

States of the Union

ONE NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF YEVGENY YEVTUSHENKO

BY RICHARD J MARGOLIS



BARRY BOYS

ONE CHILLY Friday night in January my wife and I parked our car on a dark, dingy New York street and trudged through the ruddy-faced, steam-blowing multitudes toward the Felt Forum of Madison Square Garden. Beneath my warm overcoat I clutched two tickets to a once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-forgotten event —“Yevtushenko and Friends Poetry in Concert”

“Only fancy,” I shouted into my wife’s ear, “here we are just two ordinary citizens, on our way to hear the great Yevtushenko and his friends, including Barry Boys, James Dickey, Stanley Kunitz, Blythe Danner, Richard Wilbur, the Bijou The-

ater Singers and even a former senator, Eugene McCarthy. In this country,” I concluded happily, “every man is king.”

My wife flashed a loving smile at me with her haunting Kirghiz eyes. “Dear chatterer,” she cautioned, “do not misplace the tickets.”

Outside the great hall we found a large crowd waiting to be admitted. The police were letting them in one at a time, through a single doorway. There were rumors of bombs in the balcony because the intrepid Yevtushenko had publicly pledged to read us his new poem about the bombing of impresario Sol Hurok’s office. That explosion, which most people presumed to be the work of anti-Soviet Jewish militants, had killed a secretary. The moment Yevtushenko heard about the tragedy he rushed to the scene of the crime, inspected the debris and announced he was writing a poem to commemorate the disaster. Millions thrilled to the news.

As we edged closer to the entrance a bearded young man handed us a leaflet. “Whom do you represent?” I asked.

“All the prisoners in Siberia,” he said, and vanished.

The leaflet was a pack of scurrilities. “Ask Yevtushenko,” it said, “why he is masquerading as an anti-Stalinist while at the same time his sponsors are arresting and sentencing people for their political views. Ask Yevtushenko why he remains silent about Soviet political prisoners who are dying because of inhuman conditions in prison.”

My wife shivered. “Could that be true?” she asked.

“Impossible,” I said. “Do you not recall what Yevtushenko wrote only nine short years ago? ‘There are people,’ he said, ‘who pride themselves on never having told a lie in their whole lives. But let them ask themselves how often they have failed to tell the truth, preferring a safe silence.’”

Indignantly I ground the sordid leaflet into the mud with my boot. “Come,” I said. “Let nothing blemish this beautiful evening.”

Just then a disheveled, wild-eyed girl thrust another leaflet into my hand. “Whom do you represent?” I asked.

“All the forces that are fighting racism, sexism and self-serving cynicism,” she replied, and vanished.

This leaflet was entitled, “Is Your

Head Being Led?" It was full of ferocious falsehoods "The promoters of tonight's show," it claimed, "want to develop superstars in poetry, like in boxing and folk rock. But where, oh where, is there a poetry of and from the PEOPLE?"

My wife turned pale "Could that be true?" she asked

"Humbug," I assured her. "Did not Yevtushenko declare in his autobiography, 'It makes me proud not to be just an onlooker but to be taking part in my people's struggle for the future?' And did he not also confess that he 'felt a responsibility for the whole world?'" I tore the fraudulent paper into little bits. I hate pleas that depress me

Every seat in the auditorium was filled with ordinary people like us, and when Yevtushenko appeared on stage—slim and graceful in blue slacks, a gray turtleneck sweater and a bracelet on each wrist—we all cheered. I shall never forget his first words "Sorry," he said, my English is really childish"

The first poem of the evening, read in English by the actor Barry Boys, was about the siren call of the stage and how it might corrupt a poet. In it Yevtushenko pledged never to sacrifice truth to theatrics. While Boys read the poem, the spotlight emphasized the paleness of his face, the shyness of his black silk shirt, the tightness of his matching hip-huggers

A little later Boys read Yevtushenko's new poem about the explosion in Sol Hurok's office—"Bombs for Balalaikas." In this poem Yevtushenko said he could not remain silent, he had to speak out. Comparing the incident with Nazi murders in concentration camps, he promised to "fly forever from people to people on wings singed by fire"—the fire in Hurok's office, I think. The bombing, he concluded, was "anti-Russian, anti-Semitic, and anti-American"

When Boys finished, Yevtushenko recited the poem in Russian. He

shouted a lot louder than Barry Boys had and he used many more gestures, thus proving his sincerity "Just imagine!" I whispered to my wife "He wrote that poem in a big hurry"

"It sounds like it," said my wife (The next day the poem was published in *Izvestia*. Yevtushenko had telephoned it to Moscow.)

The rest of the evening afforded us many valuable insights. Mr. McCarthy read us a poem about Vietnam which he said proved that the land over there belonged to the Vietnamese. The Bijou Singers clapped and jumped as they chanted Yevtushenko's stirring poem about America, "Freedom to Kill." The significant line in this poem shows that Yevtushenko does not close his eyes to moral slackness "The stars in your flag, America, are bullet-holes"

"There's a lot of meaning in that," I remarked to my wife

"A poem should not mean but be," she replied

PERHAPS THE high point of the concert was the reading of "Babi Yar," Yevtushenko's memorial to the 34,000 Jews shot by the Nazis in a ravine outside Kiev. Like all of his poems that sympathize with the sufferings of others, it was written in the first person "I am every old man who was shot here," he wrote (in 1961) "I am every boy who was shot here / No part of me will ever forget any of this" I won't forget it either, because in the middle of the reading one of the Bijou Singers started to play the cello—it sounded something like the *Kol Nidre* melody—and then the other singers began softly to hum a haunting Russian tune written specially for the occasion by Carlo Altomare

I nudged my wife "The music is dramatizing the poem's true meaning"

"Lots of imaginary gardens but no real toads," she shot back mysteriously

The finale featured many colored

spotlights, it was very moving. Yevtushenko read "In a Steelworker's Home," in English. The poem explained how Russians and Americans came together at the Elbe in 1945, at war's end. They were honest workers, he pointed out, who drank their vodka and their whiskey straight. Today, he went on, Russia and America are separated by the Pacific Ocean. But there is no reason why we cannot make the Pacific Ocean into another Elbe. All we have to do is "swim closer." Then he shouted it—"Swim closer, swim closer"—again and again, while the Bijou Singers sang and rocked, and all the actors and poets came back on stage and started to dance with each other (except for Mr. McCarthy, who just stood there fingering his handsome striped tie). It was like the ending to *Har*

When we got back to the car, it wasn't there "It's been stolen by anti-Soviet Jewish militants," I cried

"It's been towed away," said my wife, pointing to the no-parking sign

We eventually located our car on a forlorn pier where the city holds delinquent automobiles for ransom. \$50 for the tow and a \$25 ticket for the sin "I will not remain silent about this atrocity," I said to the man at the pier "I must speak out"

The patrolman rang up my money on the cash register and shrugged "Sut yourself," he said

I was up all night writing fierce strophes

*Here on the cruel pier
are all the castaways,
towaways
of my supersensitive,
artistic heart*

*I feel I am they,
the Dodges, the Datsuns
the battered droshkies*

*I fly from audience to audience,
on the dented wings
of Falcons and Thunderbirds,
singing of our arrangement—
my words, their pain*