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Legendary Couturier Celebrates a Milestone

By Lena Smirnova

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The guru of Soviet and Russian style Vyacheslav Zaitsev turned 75-years-old Saturday, marking the big anniversary with singing performances by celebrity guests and a lavish runway show of his best works. In his characteristic fashion, the couturier first walked onto the stage his arms raised in celebration and almost dancing in his step like he did decades ago at the first international fashion shows of Soviet-made clothes.

Before he danced on the runways at the fashion shows abroad, Slava Zaitsev was just a regular boy from a worker's family in Ivanovo. He came to Moscow in the 1950s and first had to work as a nanny, sketching his designs on the floor of the room where he slept, under the table between the two beds.

From these humble beginnings, Zaitsev went on to design the stage costumes for the most prominent Russian celebrities, parade outfits for the Soviet sport delegation in the 1980s Olympic Games and gain widespread recognition abroad.

Dubbed the "Red Dior" by the French press in the 1960s, the always smiling couturier broke the stereotype that Soviet fashion could only be glum and practical.

"You are the Gagarin of the national fashion industry!" singer Iosif Kobzon said to Zaitsev from the stage Saturday. "You were the first to show in that long ago Soviet time that Soviet people can be just as beautiful, just as stylish as the Western ones."

Kobzon then launched into his song "Platye," which sarcastically begins with the words "nothing to wear," and finished with the performance of Frank Sinatra's "My Way" in Russian.

Other performers that came to congratulate the couturier include singer Nadezhda Babkina with her colorful Russian folk ensemble, Georgian singer Tamara Gverdtsiteli and Soviet-era actor Vladimir Zeldin.

The birthday show at Luzhniki concert hall included runway walkthroughs of Zaitsev's most memorable creations, including the collection he designed using iconic scarfs from Pavlovsky Posad, Alexander Pushkin's era-inspired coats, dramatic winter garments lined with fur and rich evening gowns in white and black.

Some artists even performed in Zaitsev's outfits, like eccentric crooner Filipp Kirkorov who strolled onto the stage in a floor-length white cape that the couturier made for him in 1985.

"Look at what I dug up!" Kirkorov said with glee, then going into a story of how he had to rummage through his extensive costume wardrobe before he found this particular item. Following this speech Kirkorov took off the cape and presented it to Zaitsev as a birthday present — to be included in the designer's museum exhibit — and began singing a 1980s song in an equally elaborate white suit with black embroidered flowers.

In addition to the cape, Zaitsev received a Versace-made pendant from actress Natalia Seleznyova, a large ring from fashion expert Alexander Vasiliev and a scarf from Viktor Zubritsky, head artist at the Pavloposad Scarf Manufacture. As an eternally viable fashion statement, the scarf had Zaitsev's portrait embroidered in the center, framed in a colorful tapestry of flowers.

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