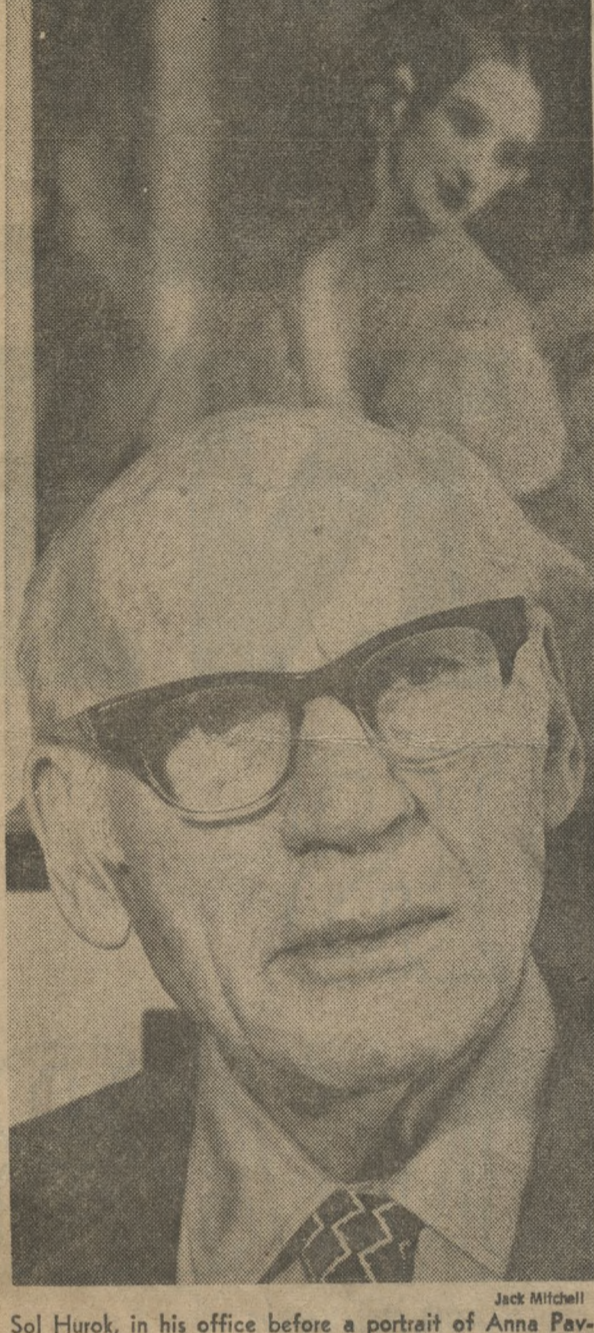


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# S. Hurok—Last Of the Red Hot Showmen



Jack Mitchell

Sol Hurok, in his office before a portrait of Anna Pavlova. His 60 years as an impresario and 85th birthday will be marked at a gala concert at the Met on May 21.

*"Lovely—but the tickets aren't priced high enough"*

By STEPHEN E. RUBIN

SOLOMON ISAAIEVICH HUROK, the last of the red hot showmen, is 85 years old and still letting off as much heat as ever. The undisputed champion impresario of the world, the man affectionately known as Papa Hurok, is of sound mind and body as well. But it all comes to naught when the loneliness sets in. Hurok tells of his solitary evenings. "I just can't be alone. I'm so attached to people; I love people. So if I'm not doing anything one night, I call up somebody and say, come over to the house, let's have dinner, let's sit around, let's have tea. If I go to a concert, I come home, get undressed, read the newspaper or a book, and suddenly I feel that I'd like to talk to somebody, to tell somebody the bad things and the good things."

It was only recently that Hurok finally found a somebody to help fill the void. Following the death of his 94-year-old brother in Leningrad, the impresario's nephew sent him the first photograph Hurok has ever had of his mother. "It's given me a new lease on life," he sighs. "I have the photo right by my bed. She died more than 50 years ago. It's marvelous the way her eyes look at me all the time. She was such a smart woman, and I had such great affection and love for her as a youngster. I talk to her, and she helps me so much to be not alone any more."

