

MOVING EPIC OF SUBTLETY, SUSPENSE - CHILLING 'EAST-WEST' LOOKS AT STALIN ERA

The Hartford Courant - Friday, May 5, 2000

Author: MALCOLM JOHNSON Courant Film Critic

France and Russia combine to look back at the Cold War in sorrow and anger in Regis Wargnier's epic "East-West," a sometimes harrowing, sometimes exciting chronicle of a bitter return to the mother country centering on Sandrine Bonnaire's displaced Frenchwoman.

An almost Hitchcock-like suspense pervades this rigorous portrayal of Stalin's murderous postwar regime. Beginning of a brief preface explaining how a Soviet propaganda effort lured emigres back to their homeland beginning in June 1946, this adventurous and moving film from the director of "Indochine" opens with a long, low helicopter shot over water. Then it jumps to a jolly fete among Russians celebrating their repatriation after years in France. The party is short-lived.

Like a sudden punch to the solar plexus, the French-speaking Russians are separated at the dock after disembarking at Odessa. A father is sent to one group, a son to another. The younger man makes a run for it, and is gunned down. Then Bonnaire's Marie Golovine, the French wife of a Russian doctor, is interrogated and accused of being a spy by a brutal and sinister agent of the KGB, who beats her savagely and tears up her passport.

Because of his profession, her husband, Alexei, is regarded as a valuable returnee. He manages to obtain Marie's freedom, and the couple journey with their 7-year-old son, Serioja, to Kiev, where Alexei is assigned to the infirmary of a textile factory, the Red Flag. As for living quarters, the Golovines suffer a new shock. They are to live in a single room, without a bath, in a once-grand residence that has become a rundown boardinghouse.

The Russian actor Oleg Menchikov sensitively communicates Alexei's shame and guilt at having led his family into this police-state hell. And for a time, Bonnaire's resourceful and supportive Marie attempts to reconcile herself to her fate. The landlady, whose family once owned the house, befriends her, as she once learned French from her nanny. But the police take the old woman away after her friendship with the alien is reported.

Marie moves to take in the woman's grandson Sacha, a championship swimmer who is threatened with expulsion from the house. The despondent boy, who resembles a taller, more Slavic Leonardo DiCaprio as played by Serguei Bodrov Jr., begins to drink and smoke and falters in his training. His coach kicks him off the team, but Marie persuades him to build up his strength by fighting the currents in a broad Kiev river.

Alexei's strategy of protecting Marie and Serioja by joining the Communist Party and playing the model Soviet estranges his wife, who is repulsed by a society full of spying eyes. Then Alexei confesses an affair with his boss at the Red Flag and Marie throws him out. Now Marie becomes even more obsessed with the idea of escape.

Her hopes are aroused by the arrival of a touring French theater company, performing "Marie Tudor" by Victor Hugo. Its star, the left-wing actress Gabrielle Develay, regally played by a lavishly costumed Catherine Deneuve, accepts a letter from Marie, but cannot help her.

Marie's plight worsens as she begins an affair with Sacha after Alexei takes up with the hard-edged, sensual woman who now runs the "kommunalka." She and the swimmer plot an escape when Marie travels with a troupe of singers and dancers to the Baltic.

Near its end, "East-West" loses some of its tension, because of leaps in time. It regathers its powers in a taut climax, however. And throughout, Bonnaire pulls the narrative together with a performance of appeal and strength. Her Marie is a woman of many parts, noble yet half-mad at times, proud yet calculating, broken after a long ordeal, then ready to fight again. Menchikov gives a performance of affecting subtleties, and Bodrov exudes youthful romanticism as Sacha. As always, Deneuve combines beauty and an almost otherworldly presence.

As in the Oscar-winning "Indochine," Wargnier fills this film with illuminating glimpses of another time. The grand

Russian locations combine with drab living conditions and a harsh factory environment to show a Soviet Union that was far more nightmarish than ``1984." All of this makes ``East-West" a journey that demands to be taken, for this truly is a film of weight and value, a revelation.

Caption: PHOTO: 1(B&W); ETIENNE GEORGE / SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

SANDRINE BONNAIRE is brilliant as Marie in ``East-West," a film by ``Indochine" director Regis Wargnier.

