

Krekhtsim of the Heart - A reflection on KlezFest 04

Nancy Metashvili, newly arrived in York UK, via Alaska describes her feelings at the end of an intensive and stimulating week. (*this article won the second prize in the UK Jewish media awards in February 2006*)

The pain in my danced-out oysgematert (worn out) knees is receding, the aching shoulders and wrists are a happy memory, and the frantic freylekhs that spin through my mind are slowing (though Merlin's haunting tish nign (table song) still ghosts around in my deepest heart). My Klez soul, mayn yiddishe neshama, has been refreshed with such verve, panache and an intensity that is rather rare in my jaded life.

Like a nign, words fail...

It was the 2004 London KlezFest, and the stars of the Klezmer world were gathered, once again, teaching and living the music and dance traditions of the Jews of Eastern Europe. Merlin Shepherd was there, and Alan Bern, Michael Alpert, Jeff Warschauer and Deborah Strauss, Stuart Brotman, Christian Dawid, Sanne Moericke, Josh Dolgin, Sophie Solomon, Jon Walton, Shura Lipovsky, Adrienne Cooper... so many folks I know only from a CD. Sing brider sing, fergessen alle tsuris (Sing brother sing, forget all sorrows) One could have been summering in the Catskills in years gone by, or celebrating a wedding in your shtetl village. Fiddles and accordions, clarinets and piccolos leading us in joyous dance, always the music spiralling upwards to a frenetic pitch, sweat splashing, fingers flying, feet stamping- joy in being Jewish (or not, as were several of the attendees); joy in being lovingly, laughingly, kvetchingly, (can't translate really, means kind of grumble) hungrily soul-brimmingly alive!

Oy, the schedule was so full: dance classes starting at – yes! – 9am, followed by lectures, hands-on classes, instrumental workshops, ensembles, choir, masterclasses, dinner, performances by fellow students 'Klezmer; the Next Generation' and then MORE DANCING – until the last train home. Singers, dancers and musicians had gathered from all over the world. There were Russians and Czechs, Belgians and French, one Brazilian, a Scotsman with a santouri and a big Turkish drum, a gorgeous chachem from South Africa, 3 foxy Irish chicks representing the Yiddish Gaeltacht, and folks from Persia,



Germany and North America. There was an elderly violinist whose heritage was Iraqi Jewish brought up in Burma, Baghdad and Israel. There were lots and lots from London. There was the young and talented 'Brat Pack', classically trained, and at the other end of the time line, a fabulous 86

year old lady in a bright pink cowboy hat, bangles to the elbows, singing away in the choir and able to converse in English, Russian, Yiddish,

Polish, Hebrew etc. And there was the ubiquitous British Punkette in yellow polka dot tights, green top and purple micro mini skirt, Bowler hat and loads of Tattoosshlepping around a cello in an artwork of stickergrafitti case.

The weather was hot and sticky, but ah, what a glorious mishegass it all was! To play the music I love so much, get to sing my heart out, dance like a dervish laughing like a little kid at Purim; there's Michael Alpert playing with his infatuation with the deep ethnomusicological meaning of 'hokey-pokey' and it's application to real life. 'That's what

it's all about'. There's solidarity, intimacy, arrogance, virtuosity, bandaged feet, Truth, comedy and Pain - There's Polina Achkenazi-Shepherd, as graceful as a Russian woodsprite Merlin's humour and drive, the dour Stu Brotman surprising us occasionally with a tsimbl solo to echo down eternity, Jeff Warschauer, my favourite mandolin player since my Mum.



in her ensemble session.

My ensemble, directed by Michael Alpert (bless him, he still raves about Alaska) sang and played soulful Carpathian Shabbes shabbes shabbes songs.... Totally unexpected was the lady from Prague, whose blindness and lack of English had left her a bit isolated, wandering around with that goofy one-with-god look the unsighted can have... when she took the stage her voice exploded like the Big Bang, rich deep and powerfully expressive. I suspect mine were not the only eyes with tears in them.

Nancy is third from left playing the flute

But the heart-stopping highlight for me had to be the unassuming chubby woman in a wheelchair who took the stage and started singing a bland and average set - and somehow we all ended up in a parallel musical universe as she belted out Holly Near's 'Rise Up': I ain't afraid - of your Yahweh - I ain't afraid - of your Allah - I ain't afraid - of your Jesus - I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your God!

Everyone in the room was on their feet, electricity zinging wildly. I ain't afraid - clapping, wailing, writhing, I ain't afraid - get down - shout it - feel it - shake it. Rise up - hair crackling - eyes glowing - hearts united, Rise up, to your higher power, Don't let the letter of the law kill the spirit of your love.

Yes, mes amis, that's exactly what we should do, rise up. It was a good KlezFest. Zay gesunt, Nancy (Alaska, via York, UK)