Berlin Film Festival

Interview with Irene Langemann, director of Russia's Wonder Children

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Irene Langemann was born in 1959 in Issikul (Siberia). She worked as an actress, scriptwriter and director in Moscow between 1980 and 1990, and from 1983 she moderated and directed for Russian television. Three years later she headed the "theatre Nasch" and in 1990 travelled to Germany where she prepared contributions for the radio program "Turntable Europa" for the Deutsche Welle in Cologne.

WSWS: Why did you make your film?

Irene Langemann: Probably the fundamental reason for making this film was the desire to show another Russia. The portrayal of Russia shown in the media over the last years has, in my opinion, been a portrayal of wickedness. Of course there is the Mafia, of course there is criminal activity, of course there is the war of Chechnya—all terrible things.

But there is also another Russia, a Russia with the highest level of culture. It is no accident that the Moscow conservatory was founded in the nineteenth century in order to popularise and bring music to the masses. It is a well-known fact that every member of the Russian bourgeoisie had his or her own piano. Whether in the nineteenth or the twentieth century, it is a long-standing tradition for children to be thoroughly educated in the various realms of music, and also in poetry and the fine arts. No other country has been able to produce such excellent musicians in the twentieth century, whether it be pianists, violinists or cello players. I have often asked myself the question: how it is possible in a country where the most difficult conditions in everyday life constitute normality that the highest levels of culture are still possible?

The original idea was simply to make a film about the secrets of the Russian piano school. By the time I went to Moscow three years ago to research the project I already knew that the subject of the film should be the Central Music School at the Moscow Conservatory. I was able to examine on the spot the living and teaching conditions, the entire ambience in which the children and their teachers work and despite everything attempt to achieve the highest level of art. I was so shocked at the conditions that from the very beginning I made the decision to make a very concrete film, about specific children, but which then naturally works on a second symbolic level to relate the great national musical tradition.

Did you have any difficulties making the film? The film is not exactly a good advertisement for current Russian politics.

I did not have any problems with the authorities because I speak perfect Russian. Filming at the school was relatively easy. Where I did have problems was with everything to do with customs. Every time we tried to get film stock and then send it out was a production. In this respect I must say that nothing has changed. In fact, in my opinion, the attitude of the authorities has simply worsened. One feels complete hopelessness and in a real fix because you are treated like rubbish. The authorities are not in the slightest bit interested if the project is to do with art or whether it is a project which could be of some use.

It is clear that on the one hand the film shows an unfavourable side of Russia but on the other hand it shows this unbelievable talent—Russian children who, in my opinion, should be the pride of Russia. As I say, the discrepancy between the authorities and the people as a whole is very great.

How does the collaboration between the state schools and private concert agencies take place? Lena, who we see in the film, has been giving concerts all over the world since the age of nine.

There is a state-run organisation called "New Names," which promotes the children, so to speak, and makes them known in the West. It is my impression that these agencies have a great deal of money, perhaps they have sponsors, I do not know. They also have direct contact with Russian television. Many concerts take place in cooperation with Russian television. For example in the film, the archive material which shows Lena playing for the Pope was made for a Russian program in collaboration with this organisation. I know that the little girl Ira, shown in the film, has also been taken up by this organisation. She will give some concerts in the West in the next period.

Most of the children receive individual engagements and give a concert now and again. The fact that Lena has her own manager who organises her performances is really exceptional. She is poorly paid. We see in the film how she lives together with her mother in a tiny flat—that shocked me. There are two beds, a cupboard and that's it. The girl has been giving concerts all over the world since the age of nine. She told me that she gets about $200 for a concert tour. That is just enough to pay the rent on the flat. Apart from that there is barely any money left. It is a real form of exploitation of such young talent at a point in their lives when they are small and sweet.

Do the children still continue to come from all over the former Soviet Union?

Formerly the teachers use to travel all over to uncover new talent. They travelled to the provinces and organised dates when

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the children played. The best were then simply invited to Moscow. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union that is no longer possible because the money is no longer available. Most parents now simply bring along their children to the school. This was shown in the film in the scene of the entrance exams where many children turn up. Whoever is able to pass this exam and has a chance of becoming a pupil at the school is on his or her way to becoming part of a music elite, because it really is the best school going.