Memo: EAST-WEST is directed by Regis Wargnier; written by Rustam Ibragimbekov, Serguei Bodrov, Louis Gardel and Wargnier; director of photography, Laurent Dailland; music composed by Patrick Doyle; production designers, Vladimir Svetozarov and Alexei Levchenko; edited by Herve Schneid; produced by Yves Marmion. It stars Sandrine Bonnaire, Oleg Menchikov, Catherine Deneuve and Serguei Bodrov Jr. Opening today at Cinema City, Hartford. Running time: 121 minutes. Rated PG-13, this film depicts a number of adulterous relationships, none graphically, a suggestive glimpse of the aftermath of marital love, and sometimes brutal acts by the KGB and Soviet army. ***

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``East-West' stretches truth in all directions but makes point

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI) - Friday, May 26, 2000

Author: DUANE DUDEK, *Journal Sentinel* film critic

"East-West" isn't strictly true, but it's true enough.

After World War II, Josef Stalin invited Russians who had fled the country to return to their homeland and help in the rebuilding process -- no questions asked, no grudges held.

His all-is-forgiven rhetoric drew thousands of Russian expatriates, many from France, who naively returned home but quickly discovered the Soviet leader's promises of amnesty were hollow. Some were killed outright, while the survivors conformed to the wishes of the state.

"East-West," directed by Regis Wargnier, isn't based on a real case but invents characters trapped in that bleak, Kafkaesque, fact-based situation.

Sandrine Bonnaire is a French woman traveling with her Russian-born husband and their son. Their voyage to Odessa is one of song and drink with their Russian government hosts, but the truth is revealed upon their landing, when several members of their traveling party are killed by the KGB.

Bonnaire is suspected of being a spy, and her physician husband, played by Oleg Menchikov, is urged to divorce her for his own good. When he refuses, they are allocated one room in a crowded communal apartment and settle into a dull routine with neither freedom nor privacy. Their colorful, noisy neighbors include resourceful, good-natured thieves; a Communist Party snitch; a grandmother whose home has been subdivided by the state into the apartments they all live in; and her grandson, an Olympic-caliber swimmer.

The youth and his grandmother speak French and befriend Bonnaire, and their kindness to her puts them under suspicion. Bonnaire's husband is a respected physician in a textile factory, and his collaboration alienates his wife, who spends her days plotting ways to escape. They grow apart, but no one is really to blame since they are victims of circumstances, strangers to each other in a strange land where you cling to whomever is closest.

After Bonnaire comes in contact with a French actress, played by Catherine Deneuve, who is passing through town, the actress spends the next decade futilely campaigning on her behalf.

A measure of dark-haired, sad-eyed Bonnaire's growing desperation is that, when her young neighbor offers to swim to safety abroad and contact the French embassy for help, it sounds like a feasible plan.

The film's kitchen-sink realism and rage-against-the-machine hopelessness make "East-West" resemble "Dr. Zhivago" without the scope and "Reds" without the passion.

Wargnier wrote and directed the Oscar-winning "Indochine" and developed "East-West" out of a wish to work again with Deneuve, who also starred in the earlier film. Both stories are about individuals caught in historical movements, and both similarly depend on family melodrama and novelistic invention that may not be true but which, in "East-West," are true enough.

East-West ***

Cast: Sandrine Bonnaire, Oleg Menchikov, Catherine Deneuve, Serguei Bodrov Jr., Grigori Manoukov, Erwan Baynaud, Ruben Tapiero

Behind the scenes: Produced by Yves Marmion. Written by Regis Wargnier, Serguei Bodrov, Louis Gardel and Rustam Ibragimbekov. Directed by Regis Wargnier.

Rated: PG-13; innuendo, violence

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Holding to hope amid desolation

The Knoxville News-Sentinel - Friday, June 9, 2000

Author: Betsy Pickle, News-Sentinel film critic

Not every prodigal son receives his father's love and a fatted calf. In "East-West," the prodigals who return are welcomed with betrayal.

Since the father figure is Joseph Stalin, that might not come as a shock to contemporary viewers. But in 1946, when Stalin issued a proclamation inviting all exiles since 1917 to come back to the USSR, promising no reprisals, thousands of homesick Russians left their lives in the West to repatriate the motherland.

