The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In Memory of Francesca Mereu

Remembering with love and sorrow one of our own.

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Francesca Mereu **Roger Stephenson Photography**

We are deeply saddened to write that Francesca Mereu, an author, playwright, tireless advocate of blues music and former Moscow Times reporter who split her time until recently between Moscow and Alabama, died June 24 in Tijuana, Mexico. Since 2011, Francesca published three books in her native Italian—one on Putin, one on Russia's transition to capitalism and one on race in America; she wrote several plays as well, two of them published in 2016 (also in Italian) under the title "Deep South." After Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, Francesca regularly wrote and gave interviews about the war for Italian media. At The Moscow Times, where she was a staff writer in 2003-2009, she reported on domestic politics and the Russian security services. Here, some of her former colleagues from the paper remember Francesca's extraordinary personality and professional qualities.

Lynn Berry, MT Editor in Chief / Managing Editor / Night Editor, 1998-2006

Francesca had a warm smile and a kind heart, as many people have noted since her passing.

We should all be as fortunate to be remembered that way. She also had a passion for calling out Vladimir Putin, from the beginning, as he set out to dismantle Russia's nascent democratic institutions and crush any opposition to his rule. I remember her quiet indignation. And how hard she worked to write the stories she cared about so much. The Moscow Times newsroom in those years of Putin's rise was flush with young smart reporters whose ability to work in two languages always impressed me. For Francesca, neither of those two languages was her native one. She was special in many ways and will be sorely missed.

Valeria Korchagina, MT Staff Writer, 1996-2006

It's hard to have to squeeze one's memories of a truly outstanding human and professional into 200 words. But if I have to, at their center would be Francesca's smile and passion for life.

Francesca joined The Moscow Times in the early 2000s. As diverse as the newsroom was at the time, Francesca always stood out. She was the only one who never allowed herself to be grumpy, moody or in any other way (visibly) unhappy. It's a rare quality. We're all humans after all. Coming across a ray of light like her was a blessing and, coupled with her professionalism and drive, pure luck for any colleague fortunate enough to be around. We were the beneficiaries of her compassion and sense of solidarity.

I always envied her inexhaustible interest in literally everything—be it politics, Russian cultural life, yoga, in later years the blues scene in Alabama and so much more.

Years went by, locations changed, but Francesca seemed unstoppable, diving into more and more new things to explore and then share, in books, plays, articles and posts...

There should be more people like you in the world, Francesca, not fewer. You will be missed by many, myself included.

Peter Leonard, MT Deputy Business Editor / World Page Editor, 2003-2007

It has been a long time since I last saw Francesca in the flesh. As I summon a visual memory, what always materializes in my mind's eye is a smiling face. It is what everybody recalls about her.

That and the expansive Italian gestures. I cannot begin to imagine what Alabama made of it.

Moscow is nobody's idea of a jolly city, which is what made Francesca's good cheer feel so refreshingly out of place.

And yet, Russia was very much Francesca's place. What possesses an Italian to fall in love with Russia in the 1990s—we all did it, no judgement here, but it is an eccentric thing to do—and then, to top that off, become a Russian citizen?

The thing is that some of us do journalism. Others live it.

It is this humanity that has been the common thread running through Francesca's work. The day-to-day at The Moscow Times was Duma this and Putin that, but Francesca was never more content than when she wrote about and explored the dignity and suffering of ordinary

human beings.

Simon Saradzhyan, MT Deputy Editor / News Editor / Staff Writer, 1998-2008

Always smiling, Francesca was truly a ray of sunlight in our newsroom. We all basked in that light, thanks to her, even if the weather (and news) outside were often gloomy.

On her first day of work she impressed me with her cheerful, upbeat personality and that impression was then supplemented by the realization that she is also a very talented journalist and writer.

Her ability to charm the top brass of the Communist Party (as well as their parliamentary rivals) into disclosing all sorts of astounding news was unmatched.

While working with her colleagues to break news and write thoughtful analysis, she also never forgot to remind us of the importance of enjoying life.

It is grim news for all of us that Francesca is no longer with us, but I hope she is now in a better place.

You will always be alive in our memories, dear Francesca.

Oksana Yablokova, MT Staff Writer, 1999-2006

For my dear friend Francesca Mereu:

Most people are too unnecessarily complex and it is usually impossible to describe them with one word. It is possible to describe Francesca with one word, though: *nice*. Francesca, my dear friend of almost 19 years, was a universally nice person, liked by everyone who knew her. In fact, I often wondered where she got the energy to be nice, positive and friendly always, with everyone. She was born that way, so it was natural. While she and her husband, Sergey, still lived in Moscow, the only thing that could upset her sometimes was the nasty climate, which she could not stand, born under the sun of beautiful Sardinia.

I remember we once traveled to Sardinia together and Francesca would make jokes about stereotypical Sardinians—reserved, untalkative and unsmiling people. She herself was not a "typical" one. Anyone who ever met her would remember, first and foremost, her beautiful smile.

We saw each other only three times over the past 10 years but Francesca somehow always stayed in touch. She wrote to me shortly after Feb. 24 to check on us and to make sure I have her current phone number and would use it if I need any help.

I will always miss you and will never forget you, my dear friend.

Natasha Yefimova-Trilling, MT News Editor / Staff Writer, 1999-2003

When I think of Francesca, I think of the saying that we may forget what people said or did, but we won't forget how they made us feel. Because the way Francesca made people feel was so unfailingly positive—joyous or optimistic or jazzed. She radiated warmth, enthusiasm,

curiosity, openness, and they were infectious. (Who wouldn't want to go to Sardinia after hearing her describe it with such relish?) I dreamed of visiting Francesca in the Deep South, where I've never been. She was the person I wanted most for a guide because I wanted to see through her eyes; I knew she would home in on the most genuine, most telling, most vital parts of a place, its beating hearts. It's been close to 20 years since we've seen each other, yet my mind has often conjured up Francesca's smiling face. It inevitably made me smile back, like magic from a distant past. Now the joy's alloyed with sorrow. And the earth is poorer for losing you, lovely Francesca.

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