

# to Russia with love

When model dynamo Natalia Vodianova returned to her fairytale homeland to throw a three-day fundraising extravaganza for her children's charity, Christa D'Souza was there to see how she turned glamour into giving –and Mario Testino captured the fashion parade



A sequined majorette hat and Miu Miu's red cape are a fitting accompaniment for the palatial architecture of Manezh Square, where Natalia is welcomed by the soldiers of one of the city's military academies

*This page and opposite:* organza cape, \$695. Organza bloomers, £275. Organza cuffs, £95. All Miu Miu. Sequined eap, courtesy of BBC Costume. Wrist gloves, from £20, Cornelia James. Tights, \$5, Jonathan Aston, at Mytights.com. Nubuck shoes, £320, Natacha Marro. Hair: Marc Lopez. Make-up: Tom Pecheux. Production: Avocadoproductions. biz. Set design: Patrick Kinmonth. Digital artwork: R&D. Model: Natalia Vodianova. Fashion editor: Lucinda Chambers





Few fashions could rival the glory of the opulent Georgievsky Hall in the Kremlin, but gold platforms and Givenchy's haute-couture ensemble complement it nicely. Multi-layered cotton-drill and organdie trench coat and trousers, Givenchy Haute Couture, Paris. Hat, to order, Philip Treacy Haute Couture. Leather shoes, £300, Natacha Marro







Amid the colours of the Shtara gypsy dancers and musicians, Galliano's tumbling red taffeta is as vivid as ever. Taffeta dress, from £11,510, John Galliano, at Harrods. Striped hold-ups, £10, Emilio Cavallini, at Topshop. Satin shoes, £345, Miu Miu. Mask, stylist's own





Once the focal point of Moscow high society, Sanduny Banya, the capital's oldest bathhouse – known as the “tsar of bathhouses” – finds its stately match in Nina Ricci's ethereal, frothy gown  
*This page:* pleated silk bustier dress, £10,800, Nina Ricci, Paris. Tulle pom-pom headdress, Emma Roach  
**Marc Jacobs's dusty-pink lingerie hints at simpler, sober times**  
*Opposite:* silk bra, £190. Matching silk shorts, £115. Both Marc Jacobs. Sequined skullcap, to order; Stephen Jones for John Galiano, at Stephen Jones









*Main picture:* Eva Herzigova and Natalia with Ekaterina Kuzmina, *centre*, who donated €450,000 to the Naked Heart Foundation to have her photo taken by Mario Testino. *Top row, from left:* one of the churches in the Kremlin; Lucy Liu and Valentino arrive at the party; Natalia with Liu; men in top hats and powdered wigs welcome revellers to the Love Ball. *Below, from left:* Natalia in a baroque railway carriage; the Ice Palace; Dasha Zhukova; Diane von Furstenberg; the Bolshoi Ballet performing at the Love Ball



Tuesday, 11pm on a freezing-cold night in Moscow. “Love Ball” limos are lined up three deep outside the Petrovka Street residence of Count Jacques von Polier. Von Polier is the host of an informal “Welcome to Russia Party”, as it says on the package which was delivered (along with a sweet little Swarovski-crystal heart) underneath my door at the Ritz-Carlton Moscow an hour or so ago. A party to kick off the three-day extravaganza the model Natalia Vodianova has organised to raise money for her Naked Heart Foundation, the charity she set up two years ago to benefit poor children in Russia. Up I go, therefore, through the dank, peeling, Soviet-style hallway, past a gaggle of stony bodyguards to the second floor, into a cosy, candlelit enfilade of rooms, thick with cigarette smoke. Though many of the private jets ferrying in friends such as Diane von Furstenberg, Natalie Imbruglia and Jamie Hargreaves have not yet arrived, and it is early by Moscow standards, already the place is fit to burst. Amid the swirling, almost studenty tableau of nineteenth-century Russia, with its dripping candelabra, half-opened bottles of Imperia vodka and table groaning with “take-out” from Café Pushkin (not at all the Cavalli’d-up, orchid-heavy do I’d imagined, in other words) are a tousled-haired Eva Herzigova; Jacques, our host, a debonair billowing-sleeved Parisian; and, bobbing around here and there, the familiar downy pate of Vodianova’s husband, Justin Portman. “Don’t mind me,” he smiles as he squeezes his way to the bar, “I’m just here to fill the wife’s glass up...”