"East-West" tells the fictional, romantic tale of one family caught in Stalin's paranoid web. Russian-born doctor Alexei Golovin (Oleg Menchikov) persuades his French wife, Marie (Sandrine Bonnaire), to leave her own country and uproot their young son, Serioja (Ruben Tapiero), so they can start a new life in his homeland.

Alexei and Marie are barely off the boat in Odessa when they discover the mistake they've made. One terrified fellow passenger is gunned down. Marie is brutally interrogated by government agent Pirogov (Grigori Manoukov) and accused of being an imperialist spy.

Alexei is urged to abandon Marie, but he refuses. While most of their traveling companions are either killed or imprisoned in camps, the Golovins are spared. They are sent to Kiev, where Alexei is assigned to head a factory clinic.

Marie begs her husband to push for their return to France, but Alexei refuses. He cautions her to play it safe, as he is doing. But Marie insists on making rash moves, such as trying to contact a French stage actress, Gabrielle (Catherine Deneuve), touring in Kiev.

Marie finds a kindred spirit in Sacha (Serguei Bodrov Jr.), a 17-year-old orphan who moves in with the family. A fine swimmer, Sacha is dismissed from the state swim team because of his rebellious attitude toward the government and his work. Marie encourages Sacha to continue training on his own, realizing that by doing so, Sacha someday may find the opportunity to escape to the West.

While "East-West" has plenty of outrageous plot twists, it's much less of a soap opera than director Regis Wargnier's "Indochine," the 1993 Best Foreign Language Oscar winner. This film evokes the harsh and repressive atmosphere of 1940s-1950s Russia without setting up the villains as buffoons or the protagonists as saints.

The actors are absolutely terrific, from the emotive Bonnaire and the impassive Menchikov to the intimidating Manoukov

and the radiant Deneuve. The supporting roles boast a wealth of talent by actors unknown in the West, such as Tatiana Doguileva as the scheming Olga, Bogdan Stupka as Marie's protector, Col. Boyko, and Meglena Karalambova as Alexei's shrewd mentor, Nina.

The script by Wagnier, Rustam Ibragimbekov, Serguei Bodrov and Louis Gardel focuses on the importance of hope and the steadfastness of love.

In an environment that breeds defeat and self-preservation, those emotions are hard to hold on to.

The script and the performances powerfully convey the fragility and strength alternating within the characters.

"East-West" doesn't treat freedom as a placard concept but as something precious that can be lost and only dearly won. The particulars may be fiction, but the film's reality is intensely moving.

Rated PG-13; in French and Russian, with subtitles. Now showing at Downtown West.

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Poignant 'East-West' traces family's trip home

Detroit News, The (MI) - Friday, August 11, 2000

Author: *Detroit News Film Critic ; Susan Stark*

They were patriots, idealists, romantics and, tragically, naifs.

Scattered over the course of a decade by World War II and its aftermath, they heard Stalin's call to come home to Russia in 1946 and heeded it. *East-West*, by France's Regis Wagnier, dramatizes their experience in unforgettably acute, moving terms.

Although its perspective is knowing and rangy, the film concentrates on the case of one young couple and their son. He's a Russian emigrant living in France, married to a French woman and the father of a young son.

They leave the comfort of their life in the West to return to the motherland, along with thousands of others in the same position. An early scene pinpoints the emotional precision of Wagnier's approach.

His camera singles out an elderly man who arrives in Russia along with the family. Immediately after disembarking, he kneels to kiss the soil of his homeland: "My God! At last in Russia!" he murmurs. At that instant, Wagnier brings the booted foot of a Soviet soldier into the shot and places it within inches of the kneeling man's cheek.

Wagnier's high-impact anecdotal approach spans the entire length of the film. This is historical drama that spans a decade, but it has a consistently intimate quality.

Invariably, it stresses experience over theory -- political or otherwise. All praise to Wagnier and his trio of screenwriting collaborators -- Rustam Ibragimbekov, Serguei Bodrov and Louis Gardel -- for that.

An impeccable cast dominated by French, Russian, Ukrainian and Bulgarian actors brings their text and vision shimmeringly alive.

