Carnival Night (1956)
by Eldar Ryazanov

Carnival Night is an enduring classic in Russia today. Released shortly after Stalin's death and in the early years of the so-called 'Thaw Period,' the musical's lighthearted, yet incisive derision of bureaucracy is symptomatic of the massive political changes sweeping the USSR.

We've all heard about it. The speech that shocked the world. It is a staple lesson in school history classes: most of us have sat half attentive at a desk, and listened to a teacher telling us about Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences.' Or, as it has come to be known, Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech.' Delivered to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party on the 25th of February 1956, Khrushchev denounced the cult of personality that had been fostered under Josef Stalin's regime. The consequences of this speech, some intended, some unintended and many drastic, were to truly change the world.

In December 1956, at the tail end of that fateful year, 'Carnival Night' was released. There is no doubt that Eldar Ryazanov's feature directorial debut has withstood the test of time: for over half a century, the formidable talents of Ryazanov and Lyudmila Gurchenko have charmed millions of viewers across the former USSR and beyond. There are many elements to the film's success. It is certainly possible to point to its vibrancy, the iconic musical numbers and innocent yet irreverent comedy that conspire to make it a timeless classic. The plot is simple and effective: Gurchenko, as witty heroine Lena Krylova, conspires against the boring plans of newly arrived Comrade Serafim Ogurtsov for a New Year Celebration. Lena is young, intelligent, a little sarcastic and enormously talented; in direct opposition to this Serafim Ogurtsov is bad humoured, pompous and unimaginative. The ensuing game of cat and mouse, with Ogurtsov as the unwitting prey, is comedy gold.

Ryazanov himself commented "For me the main character is bureaucrat Ogursov (whose name roughly translates as Pickle). He alone gave us the opportunity to make the film satirical and topical. I described the role to the great comic actor Igor Vladimirovich Ilyinsky like this, 'Pickle is not like today's bureaucrats, who have grown up in soft armchairs. He has initiative, openness, simplicity... He is democratic without cronyism or overfamiliarity. In him, there are all the qualities of a hero. Except for one thing - Pickle - is a complete idiot.'"

Whilst there is no barrier to enjoyment as modern viewers, it is hard for us to understand what such a film, made at such a delicate moment in history, truly meant. In the years following Stalin's death on the 5th of March 1953, so-called 'de-Stalinisation' had been secret and public mourning had been loud. It has been said that even Stalin's victims wept. But, faced with the reality of thousands of prisoners returning home from Stalin's gulags and the inevitable changes that was bound to bring, it was necessary to address what had until then been unspoken. The ramifications of Kruschev's speech were extreme. People were so shaken by the content they began committing suicide. March 1956 saw demonstrations in Georgia, furious at Stalin's denunciation. Tbilisi began rioting and calling for an independent Georgia. Trains were arriving in Moscow from Tbilisi with their windows smashed. Meanwhile, in October 1956, a Hungarian revolution was beginning. In Russia people were slowly adjusting to a more free society.

For modern viewers like ourselves, it is easy to forget the absolute political chaos surrounding the making and release of 'Carnival Night.' When taking this into account, it quickly becomes evident that the film became far more than a light, musical comedy. It is also an enduring message of hope. The film is centred around treatment of talent. Ogurtsov's desperate attempts to quash this talent mirrors the totality of Stalinist censorship and, yet, in Ryazanov's film, talent prevails. Humorously following Lena and her friends plans to overturn Ogurtsov's decrees, Ryazanov reminds us that laughter, talent, creativity and expression are profound acts of dissidence.

William Grimes, in a tribute to the late, great Ryazanov described 'Carnival Night' as 'a harbinger of the post-Stalin thaw and the emergence of a new postwar generation.' To understand this postwar generation, it is necessary for us to remember and respect how rapidly that world changed. Free expression was groundbreaking. In the film's most famous scene, Gurchenko leads the song 'Pyat Minut.' It is a musical number, that over half a century later, remains a popular festive song in Russia. When she smilingly sings, 'Time is rushing us to the future, and the old year is losing power,' she speaks to a hopeful generation, sandwiched between Stalin's personality cult and the decay of the Brezhnev years.

This screening is introduced by Dr Maria Korolkova, a specialist in history and theory of Russian and Soviet cinema.
MELODIA! DISCOVERING MUSICALS FROM RUSSIA & THE CAUCASUS

Melodia! celebrates the diversity and complexity of Soviet, Russian and Caucasian musicals. It gives UK and Russian speaking audiences a unique opportunity to explore an undiscovered musical tradition.

