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Feted in U.S., 'My Perestroika' Set to Debut in Russia

By Diana Kondrashin

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Director Robin Hessman is in Moscow for the premiere of her documentary film “My Perestroika.” The Wall Street Journal called her movie “a work of such exhilarating depth and humor.”

"My Perestroika," a documentary by Robin Hessman that has had huge success in the United States, will have its Russian premier this Saturday as part of the ArtDocFest. The film looks at five ordinary Russians living in extraordinary times. Hessman, who is in Moscow for the premiere, spoke to The Moscow Times about the film.

Q: How did the idea itself emerge?

A: I arrived in the Soviet Union in 1991 when I was 18, went to VGIK [film school] and worked as a producer for "Ulitsa Sezam," the Russian "Sesame Street", so my entire early adult life was spent here. I neither had a Soviet childhood nor a Russian family background, but the generation shown in the film was really the generation that I joined when I moved here.

These people had completely normal Soviet childhoods, and they were teenagers struggling with their own identity just when everything started to change: when Gorbachev came, when the foundation started to shake, when everyone started questioning things that were taken for granted. These huge political and historical waves are often examined abstractly from more of a geopolitical point of view. When I came back to USA I was surprised and a little disappointed that despite of the end of the Cold War and despite the rising of the Iron Curtain, there was still such superficial information about how things in the first 10 years in Russia had gone. I was asked questions about Russians that I could have answered in ten different ways. So I started thinking of this film as an idea. By telling the story through ordinary people I was hoping to show the diversity of opinions.

Q: The film does not look like a guide into Russian history for foreigners.

A: I hoped that the film might give the American audience an experience of being here for a while, sitting at the kitchen table having tea with these people. But over the years and years of filming and talking to my Russian friends I realized that I wanted to make a film for them to watch and enjoy as well, so it wasn't just for outsiders. That made the editing more complicated, to make it not too simplified for them and not too complicated for people who don't know anything about the country.

Q: How was the film received in the U.S.?

It was shown in more than 70 cities around the U.S., and we were surprised how enthusiastic people were about it — both the Americans and former Russian immigrants who even took their children to the movie theaters to show how their early years in the Soviet Union had been.

"My Perestroika" is shown in Russian with English subtitles. Saturday 5 p.m., Monday 2 p.m. Artdokfest, Khudozhestvenniy Cinema, 14 Arbatskaya Square, www.artdocfest.ru

Wed. 8 p.m. Ria Novosti Film Club, 4 Zubovskiy Bulvar. Metro. Park Kultury. www.ria.ru

Dec 17. 7 p.m. Sakharov Center. 57 Zemlyanoi Val, building 6. www.sakharov-center.ru

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