First among them: France's Sandrine Bonnaire as a woman who, over the course of a potentially soul-deadening decade in her husband's country, becomes as strong as she is beautiful and Russia's Oleg Menchikov, who plays her husband, a man whose gallantry remains his own heart's great secret. Bonnaire's role requires a huge emotional range, and she hits its every mark. Yet it is Menchikov, in a pitch-perfect performance built around emotional concealment, whose work gives the film its lasting resonance.

East-West derives additional resonance from the presence of Catherine Deneuve in a relatively small but important role. She plays a famous French actress whose profession takes her to Russia in the early '50s, when she becomes involved

with the trapped Bonnaire.

Those who know the singularly beautiful Deneuve's work in Francois Truffaut's *The Last Metro*, set in Parisian theatrical circles at the time of the German occupation, will find stirring echoes of it in her performance here.

A Best Foreign Film Oscar winner for 1993's *Indochina*, Wagnier, with only five films to his credit, assures his place among the modern greats with *East-West*.

Movie Review

'East-West'

Rated PG-13

* * * * (Splendid)

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Caucasus tale still stirs readers Interest: "Ali and Nino," a pre-Soviet love story set in a cultural crossroad, finds a new generation of admirers - and filmmakers.

Sun, The (Baltimore, MD) - Sunday, July 29, 2001

Author: SUN FOREIGN STAFF ; Kathy Lally

BAKU, Azerbaijan - Ali Khan Shirvanshir, a Baku high school student, an Asian and a Muslim, loves Nino Kipiani, a Westerner, a Georgian Christian - and the most beautiful girl in the world.

So the story begins, with its themes of East and West, Islam and Christianity and two young people in love as war and wrenching change approach. It is the story of Ali and Nino, set in the Caucasus just before the Russian Revolution. The novel, written by Kurban Said, was first published in 1937 in German.

Pieter Verhoeff, a Dutch screenwriter and director, came across a translation 20 years ago and immediately fell in love. "I've had it under my arm ever since," he says.

Elin Suleymanov, an Azerbaijani living in Washington, was reluctant to read it. After all, Baku was his home, and how could this book tell him anything new about it? He read it last year and immediately fell in love.

"It may be a guide to the soul of the Caucasus," he wrote in his review in *Azerbaijan International* magazine, "or even my own."

The book is magical, and it's mysterious because of the author, who may not have been named Kurban Said at all. Perhaps he was Lev Nussimbaum, who was born in Baku in 1905 to a wealthy German-Jewish family, fled as the Bolsheviks approached in 1919 and died in Positano, Italy, in 1942. Or maybe the author is a close friend of Nussimbaum's, Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels, who met him in Austria and embroidered on his tales of life in Baku.

Kurban Said's identity may not be entirely clear. What is clear is that the book is written with great detail, authority - and love.

"The story is very nice," says Ali Hoomani, who owns a large, modern movie theater in Baku. "The love story is especially interesting, taking place as it does in that period, with all those forces sweeping over Azerbaijan."

The novel describes the years leading up to Azerbaijan's independence, from 1918 to 1920, when it was free of czarist rule but before it was swallowed up in the Soviet Union. For Americans, who know of Azerbaijan only vaguely as a

distant part of the former Soviet empire, the story is new and compelling. It tells of a very non-Russian world, a cosmopolitan world where East and West meet in a distinctive Caucasian culture.

Ali and Nino is set in Baku, on the shores of the Caspian Sea. There are balls and palaces, evenings at the opera, stolen brides and gallant men racing on horseback to the rescue, great heroes and desperate villains.

The story takes the reader into the mountains of Azerbaijan, to the lively capital of Tbilisi in neighboring Georgia, with its fabled hospitality - as true today as all those years ago. The villages of Dagestan, the harems of Teheran, women hidden behind veils, eunuchs and shahs - Ali and Nino tells their story, the story of the Caucasus, and especially Baku.

Ali Khan loved the city deeply. He would go up to the flat roof of his house - in what is now Baku's old city - and look at it for hours.

"From there I could see my world, the massive wall of the town's fortress and the ruins of the palace, Arab inscriptions at the gate. Through the labyrinth of streets, camels were walking, their ankles so delicate that I wanted to caress them."

He sees the Maiden's Tower, built sometime before the 12th century, surrounded by tourist guides. It still is. He sees the Caspian Sea, as leaden today as he describes it then. And there's still a "noisy crowd" seeking oil. Then the seekers included the Nobel family (Swedes who made the fortune there that later endowed the Nobel Prize.) Today, big Western corporations are crowding noisily in, seeking oil.

