

EXCURSUS 3

Sy Syna on A SOVIET FILM FESTIVAL

Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears, which won an Academy Award in 1980, and *Oblomov*, which received much critical acclaim last season, spurred a fifteen-week New York showcase of five other recent Soviet films at the Embassy-72nd Street theatre (March 5-June 17). Each has been scheduled for a three-week run and one, *A Slap in the Face*, will be shown further at New York's Museum of Modern Art and at Los Angeles's Filmex.

Each of the films is an example of a different genre: a teenage love story; a tangled adulterous relationship; an historical portrait of Dostoevski; a simple tale set in an old Armenian village; and a Gothic ghost story.

The two with contemporary settings, *Love and Lies* (formerly *Could One Imagine*) and *Autumn Marathon* are trivial. Clearly, Soviet film makers feel on safer ground and are more imaginative when treading the pathways of the past. **Love and Lies** is a shallow reworking of the Romeo and Juliet story with a happy ending. Two classmates fall in love and, despite parental machinations, continue in their prim passion. Their school life seems to consist of outings that take them past kiosks laden with toys and food or to fields redolent of flowers, where, under the eye of a kindly and compassionate teacher, the blue-jean-clad kids joyously do "The Twist."

In *Autumn Marathon* kindness is the undoing of Andrei, a successful Leningrad translator who is having an affair with Alla of the secretarial pool, a trim young thing much given to tears. Andrei cannot bring himself to hurt his wife's feelings by leaving her, though she is as unremittingly grim as a Russian winter. Nor can he hurt Alla, though he constantly traduces her and there is much footage of her on the phone, lips aquiver and face sodden. He cannot turn down a colleague who needs help with a translation or another who wants to jog or a neighbor who needs a drinking companion.

"Oh what a tangled web we weave/When first we practice to deceive." Andrei's wife leaves him, Alla spurns him, he loses out on a translating job he has coveted, his teaching career is put in jeopardy. There is even trouble with the cops because of his drinking. But then Alla calls, the wife returns, Andrei resumes jogging, and all is as it was.

Twenty Six Days in the Life of Dostoyevsky opens somberly with the funeral of the writer's wife. Desperate because his contract with the publisher Stellovsky calls for delivery of a novel within twenty-six days or the loss of royalties for nine years, Dostoevski resorts to the new-fangled practice of stenography.

Enter Anna Snitkina, nineteen (Dostoevski was then forty-five), attractive, pure, proper, resolute, and, better yet, much devoted to his work. Together they set out to complete *The Gambler*, the autobiographical novel that chronicles his stormy affair with Appolinaria Suslova. As he dictates, the scene dissolves to episodes from the work in progress and/or his relationship with Suslova. The novel is delivered on time and Anna agrees to aid the ailing writer as both stenographer and wife.

Twenty Six Days is labored and slow, and most of the scenes are steeped in the gloom of low-key lighting. The film's value lies in its efforts to illuminate the personality of the writer—a man so kindly, according to this portrayal, that he was pathologically unable to confront anyone with his feelings or needs. "You feast on your own and

others' suffering as though they were sustenance," Anna observes, to which Dostoevski responds: "Truth is only achieved through suffering."

As **Savage Hunt of King Stakh** opens, it is a stormy night at the turn of the century and a young ethnographer from St. Petersburg seeks shelter at Pinewood Fen, a gloomy baronial manor set amidst Byelorussian marshes. The film combines many such elements suggestive of *Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as well as the frightening image of the Teutonic knights of Eisenstein's masterpiece *Alexander Nevsky*, and even some familiar plot devices of Hollywood Westerns.

It is related that during ancient times the baron of Pinewood Fen brutally murdered King Stakh, whose ghost then sought revenge. Now King Stakh and his marauders are riding again, terrorizing the countryside and also the lovely young baroness, of whom the ethnographer is soon enamored. Director Valery Rubinchik achieves a fine effect here, filming King Stakh's galloping gang in slow motion with a wide-angle lens to lend their white horses a ghostly air in the snowy landscape.

Against the opposition of the czarist police, our hero begins slowly to unravel the mystery. When a traveling troupe of puppeteers is slaughtered for presenting a play that lampoons the King Stakh legend, he leads an uprising of peasants armed with scythes and staves and unmasks King Stakh's horde. They are found to be literal straw men riding trained horses led by a local big shot's henchman. As the film ends the ethnographer is being led away to prison for his role in the uprising. His captor remarks that it is a new century, January 1, 1901. The message: Feudalism and superstition, which held the Russian people in thrall, will be swept away, as will the czarist apparatus that supported it. Yet the viewer finds a stronger image presenting itself, one that substitutes a more recent oppression for the czarist one. It is difficult to avoid perceiving the depredations of King Stakh as those of Stalin, whose savagery toward both artists and peasants left his country in terror and ruin.

A Slap in the Face, set at the turn of the century, based on a story written in the period—*The Blue Flowers*, by Vaan Tolovents—and filmed on location in Soviet Armenia, offers American filmgoers a rare glimpse of bygone village life.

The story revolves around an orphan named Torik—part Prince Mishkin of Dostoevski's *The Idiot*, part Christ—who is adopted by an aunt and her well-meaning husband. Torik grows to manhood a simple, naive, trusting soul, and joins his adopted father in the trade of making saddles for donkeys. After her husband's death the aunt, acting as marriage broker according to custom, tries to find a bride for Torik. But he is such a simple man and his trade so lowly that her efforts come to naught. Even the cesspool cleaner refuses him any of his five daughters.

Three harlots come to town and open a house. Inveigled into going there by his best friend—the butcher's son and a married man—Torik instantly falls in love with Angela, a lovely young woman with a cat-like face, who, it turns out, is also an orphan. She is brought home by Torik and he then marries her—the woman taken in adultery and subsequently purified. At film's end Torik publicly defies the hypocrisy and ostracism of the villagers, who have been led to such a state by the butcher's son.

Soviet Armenia is only a small portion of that harsh and beautiful land which existed before the Turkish holocaust, and this picture of Armenian customs, costumes, and folkways is an image cut out of time.

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