

# Peter Ustinov's Russia

## Ambassadors of television



photo: CTV

by Connie Tadros & Michael Dorland

Three days after Peter Ustinov's *Russia: A Personal History* began airing on the CTV Network March 2, Cinema Canada met with series host Peter Ustinov and producer/director John McGreevy, both in Montreal to do the dubbing for the forthcoming French-language version, *Ma Russie*.

**Cinema Canada:** How did you get into this project?

**Peter Ustinov:** Well, I wrote a book called *My Russia* which was roughly on the same lines and then I suggested to John that if anything could be made of it, then he ought to do it. To my surprise he took that seriously and the rest went on here.

**Cinema Canada:** Why John?

**Peter Ustinov:** Because we had done *Leningrad* before (in the *Cities* series) and I found it a rewarding experience. Even the disagreements were attractive.

## A Cinema Canada interview with Peter Ustinov and John McGreevy

**Cinema Canada:** But you must have your choice of producers all over the world that would jump at the chance to do something like this?

**Peter Ustinov:** It's difficult to say with him sitting at the table and with them absent. But I think that the whole idea of an understaffed, light, and slightly impulsive production of this sort, is probably the one who gets the best out of the country you're dealing with. Because I've had a lot of planning sessions and things like that in which you lose all journalistic sense, which is a sense that is much abused these days, I think, but is still a very valuable one. The improvisation, the taking things out of the air is a very important adjunct to this kind of craft, it seems to me, and it sometimes

is rendered too formal and too stiff, too monumental.

**Cinema Canada:** Is it a function of budget, or, let's say, the American approach to television as opposed to, say, the Canadian approach which would be not so top-heavy?

**Peter Ustinov:** Yes, and even on another level, anybody is willing to accept a Canadian peace-keeping force, while English ones and American ones tend to get shot at...I've worked with lots of different companies in the Soviet Union and the Canadian ones are by far the least trouble. One can really think about what one is doing and not worry about what kind of impression to create or all that nonsense.

**Cinema Canada:** Was this a function of the way the Canadians were, or the way the Soviets received them?

**Peter Ustinov:** Well, that also. I think that they are on the same latitude, the Canadians there, they have their own kind of pride so that when we would start in -40°, they tended to say it was pretty awkward but not as bad as Edmonton...which raised frozen Russian eyebrows!

**John McGreevy:** I'd like to pick up that idea. Peter and I had enjoyed a very good working relationship when we did the *Leningrad* episode of the *Cities* series and he does like people who don't stand around talking about the reasons why we are doing something, but get on and do it. And he had a very

— as always — complex schedule and we had to be very flexible in dipping in and out of his other commitments in order to get this thing done. I have something of a reputation of moving at a pretty swift pace and working with very lean crews. And it's not just a question of budget limitations — although that is a consideration — one can always find a little bit more money if you really need an extra body. It's simply that I prefer to work with a smaller unit, of very highly skilled professionals rather than carrying extra weight that, really for me, just gets in the way of doing the work. And particularly with Peter who responds to a good pace being set and his adrenaline gets going and he doesn't want to be kept waiting around to argue about whether we should do it this way or that way because then the inspiration is drained out of the experience. You cannot get as many wonderfully improvised moments...the Leningrad episode was all improvised. In this series on Russian history, while it is drawn from Peter's book and pays very respectful attention to the history of Russia, there were many opportunities for Peter to improvise on the spot as certain things occurred that we couldn't possibly anticipate. You have to be able to go at a pretty good clip and have the confidence about what you are doing and what it is you want to achieve with this thing.

**Cinema Canada:** *For instance, an improvised moment?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Well, that's difficult to say, but if you travel around Russia and you are in little towns like Suzdal, places with a long history, you've done your research, they went out ahead and looked at these places and you know more or less all about it, then the local curator goes into something you couldn't possibly have known, so the thing is to incorporate that very quickly and also find out quickly too from other sources whether it's accurate or whether it's just a legend. And also John is rather good at rather rhapsodic things like tying in the past with the present. I think on the whole we complement each other rather well on these occasions.

**John McGreevy:** And similarly in this particular series, when we were in Lithuania, going to a kindergarten school where the kids were, at age five and six, being instructed in basketball and Peter sits there in the middle of the court and gives them running commentary. And then just around the corner we discovered the only known Museum of the Devil. We couldn't possibly have known about that and very quickly put the text together, found out what the story there was and Peter, within a couple of hours of our discovering it, came up with a marvellous sequence, very unique, saying something about that culture.

**Cinema Canada:** *What happened with*

*the Soviet government when you approached them on the series? Was there resistance?*

**Peter Ustinov:** If there was, I didn't notice it. I don't think so... On the whole, they made it possible terribly quickly. We left the country with almost 80 hours of film from which John chose six, and they really had to be dragooned into seeing any of it at all. We even suggested it was rather rude to let us shoot so much without looking at it. Which reminds me of the time when I went to complain about being 20 minutes late for the opera and they said: what business is it of ours? And I said I wasn't being followed so there was nobody to ask.

**John McGreevy:** After I made the arrangements in Canada through CTV and Telefilm to fund this project, I called Peter and I suggested that we go to Moscow together to discuss with their people the idea of us making such a series and whether we would get their cooperation.

