

Smirnoff 'jokes' way into successful career

By Carol Azizian
staff writer

"My name is Yakov Smirnoff, I am originally from the Soviet Union."

Dead silence.
"Thank you very much. I'm an American now."

Dead silence.

"It feels pretty good to be an American. I remember the day I arrived. I had read a lot of books about it and said the first thing you see when you come to America is the Statue of Liberty. Well, the people who wrote those books came by boat. I flew into Kennedy Airport. The first thing I see is a 400-pound woman in the immigration office. I look up and say, 'Statue of Liberty?' She answers, 'No, but I'm tired and poor.'"

When Yakov Smirnoff emigrated from his Communist homeland a decade ago, he, too, was tired and poor. He had a meager \$100 and a pocket full of capitalist dreams.

Now an internationally known comedian, Smirnoff has acted out a "rags to riches" life that rivals Horatio Alger's.

Take a sip of the Smirnoff success story:

• Played a leading role in a syndicated television show, "What a Country," on the Fox Broadcasting Network.

• Guest-starred as a Russian selling stolen watches on "Night Court."

• Performed his comedy routine across America in casinos, comedy clubs and on "The Tonight Show."

• Appeared in such movies as "Moscow on the Hudson," "Heartburn," "The Money Pit" and "Beverly Hills Cop."

• Wrote a book, "America on Six Rubles a Day," published by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, in November 1987.

EVEN BEFORE "glasnost" became a household word, Smirnoff was sweeping the country off its feet with his wit and humor. The Wall Street Journal dubbed him "America's first comedian from the real Borscht Belt" and the Los Angeles Times wrote, "The comrade knows funny."

His Soviet schtick is as refreshing as a heat wave in Siberia. Smirnoff recently gave Detroiters a taste of his home brew as part of the "Let Us Entertain You" series at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield.

"In my high school yearbook I was voted most likely to be an American," he joked.

'In my high school yearbook, I was voted most likely to be an American.'

— Yakov Smirnoff

Smirnoff, a 37-year-old bachelor, grew up in the port city of Odessa, which he described as "a little more free-minded than other parts of Russia."

As the class clown, he performed for his peers during school talent shows. He recalled playing such playground games as "Simon Says," "Dodge Bombs" and — his favorite — "Hide and Stay Hidden."

"It's hard to be funny in Russian schools," he cackled. "You shoot spit balls at the teacher and she shoots back."

"(Education) is free. But you get what you pay for. My main objection is that they tend to brainwash you. They're recruiting new members of the Communist party. It's like Amway."

When he turned 18, Smirnoff joined the army and entertained troops all over country as the Bob Hope of Russia.

"The army wasn't bad," he said. "We lived in solar-heated barracks. They had no roofs. We'd sit around singing songs like 'Staying Alive' and 'Please Release Me, Let Me Go.'"

After two years of mandatory service, he toured with Soviet rock bands like "The Rolling Tanks" (just kidding).

Smirnoff had learned how to be a refrigeration mechanic in high school and he earned a college degree in art education. But he abandoned routine nine-to-five work to pursue show "biz."

LANDING a job on the sea gave him his first big break. While entertaining on cruise ships to the Black Sea ("The Love Barge," he calls it), Smirnoff discovered the benefits of capitalism.

"One day, I asked for a raise and for my parents to go on the cruise with me," he recalled. "They yelled at me and kicked me out. But they sent a telegram the same day and apologized."

"American and European companies contracted with the Soviet government to use those ships and they wanted good chefs and good entertainment. All of a sudden, I got a taste of capitalism and I liked it."

It took two years for the Soviet government to grant a visa to Smirnoff and his parents.

"I applied for a visa and they gave me Mastercard," he wisecracked. "The KGB (which stands for Kiss Goodbye Your Butt) decides who they want to let out. They investigate you, fire you from work and turn people against you. It's like '60 Minutes.'"

From 1977-79, Smirnoff stayed in New York City, taking odd jobs as a bartender, bus boy and shipping manager for a company that made greeting belts.

Learning English wasn't easy. "I didn't speak the language when I got here so I looked myself in a room and watched television for three months. Then I realized it was a Spanish station."

LIKE THE character in "Moscow on the Hudson," he relied on the kindness of other immigrants who gave him a family food, china and furniture. "Our apartment building in Washington Heights was just like a big (ethnic) family, a melting pot of Germans, Czechoslovaks and Russians."

Chasing his dream, he moved to California and sold light bulbs and newspapers, while performing at the Comedy Store.

Thanks to Robin Williams, he met director Paul Mazursky and landed a bit part in "Moscow on the Hudson." (He was a dishwasher in the Russian restaurant where Williams worked as a busboy.)

The gap between performing comedy in the United States and in the Soviet Union was wider than the Persian Gulf, he contends.

"In Russia, my material was censored once a year by the Department of Jokes. They'd send it back to me and I'd have to stay with the script for a year. I couldn't improvise. If someone heckled me from the audience, I'd have to say, 'come back in a year.'"

Winners of the best political joke contest in Russia get 20 years, he deadpanned.

Here's one he reportedly told: "There's a rule in Russia. If they ask you, 'Who's your father?' you're supposed to answer 'My father is the Soviet Union.' If they ask, 'Who's your mother?' you say 'The Communist party.' When they asked me 'Who do you want to be?' I said, 'I want to be an orphan.' And they sent me to winter camp in Siberia."

"Since glasnost, they say we have freedom of speech in Russia. But here, you also have freedom after you speak."



Russian emigrant Yakov Smirnoff has parlayed his brand of humor into a successful stage and movie career.

'I thought to myself, 'What a country!'

— Yakov Smirnoff

New Freedom and I said to myself, 'What a Country.' Freedom in a box. I bought 15 of them, super maid. I figured I should get as much freedom as possible. I'd write letters to my friends in Russia and put those things in envelopes. I thought they should enjoy some freedom, too."

SUPERMARKETS

"Do they have supermarkets in Russia? Yeah, they have signs that say 'sorry, we're open.'"

"When I came to America and saw the amount of food here, it was incredible. I saw powdered milk, you just add water and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice, you just add water and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder. I thought to myself, 'What a country! I'm making my family tonight!'"

RUSSIAN WOMEN

"Russian men have a saying. 'Women are like buses. . . That's it. When you go to a Russian singles bar, you get lucky. If you go home alone. Typical pickup lines are: 'Can I buy you a potato?' or 'Would you like to defect?'"

GOING BACK
"I called the Russian Embassy a while ago and said I would like to go back for a visit. They said it would cost me an arm and a leg. I know those guys. I said, 'I'll wait for a sale.'"

Smirnoff: A closer look at Reagan, Gorbachev

More slips of Smirnoff:

GORBACHEV

"The man is very slick. He said he was going to pull all the troops out of Afghanistan and put them back where they belong — Poland, Czechoslovakia. . ."

"How can you trust a man who has a birth mark on his head the shape of Poland? Every time they invade an-

other country, it grows."

REAGAN

"Reagan says he doesn't know anything about Iran-Contra and doctors keep cutting off pieces of his nose."

FREEDOM

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