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Teeter's TV Take-out: The Circus, Afonya and More Moscow TV and Film

By Mark H. Teeter

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It's finally fall, but the darkening days and chillier evenings can be offset by the bright screen and warm colors of Moscow television. This week's best from the box include good looks at a Stalin-era circus, Peter the Great eyeing liberal England, the plumber who doomed the Soviet Union and a pair of great artists whom Russians will not soon forget.

Viewers looking for real spice in their melodrama will skip the new prime-time serials debuting Monday evening and tune in the Mir channel after midnight: there they'll find Soviet superstar Lyubov Orlova ("the Russian Marlene Dietrich") directed by husband Grigory Aleksandrov in the exotic Stalin-era hit "**The Circus**" (1936). Orlova shines as an American big-top star on tour in Moscow, where a conniving mustachioed German circus impresario tries to blackmail her for giving birth to a black child — and this is a musical comedy! Will the Teutonic Snidely Whiplash shame the helpless star into surrender, or will racism-resistant

Soviet circus fans save both heroine and child, then boldly parade through the capital singing Isaak Dunayevsky's classic "Song of the Motherland"? You get one guess — but tune in regardless for a spectacle that both entertains and speaks volumes about its time, place and audience.

The Circus Цирк. Mir, Tuesday at 12:40 a.m.

Tuesday evening brings good news for those concerned about the fate of popular history in Russia: Felix Razumovsky returns to Kultura with a new series in his award-winning chronicle of the Russian experience, "**Who Are We?**" This time around we get the story of a movement whose time has never come. "**The Adventures of Liberalism in Russia**" (Part 1) takes viewers back to the Magna Carta and the Novgorod republic, then on to Mikhail Romanov, the Enlightenment and the young Peter the Great visiting the English parliament in 1698. What could go wrong when he got home? Tune in and see why many think the engaging Razumovsky series should be required viewing in Russian schools.

Who Are We? The Adventures of Liberalism in Russia (Part 1) Кто мы? Приключения либерализма в России (Фильм 1-й). Kultura, Tuesday at 10 p.m.

The question "Why didn't the Soviet Union work?" doesn't take a panel of political scientists to answer. It didn't work for the same reasons a provincial plumber named Afanasy (Afonya) didn't work — and "**Afonya**" (1975) shows you why. Afonya Borshchov is a watershed hero in Soviet film, a work-shirking, bribe-taking, street-fighting, skirt-chasing, self-centered drunk who would rather leave an entire apartment building without water than work unpaid overtime. Great role model, eh? Yet audiences loved him! Tune in Wednesday night and see how director Georgy Danelia used charismatic star Leonid Kuravlyov and a stellar supporting cast to turn Aleksandr Borodyansky's offbeat script into the Soviet box office champ of 1975 — with the most lovable un-Soviet hero you'll ever see.

Afonya Афоня. Dom Kino, Wednesday at 10:25 a.m.

Fazil Iskander was both the greatest Russian writer from Abkhazia and one of the last century's greatest Russian writers from anywhere. Moscow television has been curiously slow to react to his death on July 31. Over a month has passed, and not one of the eight movies based on his prose has been shown on the central state channels. Kultura, at least, is re-airing a 1991 Iskander event on Thursday evening as "**Remembering Fazil Iskander: A Gathering in the Ostankino Concert Studio**." Here's hoping that this tape reminds viewers of what an amusing and relentlessly decent fellow this literary folk artist was, thus doing at least a bit of TV justice to the creator of "Sandro of Chegem," "The Goatibex Constellation," "Rabbits and Boa Constrictors" and much more that made life in the Soviet Union much more bearable.

Remembering Fazil Iskander: A Gathering in the Ostankino Concert Studio. Фазиль Искандер. Встреча в Концертной студии "Останкино" Kultura,Thursday at 8:05 p.m.

As a famous and controversial non-conformist painter, stage designer sculptor and publisher — not to mention a close friend of the iconic Vladimir Vysotsky — the endlessly creative

Mikhail Shemyakin could well be the single most interesting Russian dinner guest you'll never get over to your place. So take advantage of this Kultura "**Life Line**" installment on Friday and hear what a studio audience who did get to spend an hour with him last May found out from this Renaissance Man of the Soviet, post-Soviet and international arts world. With exhibitions "arrested" by Soviet authorities, imprisonment in a psychiatric hospital, expulsion from the Soviet Union and eventually the State Prize of the Russian Federation, Shemyakin's life has been called "a confrontation between creator and system, and Shemyakin won." Tune in and hear him tell you how.

Life Line: Mikhail Shemyakin. Линия жизни, Михаил Шемякин. Kultura, Friday at 10:25

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