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In Hurok's life, his major source of contentment has always been his work. For 60 years he has been managing artists and attractions and carefully constructing one of the largest and most powerful empires in the entertainment industry. Cleverly and most deliberately, he has made something human out of the label "S. Hurok Presents" by constantly focusing all the attention on its founder and ruler—himself. Hurok Concerts may have its princes, its favorite sons, even its heir apparent, but while the Old Man is alive and kicking, Hurok Concerts is Sol Hurok. That's the way it's always been, and that's the way it will continue. "I'm not giving up yet," the king is fond of repeating over and over again.

Hurok's obsessive determination never to retire colors much of his thinking. It perhaps explains why he was not initially overjoyed by the International Diamond Jubilee Gala, to be held at the Metropolitan Opera on May 21, honoring his 60 years of service to the performing arts and his 85th birthday year. In his mind, the fete might have had the look of a farewell party—the last celebration in the world he'd ever want for himself. But he has succumbed to the excitement the gala has engendered, is pleased by the lineup of stars (Fonteyn, Segovia, Stern, Cliburn, Verrett, et al.), and thoroughly approves of the proceeds going to the Performing Arts Research Center of the Lincoln Center Public Library.

"At first I thought, what for?" Hurok explains. "I need more prestige? But now that I see so many people sending letters, cables and wires from all over the world, this is lovely. I think they haven't priced the tickets high enough though [top price is \$100]. There are no seats left already. They could have filled Madison Square Garden. The people want to see me. They're not going for the performers alone."

Modesty has never been one of Hurok's virtues. The tales of his amusing flights of egocentric fancy are legion. A recent addition to the folklore involves the time he stopped a 6-year-old in the lobby of the Savoy in London, chucked her under the chin and said, "My, what a pretty little girl you are. Little girl, do you know who I am?" Luckily, the youngster's mother knew and she paid homage while the child looked at the old man as if he were some sort of a nut.

Although this peacock's feathers don't ruffle him, he vehemently denies that he is in any way the maniac many people consider (Continued on P

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him. "That's very stupid," he exclaims. "That's the thing I'm not. I don't possess any ego at all. One has ego when he doesn't get what he wants, when he's trying to step into somebody's footsteps, to get what the other man has. But I have everything I want."

Indeed, there's even been a movie made about his life—"Tonight We Sing"—and that was 20 years ago. Hurok's knack for attracting publicity is unparalleled. "But I didn't run for the publicity," he insists. "I did things that brought it to me. If I wouldn't have presented some of the things I did, maybe I wouldn't have had the publicity. I never refuse an interview, and I think I'm good copy. That helped along. But the quality of my artists and attractions backed me up."

Hurok is a true impresario, with the sensitive nose for sniffing out great talents, and with the backbone and gambler's instinct to present them big or not at all. By now, he has probably outclassed his two most formidable predecessors, P.T. Barnum and Serge Diaghilev. He even started off with a bang. In 1912, six years after he arrived here from Russia and while he was still selling hardware, the young upstart presented the great fiddler, Efrem Zimbalist. Within three years, he had a popular-priced Sunday night series going at the Hippodrome with such notables as Mischa Elman, Titta Ruffo and Alma Gluck.

The list of his artists and attractions since then is mind-boggling. Characteristically, even Hurok himself is in awe. "Sometimes when I'm sitting around reading or listening to records, I begin to analyze who and how many I've managed, and I can't believe it." Some of the chosen include: Isadora Duncan, Chaliapin, Tetrassini, Fokine, Richard Strauss, Pavlova, Schnabel, Marian Anderson, Emyln Williams, the Renaud-Barrault company, the Comédie Française, the Scots Guards, Sadler's Wells, Fonteyn and Nureyev, the Old Vic, the D'Oyly Carte, Piatigorsky, Rubinstein, Stern, Cliburn and, probably one of his greatest achievements, the Bolshoi Ballet.

