

The New York Times



Edward Keating/The New York Times

What do you get when you cross Russian Jewish humor with immigrant life in America? A comedian like Yanislav Levinzon, whose troupe gave a performance on Tuesday at Public School 175 in Rego Park, Queens.

Exit Laughing

Russian Jews Bearing Jokes Keep Émigrés in Stitches

By CAREY GOLDBERG

Yanislav Levinzon, his round eyes beaming panic, is playing a little old Russian immigrant grandfather racked by helpless anxiety. He is about to take his American citizenship test, but can't for the life of him remember which ocean lies off the West Coast. Come on, his children prompt him, you remember! We swam there last year in California!

"Ah!" His face lights up. "The Jacuzzi!"

The audience roars every time, whether in a Brighton Beach nightclub, a Queens elementary school or a synagogue auditorium in Hartford. Babushkas turned pastel-clad matrons and apparatchiks turned suburban businessmen, they laugh at themselves, just as they always have. Only now, their comics, refugees like them, have turned from satirizing Soviet life with jokes about lines and informers to poking fun at their immigrant culture, with quips about personal-injury claims and welfare.

A new wave of the poignant, powerful humor that helped Russian Jews survive czarism, Communism and anti-Semitism has made the crossing to America, battered but as indomitable as ever. And just

as the Black Sea city Odessa is the age-old capital of Russian Jewish humor, Little Odessa — Brighton Beach, Brooklyn — has become the center of Russian humor in emigration.

"When a Jew comes to a new place, he plants a tree, he builds a house and he develops his jokes," said Semyon Livshin, editor of a new Russian-language humor magazine, *Okay!*, that is sold at Brighton Beach newsstands and by subscription across the United States. "Humor is one of our best defense mechanisms against what Americans call culture shock.

"In emigration, people become lonely," Mr. Livshin continued, "and humor is a bridge from our past life to our present and future."

Under Communism, the Soviet Union developed possibly the richest treasury of underground humor in the world, whole oral volumes of jokes playing off Leonid Brezhnev's senility, Lenin's lisping clichés and the eternal Russian anti-Semitism. Soviet comics perfected the art of the judicious pause, a silence that shouted all that the censors would not allow.

Then the surreal Soviet system col-

Heh, Heh, Heh

Q. Why do so many Russian immigrants to America go bald early?

A. They've been tearing their hair for not emigrating earlier.

Q. Why, in America, is two-day-old sour cream considered spoiled, while in Russia even two-week-old sour cream is still considered good?

A. What is two weeks for Russia, with its magnificent history of many centuries?

Q. (To an elderly immigrant selling sunflower seeds outside Chase Manhattan Bank) Grandpa, can you lend me a few dollars?

A. Sorry, I have a contract with Chase Manhattan. I don't lend money and they don't sell sunflower seeds.

Source: *OKAY!* magazine

5 Fish Dealers Face Eviction From Market

Two of the Companies Are Tied to the Mafia

By SELWYN RAAB

Using its new powers to regulate the Fulton Fish Market, the administration of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani moved yesterday to evict five wholesale fish dealers, including two companies that are owned by relatives of purported Mafia figures.

Randy M. Mastro, the Mayor's chief of staff, described the evictions as "a significant step in the administration's drive to improve the market's business operations" and said the dealers had to clear out by the end of the month.

He added that the city was still reviewing the backgrounds of many of the approximately 40 merchants in the lower Manhattan market and that the city might revoke the leases of some of them.

Joseph L. Forstadt, a lawyer for three companies facing eviction, denounced the action by New York City officials as "bizarre" and said the dealers might sue to be reinstated on the ground that their constitutional rights were violated. Mr. Forstadt asserted that the city had refused to renew a lease for one of his clients, Alphonse Malangone Jr., the owner of the Cape Cod Seafood Company, solely because his father was suspected of being a capo in the Genovese crime family.

"It is absolutely outrageous that Mr. Malangone Jr. is made guilty by his relationship with his father," Mr. Forstadt said.

The other company that faces eviction because of suspected Mafia connections is Preferred Quality Seafood. Thomas Gangi, an officer in Preferred Quality is the son of Rosario Ross Gangi, who Federal and city law-enforcement officials have identified as the Genovese family's boss in the market.

The company's office at 109 South Street was closed yesterday, and Thomas Gangi, who has an unlisted home telephone number, could not be reached.

