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How the Muppets Came to Moscow

Natasha Lance Rogoff's book has been shortlisted for the Pushkin House Book Prize.

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Author Natasha Lance Rogoff

In 1993 Natasha Lance, a television producer with excellent Russian who had made documentaries in the Soviet Union and the newly formed Russian Federation, was hired to be the executive producer of a Russian Sesame Street. This was not as crazy as it perhaps sounds today: the Children's Television Workshop behind Sesame Street were working with television producers in what would eventually be 140 countries to adapt and create their own versions of this ground-breaking and popular children's television show.

The Russian version — *Ulitsa Sezam* — had so many setbacks with funding, personnel, partners, political and economic upheavals, not to mention cross-cultural misunderstandings big enough to sink any joint endeavor that it often seemed unlikely to get off the ground. But it did. It premiered in 1996 and was aired in Russia and most of the other post-Soviet states until 2010. By then Putinism had been consolidated enough at television stations to remove this American show from the airwaves.

The story of bringing the Muppets to Moscow is, at heart, the story of the 1990s in Russia. The Moscow Times spoke with Natasha Lance Rogoff about her experiences and their importance for not only understanding Russia, but for learning how to cross cultural divides anywhere.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: It's striking how much in the book seems prophetic, or perhaps reveals how some of the issues of today were already issues then — your Russian colleagues' sense of the superiority of Russian culture, the misunderstandings about the West, the political violence and unrest. Did you highlight that intentionally when you were writing?

A: Russia had a very different historical trajectory to the United States or the Western world... so the expectation that we had at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union was rather naïve — the idea that we could jumpstart a free market and capitalism and democracy overnight. It was wishful thinking. There's a certain amount of time it's going to take for a society like the Soviet Union that's had 70 years of communism — and feudalism and autocracy before that — to transition to a more open society.

I came to realize that as I was working with my 400+ colleagues of artists from Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia. And even though I had already spent a decade in what was then the Soviet Union, in the beginning I'd also drunk a bit of the Kool-Aid. We were all very excited at the prospect of helping the country and its people explore more open ideals.

But in the process, I saw these themes of Russian nationalism, Russian pride, contempt for Sesame Street's Western values, the idea that Russian culture is superior to the West, that its people are more spiritual, that Russia would save the world. And I came to understand how these themes touched on all aspects of the show's creation, from the script-writing to the set design, to the creation of The Muppets themselves.

It was a learning process. How are we going to make this show so that it will create some light and opening for children to develop a different way of seeing the world? Where is that place of compromise, and how do we get there?

That was the process. And it was way more fascinating than making a documentary, where as a Westerner, I would come in and film the story as an outsider. In this case, we were making a TV show with a very diverse team, and it had to reflect their culture and their society, while also introducing what would become new ideas in New Russia.

Q: Was it worth it? Did it make a difference?

A: Yes, definitely. Since the war broke out, so many of my former colleagues had to leave. It's never left me that over a million young people in their twenties and thirties left Russia. And that same age cohort of people are also in Ukraine, where the show aired, fighting for their independence. And those people are the *Ulitsa Sezam* generation.

I definitely believe that the show had an enormous impact on the society. Whenever I mention to people, "Hey, by any chance did you ever hear of *Ulitsa Sezam*?" People talk about their favorite segments and how they grew up on the show. And these are people from Armenia, Georgia, Moscow, and Ukraine.

Q: Why is it an important story to tell and for people to read?

A: Often in the West we make the mistake of expecting nations to mirror our own. We have a similar problem as our own country and many countries in the West become increasingly divided. Somehow this story of how art and television is a bridge to cross cultures offers insights into getting along is very important for us today. Not only in terms of figuring out a way out of this horrific war in Ukraine, but also in our own countries where we are increasingly divided. People tell me it reads like a thriller, but in the end, it's a story of hope.

