The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Laughter, the Best Medicine With Patch Adams

By Justin Lifflander

November 08, 2010



Hunter “Patch” Adams has been coming to Moscow for the last 26 years. Above, he enters the metro in the 1990s. **Patch Adams**

American doctor and clown Hunter “Patch” Adams is back in Moscow this week with a troupe of 32 clowns from North America and Europe who will spend a week in both Moscow and St. Petersburg, visiting orphanages, cancer wards and retirement homes where they will administer the laughter medicine made famous in the 1998 Hollywood movie “Patch Adams” starring Robin Williams.

The highlight of this year’s visit will be the 13th annual art auction that will take place at the Katerina Hotel on Thursday in aid of Maria’s Children, a group of volunteers who use art therapy and clowning to improve the lives of children.

Adams will take the stage in clown costume as auctioneer, hoping to raise more than $100,000.

Maria's Children was set up in 1993 by Moscow artist Maria Yeliseyeva and friends who opened their homes to children on weekends to paint with them.

Four years later, Maria and friends opened the doors of a basement studio that today welcomes disadvantaged children — those with physical and mental handicaps, orphans, the neglected and abused — where they produce paintings, sculptures and other crafts that are sometimes simple, sometimes complex, but always striking in their passion.

"I have traveled to Russia for 26 years, for two weeks at a time, which accounts for one full year of my life," Adams said shortly after his arrival Sunday. "My love of Maria's Children and the work that they do is truly an inspiration to me and keeps me coming back year after year."

More than 200 children from eight orphanages and boarding schools now come to the studio. Art classes in painting, ceramics, music, sewing, etc. are offered daily, and in the spring and summer, art and adaptation camps teach students life skills, compassion, housecleaning, cooking, clowning, etc.

Children work year-round with teachers and volunteers, painting, sewing and making handicrafts that are selected to be auctioned at this annual event.

One work that will be up for auction is a collaborative, felt wall hanging, titled "Marine Fantasies," where a sailboat glides across a calm sea with birds flying above. Striped fish swim below, suspended by purple, orange, green, blue and rainbow wool strands.

The auction is Maria's Children's main source of funding for the year, supporting the studio as well as a wide range of programs, including assistance to young people transitioning out of orphanages to adult life on their own in mainstream society.

The money also goes to beneficiaries selected by the kids.

At last year's auction, a teenager named Sasha, who has no hands, auctioned off his impressionist paintings of Moscow architecture. He donated the money raised from his work to a boy in Beslan who lost his legs in the school attack and needed an electric wheelchair.

"I first came to Russia because of the culture, literature and music ... and my interest in the 19th-century revolutionary spirit of Herzen, Bakunin and Kropotkin," Adams said. "Russia is a wonderful place to bring new clowns because Russians give back a wonderful response."

The auction will begin with a general exhibit and sale and include dinner and drinks. As in previous years, Adams, as auctioneer, will run the show, throwing out one-liners in a typically remarkable display of energy.

Back in the United States, it is this energy that saw Adams along with a group of friends set up The Gesundheit! Institute, a holistic center based in a six-bedroom house that is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for all kinds of medical problems from birth to death.

Over its 12-year history, 15,000 patients have been seen. Adams is now raising money to build a 40-bed hospital on the site.

A new tradition begun last year will see Adams sell off his clown's underwear as the final lot of

the auction. Adams said he has learned to wear an extra pair now. The winner should check the pockets, where he or she will likely find enormous handkerchiefs and a few spare red noses.

The Maria's Children Annual Charitable Auction is on Thursday at 6:30 p.m. Katerina Hotel, 6 Shlyuzovaya Naberezhnaya, Bldg. 1. Entry is 1,500 rubles, children for free.

Please RSVP to the Maria's Children school for tickets and questions, as space is limited. Tel. 692-4870 or (916) 164-4996. See the organization's web site, www.mariaschildren.ru, for more information on the organization and its programs. If you want to join Patch on one of his clowning tours, see www.patchadams.org.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/11/08/laughter-the-best-medicine-with-patch-adams-a2811