And now you see camels only out in the desert, not in the city. Two 14th- and 15th-century caravan stops have been turned into restaurants. And there are three towns, instead of the two Ali Khan Shirvanshir knew.

His old town, with its 12th-century walls, is still surrounded by the second town, the one built by the oil men between 1885 and 1915 when Azerbaijan was producing about half of the world's oil. The third one was built in the Soviet days, a town of poorly made apartment buildings, looking rough indeed compared with the lovely oil baron mansions.

Today Baku bears so many resemblances to what it was in the time of Ali and Nino that it would make a perfect movie location. Pieter Verhoeff and Ali Hoomani plan to take advantage of it.

This fall, they expect to begin making a movie from the book, with Verhoeff as director and Hoomani as producer. Rustam Ibragimbekov, screenwriter for the 1995 Oscar-winning *Burnt by the Sun*, has already written a draft of the screenplay.

Verhoeff has been waiting for this opportunity for years, until recently unable to get a producer interested in the project.

"What should a Dutchman have to do with a film about Azerbaijan?" Verhoeff says. "No one was interested - until now."

Now, he says, relationships between Muslims and Christians and East and West have become compelling themes in Europe.

"The girl, Nino, had a very courageous and independent attitude for a young woman of that time," Verhoeff says. "And Ali is fascinating - a guy who is Muslim and wants to honor his father and traditions, but also wants change.

"The atmosphere is full of humanity and humor. It's beautifully written, and it's a fantastic love story."

Hoomani is an ethnic Azeri born in Iran - there are more ethnic Azeris living in northern Iran than in Azerbaijan. His father owned movie theaters in Iran and represented Paramount Pictures there.

After the Iranian Revolution, his family fled to the United States and lived in Raleigh, N.C., where relatives also settled. He says about 16 Hoomanis, including himself, have graduated from North Carolina State - more than from any other family.

"I got into the film business in North Carolina," Hoomani says.

In 1996, he moved to Baku, returning, in a way, to his homeland. "It's the same people and the same language, the same traditions," he says. "It was the best place for me to set up a business. There were no modern cinemas here in Azerbaijan."

While he thinks Ali and Nino will make a good movie, he doesn't think of it as romantically as Verhoeff does. For Hoomani, the book is life in the Caucasus. And the city, he says, will lend itself to the era.

"You look at Baku," he says, "and you believe it's turn of the century."

The building where Ali described going to school, the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School, is now the Azerbaijan State Economic Institute.

Ali loved to take Nino to the opera, and the 1910 Opera House is still there. According to legend, an Azerbaijani oil baron was enchanted by an Italian opera singer and built the opera house so she would perform in Baku.

The building looks stern and formal but once must have been softened by the gas lamps in front.

You can stroll by an Italian Renaissance mansion built by an oil baron named Hagi Zeynalabdin Taghiyev from 1895 to 1902. Ali and Nino danced at a reception there. Now it's the State History Museum.

The Outer Town had the opera, schools, libraries and beautiful, bare-shouldered European women. In the Old Town, "the houses were narrow and curved like oriental daggers. Minarets pierced the moon, so different from the oil derricks the House of Nobel had erected," Ali says.

Today, more than 80 years later, West and East still meet. Azerbaijan is free again - an independent country since 1991. And the names Ali and Nino still summon romance.

"After 20 years, I'm still in love with the book and the story," Verhoeff says. "It's all very exotic and wonderful."

Caption: PHOTO(S) / MAP(S)

1. History: A man walks his child past the 1910 Opera House, a place frequented by the two lovers in "Ali and Nino." The love story is drawing the interest of a Dutch film director.