Excerpted from Chapter 19: Sad Songs from the Mouths of Babes

After two years of endless drama and uncertainty, it's time to listen to the children singing. Casting the child roles for our TV show is the part I have been looking forward to the most. It's November 1995, and the treacherous weather has started making it difficult to navigate the city's streets, partially immobilized by snow and ice. I arrive late at Gorky Film Studios. My driver drops me off at the gated entrance to Moscow's most prestigious moviemaking site. Like many prerevolutionary structures in Moscow, the studio looks rundown. I stop at the security kiosk and a guard looks at my passport, then waves me inside the compound. Hiking up my collar to brace against the cold, I make my way across an expansive yard to the designated building, cautiously stepping over tiny mounds of frozen spit that shine like diamonds on the icy path—the only evidence of human beings in this ghostly place. With the evaporation of state film funding, only a small part of the studio remains open, allowing short-term space rental. Thanks to Volodya's relationship with the studio head, we're granted permission We will hold auditions here over the next three days. I'm counting on Volodya's name and fame to attract children from across Russia. Still, casting is always a gamble, and perhaps no one will show up in this biting cold.

I needn't have worried. I enter the room and find more than 160 children and their parents waiting—far more than we'd anticipated. Many of them came from nearby cities while others traveled hundreds of miles from far-off villages. In addition to her studio directing duties, Tamara is also coordinating the auditions and hastily setting up additional chairs. I take off my coat and help her. I love that Tamara pays no attention to hierarchy. She once told me, "I don't relate to the concept of 'liking' or 'disliking' work—work is work. Whether you like it or not, you should be open to doing anything!" I see Volodya warmly welcoming parents and children as they remove their heavy wool coats, hats, and scarves. Many children wear miniature fur hats with earflaps and look adorable. Volodya directs the parents and children to sit in the waiting room. Each child takes a seat in one of the straight-backed wooden chairs lined up in a row against the wall, with their mothers nervously hovering nearby. Casting calls appear to be the dominion of mothers, not fathers.

As I survey the waiting room, I'm struck by how different the scene is from the frenetic casting sessions I once visited in New York. It's far quieter; the parents speak in whispers, and there's little interaction among the adults or children. However, from their worried expressions I take it that the stage mothers exhibit the same clawing anxiety as their American counterparts. The girls and boys auditioning are between the ages of four and eleven. For the most part, the children are not professional actors, but that's no problem—Sesame Street favors a more natural acting style. Some mothers have dressed their children in their Sunday best. The stakes, I know, are high; a role comes with a salary that can

support a family of four for nearly a year, and whoever is chosen will have their lives changed forever. The plan is to cast the role of Katya, the daughter in Ulitsa Sezam's nuclear family, and fifteen other children representing a diversity of ethnicities, who will appear as extras in the show and remain in Moscow for four months of filming.

Volodya has told me that the casting of child actors is more complicated than casting adults. For this reason, he's choosing to audition the children first. I stand off to the side in the waiting room, trying to be unobtrusive. Volodya asks me not to let on that I am an American. "Most children and their parents have probably never met a foreigner before. They might feel intimidated." I don't mind being undercover—it's not the first time I've had to make myself invisible. And it's a joy to witness one of Russia's most incredible children's directors work his casting magic.

Volodya explains that he will invite each child to come into a room away from the other children and sing a song of their choosing, taking turns, one at a time. The director's assistant calls a five-year-old boy with red hair and freckles first. His mother puts her hand on her son's back and pushes him toward the adjoining room while she stays behind. The assistant closes the door.

There's a single chair in the center of the room, with two chairs opposite. A third is against the back wall for me.

Inside the room, the red-headed boy stands rigidly, uncomfortable in brown, starched pants cut too high above his ankles, making him look even younger than he is. This may be intentional—I've heard that children's television directors often want to hire older children who look younger. Volodya chats easily with the boy, telling jokes that make him laugh and put him at ease. Then, without smiling, the boy announces that he will be singing a song from the film, Belorusski Vokzal (Belorussia's Train Station), and he prefers to stand. His voice unnaturally drops several octaves to a booming alto, and he stoically sings the lyrics as though he's a cadet in an army band:

Birds don't sing here
Trees don't grow here
It's only the front
The planet is burning
Our motherland is covered in smoke

Volodya pats the boy on the head when he finishes, telling him to wait with the children in the other room. Volodya and Tamara jot down notes. I feel blindsided, thinking how odd it is for a child to sing a song about World War II at tryouts for a comedy show.

