

Cabaret

It was a strange night all round. I had been invited out to dinner together with a couple of others. I had no expectations as I had never been in Russia before. We met in the hotel foyer and took a taxi to the restaurant. That, in itself, was an event because at that time in Moscow the major currency in exchanges with foreigners was Marlborough cigarettes; one pack in the city; two packs to and from the airport.

We arrived at the restaurant and I was struck by how small the entrance was, as if they wished to keep its presence unknown.

Once inside, the contrast was striking. The restaurant was immense; dozens of tables, a dance floor and a stage. It was clearly one of the best in the city; clean white table clothes, high class cutlery and candles.

The menu was not extensive, but the food was good and the wine palatable.

We had just started the first course when the cabaret began, which even our Russian host had not expected. And what a cabaret it was.

It started with a very large lady singing opera, loudly enough to stop any conversations at the tables. Thankfully her spot did not last long and she was followed by a trick uni-cyclist, wearing a series of strange hats. The next act was an elderly chap, with another man accompanying him on guitar, singing Russian folk songs.

He was followed by a magician, doing card tricks, who failed to gain the attention of his audience.

A girl dancing troupe in scanty, glittery costumes replaced him, in what I took to be their version of the Pigalle in Paris. The final act, a Russian Rock Group, playing mainly Russian songs interspersed with a few Beatles numbers, were no better than a local group playing at a village fete.

The stage was then cleared, the cabaret over, and it was time for dancing, but this too was strange. Apart from one or two couples, the dance floor was invaded by single men, attempting the Cossack dances, down on their haunches, kicking their legs out. Watching the number who fell over during this exercise, it was clear that plenty of vodka had been taken with their meal. We had finished eating and were about to leave when there was a disturbance at the other side. Five men had come in and started firing guns. One of the dancers dropped to the floor and they shot some others sitting at a table. Our Russian host said, "Follow me," and led us swiftly by the dark wall to the entrance and out into the street. We hailed a taxi just as a number of armed police arrived.

We were pretty shaky and asked, "Is this normal?"

"Not normal but not unusual but you are safe. This is local gang warfare."

“Will there be any retribution? Don’t the KGB do anything about it?”
He laughed. “Who do you think they were?”

Inspired by the novel, ‘Crime and Punishment’ by Fyodor Dostoevsky