There, meanwhile, in the middle of the room is “Nata” herself, a pigeon-toed slip of a thing – what on earth did she mean when she said she needed a bit of “support in the tummy area” after three babies? – in a little gold frock specially run up for her by her great friend Valentino. As promised, the evening will be full of surprises, and sure enough, suddenly, out of nowhere appears a troupe of Russian gypsy musicians. Unable to persuade her husband (who is sitting, looking like the cat who got the cream, by Valentino’s feet) to dance, Vodianova takes to the floor by herself, where she is joined by a dewy, long-haired girl in a vintage gold dirndl and vest. “Ooh, don’t you just love a gypsy party,” murmurs the girl – a Russian New Yorker called Olya – and then, giving her husband her plate of

*studin* (a gelatinous lump of pigs’ trotter meat which, she assures me, is “delicious and totally low-fat”), expertly kicks her heels behind her and does a few twirls. Meanwhile everybody, but everybody, is drinking vodka like water – even those of us who do not drink. “Oh, but don’t think of it as drink,” advises the perennially youthful Carlos de Souza, the other half of the Valentino empire, a shot glass in one hand and a gherkin in the other. “Think of it as medicine.”

Welcome to the fairytale land of Natalia Vodianova, or the Cinderella of the Volga, as they call the girl who started off helping out at her mother’s fruit stall in the heartland of Russia and is now the seventh-highest-paid model in the world. That’s the Natalia Vodianova who married the third son of the late Viscount Edward Henry Berkeley Portman (those are the Portmans who own most of central London) at the age of 19 and bore him three angelic children by the age of 24, all while being the face of Gucci, the face of L’Oréal, the face of Calvin Klein, and devoting pretty much any spare time she might have after that to raising money for poor children back home in Russia. Did I also mention how it took her precisely three months to learn fluent English? Or how she appeared on the spring/summer 2008 catwalk a matter of days after she gave birth for the third time?

“I think of Natalia as a kind of cosmonaut,” offers Olya, who turns out to be a Stanford graduate and, like Vodianova (with whom she became close friends when they both

this extraordinary three-day event. An event which includes a skating party in Red Square, a visit to one of Moscow’s best strip clubs, a morning in Pushkin’s favourite bathhouse, a private tour of the Kremlin and, to round off, a lavish black-tie ball for 420 at the Tsaritsino Palace, complete with performances by Razorlight and Emmanuelle Seigner’s band Ultra Orange. Auction prizes include a painting by Damien Hirst and a chance to have your portrait taken by Mario Testino, along with Natalia and Eva Herzigova, for *Vogue*.

Noon, day two of the event and she is in the “war room” again. Seigner, who has a cold, is already here. Razorlight frontman Johnny Borrell, though, is not. Indeed, many of the guests who are flying in haven’t arrived – haven’t even confirmed when they will arrive – which makes it hard for Vodianova and her trusty French-born foundation director Valerie-Ann to know numbers for tonight. (Tonight being a grand “Red” banquet in honour of Valentino in the demonstration hall at GUM, Moscow’s favourite shopping centre, on Red Square.)

“See, look,” says Vodianova, frowning into her Blackberry. “One of the people coming over by jet has forgotten to get her pilot a visa. That means we have to get her another plane, or we have to get her pilot a visa. Of course, I will end up taking care of it all. I always do.”

Being far too hung over to take the hangover cure laid on at the Sanduny Banyan (a process which involves getting beaten

Everybody, but everybody, is drinking vodka like water – even those of us who do not drink. “Oh, but don’t think of it as drink,” advises the perennially youthful Carlos de Souza. “Think of it as medicine”

lived in New York), a mother of three. “Like, despite the odds being so against her, she has triumphed. More than anyone I know, she can rise to the challenge, she is *sooo* tough. I think of her too, though, as a true carrier of the Russian soul. She hasn’t lost her heart; she’ll always maintain her Russian-ness. She’s the real thing.”

