

John McGreevy's

Peter Ustinov's Russia

It's been over 40 years since Canadians have seen media images of our northern neighbour that weren't projections of American paranoia of their superpower *alter ego*. But that was before the Cold War, Red scares and all that — when the National Film Board was Canada's film industry and, under Grierson, was attempting to develop for Canada the ideology of a technological and northern internationalism very different from today's desperate, southward-looking continentalism.

Interestingly, about the only respite in the ensuing four-decade-long barrage of U.S. hallucinations about the USSR was the hour-long portrait of Leningrad in the 1979 Canadian-made *Cities* series, with Peter Ustinov as commentator/guide and John McGreevy as director.

And now, from March 2-April 13 — on CTV, of all places, but immensely to that network's credit — both Ustinov (in front of the camera) and McGreevy (behind it as producer/director) have managed to turn Sunday evening television viewing into an extraordinary window on an extraordinary country with their hugely successful, six-part documentary series, **Peter Ustinov's Russia: A Personal History**.

If it's possible to encapsulate a man of Ustinov's breadth of talents (actor, mimic, comic, film director, playwright, novelist and ambassador of universal kindness) in one category, it would have to be that of the cross-cultural. In this light, it was perhaps only a matter of time before this latter-day Renaissance humanist returned to his Russian roots and attempted, in his inimitable way, to show the West some of the beauty of Mother Russia over the din of east-west propaganda and the mutual menace of poised missiles. Somewhat like Tolstoy's Pierre at Borodino in *War & Peace*, ruminating on the meaning of history, Ustinov's equally distinctive figure ambles through a millenium of Russia's awesome past.

About a society whose official ideology, since the October 1917 Revolution, is as committed to such common Western values as materialism, technological development, and now TV, it is interesting to be reminded, as Ustinov evidences as of

the first episode, "A Giant's Childhood," of the depth of Russia's religious orientation. For Russia's (like the United States) is less a history than the practice of an eschatology and as such has alternated between barbarism and civilization, the angelic and the demonic, extremes of slothful backwardness and frenzies of futuristic developmentalism. All of which is expressed not only in the series' filming the treasures of Russian art (the golden churches of Kievan Rus, the Gregorian resonances of Orthodox liturgy, the monumentalism of Peter the Great's city on a swamp by the Baltic, the tombs of the masters of 19th century literature and music, through to the mass-heroism of the Revolution and the Great Patriotic War) but also in the hundreds of Soviet faces, from European Russia to Siberia, captured by the series. And these faces, which reflect both an intense privacy and an elemental weariness, profoundly convey the Russian sense of time as eternity.

For Russia is above all a *world* (not *the* world nor necessarily a design upon the world) and it is a portrait of this world that, in broad strokes, the series has sketched through a geographical mosaic of places (spanning the USSR from west to east, north to south) and encounters with historical characters from Ivan the Terrible (Aleksandr Trofimov) to the young Lenin when he was still known as Ulyanov (Yuri Orlov), all structured around Ustinov's overview of the cataclysmic course of Russia's past.

It is Ustinov's thesis, implicit in the first four episodes and explicit in the last two, that, because of its immensity, Russia is basically non-threatening, a recalcitrance to mobilization that stymied Peter the Great,

Catherine in her liberal phase, and by the 19th-century Alexanders had crushed the progressivist tsars beneath the immobility of autocracy. And the Bolsheviks too, though at frightful cost to the population, would come to a similar discovery. It's this live-and-let-live quality to Russian existence, Ustinov suggests in episode five, "War and Revolution," that leads him to conclude "I personally have no fear of Russia," a country whose "basic attitude is defensive." In a sequence whose bitterness the usually even-tempered Ustinov can't dissimulate, he lists the number of times that Russia has been attacked in the last two centuries: in 1812 by Napoleon and outnumbered by the French two-to-one; 42 years after that by France and Britain in the Crimea; 60 years after that during the First World War; again in 1918 with the multi-nation Allied intervention to prove "you can't defy international banking arrangements;" and yet again by Hitler's Germany in 1942. Indeed, as Ustinov reels off all the invasions of Russia — by most of Europe, including the not usually aggressive Denmark, and then from America, including the 1918 contingent from the never-belligerent Canada — a certain deep-seated suspicion of the West becomes entirely understandable.

