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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week is my last column for The Moscow Times after about six years of watching bad television and writing about Ksenia Sobchak.

Not that I am obsessed with the It Girl we have learned to call an opposition leader, but I did buy her "How to Marry a Millionaire" perfume.

The idea of the column was basically to read a lot of gossip magazines and watch trashy television. Back then no foreign journalists ever seemed to write about show business and television, as if people spent every waking moment thinking about Mikhail Khodorkovsky. It seemed fair to write about who was on the cover of Russia's most popular magazine, 7 Dnei. And why they were all so keen to show off their new bathroom fittings.

Over the years I developed my favorite stars, who could always be relied on when inspiration ran dry: Sobchak, of course, pop diva Alla Pugachyova and her ex-husband pop star Filipp Kirkorov, as well as permed pop singer and leopard-print addict Valery Leontyev, who is the only one not to have changed a bit.

Cartoonist Viktor Bogorad, who specializes in excoriating caricatures of Vladimir Putin, got very good at drawing Sobchak without complaining once.

Russia now has Hello! and Ok! magazines, but in the beginning it was just 7 Dnei, which publishes voluminous interviews with stars about their gigantic new houses and numerous exes. That might seem like showing off, but it is perfect escapism for readers living in crumbling one-bedroom flats with dodgy Soviet plumbing, I should know.

Another favorite was Tainy Zvyozd, or Secrets of the Stars, a slim publication where Putin's dog Connie and Medvedev's fluffy cat Dorofei have written regular columns on Kremlin gossip. Connie is back now and has become rather outspoken lately, even writing about Pussy Riot.

Rarely, I got some critical feedback. The wife of a publisher, Olga Rodionova, who likes to pose for arty nude shots, got her lawyer to send me a warning letter. Not because I described her genital piercings, but because I said she worked for an "obscure" television channel. Roman Abramovich's man asked me to check with him after I wrote about a flurry of engagement rumors. And Elton John's people got back to me to deny he was going to do a gay-pride concert.

On the positive side, I learned recently via Twitter that one of my columns was used in an English exam at Moscow State University's journalism department. It was about Sobchak.

My favorite Soviet singer Pugachyova managed to get secretly divorced, retire, marry a television host three decades her junior and move with him to a chateau in the Moscow region. Not bad for a singer who started out under Brezhnev.

Meanwhile, ex-husband number four, Kirkorov, grew progressively odder. He gave an interview from a psychiatric clinic after attacking a female assistant. Then he had two children in swift succession (less than nine months apart) via American surrogate mothers, laying the way for puzzling conversations in the playground. Background checks, what background checks?

Once the eternal leader of Dom-2 reality show, Sobchak lost contracts after taking part in opposition rallies. She was even blacklisted from Fort Boyard, a game show where people run around with rubber hammers. It has been a surreal transformation and my brain practically exploded when she had lunch with the Financial Times.

Another very weird moment was when pop star Pugachyova joined forces with Mikhail Prokhorov and spoke out against Kremlin eminence grise Vladislav Surkov.

Good for them, but I find their new activism a little bit worthy and dull. I preferred it when stars knew their place in a ridiculous bubble of Miami mansions, private jets and leopard-skin print televisions. At least Leontyev kept the faith.

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