**Cinema Canada:** *To whom did you address such questions?*

**John McGreevy:** The Minister of Culture and the chairman of the television organization over there from whom we were going to require a lot of cooperation on a day-to-day basis and so Peter and I met up in Moscow in late October and we had these two very important meetings and they were really keen on our being able to proceed but I must allow Peter the opportunity to tell you these two stories because they are very good polarities of what you experience over there.

**Peter Ustinov:** Well, we went first of all to see the Minister of Culture, Mr. Demitchev, whom I had met in Washington when a part of the Hermitage exhibition came over, and we sat there talking about nothing very much for nearly an hour and with bottles of mineral water or the usual and eventually he said: "Mr. Ustinov, we enjoy having you here with your friends, but there must have been a reason why you wanted to see me." I said: "ah, yes, right."

So we outlined what we wanted and he held up a peremptory hand and said: There is no need for this conversation to continue. He said: You must know that we like what you do and, more important, we trust you. So as far as we are concerned, you have *carte blanche* in the Soviet Union. Now, we can continue talking about nothing... We eventually had to leave because we had to see the chairman of the All-Union Television thing who was an old Bolshevik who since has been relieved of his duties, but he was for a long time their ambassador in China which explains a great deal of the friction. He didn't get up when we came in, he just went on drawing a series of geometrical shapes and colouring them with crayons, hard at work.

And he suddenly said: "You know that

Molotov has been re-accepted into the Party?" I said: "Yes, I've heard that."

"Where did you hear that?"

"From the newspapers", I said.

"Not from 'your' newspapers; ha, ha."

"Yes, from our newspapers."

"I'm sure they didn't give the reason why he was re-introduced into the Party."

I said: "No, they didn't."

"Well, he's now 96 and during his absence from the Party he never stopped for one moment paying his dues and now he commands a pension of 500 rubles a month which by our standards is quite considerable. It is in fact the same pension as (the dancer) Ulanova."

So I said: "It's very surprising if you don't mind my saying so between you and me, he was never as good a dancer as she was." This man replied: "I didn't know he danced at all." It was very difficult to know what he was doing. And then John said: "We brought Mr. Ustinov's book with us and he'll sign it for you." This man said: "I've been expecting this." He said: "My library is well-known in Russia, I have more signed books than anybody else, Dostoievski, Turgenev, Griboyedov — you name it. I don't think any book has any value unless it's signed..." So I said: "Well, there are exceptions to that: we have an ex-prime minister in England called Edward Heath and it is still possible in London to find one or two rare copies of his book which he didn't sign." John and I got the grandiose stare with arrows from his eyes. "If you like," I said, "I can make some sort of effort to find a copy of his book which he did not sign." And this man answered: "Oh, if you could do that, I would be relieved." Anyway, it was this very rocky kind of conversation and at one point I was so irritated by him, I said: "Mr. Lapin, you've taught us something about the Soviet Union which I'm sure none of us knew." "What?" I said: "Your abiding interest in abstract art." He took it all away and put it in the drawer like a guilty schoolboy found doing something reproachful and eventually we came out and thought, oh God! And all the Russians rushed up. It was dreadful! "But be accompanied you to the door" — that was the criterion, that was a sign that we were in. He didn't get up when we arrived but when we left he accompanied us to the door.

**Cinema Canada:** *In your dealings with the government officials, was it to get permissions or technical support? What kind of collaboration was required?*

**John McGreevy:** Peter and I were very ambitious to cover as many aspects of the Soviet Union today as we could, culturally, nationally, physically. We needed to travel across the breadth of the Soviet Union, visiting many centres, we needed access to all sorts of palaces and museums, orchestras etc.

**Peter Ustinov:** ...and a nuclear centre in Siberia too...

**John McGreevy:** Yes, and so we had a very formidable schedule and itinerary and we couldn't just go in there and start travelling across the Soviet Union because we didn't know where this stuff was — we needed contact people so the kind of support we required was through the television agency — we were put in charge of their international relations division which has a number of very skilled individuals, fluent in many, many languages, whose job it is to pave the way — a liaison — and we were dealing with them. Two of them were assigned to us exclusively for the project. It was their job to line up the various locations and to be advance people so that when we arrived in Siberia we were met and other places that we wanted to visit were available to us. I took my own crew from Toronto.

**Cinema Canada:** *How many?*

**John McGreevy:** Including Peter, my entire unit was six. And then we took on an electrician there, a very good man, and we had a couple of liaison people travel with us from the television centre.

**Cinema Canada:** *Your own equipment?*

**John McGreevy:** Yes.

**Cinema Canada:** *Was doing the series a personal thing for you, Peter, or did it come out of a desire to correct our representations of Russia?*

**Peter Ustinov:** I don't see the difference between the two, I mean it seems to me part of the same thing.

**Cinema Canada:** *Because of your Russian family background?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Today, in the elevator of my hotel a lady said after the first episode, "oh my God, I've never seen Russia in that light!" This is my real aim. Because there is nothing particularly political because I can't find myself comfortably down on the Reagan level. I prefer something a little more "stratospheric."