In an interview yesterday, Mr. Mastro said the five wholesalers had been ordered

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Busy Cab Meter

Eapen Kollal wanted his checkbook back, but it was with his ex-wife in Troy, Mich., and he was at Kennedy International Airport, where he had just arrived from India. So, the police said, he hailed a yellow cab and went to get it. Cost of a round trip? \$2,000. But his check bounced.

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Exit Laughing: Russian Jewish Immigrant Humor Thrives on Foreign Soil

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lapsed, and with it the foundation of all those jokes. About the same time, hundreds of thousands of Jews, among them some of the funniest of Russia's funny people, emigrated to Israel and America. The jokes dwindled. The comrades-in-arms who had brainstormed punch lines together on the premier Russian TV humor show, "The Club of the Merry and the Clever," were torn apart, some leaving for Israel, some for the United States, some staying in Odessa and Moscow.

But all that comic energy was still there. And gradually, it is recombining into something new — an international mix still so hilarious to Russians that at Mr. Levinzon's performance last week at the National Restaurant on Brighton Beach Avenue, the sound technician was laughing so hard he made the one actress, Alyona Rybchevsky, crack up on stage, she said.

The performers were part of a new Russian-language troupe, the First International Theater of Skits, whose current tour of seven American cities is showing just what that potent, infinitely ironic Russian humor can do when applied to American life.

The oddities of American insurance, for example. In one skit, Mr. Levinzon plays a Russian immigrant, Semyon Adolfovich, who is walking down a Manhattan street when he notices a sign hanging above him by just one nail.

"The sweet word 'insurance' flashed into his head," Mr. Levinzon declaimed with glee. ("Insurance" is one of those words Russian immigrants do not translate from English, although there is a perfectly good Russian word; its essence is too American. Others include welfare, apartment, meeting, appointment and garbage.)



Steve Miller for The New York Times

Russian comics had the audience laughing, as usual, earlier this month at Beth Israel Synagogue in West Hartford, Conn.

Within minutes, Mr. Levinzon continued, "Half of Brighton had gathered beneath the sign," hoping to break just enough of a limb to get a nice payment.

"This isn't Russia," the savvy Semyon explained to the bunch. "Remember Anna Karenina? Here, if the train even touched her, her son would be set for life, and her husband, and she'd even have enough left over to throw Vronsky a cent or two!"

Strategizing onward, Semyon tells one old man that the best idea is to pretend to have lost interest in sex because of the trauma of the falling

Scattered by the Soviet demise, Jews keep their wit about them.

sign; that ought to be good for \$100,000 or so.

"You mean I can't sleep with my wife?" the old man asks.

"You can, but without great interest."

The old man goggled. "If I'd known about that before, I'd be a billionaire!"

The essence of the troupe's humor, said Yefim Aglitskiy, a legendary champion of "The Club of the Merry and the Clever" and a physicist now working at the Naval Laboratory in Washington, "is when the Russian Jewish mentality comes up against the technology of American living. We're laughing at Americans and at ourselves both."

If the current humor in translation strikes English-speaking Americans as only slightly funny, that, as the Russians say, is no accident. Russian-Jewish humor tends to be

gentler and more delicate than its American counterpart, Russian comedians say. It has the bittersweet bite of the Jewish humor that once powered the Borscht Belt, with little of the modern American stand-up comedian's penchant for raw shock value. The comics still living and performing in the former Soviet Union have become somewhat cruder, pandering to lowbrow new millionaires, the skits' authors say, while émigré humor has stayed family style.

"There's a line you don't cross," said Georgy Golubenko, one of the Theater of Skits' two writers. And they don't poke fun at the current state of the former Soviet Union. "That would be like beating a child," Mr. Aglitskiy, one of the group's producers, said.

For the Russian immigrant audiences who flock to the shows, the Odessa-style skits bring back times when humor was a method of survival, what Mr. Golubenko called "medicine against the schizophrenia" of the Soviet regime.

"For us, this is as dear as our memories," said Yakov Lifshits, an architect from Kiev still glowing after watching a show in Hartford. "Americans have very thick humor. And they don't understand ours. They don't get the salt in ours."

In three weeks of touring the United States and 14 concerts under the sponsorship of Balkan Airlines and the Glavs Travel air ticket agency, the Theater of Skits has sold out virtually every appearance with its show, "The Art of Living in America."