So it is that for the last two weeks Vodianova has been holed up in her “war room” at the Ritz-Carlton, planning

by trees and drinking more vodka), most of the guests – including “the Beast”, as Vodianova refers to Justin – are still having breakfast. Not like Natalia herself, who has been up with her eldest child, Lucas, six, and his nanny since daybreak (the two younger children, Neva, two, and Viktor, five months, are back in Britain with Vodianova’s grandpa and “ultra-strict” granny, Larisa). Now she is *en route* to the Kremlin, where >





They call Natalia the Cinderella of the Volga – the girl who started off helping out at her mother’s fruit stall and is now the seventh-highest-paid model in the world





**Crowd-pleaser:** outside the Ritz-Carlton, Dior's bountiful paillette-laden frock is a magnificent sight to behold. Embroidered fuchsia silk dress, Dior Haute Couture, Paris. Tights, £5, Jonathan Aston, at Mytights.com. Sequined shoes, £435, Christian Louboutin. Silk headband with ostrich-leather pom-pom, £150, Benoit Missolin. Flowers, *in hair*, from a selection, VV Rouleaux. Bride wears dress, Valentin Yudashkin. Leather shoes, £450, Jimmy Choo. Silk headband with tulle pom-pom, £120, Benoit Missolin. Hat with veil, from £395, to order, Philippa Lepley. Tulle bow headband, £365, Jeffrey Portman. Male models: Grace Models, St Petersburg, and President Models, Moscow





Natalia plays out Roksanda Ilincic's fantasy with wispy feathers at Sanduny Banya. Sequined bikini, £48, Leg Avenue. Silk feathered cape, £1,200, Roksanda Ilincic, at Browns. Peep-toe boots, Givenchy Haute Couture, Paris



she is fitting in the shoot by Mario Testino for this magazine.

“Everything is such a hassle here,” she says, retreating into her pink hoodie, and in the harsh grey light of day not looking an hour over 16. “Did you know, for example, that when I arrived here two weeks ago, I still didn’t have approval from the Russian government? They were like, ‘What does Moscow need playgrounds for? Why is this girl doing this? Why doesn’t she organise something in London or New York instead?’

“But see, that’s why I had to do it here. I stopped going round all those other countries fundraising and decided to do it here, to throw a fundraiser for Russian children in Russia. It’s an appropriate thing, don’t you think? Russians, they have to share too.”

Vodianova remembers the first time she had the idea for the foundation. It was in September 2004 while she was watching the tragic Beslan affair unfold

If Vodianova sounds a little lofty, a little grown-up for her years, then that is probably because she is. As she herself has always said, growing up in the grim environs of Nizhny Novgorod, “the Detroit of Russia”, she never really experienced childhood. By the age of six she was looking after her two younger half-sisters (one of whom was born with cerebral palsy), living in a one-room high-rise flat with no TV, no hi-fi and no washing machine, helping her mother at her market fruit stall. By the time she was 14 she had set up her own stall, buying bananas wholesale from the Georgian and Chechnyan fruit wholesalers and then, smart cookie that she always was, going and setting up a few yards in from the market on the motorway, so customers would buy her produce first.

At 15, encouraged by a boyfriend, she enrolled herself in a modelling school. The boyfriend, a 22-year-old debt-collector by trade, told her of a casting she should go to,

GUM is in full swing. It is a very grand, echoey affair and as specified on the sweetly calligraphed invitation, everything, including the food, is red. While we are plied with mountains of red Beluga caviar, red Russian *borscht* served with traditional *pompushka* and even more Imperia vodka, the Red Army Choir are assembled up on the stage, solemnly lip-synching to Russian folk anthems. Meanwhile, at the top table, flanked by Valentino and the surprisingly diminutive Johnny Borrell, is Natalia herself, smiling gummily and looking ever the fairytale princess in her little tiara and elaborate red boa and ballgown by Valentino. A couple of seats down from her is her great friend Diana Kamalova, a fellow model from the Russian Republic of Tatarstan. Kamalova, 19, an Ashley Olsen lookalike in Alice Temperley, is here with her boyfriend Rory Howard, the London art dealer – both of them are pivotal members of the “Portmanski” court back home in London.