**Cinema Canada:** *I meant that with you having a family relationship with the country but having grown up here, did you grow up in the West feeling that Russia was somehow totally misunderstood?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Not a bit. My mother was appalled when I went there for the first time. Because she was still living the Revolution. She got out then. And these are things that you find all the time, even with the minorities that exist in Canada. They are really the same people as the ones that stayed but they are just in different positions and therefore they react differently.

**Cinema Canada:** *But you said that in many ways this was facilitated because they said we trust you. What have you become for the Russians?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Well, it's really strange, at my age to find oneself known there really only as a writer. Many of my books are being published now and they've got none of this talk show or American Express to cling to, so I don't have to swim against the tide at all. That's a great relief, I enjoy that. I have one play that's been running now very nearly 11 years in Moscow, and another one just opened. They play in repertory and they have very, very long runs. And are always full.

**Cinema Canada:** Have they in some manner adopted you? Do they look to you as an ambassador for them?

**Peter Ustinov:** No, not really, but they are very astonished even with my book. There is no reason to agree because it's not the Marxist view, it's nobody else's view but they are still astonished that it's so even-tempered and very often when you go out of your way for some people to say something agreeable about them they have enough complexes to say: Do be careful, don't ruin yourself for the West if you feel you mustn't say things like that. Because we have many more complexes than they have, really, because we are much more abrasive. I mean, they've got no **Rambo**, they've got no **Rocky IV**, nothing like that at all. And I can't think of them having anything like it but it occurs to me every time something happens. Even today looking at the American early morning news report coming here, they make all sorts of snide comments about (the Russian photos of) Halley's Comet but they desperately resent all the scientists being there: "Many American experts do not agree with this, however."

Well, that's what one has to live with. I said to one American interlocutor after a speech I made in Geneva for the American Club which went down very well, a very nice audience, very agreeable, but one sort of John Wayne character said: "Why do you keep talking about the Soviet Union, what do these people mean to you?" So, I said: "Well, forgive me, sir but I feel more relaxed there than elsewhere simply because only an American will keep asking orally or on paper whether or not you are a Communist. In the Soviet Union, they tend to think that you're not..." I must say that the American audience roared with laughter and this man didn't know whether his fly was open or what it was.

**John McGreevy:** There is another interesting anecdote vis-à-vis our success. We were approached earlier in the shoot by CBS, a **60 Minutes** production who had heard of our venture and they wanted to come and do a report on Peter and the creation of this series and they applied to exactly the same people who we were liaising with and they were turned down. So the mighty CBS approached us — they were so keen to do this — to ask if we could intercede on their behalf and get them into Mos-



● Flashback to 1979: a younger John McGreevy and a seemingly older Peter Ustinov on the Leningrad canals during filming of the **Cities** series

cow to do this report and I asked Peter to write a note I could take in and we were able to persuade the authorities to change their minds and allow CBS in for this occasion. And it really was something for CBS to have to come to us.

**Cinema Canada:** Is that to say that they then anticipate from a Canadian crew the same kind of even-bandedness they found in Ustinov?

**John McGreevy:** Yes. We don't come in with a political axe to grind or a hidden agenda. When we say we want to do something, they take us on face value and that is indeed what we want to do. They were terribly paranoid about — and they are — about the American networks — about their intelligence at all times. They were saying: CBS will come in and they say they are going to do this piece on you, but how do we know what in fact they are going to do? Well, we'll make sure they are part of our unit and neither Peter nor I would wish to be party to some embarrassing interpretation of what we are doing. So we, I think, can to some extent vouch for the integrity of this particular report.

**Peter Ustinov:** One question CBS aimed at us was wonderful. I must say my answer wasn't bad either, although to such an extent that it wasn't in the final show. (Imitating Morley Safer): "Peter, can you work here at all, you who have known the freedom of the United States?" I said to him: "Morley, I find it very difficult to answer such a question because I had a play once which I wrote which was purchased in all freedom by an American producer, put on, the money was found in total freedom, everything went well until the play opened in the provinces and then everybody had different ideas of what was wrong with it. And it was impressed on me that I was responsible for an awful lot of money, that it wasn't my money, it was other people's money and so on and gradually under this kind of erosion I began to change the play without any conviction and in view of that, it is remarkable that the play lasted six weeks on Broadway.

Meanwhile the Russians got hold of the same play without my knowing it, of course, but we found it in Leningrad — it had been on for three or four years. I was going by, I just saw my name on a

playbill. I thought it must be somebody else because they only have initials, but it was my play. It just celebrated its tenth anniversary. Playing, of course, in repertory but still that represents over a year and a half as a straight run. It was so full that I had to be given a seat in the aisle, a chair in the aisle, and I can't answer your question. All I can say is that it's absolutely wonderful for an author to see his play the way it was written. So it depends what you mean about freedom.

**John McGreevy:** Actually there was a sad aspect for me about the final report on CBS. It's that (Toronto-born) Morley still travels on a Canadian passport and alluded to this constantly while we worked together in the Soviet Union having paved the way for them to come in. When the report finally went out, you wouldn't know who was making the series. And I felt a little saddened that Morley couldn't at least give us a nod.

