

Roll Over, 'Cats.' The Real Thing Is Here.

By [DINITIA SMITH](#)

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The manager of the coffee shop in Midtown was sorry, but he could not let Yuri Kuklachev and his entourage come in; the New York City Department of Health does not allow animals in restaurants. In Mr. Kuklachev's hand was a cat carrier containing Marusa, his favorite cat. He had brought her to New York, along with 25 other cats, on the nine-hour trip from Russia to perform in the Moscow Cats Theater here, and he was not about to be deterred by details. After repeated promises to keep the carrier under the table and well out of sight, everyone was allowed to sit down.



Then, through a translator, Mr. Kuklachev started to describe one of the cat's most famous tricks, when he suddenly leaped up. He slid out the

carrier, and in a moment Marusa was standing on her two front paws in the palm of his hand, her tail waving in the air.

Customers stood up, craned their necks and pointed, as the manager hurried over to Mr. Kuklachev - and laughed. Mr. Kuklachev, a small, muscular man with white hair and wide cheeks, smiled and put Marusa away.



The show, which opens tonight at the TriBeCa Performing Arts Center and runs weekends through Oct. 30, features 26 cats; Mr. Kuklachev's wife, Yelena, as the Queen of the Cats; and two small, outnumbered dogs. The theater has a total of nine different routines, including "Cats From Outer Space" and "Nutcracker." No one show is ever exactly like another.

"Cats are like actors," Mr. Kuklachev said. "They do what they want. Sometimes a cat doesn't want one trick, so he does another."

The next day, in rehearsal, Mr. Kuklachev gave a preview. A cat called Tamara was brought out onstage and began rocking on a glittering pink rocking horse, nearly tipping over at one point.



There would also be a "tightrope" act. Two people held a pole horizontally while Belok, who is white, walked across it, with an intent manner. A black cat named Charlie did the same thing, but upside down, grasping the pole from underneath with his four legs. Motia, who is off-white, outdid them both. She made her way across the pole from underneath using only two legs. As the cats worked, Mr. Kuklachev clucked and cooed encouragingly, rewarding them with gentle strokes of his curved palm.

The story of "Queen of the Cats" is a kind of allegory, Mr. Kuklachev explained. He plays a painter who goes to sleep and dreams that aliens arrive from outer space in a U.F.O. and try to steal his cats.

At one point, one of the cats stands on a mirrored ball that looks as if it has been borrowed from "Saturday Night Fever." She is emitting "rays of goodness," he said, spreading kindness throughout the world.



The idea of performing cats came to Mr. Kuklachev in 1971, he said, when he found a stray begging for food by performing on its hind legs and doing somersaults for onlookers. Mr. Kuklachev, the son of a truck driver and a factory worker, had attended clown school. He realized he and the cat might be able to do something together. He named her Strelka, and soon she was performing with him at the Moscow State Circus.

Mr. Kuklachev did an act which would become well known as "The Cat in the Pot." A cat would sit in a pot. He would take her out, and she would keep jumping back in again.

In 1988 Mr. Kuklachev left the Moscow circus, and in 1990 he founded the Cats Theater. It is very popular in Moscow, Mr. Kuklachev said, and over the years he has traveled to 80 countries and won many awards.

There are 120 cats altogether in the company. The other 94 are back in Moscow at the theater on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, where 10 caretakers and four veterinarians look after them. There, they live in the theater in glass-fronted spaces - not cages, Mr. Kuklachev insists - where they each have a bed and a chair to play on. They are allowed to roam but must enter and exit their rooms on his command, he said.

"We have no mice," Mr. Kuklachev noted.

Mr. Kuklachev's son Dmitri, 30, who is a member of the troupe, interjected: "A cat cannot live in a cage. If it lives in a cage it becomes wild, aggressive." Although Dmitri performs with the cats, he is allergic to them, he said; he controls his asthma through breathing exercises.

The cats are accomplished travelers, Mr. Kuklachev said. He did not sedate them for the trip on a Boeing 767, and they are not nervous about the location change. Translation: They still use the litter box.

For their visit to New York, a hotel was not really an option, so Mr. Kuklachev rented two apartments in Brighton Beach, where Russian speakers and Russian food are plentiful. The cats and the two dogs share one apartment with two caretakers that is directly underneath where the Kuklachevs stay, and they have free rein. It takes 55 cans of cat food every other day to feed them, with dry food and meat on alternate days.

Mr. Kuklachev does not worry about damage. If the cats ruin the rug by scratching it, he will replace it. As for cleaning the litter, he said he and the other members of the troupe all pitch in.

The only cat not in the downstairs apartment is Marusa, who gets to sleep with Mr. Kuklachev. "Marusa is like a guard dog," he said, adding that cats are jealous creatures. "She won't let anybody near me."

One day, Mr. Kuklachev said, he would like to found what he calls a "cat temple," where 1,000 cats would live and tourists could visit the "living museum."

Where does Mr. Kuklachev find new cats to replenish his, uh, stock? "It's a dynasty," Dmitri said, answering for his father.

The younger Mr. Kuklachev said his father trains the cats not by rewarding them with treats, as one might train a dog, but "by long, good words, touching them."

The elder Mr. Kuklachev bridled at the idea of rewarding cats with food. "A cat is not a dog," he said. "If a cat doesn't want to do something, he will not do it."



END