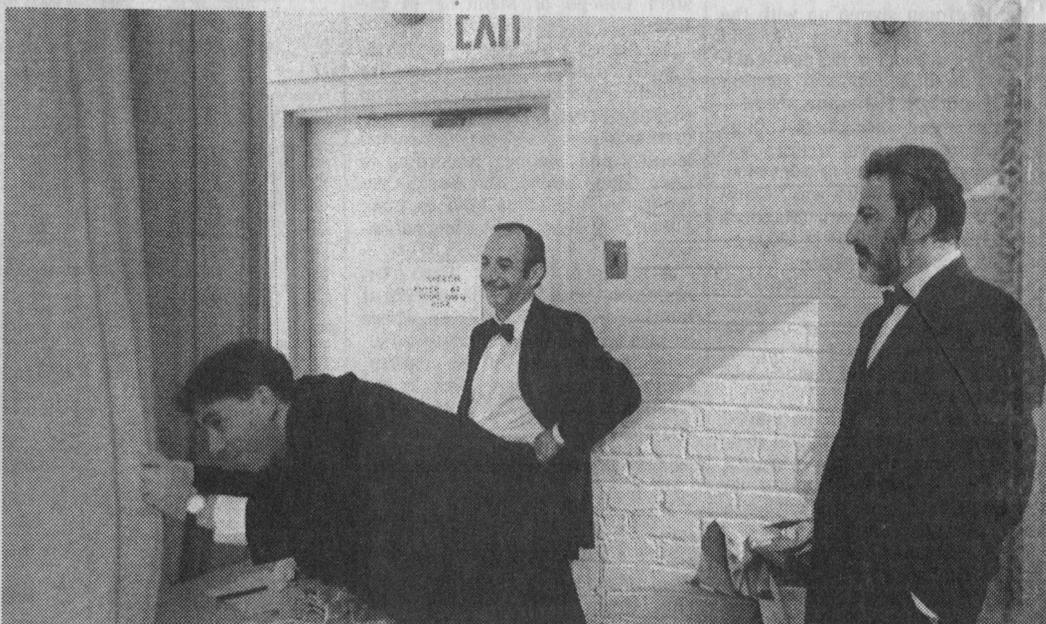
The troupe is too fledgling to be flush, charging only \$10 a ticket and writing off this tour as an attempt to jump-start its popularity. The shows are held in halls ranging from Atlantic City night clubs to synagogue auditoriums, generally for an audience of about 500.

The material is written in Odessa by Mr. Golubenko and his partner, Igor Kneller. Then the furious faxing begins, to Mr. Levinzon in Haifa and the producer Ulyana Yusim in Brooklyn. The Golubenko-Kneller team are used to living by fax; they support themselves writing Russian-language ads aimed at immigrants here and faxing them to a New York agency that employs several of the old "Merry and Clever" bunch. Mr. Levinzon, for all his status as a comedy star in Russia and émigré circles, still makes his main living as a travel agent in Haifa. And Eduard Kalandarov, the group's pianist and a composer, gives lessons.

The troupe comes together about two weeks before the tour begins to rehearse, staying at a friend's house in Brooklyn.

"Our circle is spread around the world, but our mentality remains," Mr. Kneller said. With raves gathered from this tour, the group is considering a few stops in Canada next.

Mr. Livshin's humor magazine, Okay!, is also doing well, having attracted 27,000 subscribers in the last two years with its friendly mix of old jokes, new jokes, essays and



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Three popular Russian immigrant comedians — from left, Yanislav Levinzon, Edward Kalendar and Igor Kneller — waiting backstage before a performance on Tuesday at Public School 175 in Queens.

tales of émigré life. Like the skit-meisters, Okay! is broadly international, putting out issues from its publishing base in San Diego that travel as far afield as the pocket of Russians in Australia.

Okay! has thought up an "Academy of Immigrant Sciences," with comical advice on everything from how to get a driver's license to what to do on vacation, and runs spoofs of American ads as well, including one by a personal injury lawyer offering help for those who "suffered traumas while studying the English language."

One bogus language exercise informs immigrants with weak English that to carry on a conversation with any American, all they need is three expressions: "Big deal!" "Oh, really!" and "Wow!"

A sample dialogue follows, in which the uncomprehending immigrant is working as a dental assistant.

The doctor turns to the assistant. "Masha, the needle!"
 "Wow!"
 "Quick, the patient is feeling bad!"
 "Oh, really?"
 "Quicker, he's about to faint!"
 "Big deal!"
 "I'll fire you!"
 "Wow!"
 "I'll sue you!"
 "Oh, really?"

And on it goes until the patient collapses and Masha responds, predictably, "Big deal!"

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