

Snow No Match for Moscow Theater Audiences

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February 22, 2010

The  Moscow Times

Didn't all of our fathers taunt us in childhood with claims of how tough they were? How every morning they tramped 2 miles through 2 feet of snowdrifts to school and then had to chop wood on the weekends? Or something like that.

Yes, we kids had it easy. Mom picked us up in the station wagon. Schools closed down at the first reports of possible snow flurries.

I couldn't help but think of all that Sunday evening as I trudged off to the theater.

Moscow was in the grips of a record-breaking snowfall. On Monday morning, ITAR-TASS reported that an all-time record, previously set in 1966, had been broken. Over a 4-day, period 63 centimeters of snow had fallen. And there is much more on the way.

Well, that is all official news and it is impressive. But I didn't need anybody to tell me

anything last evening as I made my way from my apartment in the Zamoskvorechye neighborhood to the OKOLO Theater in the center of Moscow.

I am used to seeing the 6-foot piles of snow in my courtyard, so they didn't surprise me much. What took away my breath was what I found when I came up out of the metro at Pushkin Square and headed over towards Voznesensky Pereulok, just a stone's throw from the Moscow Conservatory.

The first thing that struck me was that there was no one on the streets. Sure it was a Sunday of a long holiday weekend, but there are 10 million people living in Moscow. You couldn't have proven that Sunday night. The city was deserted.

As I turned off of Tverskaya Ulitsa onto Bolshoi Gnezdikovsky Pereulok to head past the GITIS Student Theater, I was struck by the thought that I had landed on the set of a Mad Max movie being filmed in Siberia. The road appeared to be impassable, although a few fresh tracks indicated that someone was getting through from time to time. Still, both sides of the road were lined with abandoned cars and most of them were little more than big, round white lumps of snow.

After trudging through the drifts that had piled up unhindered for days around the State Cinematography Committee, I came out onto Leontyevsky Pereulok, formerly Stanislavsky Street, on which stands the home in which the great director Konstantin Stanislavsky once lived.

Leontyevsky had been plowed relatively recently when I arrived on the scene, but, still, the sight was one to behold. The street was as desolate as any in those ghost towns that still barely stand in the Mojave desert where I was born and grew up. Keep in mind that at this point I was just a half a kilometer from Pushkin Square, which might be considered Moscow's second central point.

Its primary central point, the Kremlin, was just a kilometer and a half away in a southerly direction.

And there was not a soul to be seen or heard.

In fact, it was the silence that may have astonished me more than anything. Moscow is usually a grinding, crunching, humming, buzzing, clanging, whistling, honking, wailing noise factory. That and too many rock 'n' roll concerts when I was a kid are someday going to make me go deaf. But Moscow on Sunday evening was quieter than a whisper.

Listening to nothing but the shuffle and squeak of my rubber-soled shoes padding along in the snow, I passed through a little square between Leontyevsky and Voznesensky Pereulok. This little place with a statue, a gazebo and some benches is usually as popular with elderly residents looking for a rest or a place to think as it is with younger people looking for a bit of cover under which to sneak a kiss or two. On Sunday evening there was nothing there but ghosts. The piles of snow and the snow hanging heavily in the tree branches nearly obliterated the sights of the city around them and gave me a fleeting impression that I — a winter-bound Hansel following an unseen Gretel — was lost in the middle of a forlorn and forgotten forest.

And yet, as I came out of the square, there were people! Three or four of them. All hunkered down against the wind and snow coming down on our heads and blowing in our faces. All of us were heading in one direction. Could it be? Was it really possible that all of us were headed towards the same place?

Sure enough, over the next minute or two a trickle of people seemed to appear out of nowhere. All of us were moving in the direction of the OKOLO Theater.

On occasion I have to defend my opinion that Moscow is the finest theater city in the world. Londoners, New Yorkers, Chicagoans, Romans, Parisians, even people from Austin, TX, sometimes try to tell me that they know their city is the theater center of the world.

After last evening no one will ever convince me that anybody can beat Moscow. Forget Pyotr Fomenko, Kama Ginkas, Konstantin Raikin, The Moscow Art Theater — forget 'em all. Moscow is the greatest theater city because of its audiences.

When I finally pulled off my coat and walked up to the second-floor foyer of the La Stalle stage at the OKOLO Theater, I was dumbfounded. The place was packed. There was barely room to squeeze another body in. No wonder there was no one on the streets. The whole city was here at the theater.

So don't talk to me about who's tough and who's not. Moscow is tough. And the people of Moscow theater are the toughest of the tough.

In the gallery above you can check out a few of the photos I took on my epic trek to the theater.

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