The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The "Russian" Element of American Culture

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November 10, 2013



In this video actor Mila Kunis shows off her command of Russian that she usually uses only with her parents.

As I flew across the Atlantic yesterday on my way back to Moscow from the United States I had the unexpected pleasure of watching one of my favorite movies of recent years — Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris."

And as I often do when I watch Allen's movies I got to thinking about all the Russian connections he has. His paternal grandparents were Jewish emigrants from the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. Numerous of his films play deep games with Russian culture.

His farcical "Love and Death" (1975) was a wild parody of Russian literature with incredibly funny mash-ups of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hollywood impressions of Pasternak and a lot more.

Allen wears his Chekhov influences on both sleeves in many of his serious dramatic works, but nowhere is that so evident as in "September," a brilliant film from 1987 that I remember getting very unfair short shrift from the critics. Chekhov crops up in bits and pieces in "Interiors" and "Hannah and her Sisters," both of which play off of "Three Sisters."

The extended conclusion to "Match Point," a love story-turned-murder tale from 2005, is lifted in large chunks, and with great wit, from Dostoevsky's novel "Crime and Punishment." It was a treat to watch that film for the first time in a Moscow cinema and hear the reactions of an astute Russian audience that was picking up on every single crib and echo.

I'll never forget how several of my teachers of Russian in the late 1970s and early 1980s, immigrants from the Soviet Union, worshipped Woody Allen. They tended to be highly skeptical of American culture and art, believing most of it to be unworthy of note — except for the films of Allen, the genius who, in their opinion, was really a Russian — and Jewish, of course — director at heart.

And that is what finally brings me to my topic today — the Russian contribution to American culture. Pull artists of Russian and Russian-Jewish descent out of the equation and the light of American music, literature and film suddenly grows significantly dimmer.

Now, the "Russian" connection for many of these individuals is primarily geographical, of course. Their parents or grandparents were usually Jewish and they usually came from the Pale of Settlement, those lands in the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to live and work — Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine and Moldova. But the intertwining of Russian and Jewish cultural codes, as is clear in the work of Woody Allen, is significant.

Just imagine the American songbook without Irving Berlin (who was born in the Russian Empire and emigrated to the United States with his family at the age of four), the Gershwin brothers and Bob Dylan. Forget it, it can't be done.

I have an easier time imagining American music without hair rocker Jon Bon Jovi and booty shaker Nicole Scherzinger, but, hey, as the Russians say, you can't throw words out of a song, and both are descendants of immigrants from Russia.

Everybody these days knows that actors Milla Jovovich and Mila Kunis were born in Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union. What may be less common knowledge is that Yul Brynner was born Yuly Borisovich Briner in Vladivostok and that Kirk Douglas was born in New York with the name Issur Danielovich. His father had been a horse trader in what we now know as Belarus.

In fact, Hollywood's Russian connections are astonishingly deep.

There are the obvious classical connections like actor Mikhail Chekhov and composer Dmitri Tiomkin. Chekhov, the famous writer's nephew, began his career in the Moscow Art Theater and ended it as an Oscar-nominated acting guru in the 1940s and 1950s. Tiomkin, a Ukrainian Jew, was one of the great golden-era Hollywood composers, working with Frank Capra, King Vidor, Alfred Hitchcock and others. He won four Academy awards and was nominated for at least 22 more.

But the deeper you dig, the longer the list of Russia-connected Hollywood stars grows. Here is a bare inventory of some names where the names alone speak for themselves: Leonardo DiCaprio, Natalie Wood (born Natalya Nikolayevna Zakharenko), Danny Kaye (born David Daniel Kaminsky), Whoopi Goldberg, Winona Ryder, Harrison Ford, Natalie Portman, Sylvester Stallone, Steven Spielberg, Gwyneth Paltrow, David Duchovny, Pamela Anderson, Robert Downey, Jr., Peter Falk, Joaquin and River Phoenix, Maggie and Jake Gyllenhaal, Walter Matthau and Sean Penn.

Harlow Robinson wrote a book called "Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood's Russians" that examines both the work of Russians in American cinema as well as American cinema's often distorted impressions and portrayals of Russians and Russian culture.

The field of American letters was demonstrably enriched by many Russian writers including Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky and other prominent emigres.

Perhaps less known is that one of the great science fiction writers of our time Isaac Asimov was born in the Russian village of Petrovichi near Smolensk shortly after the Russian revolution. His family emigrated to the United States three years later and he never spoke Russian — his native languages were Yiddish and English.

And, just to prove that there is one rotten apple in every barrel, we have the case of Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum. Better known as Ayn Rand, she was born in St. Petersburg and emigrated to the United States at age 20 in 1925. Her so-called objectivist philosophical novels, "The Fountainhead," "Atlas Shrugged" and others, have had curious sway over some conservative American politicians and economists for many decades.

For the record, I would list Rand's "The Fountainhead" as the silliest, single most aggravating piece of prose I have read in a lifetime of reading.

Woody Allen, Bob Dylan and Whoopi Goldberg (whose grandmother grew up in Odessa) she was not.

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