



Migrating pink flamingos



Migrating pink flamingos are seen at a lake in the United Arab Emirate of Dubai. — AFP photos

Rita Moreno, 86, set for 'West Side Story' remake

The 86-year-old American actress Rita Moreno, who won an Oscar in the original film version of "West Side Story," is being cast in Steven Spielberg's hotly anticipated remake. Her publicist announced that Moreno, who played Anita the first time around, will this time play the role of Valentina—a reconceived version of a corner store owner. She will also get an executive producing credit. Back in May, the Puerto Rican-born actress confessed that she was anxiously awaiting the Spielberg remake, which has advertised for Latino actors in all the main roles—not the case for the 1961 original.

"I am very curious to see what he does with it. I am nervous about it. Listen, we did very cliched things in 'West Side Story' but I am sure he's going to avoid that because times have changed," she told AFP. "From our earliest discussions, we wanted to include Rita Moreno in our production," said Spielberg in a statement sent by Moreno's publicist. "Her Anita is one of the greatest musical performances ever filmed, and a personal favorite of mine," he added.

"We feel beyond fortunate that Rita will bring her extraordinary gifts as an actress, as well as her deep understanding of 'West Side Story' to this production as an executive producer." The original film of Leonard Bernstein's musical-Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" reimagined in the world of warring New York gangs—won 10 Oscars and captivated a generation on the cusp of huge societal change. In the original movie, the Puerto Rican character Maria was played by the late Natalie Wood, and Bernardo by George Chakiris, the son of Greek immigrants.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I see myself revisiting this seminal work," said Moreno in Tuesday's statement. "To be asked by Steven Spielberg to participate is simply thrilling!" "West Side Story" pits warring gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, against each other in Manhattan's Lincoln Square on the Upper West Side. —AFP



Rita Moreno

Russian rappers strike back against crackdown by authorities

A packed club reverberated as the young crowd filmed on cell phones and chanted the names of rappers. Three of Russia's biggest rappers: Oxxxymiron, Basta and Noize MC, were giving a rare joint concert in a Moscow club, protesting that authorities are stepping up pressure on popular artists and effectively censoring them. The stars rallied together after the jailing last week of popular rapper Husky. They warned that this comes on top of frequent concert cancellations and bans on videos. "There's a special attitude to the word in Russia, some love it, others are afraid of it," rapped Noize MC at the show's finale.

Some artists have said this resembles Soviet-era campaigns against rock music, seen as promoting false Western values. It comes as a new generation of music stars connect with young people through hard-hitting lyrics and a massive online presence, bypassing state-controlled media. Top rappers sing about social problems but are rarely explicitly political. Yet the authorities are on edge as opposition leader Alexei Navalny has harnessed a mood of discontent among teenagers. Navalny attended Monday's concert with his family, posing with fans for selfies.

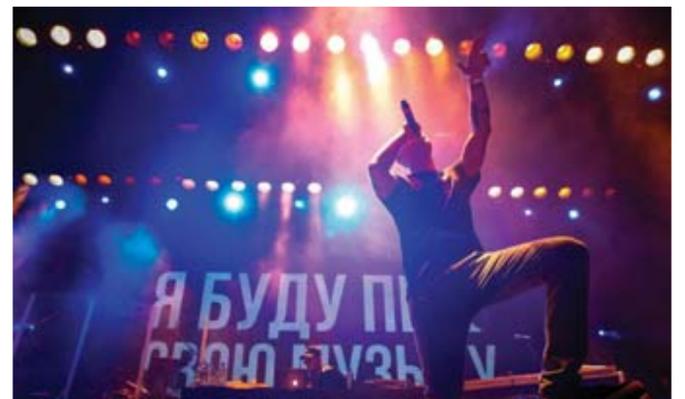
The concert's trigger was the 12-day sentence issued to Husky, real name Dmitry Kuznetsov for "petty hooliganism" over an impromptu performance from a car roof in the southern city of Krasnodar. He rapped on the street after a concert venue was cancelled at the last moment, the latest in a series of crackdowns on his gigs. In a surprise move, Husky was released hours ahead of the concert—which the rappers attributed to widespread public outrage at his arrest. "It happened because of you," Oxxxymiron told the audience.

Editor-in-chief of Kremlin-controlled RT television, Margarita Simonyan, controversially suggested influential Kremlin figures intervened—alerted by the public reaction to his case. The title of the concert, Husky's lyric "I will sing my music," became a top Twitter trend in Russia. Oxxxymiron, an Oxford-educated musician whose real name is Miron Fyodorov, complained that intimidation of artists and concert cancellations are becoming more frequent. "Creative freedom should be equal for all," he told the audience. "If you're offended by a video, turn it off." He accused the authorities in Husky's case of "seeing propaganda (of negative values) where there is none" in his lyrics.

One audience member, 21-year-old student Denis Zabuzov, said the authorities "are starting to tighten the screws and trying to scare certain artists, like Husky." "He was jailed for nothing." The rapper's jailing prompted criticism even from stars far from the rap scene. Crooner Lev Leshchenko, 76, told Govorit Moskva radio station that "law enforcement structures interfering in the arts is unprecedented and shouldn't happen." "We've already been through this," he said, referring to Soviet official censorship of pop performers.

'It's like we're criminals'

Recently authorities have closed down concerts in several regions, citing various reasons. Artists affected include pop singer Monetchka, Siberian-born hip-hop artist Eldzhey and Kazakh performer Jah Khalib. Moscow-based electronic duo IC3PEAK told AFP they recently had concerts in two cities interrupted by police and security forces. "It's funny, like we are dangerous criminals," said singer Anastasia Kreslina. Their latest song,



Rapper Oxxxymiron performs during a concert in support of rapper Husky, whose real name is Dmitry Kuznetsov, at a Moscow club. — AFP

"Death No More," has been viewed more than five million times on YouTube. The video shows them riding on the shoulders of riot police and one singer pours petrol over herself. "They'll subdue you with the others on the square," the lyrics go, referring to detentions of young opposition protesters.

"It's true that we're not happy with a lot that's happening in the country and we talk about that freely," said one of the duo, Nikolai Kostylev. Tour dates in the cities of Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan saw several club owners pull out, citing harassment from police, emergency services and pressure groups, the group said. They believe the authorities fear musicians' influence on an Internet-savvy generation not reached by the Kremlin's spin doctors. "They're scared that they have lost a whole generation of young people

who don't watch propaganda on television," said Kostylev.

In the Volga city of Kazan, the duo had electricity shut off at their concert. They performed "Death No More" in the dark with the audience singing along. Yet some conservative Russians see such artists as a malign influence and back official intervention. Activist Denis Khanzhin of the Siberian Working Youth group has campaigned against hip-hop concerts by artists including Eldzhey, prompting police close down a venue. Such music causes the "degradation of young people," the 29-year-old said. "It's propaganda of drugs, all kinds of perversions and sexual disorders, wall-to-wall swearing and blasphemy—and they are teaching all this to children." — AFP