2. BAKU, Azerbaijan 1. ALGERINA PERNA : SUN STAFF

2. SUN STAFF

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A list of award-winners at the Venice Film Festival

Associated Press Archive - Saturday, September 6, 2003

Award-winners at the Venice Film Festival announced Saturday night:

Venice 60 section

Golden Lion for Best Film: "The Return" (directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev; Russia)

Silver Lion of Jury Grand Prix: "The Kite" (directed by Randa Chahal Sabbag; Lebanon/France)

Silver Lion for Best Director: Takeshi Kitano ("Zatoichi"; Japan)

Coppa Volpi for Best Actress: Katja Riemann ("Rosenstrasse"; Germany)

Coppa Volpi for Best Actor: Sean Penn ("21 Grams"; United States)

Marcello Mastroianni Award for Best Young Actor or Actress: Najat Dessalem ("Raja"; France)

Award for an Outstanding Individual Contribution: Marco Bellocchio for script of "Good Morning, Night" (directed by Bellocchio; Italy)

Silver Lion for Best Short Film: "The Oil" (directed by Murad Ibragimbekov; Azerbaijan)

UIP prize for Best European Short Film: "The Trumouse Show" (directed by Julio Robledo; Spain)

Less mainstream films

San Marco Prize of \$55,500 for best film: "Vodka Lemon" (directed by Hiner Saleem; France/Italy/Switzerland/Armenia)

Special Director's Award: Michael Schorr ("Schulz Gets the Blues"; Germany)

Upstream Prize for Best Actor: Asano Tadanobu ("Last Life in the Universe"; Thailand)

Upstream Prize for Best Actress: Scarlett Johansson ("Lost in Translation"; United States)

"Luigi De Laurentiis" Venice Award for a First Film: "The Return"

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Salon

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Author: *Victor Sonkin*

URL: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/>

Audiobooks have featured prominently in the Western recording industry for quite a while. There is even a special category of the Grammy Awards called "Best Spoken Word Album." In Russia, however, the idea seems new and unusual.

But its novelty is in part an illusion. Several generations of Soviet children grew up listening to long-play records of their favorite fairy tales, usually performed by the very best actors, while their parents avidly listened to famous plays adapted for radio performance. Some books were actually famous only for their radio versions, informally called instsenirovki. Very few people read novels like "Death for Everything Good" by Maksud Ibragimbekov or "Dingo the Wild Dog" by Ruvim Frayerman, but almost everyone knew their audio versions.

These days, vinyl is obsolete and radio gives listeners little choice: You listen to what's on. But the stage-to-radio link is triumphantly re-emerging in the guise of audiobooks.

The major player on the audiobooks market is Soyuz, which also puts out CDs, DVDs, video films and more. Soyuz emphasizes the stage aspect of audiobooks, not just "reading" the text, but playing it out with a whole company of actors, often famous ones.

"Our goal," said Irina Katina, one of the managers of Soyuz's audiobooks program, "is to draw the listeners into the world of the book, to make them participate in what's happening on the soundtrack." Soyuz's list of nonmusical records (available on compact disc, MP3 and cassette) is several hundred entries long, and sales have been steadily growing.

Another company, Abooks, takes the Western approach, recording single works of fiction with one actor alone. Needless to say, the actor's voice must be suitable for the text at hand. But the choice of book is also important; while it shouldn't

be totally unknown, it also shouldn't be something that almost every reader knows by heart, like Mikhail Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita." (Abooks has issued recordings of other, somewhat less well-known, works by Bulgakov.) Finally, the text must lend itself easily to reading -- a very difficult task when it comes to literature in translation.

Audiobooks are catching on with people whose vision is failing, for those stuck in traffic jams, for the growing number of Russians trying to keep fit in gyms and for children who cannot read. But apparently not all authors take advantage. Mikhail Gasparov, a world-renowned scholar, wrote one of the best nonfiction books of the last decade; when asked whether he knew that his "Amazing Greece" was now sold as an audiobook in Moscow's largest bookstores, he replied, "What's an audiobook?"

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Uncommon Senses

WorldSources Online - Friday, November 19, 2004

Author: Tom Birchenough

URL: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/>

Two of the patients, played by Bogdan Khizhnyak and Olga Golitsa, come together in response to therapy.

Setting a film in a home for the blind, deaf and dumb might sound like a recipe for yet another bleak, moralizing post-Soviet film, but Roman Balayan's "Bright is the Night" is an exception to the rule. Social commentary is simply not something the veteran Armenian-born, Ukrainian-based director does. If anything, "Bright is the Night" resembles his costumed 1995 adaptation of Ivan Turgenev's "First Love," with its lush pastoral setting and atmosphere of slow but unoppressive decay, and its understated treatment of the emotions that connect a small number of characters in close proximity. It's summer, and the majority of residents are away from the institution, leaving just a handful of staff and patients on the premises.