It's for its quiet effectiveness in undermining some of the all-too-prevalent clichés about Russia that the series can lay claim to be an outstanding contribution to cross-cultural dialogue. And given the possibility of an airing on Soviet television, **Peter Ustinov's Russia** may even go a way to re-establishing Canada's own claims to media peacemaking. While ideological purists might be tempted to argue that the possibility of a Soviet broadcast causes Ustinov and McGreevy to tread a little softly in their depiction of the Revolution itself, in a series otherwise distinguished by an excellent selection of archival footage and film clips, edited according to Eisensteinian laws of *montage*, one cannot, especially in documentaries, make an omelette without breaking eggs, as the Russians say. And, overall, **Ustinov's Russia** is one tasty television omelette.

Particularly appetizing were the dramatic sequences with Russian actors portraying what Ustinov calls "the endlessly repellent but fascinating figures in Russian history," from Ivan in the first episode to Goncharov's unrepellingly endearing literary hero, Oblomov (Anatoli Obukhov), in the concluding episode. Just to hear, undubbed, so much of the gorgeous sonority of the Russian language goes a long way toward overcoming the great distances, cultural and ideological, between nations — and Yevtushenko's

recital from his poem *Babi Yar*, in episode five, is still deeply moving (even if the poet has been reciting it to Western audiences for 20 years now).

For his part, Ustinov brilliantly plays the foil of the naive foreigner 'accidentally' encountering titans of Russian history. So he's fearful with Ivan, awed by Peter, respectful of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, sympathetic to the burdens of Alexander I, and skeptical of the young Lenin. But with Catherine the Great, portrayed with considerable cynical dignity by Valentina Azovskaya, as he grills her about her vaunted amorous escapades and how much she paid her lovers, Ustinov comes across rather more as someone who subscribes to the Joan Collins theory of history. But it all nicely humanizes a visual and historical panorama whose monumentality might otherwise have been daunting, particularly in a medium that, for the most part, so often only trivializes.

Above all, perhaps, where **Ustinov's Russia** succeeds most effectively is to offer to Canadians a superlative model of the kind of authentic international television programming that this country could produce much more of, were it not so hypnotized by U.S. television. It goes without saying, though it's worth saying anyway, that this is a program Americans could *never* have produced.

With **Peter Ustinov's Russia**, an independent filmmaker like John McGreevy has blazed an important trail into the future of Canadian television. To be sure, he could not have done it without Ustinov or, McGreevy would no doubt add, CTV. But now that it has been done, it's possible to say (as was once said of the USSR itself) that I, together with 1.5 million other Canadians, have seen the future — and it works.

Michael Dorland •



photo: Pushkin Productions

PETER USTINOV'S RUSSIA: A PERSONAL HISTORY

d.p./sc. John McGreevy adapted from the book *My Russia* by Peter Ustinov exec.p. Victor Solnicki exec.cons. Arthur Gelgoot p.man Jennifer Pucher cam. Barry Berghorson, Bill Rhodes, Jim Mercer sd. Brian Avery, Tom Hilderly sd.ed. Eric Goddard music cons. G.C. Campbell audio re-rec. James Porteous res. Eric Walberg p.asst. Carole Chapman ed. Richard Wells tech. facilities and post-prod. services MPI Productions Ltd., Toronto Gosteleradio liaison Boris Semenov, Valery Abromov elect. Sacha Belevich l.p. (Ivan the Terrible) Alexander Trofimov, (Tolstoy) Lev Durov, (Peter the Great), Evgeny Telychev, (Catherine the Great) Valentina Azovskaya, (Dostoevsky) Oleg Fydeorov, (Alexander I) Andrei Tolubeev, (Lenin) Yuri Orlov, (Oblomov) Anatoli Obukhov, **Peter Ustinov's Russia** is a joint venture of John McGreevy Productions and Victor Solnicki in association with CTV Television Network Limited with the participation of Telefilm Canada p.c. Pushin Productions, 1986. (416) 963-9958 col., 1/2" Sony Betacam running time: 6 x 1 hr.