**Cinema Canada:** There was no mention of this being a Canadian series?  
**John McGreevy:** No mention, no.

**Cinema Canada:** *Isn't that interesting. That sort of perverts the sense of what you were doing, of your ability to do it at all.*

**John McGreevy:** And it would have been easy to make a passing comment, particularly for Morley Safer who is travelling on a Canadian passport.

**Cinema Canada:** *What about the average Russian? People coming around during the shoot?*

**John McGreevy:** When you are filming in the streets here, invariably you catch a crowd, I think it's a cultural thing. In Russia they are simply not as invasive as we are here. They are curious but standoffish. They didn't really want to intrude on what we were doing.

**Peter Ustinov:** They are not at all what you are led so often to expect, about people wondering whether you are a spy or not. We went all over the place in and in remote parts of the Soviet Union and by now there is so much television of their own that anything being filmed on the street-corner, they think it must be something official.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is there any chance the series will be seen in Russia?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Yes, it was one thing Demitchev said: "Don't be surprised if we ask for it because we've reached a stage in our development where we are frightfully interested to know what other people think of us."

**John McGreevy:** I haven't even had time to tell Peter this but this morning I was checking with my office in Toronto and a telex came from Moscow requesting tapes — we have just completed the series and I've been mostly concerned with preparing it for telecast here — but Moscow requesting broadcast quality tapes of the series... We always agreed that we would give them copies of the series when it's completed.

**Cinema Canada:** *Give as a gift?*

**John McGreevy:** Yes, although it was part of the contract that they have it for their files and there was the statement from the Minister of Culture that he thought the time was right for them to see how they are portrayed elsewhere. But I was never too confident that they would actually show it, but this latest inquiry from them requesting broadcast-quality leads me to believe that they are very much now inclined to perhaps run it.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is there an opening to the West taking place again, a larger one than during détente?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Oh yes, and it's so much easier than we imagine. I remember a time when everybody was wondering what's going to happen to China when Mao goes, or to Spain when Franco goes, or France when DeGaulle goes, or Yugoslavia when Tito goes. What happens is nothing at all. There's just this big cleaning up to do after a great man — there is a lot of mess around — and then things go on. They have to find their own way and everything goes on as normal. Spain changed in five minutes, but literally in five minutes: not a drop of blood was spilled, and the same thing almost happened in the Philippines or anywhere else. So long as the atmosphere remains clement but I think that as soon as you put any pressure on them, everything gets hard again and I sometimes think it's in the interest of the West to keep that pressure up and therefore that's what I resent. I think it's dangerous for all of us.

**Cinema Canada:** *What did you feel when you went back for the first time? Did you feel Russian?*

**Peter Ustinov:** I feel more Russian here than I do there. For obvious reasons, I'm surrounded by the real thing there, so that I feel more "foreign" in a way. But

at the same time I must have an atavistic Russian way of writing and thinking because they do my plays and things there so much better than anywhere else, in a sense, but without the benefit of my advice which is rather annoying! However I can live with it.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did the idea come up to use Russian actors in the series?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Well, I must say, I think it was my idea. Because I thought you'd never recognize them — you wouldn't think, oh God, Alec Guinness has gone too far this time. Especially as they are talking Russian, you are liable to believe it.

**Cinema Canada:** *And how was it for you as an actor to be in that situation?*

**Peter Ustinov:** It's very interesting to be playing in English while they were playing in Russian. Because they had to act it very between ourselves, very intimately, and each is different. But they all understood very strictly what was wanted. I said to Ivan the Terrible: "Don't give a performance, you know you're not helped by incidental music — Prokofiev isn't here today nor is Eisenstein. You don't have to hide behind columns you are just sitting there between takes and saying what you really think about all this crowd." He was very good because he found the tone.

**John McGreevy:** There was another aspect and Peter wasn't too conscious of this. I would go in a few weeks ahead of each shoot and prepare the locations and work up the itinerary and meet the actors in advance of Peter to do these interviews. When I mentioned what it was, they were absolutely awed because they were going to play opposite Peter Ustinov. So, for them really it was quite awesome to find themselves...many of the actors were very

young, in their 20s. The one that plays Tolstoi is an older actor but only in his mid-fifties but they are all extremely awe-struck at the idea of playing opposite Peter, and some of their nervousness is attributed to that. And it was fascinating working with them, how fast they are at instinctively picking up what it is you want. And then of course you saw the Ivan thing: it had a perfect note to it. I couldn't imagine an English actor playing it that way. I mean, putting the subtitles across the bottom gives the whole thing a much greater sense of authenticity. You forget about the technique and so on and — one hopes — get right in there.

**Cinema Canada:** *The idea of using sub-titles on TV would be anathema to an awful lot of TV producers. They would say: this is absolutely a crazy idea. Did you get much feedback before you started about that?*

**John McGreevy:** It's to the credit of CTV, a commercial network here, that in the first place they took the series and then allowed Peter and I complete freedom in our choices of the style, the arrangement of the material, etc. Our relationship with them has been absolutely remarkable.

**Cinema Canada:** *CTV has not always been known for as a great supporter of independent Canadian productions...*

**John McGreevy:** I have to tell you that this is my first major effort for CTV and I cannot speak more highly about (network president) Murray Chermov and (head of programming) Arthur Weinthal. The relationship that they had with me and with this project over the last year was absolutely impeccable.