The main player is a young therapist, Alexei, played by Andrei Kuzichev, who was seen earlier this year in a supporting role in Vladimir Mashkov's "Papa." Though obviously devoted to his profession and to those he looks after, he has plenty of extra time during the summer months for wandering the forests and fishing in the lake with the institution's janitor, an amiable drunk named Petrovich (Vladimir Gostyukhin).

But Alexei's idyll is turned upside down with the arrival of an attractive medical resident, Lika, played by another relative newcomer, Olga Sutulova, whom he first encounters sunbathing in the nude and later discovers to share his enthusiasm for engaging patients by kindling their emotions for each other. Needless to say, Lika and Alexei's new-age therapeutic techniques raise the hackles of the institute's more traditional-minded director, Zinaida (Irina Kupchenko), as does their growing romantic involvement. Zinaida has long felt affection for Alexei, while rejecting the advances of the institution's other therapist, Dima, played by Alexei Panin.

If that sounds like a prelude to a major dramatic crisis, it isn't. Instead, the film is dominated by slow interactions between the therapists and their patients, through Braille and a kind of sign language made of hand and body contact. These scenes are made all the more effective for the fact that the amateur actors playing the patients are themselves either blind, deaf or dumb. Such verisimilitude has become reasonably standard for Europe or the United States in art-house films, but is extremely rare in Russia to date.

Moving moments do emerge, particularly in the interactions between Alexei and Vitya, a young boy whose arrival at the institute precipitates the film's denouement -- if that's what the final scene can be called, given that the revelations themselves can't be spoken out loud. Climbing trees and running through the fields with Vitya, Alexei reaches the stage, crucial to his method, when he feels that his combination of touch and body sign language has allowed him to "hear" the voice of the child. Once that bond is established, Alexei is too devoted to abandon the lad, even if that means

abandoning his love.

Production values are modest, and certainly reflect the limited funds available to this Russian-Ukrainian co-production. But cinematographer Bogdan Verzhitsky does a great deal with the assets he has. At a nighttime open-air dance scene toward the end, his camera centers on two patients who have obviously responded to Alexei's treatment and found emotional engagement with each other, contrasted with close-ups of eye contact between the other characters who have not.

The paradox with "Bright is the Night" -- a film that will catch some international attention, given the reputation of its director and his co- screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov -- is how little interest it will provoke among Russia's multiplex-going viewers today. The small late-afternoon audience with whom this critic watched the film was dominated by people well into their 40s, who responded well. Most likely, Balayan's film will find its place on a mainstream television broadcast sometime in the future, where it will appeal greatly to those viewers -- Soviet-era, yes -- for whom a trip to the cinema is no longer a possibility.

"Bright is the Night" (Noch Svetla) is playing in Russian at Dom Khanzhonkova.

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Kazakhstan goes West No cowboys in this epic but plenty of horses, fighting and clich's.

Kansas City Star, The (MO) - Friday, April 13, 2007

Author: NEIL GENZLINGER, *New York Times News Service*

MOVIE REVIEW - Nomad

No cowboys in this epic but plenty of horses, fighting and clich's.

John Ford was widely reported to have died in 1973, but it turns out the director is alive and well and still making movies -- in Kazakhstan. At least that's what is suggested by "Nomad," a big-budget epic newly arrived from that country.

Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer are the directors of credit, and there's not a cowboy in sight. But the film looks and feels like an old-school American Western.

The story, set in the 18th century, tells of the nomadic Kazakhs hope for a leader who can unite their various tribes and drive out the invading Jungars. It's a bit odd that a tale of nationalistic pride is told using North American actors in several important parts, but one of those, Jason Scott Lee, makes a compelling presence as Oraz, a mystic dedicated to identifying and educating this long-prophesied leader, supposedly a descendant of Genghis Khan.

The destined lad is Mansur (Kuno Becker), and he's a bit scrawny for a warrior king, but when his time to lead comes he proves worthy.

