



Tuesday 10 November 2020
#Klassiki

Running to the Sky (2019) *Mirlan Abdykalykov*

Jekshen does not walk like a child. In a scene showing the children entering the school, the others bound in happily and in groups. He enters hunched over, the weight of the world clearly on his shoulders. This all changes when Jekshen runs. The oppressing weight of his environment dissipates and he speeds along the sandy, vastness of the Kyrgyz countryside. For a just a little while, he is unfettered by his troubles and his face is joyful- just like a child's should be.

There are only a few sparse moments of levity that punctuate the Jekshen's unfortunate lot. Mirlan Abdykalykov's film, his second film as a director, has expanded on the Kyrgyz film tradition his father boldly innovated. In many ways, *Running to the Sky* is a sequel to *Beshkempir*, the film Mirlan Abdykalykov's father directed and he starred in. *Beshkempir* was the first in a wave of Kyrgyz films to leave the country after independence from the Soviet Union, in 1998. An enormously personal film, *Beshkempir* chronicles the life of a boy in a small countryside village. *Running to the Sky* similarly paints an empathetic and masterful sketch of a boy's coming of age in a small Kyrgyz town. Despite the 20 years between the two films, it is striking that the quality of life in such a place remains largely the same. Problems plague the village and a handful of children are doomed to grow up far too fast.

The film begins with a woman weaving and engaging in a traditional ceremony. Then we are shown the setting. It is a beautiful landscape, an expanse of desert surrounded by hills. There is a ridge that runs across the edge of the town that looks almost like a running track- it leads nowhere. Uniquely stunning, the landscapes features are enviable and so specific to the geographical location. In spite of this, there is something enclosed about the village. Closed in by the hills, they are isolated from other places. The camera often focuses on the birds flying above the village. This both highlights the entrapment of the villagers, who do not have the bird's flight or freedom. As the hawks circle above the village it makes the villagers seem a lot like prey.

Jekshen's life is series of humiliations, these are witnessed publicly and there is no escape from viewers in a town so small. His father drinks away the money meant for school. He

is publicly called out by the teacher. The other children gleefully make fun of his father's alcoholism. His moments of happiness often end in disappointment. He wins a race, and when at the finish line sees his father not watching and drinking in the car lot. It is heartbreaking to watch the childlike joy and glow from victory so quickly turn into despair. There are a few scenes in the film that are happy, these carry so much pathos for their understated nature and indeed their sparsity. Allan Hunter, for *Screen Daily*, commented on the mature and layered portrayal of Jekshen by Temirlan Asankadyrov: 'His features convey a real spectrum of emotions from the awkward embarrassment at the way others treat his father to the quiet glow of pleasure when a sober dad lets him drive a tractor and they plough the fields together.' They are in the fields when this happens, far away from the village and prying eyes.

Despite the film's realism and dour content, it is not a sad watch. In spite of everything, there are moments of hope and kindness. Beyond this, even the difficult content is approached with stoicism and practicality. This is exemplified by Jekshen, Whilst the viewers heart breaks for this talented and kind boy, to whom life simply dealt a bad hand; you do not think that he will allow his circumstances to define him. He is an unusually practical and diligent child, who seems to do the right thing with ease and grace. His mother comes to visit him and offers him the chance at a new life. He rejects it. When questioned on this, he says that he cannot leave his father because he will die without him. When his mother tries to convince him otherwise, he reassures her. 'I am grown up now, I can look after myself.'

In many ways, Jekshen is a ray of hope in and of himself. This quietly hopeful undercurrent is reflected in the films imagery. Every now and then focus on the arid landscape, or themes of entrapment, is undercut with a vision of hope: an old tree grows a new shoot, a shot of barbed wire changes to a shot of the wobbling legs of a toddler. There is an underlying message: there is always potential for newness and hope. The film ends with Jekshen carrying a rooster down the dirt path, he has a small smile on his face and in the background a woman sings a traditional song.



Mirlan Abdykalykov

Mirlan Abdykalykov is a Kyrgyz director, screenwriter and actor born in 1982 in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. His father, Aktan Abdykalokov, is an innovative Kyrgyz director and from childhood Mirlan has been starring in his father's complex and lyrical films. He excelled as an actor, and his performances recognised on the award circuit. His directorial debut was *Heavenly Nomadic* (2015), about a family of nomads who live high in remote mountains. Lauded on the award circuit, it won a NIKA, the FEDEORA Award and the Silver Gateway Award at Mumbai Film Festival. *Running to the Sky*, his sophomore film, has been met with similar acclaim and won the coveted FIPRESCI award at Busan.

About Klassiki

Klassiki screens a highly curated selection of director led films, with each week's choice introducing UK audiences to an important filmmaker's work. An opportunity to experience online a weekly curated selection of the best of Soviet, Russian, Caucasian and Central Asian cinema, and KLASSIKI choices range from early silent cinema, to masterpieces of animation, from post-war classics to contemporary Cannes winners. Supplementing the film experience, KLASSIKI offers specially commissioned and downloadable programme notes as well as podcasts and filmed introductions which give biographical, social and political context to each film. We also program film seasons, including RED FRONT: 75 YEARS OF RUSSIAN WAR CINEMA and TASHKENT FILM ENCOUNTERS, to spotlight classic cinema from Central Asia.

This is the birth of Klassiki, our planned free streaming platform, which will allow you to stream great cinema from the region.

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 bank details are as follows:

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www.kinoklassikafoundation.org

About Kino Klassika Foundation

Kino Klassika is the only organisation in the world dedicated to spotlighting cinema from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The foundation 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 *Hakob Havnatanyan*, *Arabesques on the Pirosmami Theme* and *Jirdan* (1969). We have recently completed *Melodia! Discovering Musicals from Russia and the Caucasus*, a screening season in partnership with the British Film Institute, Institut Francais, Bristol Watershed and Broadway Nottingham.

KLASSIKI continues Kino Klassika's longstanding undertaking to showcase classic films from the region. By giving audiences access to unseen gems as well as the opportunity to meet and chat with directors and filmmakers from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Kino Klassika are a trusted, credible and essential part of the UK's specialist film exhibition sector.

Kino Klassika was founded by Justine Waddell. The trustees are Professor Ian Christie, Daniel Jowell QC, Roger Munnings CBE. The patron of Kino Klassika is Ralph Fiennes.

The Kino Klassika Team

This screening could not happen without the unstinting support of the Kino Klassika team: Joseph Andreyev, Alexia Claydon, Olga Doletskaya, Seraphina Paisey, Talitha Piggott and Jack Weeks.

Upcoming Klassiki Screenings

Klassiki will screen a new film in our weekly curated series, every Tuesday from 2pm. Please check in with us on social media or via our website to access each week's new screening. And please share the news with your friends!

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