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Moscow Cat Circus a Family Affair

By Jessica Kirk

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Moscow's Cat Circus seems ready-made for a world in which people spend hours watching and sharing cat videos. Out of the Russian capital's many tourist sights, it is the only one to prompt reviewers on Trip Advisor to declare: "I imagine it is what an acid trip feels like."

The show has been pulling in the crowds for 25 years, and the show is everything you might imagine the world's only Cat Circus would be. Aided by a troupe of clowns and some slapstick comedy, highly-trained felines somersault, walk on tightropes and balance on balls for adoring crowds — mostly made up of the under-five set.

Dmitri Kuklachev, the theater's artistic director, passionately defends his strange family business, "It's our family tradition," he said. "I'm continuing a dynasty."
Kuklachev fronts the show with his sister, coaxing the cats through a classic circus routine in which he stars as a clown like his father before him. The slapstick element is important, he stresses — the cat circus is not just a novelty, but a performance.

"Coming from this background, I know to make a good show," Kuklachev said. "We don't

want this to just be a show for kids; we want it to be for the whole family. It can't be just the cats on stage either — that would become boring."

Back in the 1980s, Kuklachev's father Yury, a world-renowned clown in the Moscow State Circus, saw a stray cat performing tricks as a way of begging for food as he walked home from work. He took the cat home and began performing with her. The business was born. It wasn't easy for Kuklachev to fill his father's shoes— especially due to an unfortunate cat allergy, which he controls with special breathing exercises — but the pride in his work is clear.

According to Kuklachev, training the animals is not as difficult as some may believe. As the cats scuttle across the stage, keen observers may begin to notice that most of the tricks seem centered around typical movements — jumping into boxes, eating, or sitting and staring with disdain at their human underlings.

"We notice if a cat enjoys doing something in particular, and we can build things around that," Kuklachev said. "Most of the cats are trained just to do one single action, one single movement — to jump into a box or to run across the stage. Once they know that movement, that's it. We don't have to rehearse."

The crowds and the family atmosphere do not mean that the theater is immune to controversy, however. Many animal rights activists have campaigned against the theater.

"I don't mind," Kuklachev said, giving a well-rehearsed answer. "Anyone who comes here can see that we treat the animals well. They are obviously well fed; they are not scared on stage. We have a big building here in the center of Moscow where anyone can see us. We have nothing to hide.

"Five years ago, we did have a wave of bloggers writing negative things about the theater. Since that time, there's been nothing, and hopefully there will be nothing like that again."

"The most important thing is that the animal is comfortable on stage. We prepare them for that. After all, if they are not comfortable, then they won't perform well. "
"We've toured so many countries with this show and it's always been popular. Everybody loves cats!"

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