All of this phenomenal activity emanates from a 5-foot 6-inch roly-poly Russian Jew with an undistinguished bespectacled face, a minimum of snow-white hair, and a manner of speaking that belongs only to him—and Samuel Goldwyn. If nature cheated him physically, Hurok has made up for it in other ways. The mogul has the carriage of a man who knows he's important. These days his stride may be slower, but it is nonetheless the walk of a grand seigneur. Because he is an innate showman, Hurok understands the importance of trappings and dresses expensively. His gold-topped cane and old-fashioned black slouch hat have become his trademarks.

The old pro has been interviewed too many times to try to woo the press with phony charm. He is a bit

blasé, but agreeable at all times. No question will throw him. If he doesn't want to answer something, he either says so directly or is evasive enough to make his point obvious. The only giveaway of any sort of real emotion is a slightly wicked and very attractive glint which, on occasion, brightens his greenish brown eyes.

Hurok lives in a smartly decorated six-room Park Avenue apartment. He is served by a devoted couple, who reside in a separate dwelling on the same floor. Across Central Park lives Emma Runitch Hurok, the woman he married in 1939. "We have been separated 12 years or so," Hurok reports. "Before that we lived under one roof, but were apart for a long time. We're good friends. She's a very nice lady, very intelligent, very good-looking. We meet; we see each other; but we agreed to disagree, that's all."

This was a second marriage. From his first wife, Tamara, whom he divorced in the late twenties and who is now dead, he has his only child, Ruth, currently married to the conductor Arthur Lief. Ruth has presented him with two grandchildren, both of whom work in Hollywood.

Hurok is seated on a couch in his book-lined study. The variety of reading material is startling: everything from Kinsey and the Encyclopaedia Britannica to books in Russian and a collection of Oscar Wilde. The walls are filled with a variety of art work, including many theatrical drawings and sketches. The impresario is a bit withdrawn until he suggests we leave for lunch. Then, despite the heat, he gets into his usual paraphernalia plus a scarf, calls out to his butler to phone Cote Basque, and out we go to his waiting chauffeur-driven limousine.

In the car, Hurok discusses some recent pieces in *The Times*, commenting in one case that if a certain pianist deserved an article, he deserves a book. At the restaurant, a change comes over him. Now he is in public, and Hurok enjoys the bowing, scraping and flourishes of the Cote Basque personnel. He makes chit-chat with the hatchback girl, and then we are ushered to the best table in the house. "This is my table—it's been mine since 1939," the celebrity says with obvious pride. "Turn off the air-conditioning please, it's blowing on my neck," he tells an attentive waiter.

As he slowly sips his Campari and bitters, and eats a little each of asparagus, poached striped bass and melon, Hurok's color improves and he seems to loosen up, even to enjoy himself. It is quite apparent that there is nothing more to Hurok's liking than talking about Hurok.

"I don't think there's anybody in this country who went through what I went through," he says expansively. "Hardships and everything else. But I think I contributed something to this country, which I'm very happy about. Nobody else

has done it. And it was never a question of how much money I could make. I never worked as if this was a business; if it was a business, I wouldn't be in it.

"I'm one of those fanatics who believe in presenting the best things to the masses, and taking all kinds of risks." Hurok has lost a fortune on various gambles, including one of his first, a tour of the Russian Grand Opera with Chaliapin in 1925. "I went out of my way to travel day and night all over the world. I brought things from Japan, from India, from Italy. I started this cultural exchange before we had an official cultural exchange with Russia."

Hurok's dealings with the Russians are, of course, almost as well known as Hurok himself. But, despite all the publicity, he was not and is not the sole importer of Soviet artists and attractions. The American debuts

### "People are mistaken when they say if Hurok disappears his organization will fall apart"

of Emil Gilels, David Oistrakh and the Leningrad Symphony, to cite three examples, were all under the auspices of Hurok's biggest competitor, Columbia Artists Management. For about 15 years, Hurok did manage to dominate the field, with Columbia taking a seat way in the back, but currently the firm is giving the impresario a run for his money.

It is rumored, for instance, that Columbia will be bringing over the Kirov Ballet next year, as well as a number of other Soviet specialties, including a possible series of well-known stars. Hurok has nothing to say about Columbia's expanding activity in "his" field other than, "I have no objections and, so far, no concern. Good luck to them. If the Russians feel somebody else should have something else, why not? It's all right. We have plenty. The last time I was there, about three months ago, we signed up about 27 contracts. I can't complain. I love the Russians, and I do business with them and have no trouble with them."