Despite the school-assembly-hall acoustics, everyone is having fun discussing everybody else – the utter fabulousness of Diana’s surname (“Kamalova?” one guest cries in delight, “but if Mike Myers makes another Austin Powers film he *must* put her in it”); how Rory and Justin could be twins; how Justin is beginning to look more and more Russian; and so on and so forth. Then there’s which is the best book right now to read on Russia (Diane von Furstenberg opts for *Imperium* by Ryszard Kapuscinski; film producer Duncan Ward, who is here with his wife, Molly Dent-Brocklehurst, thinks Witkiewicz’s *Insatiability*) and how it’s impossible to find a shop out here that does basic black tights. Not to mention how much all of this lavish treatment is actually costing. And who is actually coughing up (tickets for the ball cost £1,500 each; tables, £18,000).

“The answer to the first question, I couldn’t tell you,” smiles François Chateau, Natalia’s New York-based lawyer for eight years, and board secretary of the foundation, “but what I can tell you is that if it had cost the foundation one single penny, I would have vetoed it.” As for the second matter, the people Vodianova has to thank most are the event’s main sponsor, the Russian investment concern KIT Finance (which supposedly picked up half of the tab) and to a lesser degree sponsors such as Calvin Klein, Christie’s, Imperia vodka (owned by Natalia’s friend Rustam >

## Growing up in Nizhny Novgorod – the Detroit of Russia – Natalia never really experienced childhood. By the age of six she was looking after her sisters in a one-room flat with no TV or washing machine

live on television with Justin. “I was really so upset, so depressed,” she recalls in her careful, American-inflected Russian accent “I couldn’t *bee-leave* people could be such animals. At the time I thought the children wouldn’t really care about all the money going over there, but maybe something like a playground would help them forget. Not forget, but rehabilitate.

“See, that’s what play does: it’s very therapeutic,” she goes in that heartfelt yet utterly steely way of hers, the pair of us now lurching at the speed of about one mile an hour towards Red Square. “Children need to do that to be happy, and it’s the same thing for us. We need to take time to have fun, to enjoy our friends, to smile, to laugh. I really need to concentrate on that myself, actually; it’s kind of my goal to take it easy by the age of 35, not to use my success in order to do more. It may not look like that, me finishing at four in the morning and getting up early to shoot, but I assure you I’m working very hard on it.”

which involved wearing a miniskirt. Since she didn’t have one, the next time she visited her mother she “borrowed” a skirt of hers and took a pair of scissors to it; she was subsequently spotted by a scout in from Paris who promised he’d get her work, but only if she learnt English in 12 weeks flat.

“I tell you, when I first saw her my eyes go like zat!” recalls Cyril Brulé, owner of the Viva model agency in Paris, which has been representing her for the past eight years. “She was like this little Romy Schneider, you know. But the funny thing is, my scout who had seen her in Paris actually didn’t like her so much. Me? Really, I had nothing to say but *wow*. And that ability to promote causes, that drive, that determination. Naomi, Linda, I’ve seen some models in my time, but I’ve never seen a girl like this.”

It is now around 10 o’clock, the skating party for children from four of the local orphanages has gone without a hitch, and the Red dinner in honour of Valentino at



ГАРДЕРОБ

2<sup>ой</sup>  
ВЫСШИЙ  
МУЖСКОЙ  
РАЗРЯД



*Opposite:* polka-dot blouse and rabbit-ear headband, courtesy of BBC Costume. Sunglasses, £200, Jeremy Scott by Linda Farrow, at Harrods. Fingerless gloves, £45, Glovedup.com  
**Pure fantasia:** check Luella's lace-ups and Prada's organza fancy for a much talked-about affair  
*This page:* organza tunic, £805. Fine-knit vest, worn underneath, £285. Both Prada. Striped leggings, £115, Tata-Naka, at Brittique.com. Leather boots, £360, Jonathan Kelsey for Luella, at Luella. Hat, courtesy of BBC Costume





