



NEWSLETTER

January 2004

Good news from the treasurer

Dear Members,

We wish you all a very happy New Year and to help you begin this year in a joyful mood, the committee has noted the relatively healthy state of the funds as they stand at present and has decided that, for this year at least, there will be only one membership fee - £10 per person.

Although our membership has grown very slowly but steadily since the days of our foundation, we do hope that this beneficial adjustment might encourage more people to join the society. The benefits of membership are the newsletter, reduced entrance to meetings, notices about special offers - such as the 2for1 offer of tickets at the Birmingham School of Speech and Drama, and the reduction on the Ruslan Russian song book.

We would like to expand both our membership and the benefits of membership of and would welcome any of your ideas which could be brought up at the AGM on Friday 30th January. Please let the secretary know.

Tim O'Sullivan (Treasurer)

Come and celebrate Russian Christmas and the New Year with Russian chocolates and vino!

The Annual General Meeting of the British-Russian Society will be held on **Friday, 30 January 2004 at 1830** at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, Margaret St, Birmingham, B3 3BS (tel: 0121-236 3591)

All members are most welcome to attend.

AGM agenda available from the secretary.

Friday 30 January at 1930

at Birmingham and Midland Institute, Margaret St, Birmingham B3 3BS
(tel: 0121-236 3591)

**“Can Ekaterinburg learn lessons from
Birmingham?”**

Speaker: Dr Elena Denezhkina, Project Leader of the DFID-funded RACE project (“Russia: Advice to the City of Ekaterinburg”), Chair of BRS.

Admission £1.50 for members of BRS or BMI. £3.00 for non-members.

Includes Russian chocolates and a glass of wine or juice.

Dr Elena Denezhkina has met people at every level from government to grassroots, frequently travelling to Ekaterinburg and Moscow, and hosting delegations from Ekaterinburg. Like Birmingham, Ekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk) is a major city with a history of heavy industry and a jewellery trade. Ekaterinburg was previously a closed military city. On the break up of the Soviet Union it suffered many social and developmental problems, comparable to those previously overcome by Birmingham. The RACE project helped the City Administration to develop a strategic plan for the development of the city, and the results of the project will be disseminated to other Russian cities and the Presidential Administration. Elena will explain how the Ekaterinburg City Administration learned to adopt a “bottom-up” approach and share her conclusions and thoughts about the project, using examples drawn from small businesses, hospitals and other Ekaterinburg institutions.

British Premiere at Birmingham School of Speech and Drama

We would like to thank Rogelio Nevares Guajardo and the Birmingham School of Speech and Drama (recently renamed the Birmingham School of Acting) for his offer of 2 tickets for the price of 1 for the students' performance of the British Premiere of Ludmila Petrushevskaya's *Music Lessons* at the Crescent Theatre. I asked two members for their comments, and this is what Nicholas Smith wrote:

“The performance was in a very small room, seats on three sides, only three or four rows of seats, mostly taken by fellow students or their friends. My wife and I felt quite out of place, the oldest people there by far except for a very strange old chap in a formal suit who seemed to be a sort of minder from the KGB who now works for the BSSD to watch the students.

The play did seem to reflect the realities of life in Russia, and some of the situations would have been lost on some of the audience (residence permits, for example). The scene changes were not always clear enough to tell me whose flat they were in, or if they were outdoors. But the real problem was that almost every member of the cast smoked almost non-stop in an unventilated room”. This caused such a problem for Nicholas that he had to leave early.

On the positive side, Nicholas comments that “The acting was very good, and I am sure that we will see these students on stage before a wider audience for many years.”

Stella Sims comments “I'd just like to say that I thoroughly enjoyed it!! I thought the acting, staging and music were all excellent, appropriate and enhancing in that order. The overall atmosphere, in relation to my experience of Russia, was understandably 'edgy', negative and sparse- giving a rather depressing but authentic view of lives which were so fundamentally unsatisfactory. The whole play 'hung together' admirably without unnecessary and boringly standard scene changes which would have broken up the flow and rhythm of the piece. The plight of the characters was matched by the effectiveness of both the casting and acting in what was, inevitably a limited set and space. As a fervent non-smoker, I would have welcomed a warning about the smoking of certain characters - and its proximity to the front row where I was sitting. It certainly did prove uncomfortable but I felt able to accept the need for realism without leaving on account of the physical atmosphere. The play was too interesting and stimulating for me to resort to that!!

Fatal Rendezvous. By Bert Gedin

What a New Year's present! I've just been asked to comment on the performance of 'Eugene Onegin', which some 7 or 8 of us enjoyed at Birmingham Symphony Hall, a few months ago. But, did I take any notes? Not I!!! (Wherefore art thou, Stella?).

Apart from being immensely impressed by the Rostov Ensemble, my one powerful reaction is of a boringly, sickly-sweet first half of the Pushkin/Tchaikovsky Opera, followed by an intensely dramatic second half, set in 1820's St. Petersburg, & surrounds, within the opulent Russian Empire. Where our hedonistic hero, Onegin, settles a dispute, with a very dear friend, Lensky, over one who "shines like a star in the dark night", 17-year-old Olga. He, Onegin, "wins" the gentleman's duel, but reality is eventually none too kind to him - Tatiana (with whom he eventually realises he is in love) already belongs to another, less romantic, perhaps, but a very steadfast liason indeed. This poignant love story, we are told, "is the decline of Imperial Russia sliding, eventually, into a people's revolution." 'Eugene Onegin', not unlike certain other pre-20th Century Russian creations, is an "artistically rich work in words and music a telling social commentary on aristocratic Russia before the revolution." Even Lenin would have said 'amen' to that.

COMMITTEE AT WORK

Some of the ideas discussed at committee meetings – which do you think should be pursued and can you help?

- re-launch of the British-Russian Society as a more dynamic organisation
- provide entertainment/information about BRS in foyer of Symphony Hall before Russian events (Symphony Hall is keen to promote links with local societies)
- use Russian concerts and other events to distribute our publicity
- hold Eugene Onegin/Pushkin evening shortly before a related event
- annual membership cards showing year's meetings
- need decent information leaflets
- Christmas/New Year social event (Russian Christmas is 6 Jan)
- need to provide something of interest to members who cannot attend meetings
- membership advantages approach bookshops for reductions? Ask Waterstones to provide talk arranged by BRS at Brasshouse Centre?
- meetings – invite members to bring copies of newspaper articles or chapters from books for people to take away or to send to absentees
- need good publicity eg year book (Elena showed us Botanical Gardens Year book)
- Ikon Gallery - workshop/round table activities e.g language activities
- change venue?
- possible speakers – Mike Pushkin or Archie Tate from Birmingham University on literature, Charlotte Hobson, author of "Black Earth City", Rogelio Nevares Guajardo from Birmingham School of Acting
- weekend of Russian poetry