It might sound like I'm anticipating future events, and certainly I hope I am with CTV, but they were hands-off throughout the shoot and I invited



them in to see rough cuts — I didn't have any pressure from them and I found invariably the suggestions coming from in particular Arthur Weinthal, to the benefit of the series, in making it more accessible to a mass audience. So, when you live with a project like this, as I had done, with Peter, for more than a year and we filmed more than 70 hours of material, now we are going to the cutting room and we start cutting it. Even though you fight against it, you invariably make assumptions, you have the material so absorbed into your own being that it is easy to make assumptions and Arthur Weinthal was very, very good at reminding me that the CTV audience was seeing it for the very first time and that we couldn't assume that they had read Peter's book or knew anything about Russia and Russian history and so, he was constantly giving me pointers about making the material more accessible.

**John McGreevy:** Well, I think it's not just CTV that has changed but I think the realities of Canadian television. It's the emergence of independent producers who have an eye, not just for the domestic market but to the international market, who have developed a network of contacts all over the world, who enjoy working out of Canada and really like Canada and see no reason why we can't create in Canada productions and series of international appeal and I think that that is a new phenomenon in this country.

When I say "new" I think, there is no question within the last decade and yes, the advent of Telefilm is extremely important to our surviving in the marketplace but more, I think, is that it has to do with an emergence of independent producers and individual entrepreneurs in Canada who have a vision beyond the Canadian borders.

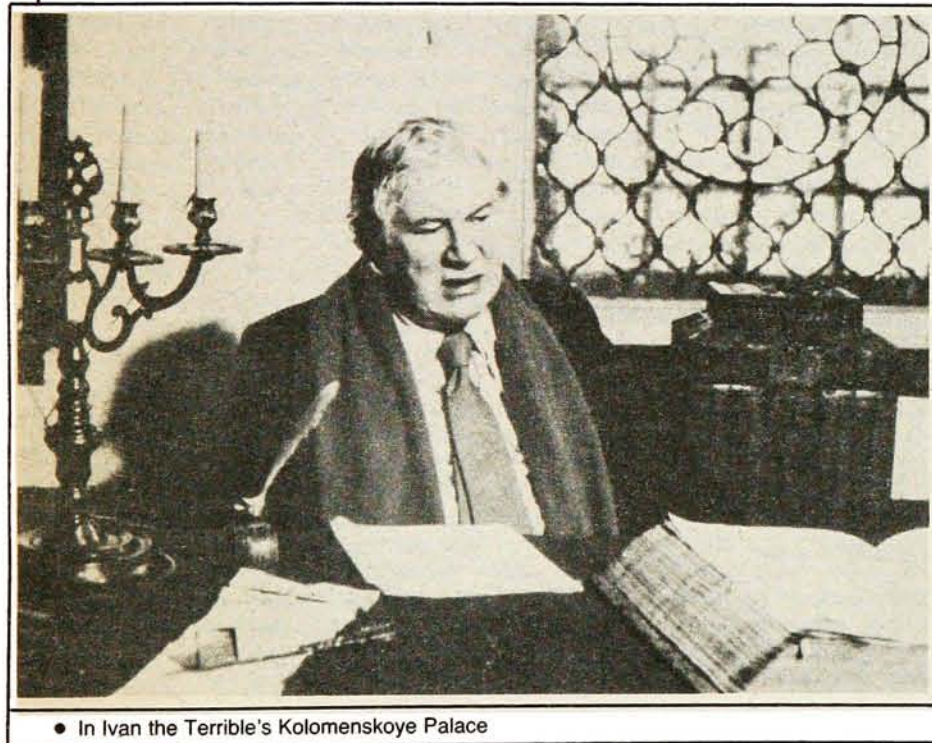
obviously than Australia but I find, for instance, that the best audiences in the English-speaking world are not American or British but Canadian and Australian. They are tremendously good and quick.