Dressed in regal Chanel couture and surrounded by orphans supported by her charity, Naked Heart Foundation, Natalia greets Olympic ice-dance champion Roman Kostomarov Organza and ostrich-feather minidress, Chanel Haute Couture, Paris. Tights, £5, Jonathan Aston, at Mytights.com. Flower headress, £195, John Rocha. Swarovski-crystal headband, £78, Butler & Wilson. For stockists, all pages, see *Vogue Information*







“I think of Natalia as a true carrier of the Russian soul. She hasn’t lost her heart; she’ll always maintain her Russian-ness. She’s the real thing”







**Beauty note:** for extravagant sensuality, soothe and soften skin using Agent Provocateur's Crème d'Amour, £38, a delectable blend of purple orchid extract, shea butter, ginseng root and damiana flowers











Tariko) and, of course, the Ritz-Carlton Moscow. “Natalia, she’s pretty much a one-woman show, too,” he adds paternally. “It’s she who makes the key phone calls, the key decisions. To see that power of conviction, it’s really quite amazing.”

“Ahh, these guys,” croons Natalia, slinking up from behind and draping a lanky, alabaster arm round Chateau’s shoulder, “I’m telling you, they’re like family to me.”

The fairytale story of How Justin Met Natalia, like the banana-stall story, is now a part of modelling history. They first met at a dinner arranged by a Russian model agent at the Georges restaurant in the Pompidou Centre. Natalia, who had just moved to Paris, was feeling a little defensive and “ready to kill” anyone who tried to flirt with her. For Portman, meanwhile, the smooth-talking son of a viscount and scion of the billion-pound Portman property fortune, it was a total *coup de foudre*; for the next few weeks he became “like a labrador with a bone”, trying to win her over. Eventually, of course, she succumbed. By the time she was 19, she was not only madly in love and living with Portman in downtown New York (“Ugh, so unhygienic: all those stinking hot-dog stands. I much prefer London”), she was also pregnant with Lucas. A year later, in

build their dream house in Battersea, is to move full-time to their Sussex millhouse, where Justin does most of the cooking and makes “the most perfect, perfect English roasts in the world”.

“I mean, I’m so lucky,” offers Vodianova disingenuously, “to have a man who is not just a great cook, but a great cook who doesn’t stress! Because me, if I cook, I’m always, God, this is taking so long, I really should be doing other stuff. But then I’m an over-achiever, you see. I’ve always got to be doing too many things at one time.

“You know,” she goes on, slowly, deliberately, never, ever, off the cuff, “it’s hard letting someone in your life, not living one of those lives that couples do where he does his thing and I do mine. It took a long time to really let Justin into my life, to get over that ‘I can live without you’, a pattern I know I inherited from my mother, who had always been treated so badly by men [Natalia’s father Mikhail left when she was very small, while one of her mother’s boyfriends was a heavy drinker] and was therefore not very strong, not very secure in herself. People repeat mistakes or patterns of living that they learnt in childhood, and you need to get out of that circle. In that way, therapy has been very useful for me.

“Oh yes! Absolutely! Why not? When a

estranged for so many years and who only recently reappeared in her life, gets to benefit from her largesse. “It’s normal to do that, no? I give to so many people who aren’t blood, so why not him? Although to be honest I haven’t done a great deal for him. I’d rather help his children.” In an ideal world Vodianova would like to have her mother and Christina come and live in London (where she could put her sister, who is very smart, in a decent boarding school) but it’s been hard getting Larisa, who does not speak much English, to budge. “I’m really working on it, believe me,” she says earnestly, “but I guess she likes to be important where she is, with her driver and her security, rather than a nobody in a big city. A big fish in a small pond, that’s how you say it, right?”

And what does that make her? Is she a big fish in a big pond?

“Oh, you’re sweet,” she purrs. “No, actually I see myself as a small fish. And there are so many sharks around me. But I have some sort of immunity or something; maybe they don’t smell me.”