Next in line is a four-year-old blonde girl with big blue eyes. Her doting mother insists on staying with her for the audition, and Volodya agrees. The child fidgets while her mother brushes away loose strands of hair from her face. The girl pulls on the lace hem touching her legs, making a face in response to the itchy fabric. Volodya asks her to begin. The little girl stands straight and still. She sings several verses from "Katyusha" (Little Kate), a melancholy Russian folk song about a young woman who bids her lover farewell as he marches off to the front.

The apple and pear trees were blooming
The mist floated over the river
Katyusha was walking out to the shore
To the tall, steep shore

I watch the girl's mother, who is silently mouthing the words.

Oh, you, song, the song of the maiden
You fly along behind the cloudless sun
And, to the soldier on the far border,
send regards from Katyusha . . .

Another sad melody. I'd expected this morning to hear boisterous, upbeat Russian equivalents of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" or "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider." Instead, incredibly, nearly every child we listen to launches into a sad melody with tragic lyrics—little soprano voices singing of loss, death, and war. As the first session ends, Volodya thanks the group for auditioning, then dismisses them. Some children look like they're about to cry, while others look ecstatic that the session is over. Tamara apologizes to Volodya and me, explaining that she must leave to attend to another Ulitsa Sezam crisis.

Volodya and I trudge through the bitter cold to a nearby canteen for lunch. The musty-smelling cafeteria with only a few metal tables does not look promising. I take a bowl of soup without really being sure what it is. After the intense morning, Volodya is hungry. He fills up his plate with pickled cabbage, potatoes, and something gray that looks vaguely like beef.

When we sit down, I ask Volodya about the song selections. "They're not imitating each other, because each child is performing in complete isolation. So, why aren't they singing, you know, happy children's songs like 'Riding in My Car?'" I sing a few lines from the famous Woody Guthrie song, spitting out the "brrm brm" sound of the car off-key. Volodya is amused but seems surprised by my confusion. "These are the songs that bring children comfort. Their grandmothers sing these songs to them," he explains, taking a knife to his beef and continuing. "For us, these melancholy songs are about our past and the people we have lost. Grandparents want to share their melancholy feelings with the people they love." When I don't look convinced, he continues, "Natasha, you shouldn't think of these ballads as sad. They are lyrical, poetic. Russian children listen to poetry and music from a very early age, and they expect lyricism and sadness in music, as in their lives."

We sit in silence for nearly a minute as I pretend to eat my soup while considering to what degree I sound like an Ugly American. One of our producers had recently told me, "Happy is not a Russian concept." By contrast, Americans smile more than Russians and stereotypically pretend to be happy, often at the expense of their well-being. "Are there any other more upbeat traditional Russian children's songs that children can sing?" I ask.

Volodya grins mischievously. "Of course, there are! We have revolutionary marching songs that children sing at their Communist Party summer camps." Then, right there in the lunchroom, he breaks out into a booming, over-the-top rendition of a patriotic ballad.

Lenin is always alive,
He is always with you,

In all the bad times and,
In all the good times,
Lenin is in every spring,
In every happy day,
Lenin is inside you and me.

I laugh. I suspect he's poking fun at me, but I can't be sure.

As we walk back to Gorky Studios, Volodya tells me that he's actually been developing a new type of segment—short lyrical moments for Kubik's character. "The American Sesame Street broadcast doesn't have anything like these moments, which are purely for the Russian mentality. These segments will intone quiet sorrow." This sounds like a terrible idea to me. Volodya explains that Kubik would walk around with a little stuffed tiger who always feels lonely. "Children will love Kubik's tiger because they also feel sad." I don't even know how to respond to this.

Excerpted from "Muppets in Moscow. The Unexpected Crazy True Story of Making Sesame Street in Russia," written by Natasha Lance Rogoff and published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Copyright © 2022 Natasha Lance Rogoff. Used by permission. All rights reserved. For more information about the book and author, see the publishers site here.

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