**John McGreevy:** But you like Toronto very much, don't you? What is the thing you say about Toronto?

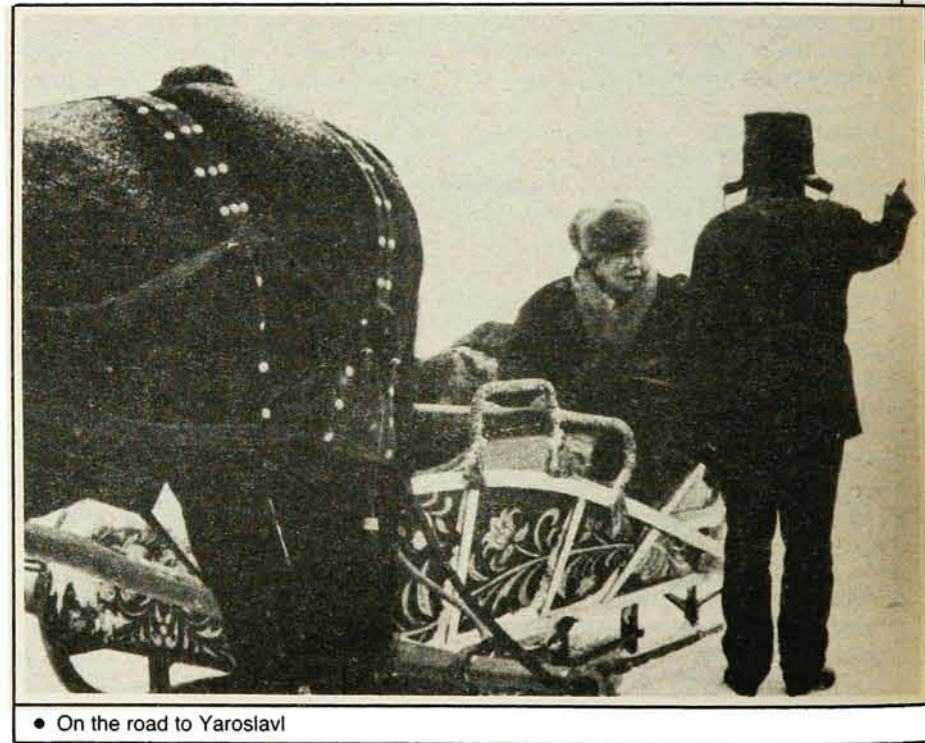
**Peter Ustinov:** I call it New York run by the Swiss. I used to hate Toronto. When I was young I used to come down there to debate on the radio with Nathan Cohen and it was really very hostile. In those days I said about it: now I know where the Cromwell Road leads to! But it has changed... I have rarely seen a town so transformed. Now, it's much more Swiss. I mean it's very modern and very elegant and yet it's all done with a kind of Scandinavian precision. If you go to New York after Toronto, you are impressed by the filth

*of all the things you do, what means the most to you?*

**Peter Ustinov:** Oh, I love it. Writing is the thing I take the most seriously. It's the most difficult and I love it and I'm astonished. It's very flattering, because they regard me as rather promising. A novel of mine came out there and the critic of the *Literaturnaya Gazetta* which is a pretty weighty tome, gave it a review of six pages. For one book that's not bad to start with, and the first line of the review from the reviewer, who's got a very big local standing, was: "Now I believe in love at first sight". The interesting thing is that it was a book called *Krumnagel*, a novel which didn't have much of an impact anywhere... But it's about an American policeman who shoots somebody in London and can't understand why he is arrested. And it's a pretty sarcastic piece but I think it's good character and the Russian critic, Mr. Nicolayev, said: This couldn't be



• In Ivan the Terrible's Kolomenskoye Palace



• On the road to Yaroslavl

**Cinema Canada:** Did you have a feeling as he described his audience that this was in any way different from what the CBC audience would be?

**John McGreevy:** No, we didn't make those distinctions, he just kept reminding me that it is a television audience and the competition out there is pretty fierce for their attention and that you have to... You cannot, particularly with a series like that, make assumptions that there is an interest in the first place in this material and do whatever you can to excite their attention at the beginning and then make decisions along the way to keep their attention.

**Cinema Canada:** John Stoneman is one producer every bit as excited by Chervcover as you are about his support. Do you know what caused the change of mood at CTV after so many years of not doing much independently?

**Cinema Canada:** For you does the international appeal coincide with the international content?

**John McGreevy:** Yes. For me in particular, personally, yes. The projects I have been associated with do indeed have international content, the *Cities* series is a very good case in point. I happen to enjoy material that has universal appeal, that crosses cultural borders and national boundaries and certainly I'm drawn to that and hope to continue with similar projects.

**Cinema Canada:** But is there something about your commanding both of our languages for one thing and coming from the outside that makes you specially appropriate for the Canadian industry?

**Peter Ustinov:** I have no idea but, attached as I am to Europe, I find myself very attracted to this place. And it's slightly more cosmopolitan in its ways

and New Yorkers regard this filth as exciting. "That's life, Peter! That shit on your shoes, that's part of life, don't you understand that?" I find it profoundly irritating, all that kind of romanticism about Big Apples and so on. Although there are some towns in America I'm very fond of, having played in many of them. Since I based my play about Beethoven in Palm Beach and they asked me what I thought and I said: it seems to me nobody here has ever heard of Beethoven unless they knew him in person. And then a waiter in a restaurant said: Hey, you had trouble in your theatre last night, I heard there was a death in the auditorium? I heard my own voice say: Well, that's not something we would have noticed... I didn't plan to say anything.

**Cinema Canada:** You said earlier that the Russians see you mainly as a writer, are you happy with that? Is writing,

written by anybody who hasn't got a profound affection for the United States. The American press all said: He's pretty tough on us... And the Russian in the end, I thought it extraordinarily elegant, he said: "It is a pleasant duty thing for us to point out an important writer to the West since they have performed this function so often for us."

**Cinema Canada:** It strikes me, John, that you're peculiarly set in terms of English production being on top of the States and yet reaching out to Europe and Asia. Have you had any particular vision about what the Canadian industry might be able to do better than others or differently from others?