Formerly everything was free. Now it is only free for Russian citizens. Those who come from Ukraine, or from Kazakhstan, now have to pay tuition. And of course foreigners also have to pay. There are now more foreign children at the school, above all from Korea.

You last lived in Moscow in 1990. Could you say something about the changes which have take place over the last 10 years?

I lived in Moscow for 14 years, from 1976 to 1990; I moved to Germany in July 1990. I returned to Moscow for the first time in 1993 and was surprised at the changes which had taken place. There was this huge chaos, a great lack of orientation. On one side, there was great happiness that democracy had arrived and big changes were on the way, that the despised former system had finally been done away with. On the other hand, there was this dreadful poverty, in particular for elderly people who basically witnessed the destruction of all their ideals. This general feeling of insecurity meant that for a whole period there was a very strange atmosphere.

I was in Moscow shortly before the putsch in 1993 and I noticed a threatening climate. Two weeks later the putsch took place. Somehow it was in the air that something was brewing. During this time people stopped going to the theatre because of the increase in criminal activities and the fact that, for example, it was dangerous for a woman to walk the streets of Moscow alone. People had no money, they could not afford the theatre tickets. In Russia it is part of everyday life that one goes regularly to the theatre. Ordinary people go to the theatre. 1993-94 were difficult years but then quite suddenly, I would say around 1996-97, there was a change. Once again the theatres were full. And now you cannot get tickets.

You have talked about one aspect—the attendance at theatres. Another question is the content of the pieces being performed and the quality of the theatre. In other East European countries one observes attempts to commercialise theatre.

Theatre in Soviet times was strongly characterised by the fact that it was possible to say things on the stage which one could not say on the streets or amongst friends. One example is the *Taganka* theatre. Liubimov put on his classical pieces there. He developed a content in which is was possible to draw direct parallels with everyday life in the Soviet Union. And that was powerful. It was a source of excitement for the audience to realise: Aha! This is about such and such a prominent politician or deals with an event which had taken place a short time ago.

In the beginning of the 1990s it was suddenly possible to say anything one wanted, and the result was a vacuum. I think this was also a reason for the stagnation at the beginning of the 90s. Not just the poverty, not just the general situation, but simply the fact that there was a lack of new content. Now many classical pieces are being played. A great deal of Chekhov and Shakespeare is being played. German authors are featured, classic and modern works, a great deal of Dürrenmatt and Max Frisch, as well as many French authors. Plays are being written based on various novels. There is a great deal of material on offer.

Every theatre is a repertory theatre and every day there is a different performance. Normally theatres have about 20 pieces in their repertoire which are regularly changed. I know that at the end of the 1980s in Moscow alone there were roughly 200 small theatres. Most of them are now gone. From the initial total there are at most 12 or 15 left, and they were only able to survive because of state support. Theatre has declined rapidly because the artists were not able to live on the money they earned. In the small theatres which are left the artists work under dreadful conditions. Actors earn such a paltry wage, it is scarcely believable, I believe something in the region of 20 deutsche marks per month. All of them are forced to take up other jobs in order to be able to live. So in this respect the situation is not at all rosy for the artists.

Are there parallel developments in music?

The situation in music is somewhat different. There is a tendency in the music branch for many musicians to go abroad. There are countless people from Russia, Poland, Hungary, etc., in every orchestra in Germany—they play in Latin America, all over North America. They are, of course, all excellent musicians who then sign contracts in the West for less money than the corresponding Western musicians. Very many have left. Things are somewhat different for musicians in comparison to actors. Actors live in, depend on their native language and therefore do not have not the same possibilities to work abroad.

I had been living in Germany for 10 years and I was shocked at the cuts which are being carried out here. In 1992-93 saving measures were carried out at all levels. It was a big shock me to witness the closure of music schools and libraries in the area of Cologne were I live. I found it incomprehensible that in a rich country like Germany culture should suffer first.

I can only compare it with my own past. I was born and grew up in a small town in Siberia where there was virtually nothing, where the most simple things such as a telephone and running water were considered complete luxuries. But at the same time the town had its own school of music, there was an art school and also, for example, a book shop where one could buy German language books from the GDR.

That was possible then even under such difficult conditions. And I think that is still the case in Russia: If you go to Moscow and ride in a subway everybody is reading. I have not come across a comparable interest in literature, for example, in any other Western country. I believe this is part of the Russian soul—this urge for knowledge, education and art.

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