

The Perfect Fit of the Russian New Year and Eldar Ryazanov

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January 13, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

It's New Year's time. That's right, it still is New Year's in Russia, where the holidays do not officially end until January 14 with the passing of what locally is known affectionately, I would even say wistfully, as the Old New Year. That all has to do with leftover dates from the old Julian calendar, about which you can learn more [here](#), if you are so inclined.

But my real topic is Eldar Ryazanov.

You would be forgiven for believing that Eldar Ryazanov is the sole embodiment of the Russian New Year. His 1975 comedy "The Irony of Fate" is easily the most-showed, most-watched and most-loved New Year's film in Russian cinema history. From the waning days of December through mid-January it plays hundreds of times on hundreds of channels throughout Russia.

If you thought no seasonal movie could be broadcast on television more often than "It's

a Wonderful Life," you have never been to Russia. "The Irony of Fate" not only plays hundreds of times around the New Year, it plays with astonishing regularity throughout the year, too.

Ryazanov started out as an artist with an eye to the New Year. His 1956 feature debut "Carnival Night" made everlasting stars out of the director and his leading lady, Lyudmila Gurchenko. In fact, Ryazanov went back to the film in 2006 to make a special TV remake of that film 50 years after its premiere.

It so happens, however, that this director has made a dozen or more of Russia's and the Soviet Union's most beloved films. Here are just a few for starters: "The Girl Without an Address" (1957), "The Man from Nowhere" (1961), "The Hussar's Ballad" (1962), "Beware: Automobile" (1966), "Zigzags of Fate" (1968), "Old Men Robbers" (1971), "Office Romance" (1977), "Garage" (1979), "Say a Word for the Poor Hussar" (1980), "Station for Two" (1982) and "Ruthless Romance" (1984).

If Russia had a cultural Mount Rushmore, Ryazanov's face would be all over it.

My wife Oksana and I once crossed the street with this man and his wife Emma. It was just outside of St. Petersburg at the Gatchina film festival. Our meals were being served in a cafe on the opposite side of a very busy, four-lane thoroughfare from the cinema where the films were being shown. I wondered if we were going to go hungry. Who could possibly get across that highway which had no street lights to slow traffic down? Oh, me of little faith.

Eldar Ryazanov merely stepped out into the road, without even looking either way, as my mother used to insist that I do when I was a kid. He took one step, and without more than a split-second pause he just began to cross it. I gasped. Not because of the danger he put himself in, but because of the extraordinary sight that greeted me eyes. Dozens of automobiles slammed on their brakes and came to a stop, leaving a broad swath of clear road for us to pass through. For the first time in my life I had an inkling of what it must have been like for the Israelites to follow Moses across the Red Sea.

Ryazanov is 82 now and he doesn't make films as often as he once did. He is, however, a restless and creative spirit. A few years ago he opened his own club, appropriately named Eldar, and he keeps the stage there busy with all kinds of events, including concerts, benefits, film and music festivals, and film showings. He is always in attendance and is always a participant in whatever is going on there.

In mid-December he hosted an evening honoring the memory of his great friend and colleague, the composer Andrei Petrov.

Petrov had already become a famous film composer for comedies by Georgy Daneliya and others by the time he began a lifelong collaboration with Ryazanov in the mid-1960s. Over the next 40 years they worked on more than a dozen films together.

On that December evening, nineteen performers, including Gurchenko and several of Petrov's highly accomplished grandchildren, performed 21 of Petrov's classic songs. This is very much the kind of thing Ryazanov does — using his influence and resources to keep alive the memory and work of people who have contributed so much to Russian culture.

During the concert Ryazanov told the story of one of his first meetings with Petrov. The director asked the composer to sit down at an upright piano and play some of the tunes he had worked up. What he didn't know was that Petrov was a notoriously bad pianist.

"Well, when I heard him play that piano, I knew we were in for something," Ryazanov quipped ironically.

There is also a great story about Daneliya's reaction when he learned that Ryazanov had hired Petrov to score his new movie.

"Write some nice music for Ryazanov," Daneliya reportedly said, "but make sure it's worse than what you write for me."

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