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## THE NEW NEW YORKER Composer Takes His First Bow 'Skyline' honors Bulgaria's freedom

By Sorah Shapiro. Sorah Shapiro is a freelance writer

Though Dimitri Kovachev was a renowned composer back home in Sofia, Bulgaria, no one recognized his face in a crowd. Even at concerts where his music was played throughout Europe, no one even knew he was in the audiences.

A modest man, Kovachev never minded the obscurity, for composers are expected to be faceless, he thought.

But all this will change on Sunday when the new American is brought up for a long-belated bow at the performance of his English-language, Broadway-style musical play "Under Manhattan Skyline" at the Queens Museum of Art. The production marks the 123rd anniversary of Bulgaria's independence from Ottoman rule, a national Bulgarian holiday reminiscent of America's Independence Day.

Kovachev, 50, left Bulgaria in pursuit of his own independence in 1990, when he saw the country crumbling after the collapse of communism.

"I looked out the window and saw the stores were closed because they had no food. I said to my family, 'This is ridiculous! There is no country any more,'" remembered Kovachev. "The people were becoming very frustrated and unfriendly, so we left for America." Recently, when the Bulgarian Consulate in New York City invited him to organize the upcoming holiday event, the Jackson Heights resident proposed honoring Bulgarian-born Vasil Ivanov with a surprise English-language musical about his life. The consulate readily agreed. Ivanov is a prominent Bulgarian emigre whose escape from communism and subsequent building of a prestigious life is enough for a book- let alone a musical.

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"Of all the people we could have honored, I thought Ivanov, 65 (whose character is known as Victor in the musical), would be the best, as his background tells the real story of gaining independence. His rags-to-riches life story is very impressive," said Kovachev.

Escaping communism in 1948 by crossing Bulgaria's border with Yugoslavia, where gunfire was exchanged with border guards, Ivanov said he and his family faced all sorts of deprivations in a labor camp. After escaping to Italy, Ivanov said he eventually boarded a train to Paris, hiding in a compartment above the bathroom, and found employment in an automobile factory in Paris.

But in an argument over communism, Ivanov said he clobbered his foreman with an iron wrench and after getting detained was released on condition he join the French Foreign Legion. But, he said, the legionnaire's life was not for him and he fled to Italy where he had the opportunity to join the U.S.

Army. Having been discharged from the Army in 1962, he traveled to America as a U.S. citizen, drove a taxi, tended bar and did other odd jobs while earning an undergraduate degree in Russian literature and a master's degree in linguistics. He fell in love, he said, and married a Cuban girl whom he met in college and landed a job on Wall Street.

Kovachev met Ivanov, who lives in Brookville, through their employment at New York Life Insurance Company, where the former is an agent and the latter a managing partner of the Long Island office. The first to win more than two chairman's trophies, Ivanov was named chairman emeritus after winning 10 in succession, according to John Curry, partner at New York Life in Long Island.

"This performance will be one of the biggest days in my life," says Ivanov.

"I will see my family and my whole life story played out, all my running and my suffering and finally reaching America, the land of my dreams." "In addition to commemorating our national holiday, this event has another significance," said Stoyan Tonchev, charge d'affaires of the Bulgarian Consulate in Manhattan. "The theme of the musical play, the life of a Bulgarian who achieved the American dream, will be a good inspiration for our community." Kovachev, who was also a civil engineer in his country, has written more than 150 compositions, mostly love songs.

"Mr. Kovachev's work is well-known in our country. His songs are recorded by the most popular Bulgarian singers, and most of them are huge hits," said Tonchev.

This Sunday's production, which will be performed by 12 costumed actor-singers and instrumentalists, marks Kovachev's first musical play and second concert in this country. He describes his New Age music as a cross between classical and pop—a sort of "rock opera." Published through DSM Producers, a Warner Bros. affiliate, his music has been released on numerous compact discs and aired on TV shows.

"In an immigrant's heart there is always a special place for his roots and his birthplace," said Nellie Lozanova, special events officer for the Queens Museum of Art. "Whenever there is a moment to somehow connect with that, he has a strong impulse to come and be part of it." The musical play, "Under Manhattan Skyline" will be performed on Sunday at 4 p.m. at the Queens Museum of Art. Admission by invitation only. Call Dimitri Kovachev (718-458-7934) for information.

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