

## *Home stretches beyond our borders*

### **For Arlington singer, it's Russia – with love**

By **Anne-Marie Seltzer**  
SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE

*In a planned escape with a traveling theater troupe, a Russian prince flees his homeland in the 1920s to avoid the communist regime. Arriving safely in Poland, he receives a visa and makes his way to Paris, where he earns immediate recognition as a painter. The nobleman and his wife immigrate to the United States several years later and raise a family. At age 44, he dies in an automobile accident.*

This scenario does not come from the pages of a novel. It summarizes the life of artist and Russian icon painter Alexis Alexeyvich Arapoff, the father of Arlington resident Mary Arapoff. Since her father's death, when she was 11, Arapoff has always dreamed of visiting Russia.

This past July, she fulfilled that dream by spending 10 days in St Petersburg in an exchange program between OperaFest in Derry, NH, of which she is a member, and the Zazerkalye Family Musical Theatre. Not only did she learn more about her father, but she also came away with a greater understanding of herself.

"I volunteered to go on this trip. I thought it would be wonderful to feel what my father felt, being on Russian soil. I wanted to see the city where he lived. I never dreamed that St. Petersburg would be so beautiful and so large. It is a microcosm of the Russian culture. The people have a passion for every art form. Their love of art has helped them to survive," said Arapoff, a singer for 20 years.

"I've studied and performed Russian music for years in America as well as in Italy. Now, I wanted to drink in the sounds of St Petersburg, to feel the Russian spirit and soul through the music. As an artist, I needed to be in contact with other Russian artists and to be enriched by them. I also wanted to get more ideas for my shows, and see the churches and the Russian icons first hand."

Arapoff's itinerary included daily interaction with members of the Zazerkalye Theatre. The eight Americans from OperaFest would spend part of each day observing the creation of their latest show, *Fenice the Falcon*.

"It was like being in a master class. The level of artistic creation in St Petersburg



ADVOCATE PHOTO BY TODD MAGLIOZZI  
Mary Arapoff of Arlington, in Russian costume, rehearses for the International festival.

# She sings to Russia with love

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is very high. All the artists in the theater are opera trained and knowledgeable in dance and storytelling," she said. "One of the performers coached me while we were there."

Arapoff also brought home several Russian costumes and large crowns called kokoshnik that were made especially for her by seamstresses for the Zazerkalye. "I was the only American from the group who was taken to the atelier of the theater's costume designer," she added. "I felt very privileged."

During her stay, she and two other Americans lived in the apartment that had belonged to the late-artist father of Alexander Petrov, the Zazerkalye's director. The apartment was a few doors from the Winter Palace.

In her travels around the city, she saw more relatives. "I went to an exhibition on pre-Revolutionary Russia and saw a painting of one of my ancestors who had been a lady-in-waiting to the czarina," she said. "Taking picture. of the exhibition wasn't permitted, but when I told the guard that the woman was my ancestor, she quietly left the room so that I could snap one photograph."

Arapoff was also impressed by the graciousness other hosts. Russian guides Natasha and Valentin Navara, whom Arapoff met when they visited the United States last year, took her and the group on special walks and to state museums. "We walked or took buses and the subway to get around the city. The subways are six stories underground because they go under the river. A special driver took me to the churches."

The trip wasn't without hardship. "We were hungry most of the time because there was very little to eat. Our diet consisted mostly of cucumbers, tomatoes, bread, eggs, and cheese in various forms, and some fruit. We shared whatever we had with those who didn't have anything," Arapoff said.

Another highlight was visiting her father's large apartment on a canal in the northern part of the city, where the intellectuals lived. "Alexander also showed me the church there and lit candles in front of the icons for my family. He was wonderful."

Arapoff's voice is full of pride when she speaks about her father: "My father was a Russian prince through his maternal grandmother, who was a Tolstoy. He was 13 years old when the Russian Revolution started. "The suffering was incredible; he would never discuss it with anyone. My grandmother took her children to the Russian Steppes and avoided starvation by bartering the family jewels. Later, he was able to attend Moscow University of Art. He left the country with great sadness and regret when he was 21, but he had no choice. Life under communism would have been intolerable. He would have spent his life painting portraits of Lenin and Stalin."

"Relatives helped carry out his escape. They had a visa waiting for him in Poland. From there, he went to Paris and became an overnight success through his paintings. He and my mother came to America several years after their marriage. Their six children were all born here. Just before his death, he tried unsuccessfully to establish a school for icon painting here."

"Because Arapoff is the child who most shared her father's love of the Russian icon, visiting Russia was especially meaningful "Russian icons are unlike anything else in the world. They are filled with light and exuberance, and are a witness to the story of Christ.

"You must be in touch with God to do that kind of painting I remember my father fasting in the spirit of the icon painters and stopping at churches to pray. Even after he died, his paintings talked to me," said Arapoff who has lectured on the subject

Arapoff is planning to return to Russia. Next time, she plans to take groups of Americans to St.Petersburg to see the Russian icons. "I was taken to the churches with the most ancient icons in the city and given information on the meaning of the Icons," she said. "I want to share this wonderful experience with other Americans."

