

A Film Looks Back at the 'Citizen Poet' Satire Series

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Andrei Vasilyev captured in a frame from Vera Krichevskaya's documentary "Citizen Poet. The Run of a Year." **John Freedman**

I have frequently taken the opportunity to say I consider the "Citizen Poet" program to be one of the key elements feeding the protest movement that arose in Russia over the last year. Having watched Vera Krichevskaya's documentary, "Citizen Poet. The Run of a Year," I am more convinced of that now.

"Citizen Poet" appeared in early 2011, attracting huge numbers of fans on the Dozhd television station, the station's website, and on YouTube. Produced by Andrei Vasilyev, written by Dmitry Bykov and acted by Mikhail Yefremov, it consisted of politically astute and poetically hilarious parodies of Russian literary classics.

This was well before any organized protest movement was in place. There were still another

eight or nine months to go before then—Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and then—President Dmitry Medvedev would announce plans to swap jobs. There was still almost another year before the controversial Duma elections on Dec. 4, 2011 would spark street protests that continued regularly beyond the presidential election on March 5, 2012.

But something about "Citizen Poet" mobilized people, drew them together and gave them a shared experience to discuss. It was funny, it was on target, and it rang of the truth.

The project ended the day of the presidential elections with a video called "On the Death of a Project," a parody of Joseph Stalin rising to gloat that "Citizen Poet" was now dead, but his own legacy was still alive. Dozhd had not been broadcasting the segments since March 2011 when it refused to air an episode parodying the Putin–Medvedev tandem, but the series continued providing a powerful political voice on the internet and, later, in live performances. A book, an audio book and an iTunes application providing access to the segments all appeared in 2012.

Krichevskaya's film, which I saw at a screening hosted at the Memorial Society by Memorial and Moscow's Museum of Cinema, provides an inside, retrospective view of the series. It contains extensive interviews with Vasilyev, Bykov and Yefremov, as well as with their mothers and others around the project. Much of it is filmed during a dress rehearsal of a live performance in Moscow, thus the subtitle "Progon Goda," which can be translated as "dress rehearsal of the year" or as "the run of a year," as I have chosen to render it loosely. We also see the group traveling to live performances in Rostov-on-Don, Sochi and other Russian cities. Footage of the trio greeting readers at a book signing in St. Petersburg has all the earmarks of a genuine celebrity crush.

What caused a witty, literate, politically-oriented series of satirical videos to take on the air of pop star mania?

Krichevskaya, I think, answered that question in a note she sent to be read by host Yury Burtsev at the showing at Memorial. "It is a film about some people who lost all shame and began criticizing the government," she wrote.

"Citizen Poet" helped thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people "lose their shame."

It is fascinating to listen to the mothers. Yefremov's mother Alla Pokrovskaya, a famous actress in her own right, admits that her grandfather perished in the prison camps and that as a result "fear set in for my whole life." Bykov's mother Natalya Bykova similarly states, "I was born in 1937 and fear sits in me." She adds that she is concerned that the men behind "Citizen Poet" are "teasing too dangerous a person."

There we have it, the kernel of what made "Citizen Poet" so wildly popular. It broke the cycle of fear. The fear of Yefremov's and Bykov's mothers was not passed to the sons.

Having said that, none of the trio emerges as a crusader for a political movement. Vasilyev, looking as though he nurses a permanent hangover, talks about how the project kept him "interested." Bykov declares, "it was not a political act, it was more aesthetic." Yefremov deadpans that he is not Putin's type because Putin is a "doer and I'm more the type of person

who says, 'let's not do anything and go drink.'"

Of course each man is being coy with their "what me?" phrases. Bykov admits that he also realizes "Citizen Poet" "pushed back boundaries" in political satire, while Yefremov relates how his father, the great actor Oleg Yefremov, talked about Konstantin Stanislavsky intending to influence Russian history with each of his productions of plays by Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky in the early 20th century.

Vasilyev, Bykov and Yefremov knew perfectly well what they were doing. One need only watch a single one of the 50-plus videos they created to see that their swords were sharpened and the tips were poisoned. But it is also obvious — and important — that they were not missionaries seeking to lead a movement or exhort anyone to action. They were just, well, people who had lost their shame and their fear and decided to share that with others. It made them accessible to the masses in a way that not one opposition leader has matched in Russia in recent memory.

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