**John McGreevy:** I think that precisely these projects, because, given that we come from Canada, we are afforded an access to many other cultures that lacks

a sense of inhibition or intimidation from those other cultures because Canada is accepted as neutral, balanced, sane, unhysterical, and I think that Canada has a great tradition for documentaries of all forms and what we are doing here is continuing in that tradition. I think that this, I really don't call these documentaries, I think they are essays, film essays, and the thing that I like, I'm an adopted Canadian, I came to Canada in the mid-sixties, is that one is really left alone to pursue their own interest here uninhibited by all kinds of cultural pressures and bureaucratic pressures, or political pressures. The only pressure that I have is financial pressure. It's constantly finding the funding for the project that I wish to do — that's the pressure. And that's a very tangible pressure but one can deal with that.

**Cinema Canada:** Was it tough with

there is the rest of the world. If you want to think in those terms, I happen not to care about borders, cultural or national borders, and I care very much about doing projects that transcend those narrow horizons. But I certainly wouldn't think that if you sold it to the United States that you have an international success on your hands. No. If you sell it world-wide, then you have an international success. I'm very concerned about the pressure to make our projects in Canada specifically attractive to the United States because that's a Catch 22. We cannot possibly compete with the extraordinary energy, dynamism, dollars and skills in the United States and if you make projects, if you design projects to appeal to them, you are headed for a difficult time. I think if you simply make projects that have their own integrity, that they make sense, that there is some recognizable audience for it, it will play anywhere in the world. That's

perience. I'm part of the television audience. I don't make these distinctions and I think that's a terrible mistake in particular that television executives in the United States make. They all have an awfully condescending attitude about the viewing public.

**Cinema Canada:** Peter, how do you feel — this is after all a production, it's got markets, there is a whole industrial component to it, does that enter into a project for you?

**Peter Ustinov:** No. I would agree largely with what John has said, I think that if the thing is national enough and good enough, it becomes international. If it tries to cater to all sorts of imperious I think it's doomed to mediocrity, if not failure. And mediocrity is the great scourge of our time, I think. There is an awful lot of very, very bad stuff around and everybody in Europe is congratulating themselves now they are

ment. If you hear the telephone ringing and you pick it up and it's very good news, you think: marvellous. and if it's some terrible bore, you think: who the hell invented this thing? So, there are no rules about television — at its best it can be absolutely marvellous and can be of more value than many other things. It has, to my mind, hidden virtues. Because of television, it's going to be impossible to have any great men in the future which is quite a relief, because they appear far too often.

**Cinema Canada:** Canada used to support its film industry with a great deal of money and really neglect television. With the broadcast fund, of course, all those funds have been shunted over and there was, I think, a general feeling that this was a step down in terms of quality, creativity, or what one can do. And yet when you hear John speak, you feel that he has a notion of television which is quite different from the



• In the city of Rostov



• Visiting Lev Tolstoy (Lev Durov) at Yasnaya Polyana

this project?

**John McGreevy:** It's always tough. It was less tough than most, because the nature of the project and because of Peter. And it was perceived as an international project that would have international appeal and therefore for Telefilm and for CTV there was no question that it made sense financially.

**Cinema Canada:** In Canada, and in this industry in particular, there is this constant confusion of 'international' as meaning other nations and 'international' as meaning the U.S.

**John McGreevy:** Oh really? That's interesting because I never heard that distinction before and, in fact, when I look at the concept I don't think of the United States as part of the international world that I think of when I think "international". I think of the United States as part of the North American culture of which Canada is a member and then

my simple view of things... You don't have to specifically design them for a Canadian audience or an American audience or an Icelandic audience or an English audience, I think that's a terrible trend. Either it has merit on its own and would have universal appeal or there are real problems with the thing itself.

**Cinema Canada:** Obviously you believe there is an intelligent audience somewhere tuned into their TV?

**John McGreevy:** Oh, I think that audiences are very under-estimated. Of course, I think that people are as intelligent, that audiences are as intelligent as you or me, of course I do, I believe I'm part of that. I never make the distinction between what I'm doing and where finally it's going and I don't ever make any concessions to things that are of no interest to me. I do films that are of interest to me and I accept my participation in the commonality of human ex-

getting more channels. It won't improve. What happens immediately is that the standards go down and everything is going to become now like Musak, instead of music — you hear it but you don't listen to it anymore. And that's very grave, I think, very grave, and I think the standard on the whole in the world has to be low because of the amount of time there is to fill and because of the gamut of unemployment which is a problem which won't go away. It's going to be even more vital to have more and more hours to fill for people who have nothing to do but stare at what we are up to.

**Cinema Canada:** You've seen the growth of this since the war, the growth of television and the media universe.

**Peter Ustinov:** But of course, you can't blame television — television is like a telephone. You can't blame the instru-

common denominator North American television which I think is what Telefilm is principally feeding into. Do you feel that what you are doing is different qualitatively than what other Canadians are doing? How do you situate yourself in the milieu?

