most enjoyable and educational trip built around our musical interests. The 'White Nights' period is a particularly fine time to vacation in Scandinavia and Northern Russia, and we are fortunate to be able to offer both at air and ground rates which are unbeatable in today's travel world. Check it out!

Questions? Call BDAA President Jan Rybka (770-977-8537) or tour coordinator Max McCullough (703-893-5545), or e-mail maxwellm@aol.com.