

Moscow International Film Festival - 2004

Russian Films at the Festival: Comedies & Dramas & Adaptations

By Alexander Fedorov

The Russian film program at the 26th Moscow international Film Festival was, in my opinion, pretty varied. The aesthetic fantasy "About Love" (based on Anton Chekhov's short stories) brings the audience back to the starting point of the director Sergei Solovyov's career, when he was making sophisticated screen versions of Russian classics. Solovyov's new film is marked by a special visual stylishness (camera Yuri Klimenko), the passionate work of the cast (Alexander Abdulov, Tatiana Drubich, Alexander Zbruev, etc) and the eternal Russian half-sadness, half-irony.



"My Stepbrother
Frankenstein"

One more variation of the classical plot (this time: Shelly's novel "Frankenstein") was Valery Todorovsky's film "My Stepbrother Frankenstein". The story takes place in modern Moscow, and the Frankenstein monster appears in the form of a one-eyed ex-soldier invalided out of one of Russian's local wars. Following the solid script by Gennady Ostrovsky, the director turns the movie into a psychological drama with a slight surrealistic tint. I should mention that the performances of Leonid Yarmolnik (intellectual father) and Daniil Spivakovsky (disabled son) are thrilling, played with unpredictable emotional reactions.

In his adaptation of the 20th century Russian classic novel, Yuri Trifonov's "The Long Farewell", Sergei Ursulyak scrupulously evokes the Moscow atmosphere around the theatre of the last years of the Stalin epoch - beginning of the 1950s, without trying to modernize Trifonov's story, with all its understatements and subtexts.

Adapting the autobiographical prose of one of the most scandalous Russian writers, Eduard Limonov, Alexander Veledinsky in his film "Russians" (Russkoye) achieves a convincing synthesis of a satirical comedy and a drama from the retro material of the 1960s. In contradistinction to "The Long Farewell", Veledinsky's movie does not seem to be too long and does not let your attention go until the very end.

The most notable film of the Russian festival program was, undoubtedly, "Us" by Dmitry Meskhiyev (the main prize of the festival, best director and best actor prizes). Probably for the first time in Russian films with a war-theme, the main characters - three men who escaped from the Nazis - do not necessarily elicit the audiences compassion. And the atmosphere of the German occupation of 1941 itself is shown not as black-and-white as in classical Soviet movies of that genre.

The unfinished film of the late Semyon Aranovich, "Agnus Dei" (1995), was also shown at the festival. It could have been the sensation of the Russian cinema in the 1990s. It is a dramatic story of the preparation of an 'heroic deed' by the Soviet special services, where the common people fall innocent victims of this plan.

Unfortunately other films of the Russian program seemed to me less interesting, although in many of them one could find a good performance or good directing. For example, in Vladimir Khotinenko's drama "72 Meters" about the catastrophe on a submarine, Sergei Makovetsky is wonderful in the role of a doctor.

In the autobiographical film by Leonid Maryagin "Hello, Capital", Vladimir Menshov is brilliant playing the director of socialist realist movies. Andrei Proshkin in "Papillon's Playings" reanimates plots of the 'youth cinema' of the age of Perestroika (like "Intruder", "Blackmailer", "Needle", etc). The key theme of those years was the sorrow and boredom of provincial life from which young people find only two ways out — alcohol/drugs or protest by rock-music. The drama of Roman Balayan "Bright is the Night" is worth appreciating for its delicate and lyrical visual images. And the fantasy "Night Watch" by Timur Bekmambetov successfully uses modern computer technology to compete with stereotypes of American blockbusters about vampires.

Some movies, because of their invalid artistic quality ("The Recipe of Sorceress", "Mudflow"), to my mind, were not indispensable in the festival program. Unfortunately, I have to say the same about the film "Papa" by Vladimir Mashkov. The screen adaptation of Galich's play "The Sailor's Silence" turned out to be too theatrical, decorative and sentimental.

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