It’s now the following day, the eve of the big Love Ball. The temperature has plummeted further and we are in the subway making the five-minute trip from the hotel to Red Square, where Natalia is to be photographed again for *Vogue*. The walkway is crowded with red balloon sellers (it is Valentine’s Day today), beggars, a lone female busker sorrowfully belting out Russian opera, and young couples in their lunch breaks. Again and again one is struck not just by how much this is a city of extremes, but by how very Russian Vodianova’s looks are – how, with those slanting, almost oriental eyes, those dollish, slightly flattened features and that wan complexion, she would easily (with a little tweak here and there) blend in with the crowd. And does, for now, anyway.

“The truth is, although Natalia is a megastar in the West, paradoxically her profile in Russia is relatively small,” says the editor of Russian *Vogue*, Aliona Doletskaya. “As she told me recently, she absolutely adores shopping for clothes in Moscow because nobody ever recognises her. If she wants to raise the profile of ‘Brand Natalia’ in Russia, therefore – and why wouldn’t she, when she has such an amazing lifestyle and story to sell? – this event is going to do a lot for her.”

Brand Natalia. Is that, perhaps, one of her aims? She has, after all, spoken of her admiration of Martha Stewart; it is clear,

## When she was 15, Natalia’s boyfriend told her of a casting she should go to, which involved wearing a miniskirt. As she didn’t have one, she “borrowed” a skirt of her mother’s and took a pair of scissors to it

September 2002, the couple married in St Petersburg, inviting 110 friends over for the three-day extravaganza complete with a Russian Orthodox service in St Vladimir’s Church, Cossack dancers, Kirov ballet dancers and a wedding dress designed by Tom Ford.

Six years on, their life is as much a mixture of fabulousness and domesticity as ever. The starting date for Justin to resume his career as an artist is, he thinks, probably going to be September, but until then he is quite happy to pose as Mr Vodianova in double-page magazine spreads and, as he once put it to *Vanity Fair*, “following my wife round the world”. The plan, until they

friend first told me about it, I was doubtful, I kept saying I don’t need it, but actually it was amazing how many things I needed to sort out from my childhood, how talking things through subtly changed my life.”

Meanwhile, Vodianova is not only the perfect wife and mother, she is also the perfect, perfect daughter and sister. Her mother Larisa and her “baby” sister Christina, 12, both live in Nizhny, where they are the envy of all the neighbours with their nicely decorated house and bulging wardrobes. Her sister Oksana, 19, who suffers from cerebral palsy, is in a smart home just outside Moscow. Why, even her father, Mikhail, from whom she was



too, that the red tape she has had to battle through, the brick walls she has been up against in planning her event out here, combined with her relentless drive and passion to give something back to the country of her birth, will have to find an outlet somewhere. “Well, I can tell you it will never be politics, no way, no way,” says Vodianova, standing in the middle of Red Square virtually naked, save for a pair of platforms and a thin blanket round her shoulders. “Philanthropy, yes, maybe; and the lifestyle thing? Well, let’s say that is one of my dreams, to do some sort of TV programme where I could teach Russian women how to balance being rich and having style. You don’t have to be an oligarch’s wife to have a beautiful house and be stylish and feel good about yourself, you know.” And then, in that sweet but implacable way of hers: “Now, don’t you think it would be nice maybe if someone could find me more than one blanket?”

It’s 6.30pm and as usual a harried-looking Valerie-Anne, or Valechka as Vodianova nicknames her, is on cat-herding duty by the revolving door of the hotel lobby. As Vodianova had warned earlier, if we’re not down here by quarter to, the train will leave without us. One by one Lucy Liu in white Zac Posen, Eva Herzigova in plunging YSL, Natalie Imbruglia in purple vintage (by she has no idea whom) all traipse – carefully, carefully, for it is treacherously icy – into the big white coaches provided outside to take us to Belarus Station. There we board the train for Tsaritsino, to the minimal curiosity, it seems, of other travellers in the station.

Made up of the carriages of the original Trans-Siberian Express, hired exclusively for the Vodianova/Portman party guests, each baroque compartment is laid with all manner of *zakuski*: salted mushrooms, red caviar, smoked salmon, miniature gherkins with which to “chase” the vodka shots and, of course, unlimited tea, served in rattling metal teacups. Which prompt Diane von Furstenberg, while two female violinists play in the background, to tell the story of how she once took the train to St Petersburg, and got so scared of getting up out of her cabin to go to the bathroom that she peed in one of them.