The troubles he does have tend to be political in nature. In December, 1970, Soviet authorities canceled what would have been Hurok's largest undertaking to date, a joint tour of the Bolshoi Opera and Ballet in 1971. The visit was halted because of the explosive problems surrounding the question of restrictions on emigration by Soviet Jews to Israel.

Worse than the disappointment of the cancellation was the firebombing of Hurok's offices last year in which a young woman was killed and others, including Hurok, were injured. His being a Jew himself poses no conflicts for Hurok. He has no sympathy with extremist organizations, such as the Jewish Defense League, nor does he believe that the League reflects majority Jewish opinion. "The J.D.L. is just a small group objecting to everything," he says with

annoyance. "They certainly didn't do any good as far as the Jewish question is concerned in America, in Russia or in Israel. The Russians want our government to take a stronger stand, and I don't blame them—to stop this mugging and harassment against Russian diplomats, artists and attractions. It's a horrible thing. I almost got killed myself. I can't understand the simply terrible judiciary system we have in this country. Those people have been brought into court a number of times, they have been proven guilty, and still the trials go on."

Despite all these problems, Hurok the optimist is very hopeful about bringing over the Bolshoi Opera and Ballet together. (This summer he is presenting the latter, along with the Bolshoi Dance Academy.) Since he has the Metropolitan Opera House booked through 1976, he would, of course, like it to be sooner than later. As to the rumor that he and Columbia might jointly import this unique attraction, Hurok says coldly, "I haven't heard about it."

Hurok is able to afford these monumental undertakings because, since 1971, his company has been owned by Tomorrow Entertainment, Ltd., a subsidiary of General Electric. (A 1969 sale to Transcontinental Investing Corp. did not work out.) The impresario makes it blatantly clear that he doesn't mind being a salaried employe, and that his powers have been in no way curtailed.

"I probably make more money than I made when I was by myself," he says, a satisfied smile settling on his face. "I'm pretty well set. I run the business just as before. I'm chief executive, president, and I do whatever I want. My intention is to do bigger things. I've looked forward to being affiliated with an organization of the kind where I'd have the power to do what I want, and at the same time have no limit of spending money. Today, there is very little room left for independent managers because of the expenses you have to carry."

It has been suggested that one of the reasons Hurok sold his company was to avoid having to choose a successor. This is a touchy subject for two reasons: First, Hurok doesn't think in terms of ever leaving, and second, to actually name an heir apparent might cause a rift within the company. But, is there a young Hurok on the horizon? "I hope so. I would be very happy if I would know there is someone. I think some of the boys in my company will be able to do good things. But if I mention certain names and

not others, they'll get insulted."

And what about outside his organization? Is there a young Hurok in the competition? Might Ronald Wilford, the controversial, strong-minded president of Columbia, be waiting in the wings to step into the star role? "Not with his temperament. Not the way he wants to conquer. I don't want to express myself fully because I don't want Wilford to have a reason to reply to me. To discuss other managers and agents—that's their business. Me, I have no competition." Hurok is indeed an institution—and he will be the first to remind you of it. And the institution will continue. "A lot of department store heads die, but the store goes on," he says. "A lot of people are mistaken when they say that if Hurok disappears his organization will fall apart. It'll go on, as long as they have the artists. It's true that a lot of people prefer to deal with me, to see me. At the same time, if they come to the office and I'm not there, they still make deals. And besides, I'm not giving up yet."

Since Hurok never chooses to think of retiring, does he ever ponder the inevitability of death? "It's a terrible thing to think. But it happens. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I don't discuss it and I don't talk about it. I don't recognize my age; age is for the calendar. Today is not so bad; tomorrow's a better day."

It's been a long lunch, and Hurok is getting impatient to go to his office. We leave Cote Basque and get into the car for the trip around the block. Suddenly Hurok says, "Please don't hesitate to call if you want to know anything. I'll give you as much time as you need. You know, *The New York Times* is the most valuable paper today in the country—particularly for our business. I haven't had an article in it for a long time."