WE ARE FROM JAZZ (1983)
KAREN SHAKNAZAROV
Introduced by Peter Bradshaw
This film casts an eye back to the jazz's beginnings in 1920s USSR. Released into the harsh economic reality of the 1980s, it is an example of the loosening of censorship in the late Soviet film.
7 Jan 6.30pm

CHERYOMUSHKI (1963)
HERBERT RAPPAPORT
Introduced by Owen Hatherley
An adaptation of Dmitri Shostakovich's operetta, which subtly criticises Soviet life, raising intriguing questions about whether Shostakovich was a dissident or an ideologue.
Screening on 35mm.
8 Jan, 6.30pm

CARNIVAL NIGHT (1956)
ELDAR RYZANOV
A brilliant parody of Soviet top-down bureaucracy, Carnival Night satirise the appointment of a new director at a House of Culture, who threatens the New Year's party plans of his co-workers.
14 May, 6.30pm

MELODIES OF THE VERA QUARTER (1987)
GIORGI SHENGELIA
Melodies is a charming tale that clearly has its origins in folklore. The film's context is infused with marvellous Georgian music and dance and featuring performances from great Georgian actors Vakhtang Kikabidze and Sofiko Chiaureli, Melodies is a celebration of Georgian culture's vibrancy.
Screening on 35mm.
15 Jan, 6.30pm

KARINE (1969)
ARMAN MANARYAN
Based on an operetta by Tigran Chukhajian, Karine includes everything an operetta is supposed to have. Performed in Armenian and released shortly after the 1965 demonstrations in Yerevan, it is important to see this film as a declaration also of Armenian identity.
21 Jan, 6.30pm

A MAN FROM BLVD DES CAPUCINES
ALLA SURIKOVA
Introduced by Hope Dickson Leech
This rare red Western acts as an exploration into the nature of cinema. Lovingly playing with devices of American film and the birth of cinema, it is the only film in the season to be directed by a woman.
Wed 22 January 6.30pm

HIPSTERS (2008)
VALERY TODOROVSKY
Todorovsky's musical provides a contemporary view on the 'Stilyagi' counter-culture (parallel to the Beat Generation). A melange of 1950s music with contemporary score, this eclectic film contextualises Russian musical tradition within its Soviet past.
Screening on 35mm.
Sunday 26 Jan, 6.00pm

LETO (2018)
KIRIL SEREBRENNIKOV
Introduced by Roman Bilyk
Kiril Serebrennikov's film is a foray into Leningrad's 1980's music scene. Depicting real cult figures from the time like Viktor Tsy, the film is a nostalgic exploration of Western music's impact on the underground scene.
Friday 31 Jan, 7.30pm

Eldar Ryazanov
Often compared to Billy Wilder, Eldar Ryazanov (1927 - 2015) was a Soviet and Russian filmmaker. As a student at VGIK he was supervised by none other than Sergei Eisenstein. 'Carnival Night' was his first feature film, and throughout his career he produced many classics of Russian cinema: 'Irony of Fate' (1976), a comedy about a doctor who ends up in St. Petersburg and does not realise due to the uniformity of the apartments, is still a much played and referenced classics. As are his comedies 'Garage' and 'Beware of the Car'. Through humour, Ryazanov liked to express some of life's tragedies.

Dr Maria Korolkova
Dr Maria Korolkova teaches, writes and curates on cultural theory, film and new media, specialising in Russian and Soviet cinema history and theory. Having gained her first degree from Moscow State University in Media Studies, she completed MPhil in Screen Media and Cultures at the University of Cambridge, and DPhil at the University of Oxford. In 2017 Maria joined the University of Greenwich, launching a new MA in Media and Creative Cultures in 2018.

The Kino Klassika Team
This evening's screening could not happen without the support of Joseph Andreyev, Nathan Dampier, Maria Egieva, Tatiana Isaaeva, Zoryana Mischiy, Seraphina Paisay, Talitha Piggott & Tom Rebour.

Support Us
Kino Klassika is a UK registered charity (1150791). We rely on the generosity of our supporters. If you want to encourage education and engagement with classic Russian language, Eastern and East European film, please support us by making a donation. Our trustees are Ian Christie, Daniel Jowell QC, Roger Munnings CBE and Justine Waddell. Our patriot is Ralph Fiennes.

We are fundraising to complete a restoration of Parajanov’s Arabesques on a Pirosmani Theme (1985). This short film, about Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani, is a meditation by one great Georgian artist (Parajanov), on another (Pirosmani). Parajanov, of both Georgian and Armenian descent, is considered one of the most lyrical and imaginative figures of 20th century cinema, developing the art form with unique, poetic vision, and leaving a legacy that his influenced countless subsequent directors. He is arguably best known for his film The Colour of Pomegranates.

Kino Klassika creates programmes of film restorations, publications, art commissions and events to educate audiences about classic Russian language and Eastern cinema. This includes a 2-year programme to spotlight the pioneering work of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, and our first restoration projects of Parajanov’s Hakob Havnavanyan, and Arabesques on the Pirosmani Theme as well as Jirtdan. Kino Klassika's trustees are Professor Ian Christie, Daniel Jowell QC, Roger Munnings CBE and Justine Waddell. The patron of Kino Klassika is Ralph Fiennes.

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