As we arrive on the platform, a swathe of locals watch us silently from behind a gate and follow us with their eyes as police escorts greet us, and then lead us in a convoy of cars into the sweeping Tsaritsino estate. Slip-sliding our way into the

magnificent, gilt-columned Catherine Hall for drinks (the estate was acquired by Catherine the Great in 1775), we are then invited to take traditional Russian shawls from the pile provided in wooden baskets by the door, and led across a bridge to a glowing, blue neon-lit ice palace, which has been built for the occasion with 220 tons of ice. Inside the massive, lily-filled “marquee” the air is scented with Calvin Klein’s Euphoria and, as usual, thick with cigarette smoke. Ah, and there’s Natalia’s table right in the middle of the room, with Lucas running around it in a little tuxedo,

“The truth is, although Natalia is a megastar in the West, paradoxically her profile in Russia is relatively small. She adores shopping for clothes in Moscow because nobody ever recognises her”

waving a camera in the air, and Christina in a bright red feather stole and party shoes glued next to Larisa, an attractive, baleful-eyed blonde in white sequined Pucci. Natalia herself, meanwhile, in a shimmering, full-length burgundy wrap by Diane von Furstenberg, is smiling her sweet smile, and about to take to the stage yet again to give yet another speech. In Russian, of course. But then although there are plenty of people here from London, Los Angeles, Paris and New York (including Rafi Manoukian, Gyunel Boateng, Paolo Roversi and his wife, Tatiana) the atmosphere tonight is distinctly Russian, what with the bodyguards by the entrance, furs draped over their big beefy arms, the heavy-set richer-than-Croesus businessmen from all the various -stans pulling uncomfortably at their bow ties and cuffs (apparently it’s hard to get Russian men to dress up for anything) and, of course, the enormous amounts of money that are spent. A Slavic Tania Bryer lookalike called Polina Kitsenko, at the table next to ours, pays €90,000 for a privately performed love song by Bryan Adams. A glam publisher called Veronica Belotserkovskaya pays €600,000 for the wedding dress which Vodianova wore at Valentino’s very last couture show. The portrait by Mario Testino, along with a limited edition of handmade travel cases by Goyard (donated by British *Vogue*), is snapped up for €450,000 by Ekaterina

Kuzmina, a pretty brunette from Siberia with a passing resemblance to Natalie Imbruglia. “Oh, you think?” she says in perfect English. “Actually everyone here confuses me with Sarah Jessica Parker...”

Outside, meanwhile, it has started to snow. “I mean, is the girl blessed or something?” shouts one American woman across the table. “She raises \$6 million in three hours and then it snows?”

The following morning Natalia emerges blearily from the hotel lift, again in her Hello Kitty pink hoodie, biting on a giant Granny Smith apple. The evening has been

an unparalleled success. As Dasha Zhukova, one of the guests last night (and yes, she paid for her own ticket), said, “These kinds of fundraisers, they don’t happen in Russia. What Natalia has done is amazing – she’s set a new trend.” As François Chateau later comments: “Even by New York standards, where those hedge-fund types throw their money around, this was kind of incredible.” But there’s not much in the papers. The front pages of *Pravda*, *Izvestia* and the *Moscow Times* are all pretty uniformly splashed with pictures of Putin.

“There’s one thing I read,” says Vodianova croakily, “but they got it wrong – they said it was a party to raise money for children with cancer... I don’t know, Russian people, they are very dry; did you notice that last night? It was very difficult to get them to move, to express their emotions. Sure they were generous and they participated, but to me they did not look like they were enjoying it. It’s strange, that duality.” And then, dismissing an approaching Valerie-Anne with a very slightly imperious wave, “Ohmigod, though, I don’t want to talk about it, I have so much to do. Now, I’m thinking thank-you letters to all of my sponsors. What do you think is an appropriate time until which I can leave it? It’s so many of them I have to write, and I have to go to St Petersburg tomorrow to present a sports award. I hope it’s OK to leave it for a few days...” ■