**John McGreevy:** I don't situate myself. I do what I do.

**Cinema Canada:** Because you choose not to?

**John McGreevy:** No, it just doesn't occur to me to make comparisons. Comparisons are odious anyway: one simply goes ahead and does what it is they are capable of doing. I do, though, very much avoid formula television, the pablum approach to television. I'm not terribly interested in repeating the formulas that exist. It gives me no particular excitement. So, I get involved with projects that are slightly different from the normal fare and I've been at it

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.

now enough years to believe that there is an audience for it. I've been an independent producer for more than 10 years and somehow, in a very rocky market in Canada, I'm still there and I think that says something about the fact that there is an audience and that there are television outlets for productions that are not the normal fare for television. In fact, I've known that to be the case. That's my secret, that there is a large vacuum not being serviced and that what I've done is identify that vacuum and constantly feed projects into that vacuum. There is, I mean, the television audience is a mass audience of very wide configuration and when you talk about millions and it was very pleasant to me on Sunday night for the premier episode of this to have Murray Chercover, the president of CTV, tell me that he was certain this was going to get an enormous audience. When I started out with that project, I would not have expected an enormous audience but yes, a considered audience, a good audience but Chercover has absolutely no doubt that this was going to have a huge audience. That's wonderful, because it means that we've crossed over from so-called cultured audiences who look at PBS *Masterpiece Theatre*, CBC's *Nature of Things* and more selective viewing to a mass, more popular audience.

**Cinema Canada:** How important is it for you to direct that which you produce? Or produce what you direct?

**John McGreevy:** Both. I happen to wear both hats and I'm comfortable with that.

**Cinema Canada:** But how germane is that to the quality of what you do?

**John McGreevy:** Well, it's germane to my own excitement and interest and curiosity. And I do produce in order to direct and therefore I'm extremely selective with the kind of projects I work with. But up to a point I select them as far as I can find the money for them.

**Cinema Canada:** Watching that first episode, I had this feeling, this wonderful sense of suddenly seeing the tiny little television world opening up and the standard just going up right in front of your eyes... You talked about reaching a mass audience — do you feel that you've been able to do that here?

**John McGreevy:** Murray Chercover seemed to think so.

**Peter Ustinov:** A mass audience is just a mass of individuals. There is no secret about them. Immediately as they become statistics, they begin to have their own secrets which they themselves don't know, so they are not dangerous.

**John McGreevy:** The honest response is that really, in the end, you are satisfying yourself. You can't do other than that. If it's satisfying to you, you then... That's an assumption that I think is pos-



• In Stalingrad's ruins: McGreevy and Ustinov finalizing script details

sible to make, that there are other people out there who will respond. I like very much what you say. I don't think in terms of elevating, it's such too pompous, but I think what is happening is that because it's not formula, because it's not following the previous 10 hours of product — and I hate that term product, because it becomes a commodity. I never think of what I do as a product or as a commodity but as something very essential to my reason for being and like a good craftsman gives it everything he's got. And if it comes out a particular way, that happens to be where you are at at the moment. And I just simply respond to intuitively to what is happening in the editing room. I don't subscribe to a certain formula about how a thing like this should be shaped.

**Cinema Canada:** But do you have the feeling that in Canada the nature of TV and the nature of the programs that we produce is brought into question often enough? Here we are sitting on \$36 million a year to pump into TV production.

**John McGreevy:** I think that the quality of programming in Canada is pretty high, frankly, certainly in terms of its content. Everything can get better, one wants it to be better all the time. But one thing that worries me is too narrow a definition of what constitutes Canadian programming. I loathe those kind

of concepts. I don't like the idea in principle of restricting what a producer or a network may carry in terms of cultural or national boundaries; either it's worth viewing and worth viewing everywhere.

**Cinema Canada:** "Worth" has never been a criterion that I know of. Did you have Canadian content arguments over the series?

**John McGreevy:** Certainly not with CTV!

**Cinema Canada:** With who then?

**John McGreevy:** With others who chose not to participate...but it wasn't really an issue. Yes, I had to do a little bit of lobbying, I had to make the case...

**Cinema Canada:** Who besides Mr. Ustinov is not Canadian?

**John McGreevy:** Russia! I did have to do a bit of lobbying with the CRTC and persuade them that if they read the rules too narrowly, I would not have been permitted to do the *Cities* series and that seemed to be a valid enough argument. The *Cities* series have been a success, it had shown three times in Canada, sold in 39 countries around the world, got a number of awards and with that precedent it was hard for them to argue against.

**Cinema Canada:** Locale does not appear on the criteria...

**John McGreevy:** Well, that's my problem with bureaucrats who make these rules. How can you, for God's sake... They didn't want me to do *My Russia* per se, they wanted *My Canada*.

**Peter Ustinov:** We could do a wonderful redneck version of what you've done called *Their Russia*... I could be sitting on my rocker cleaning my rifle...

**John McGreevy:** Even before Peter started to write his book, we spoke, not so much of television, but of a kind of view of how to present this extraordinary history, so tumultuous, 700 years of Russian history and particularly for television I was fascinated by a mosaic approach rather than starting with one place and going predictably forward. I was very interested in the structure of this: while we do pursue a narrative line as you saw, to surprise the audience by taking off from time to time away from the narrative and putting in side trips to different places and that keeps the fascination, one hopes, and keeps the thing a surprise all the way. I think that you can impress an audience's attention that way. In fact for me, it's a way of sustaining their interest. They don't know quite where they are they going next. The idea that you have to spoon-feed the audience, I think, is one of the most condescending things that has happened to television.