The story (written by Rustam Ibragimbekov) is never anything but predictable, including the end result of a triangle involving Mansur, his best friend (Jay Hernandez) and the woman they both love (Ayana Yesmagambetova). Clich's are almost as thick in the air as the warriors arrows and swords ("Like night and day, good and evil are always together"; "If we are to die, let us die free") and set pieces from the "How to Make a Western" handbook roll by as if someone is checking off a list: the surrounded stagecoach, the cavalry gallop, the pivotal duel.

Yet the actors manage to invest all this predictability with a surprising amount of charm. They don't get any help from the landscape: Kazakhstan, alas, appears to be one extremely brown country. But the cast does get excellent support from a huge assembly of horses.

The scenes are staged with an impressive (and, one hopes, safe) fearlessness, the horses pulling off stunts that Hollywood films usually reserve for cars.

NOMAD 1/2

Director: Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer

Cast: Kuno Becker, Jay Hernandez, Jason Scott Lee, Ayana Yesmagambetova

Rated: R for a beheading and other violence

Running time: 1:51

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Send your short reviews to myreview@kcstar.com.

'Nomad' - No cowboys in this epic but plenty of horses, fighting and clich's.

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How glorious nation of Kazakhstan was born

Seattle Times, The (WA) - Friday, April 27, 2007

Author: Jeff Shannon: *Special to The Seattle Times*

Great looking, noble in spirit and utterly bland in almost every other respect, "Nomad: The Warrior" does one thing very well: It reminds you that ambitious international co-productions are almost always a mixed bag of impressive strengths and ridiculous weaknesses.

Set in Kazakhstan long before "Borat" brought comedic shame to his "countrymen," this \$40 million French-Kazakh co-production (which somehow managed to snag a Golden Globe nomination earlier this year) is reportedly the brainchild of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who thought it would be nice to see his country represented by a grand-scale epic full of colorful costumes, sweeping landscapes, and the flashing swords and flying arrows of armor-clad warriors on galloping steeds. That makes "Nomad" a kind of Western-themed PR campaign, with a beheading or two to scare off any tourists looking for Kazakhstan's answer to Monument Valley.

Naturally, such an exercise in national pride calls for two foreign directors (one Russian, the other Czech), a screenwriter from Azerbaijan, and Mexican and American actors in the male leads. As the obligatory love interest torn between two best friends, the very appealing Kazakh actress Ayanat Yesmagambetova had her dialogue dubbed by Chinese actress Bai Ling, leading one to wonder, is this an 18th-century prequel to "Babel"?

Oh, well. Who cares if the dubbing is obvious when you've got loads of repetitious battle action and a descendent of Genghis Khan as your hero?

That would be Mansur (Kuno Becker, from Mexico's popular "Goal!" movies), historically known as legendary Kazakh military strategist Ablai Khan. He's prophesied by the mystic warrior Oraz (Jason Scott Lee) to be the savior of Kazakhstan, born to unify the country's tribes against their marauding Jungar enemies. Trained in secrecy by Oraz, Mansur grows up to fulfill his destiny, which includes a fateful duel with best friend Erali (Jay Hernandez, from "Hostel" and its sequel), and a hopeful future with Gaukhar, the Kazakh sweetheart who speaks English with a semi-Chinese accent.

I don't mean to dismiss "Nomad" out of hand; it boasts plenty of expansive scenery and some grand-scale horse-riding that's a welcome throwback to the authentic scope of pre-CGI classics like "Lawrence of Arabia."

Unfortunately, it also embraces every cliché in the epic-movie playbook, relies too heavily on stale dialogue delivered in

somber tones and offers little to its actors besides the opportunity to fashion some great-looking Eurasian costumes. It really doesn't matter how directors Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer divided their duties, since "Nomad" is uniformly unremarkable in terms of its overall impact.

On the other hand, it makes Kazakhstan look a lot better than "Borat" did, and when most people discover this movie on DVD, that'll surely count for something.

Jeff Shannon: j.sh@verizon.net

Movie review **

"Nomad: The Warrior," with Jason Scott Lee, Kuno Becker, Jay Hernandez, Ayanat Yesmagambetova. Directed by Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer, from a screenplay by Rustam Ibragimbekov.

112 minutes. Rated R for violence. Partially dubbed into English. Crest.

Caption: photo

The Weinstein Company: "Nomad," reportedly the brainchild of the Kazakh president, has an international cast and a steppe-ful of battle sequences.

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