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'Pushkin's Grandmother' Brings Russian Poetry Back to Life

By Eradzh Nidoev

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Andrei Abeltsev preparing for his performance on the second season of the Babushka Pushkina poetry contest. **Denis Makarov**

Unless you have traveled forward in time from the beginning of the 20th century, writing rhymes might not seem like the hippest thing to do. Such an old-fashioned skill probably won't even get you a date.

But this preconception is changing thanks to a group of young poets who are making poetry modern and breathtaking again.

On Feb. 14, poetry lovers will be able to tune in to the third season of the show "Babushka Pushkina" (Pushkin's Grandmother) on YouTube.

It's a contest of poets ages 18 to 25 and is organized like a real television competition.

The contest consists of several rounds. In each round, poets write a verse on a given topic.

After each round, three contestants are asked to leave.

One of them can be rescued by a popular vote and another one by the jury. The remaining one is out.

The idea to create "Babushka Pushkina" belongs to Yevgeny Lebedev, director of LeCo Media, which produces the show.

"Our aim is to popularize young poetry," Lebedev told The Moscow Times. "Most readers do not know anything about modern poets. We want to enhance this audience. Fifty percent of the people who watch our show were not interested in poetry before."

The project's name stems from the Russian word for grandmother and a reference to Alexander Pushkin's nanny, Arina Rodionovna. Though officially a nanny, Arina Rodionovna was first of all like a grandmother to the great Russian poet.

"Babushka Pushkina" looks like a real television show with a big budget although it is uploaded only on YouTube. The youngest viewer is about 12, the oldest about 68.

The uploaded episodes get an average 4,000 to 5,000 views, but the most popular round, Rap Battle, had more than 600,000 views.

Curiously, the organizers use only social media for promotion, nothing else.

"We were fed up with the sheer number of foolish comedians on Russian YouTube. We are targeting an audience that are not hipsters and who do not watch "+100500" [a popular online show that often gets complaints for its abundant profanity]. We wanted to do something Russian. Something that is close to us, Russian people," Lebedev said.

"Babushka Pushkina" has provoked an ambiguous reaction.

Some people praise the project, while others claim it exploits national literature and commits "a violent assault on Russian poetry," as one of the project's opponents said.

However, the negative feedback is still not as widespread as the positive.

In the first and second seasons of the show, the poets were on their own and competed with each other. The third season will be a team contest between cities, with the winner being named the cultural capital of the country.

Moscow and St. Petersburg will be represented by teams of eight to 10 ambitious poets, who will work together to defend their native city. The teams will have second string poets and will be able to change their members if someone is not seen as being up to the task.

During the last few decades, poetry stopped being a show business like it was in the 1960s or during the Silver Age of Russian Poetry. According to Lebedev, the lack of competitiveness is one of the reasons why poetry lost popularity and that is a feature that "Babushka Pushkina" tries to bring back to the genre.

"In the first season we did not eliminate our participants and we lost the intensity of

emotions," Lebedev said. "The second season became interactive. People could save a poet they liked by a poll. This is very important."

Organizers are not worried that the majority of the project's spectators like the show because it is well shot and not for the poems. As Lebedev said, poetry is not just verses but also how a poet performs them.

"We are absolutely sure that nowadays it's necessary that poetry should be presented like a show. It's the only possible format. I'm sure that if a poet is talented, he can perform his poetry very well. First of all, it is a form of entertainment. I don't like it when poetry is made to be overtly serious," he said.

During the final round in the second season that was held in December 2012, young poets demonstrated their skills in front of a large audience at a club. At one moment during this evening the audience members started to repeat the verses after the authors.

Organizers will plan an even bigger Russian poet festival, which will start this summer. But the key idea is to transform "Babushka Pushkina" into a Russian social movement.

The idea looks a bit naive, but it is not impossible. The project only started several months ago.

During the first season organizers received about 20 to 30 applications and during the second this number grew to 200. Today they have about 200 applications and close to 20,000 subscribers on the Russian social network VKontakte.

And that means that Russian contemporary poetry, which was close to being nonexistent a couple of years ago, could now be experiencing a popular renaissance.

All episodes of the show can be seen at www.fresh-i.ru.

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