



Tuesday 12 January 2021

#Klassiki

## *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.

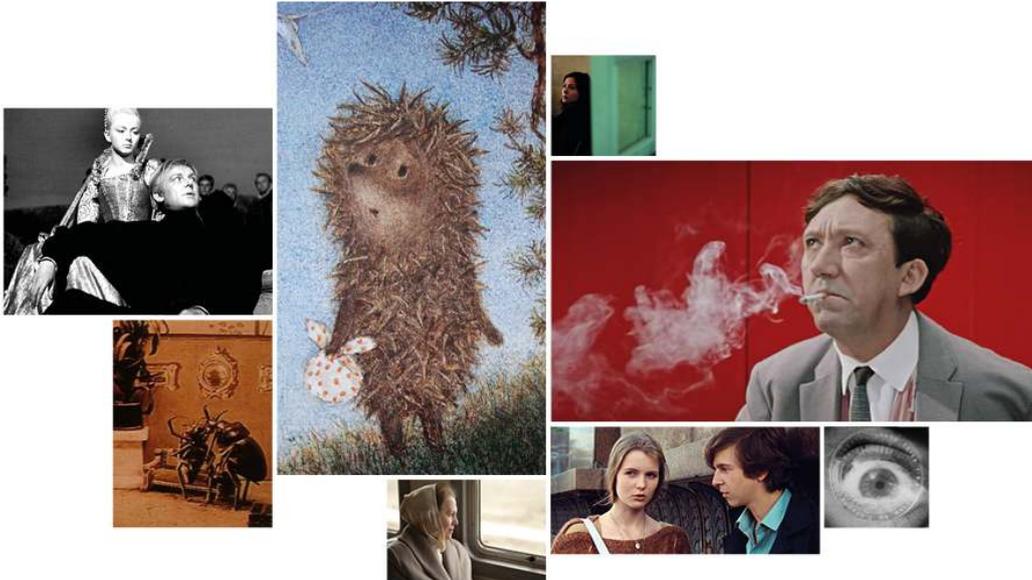
We've all heard about it. The speech that shocked the world. It is a staple lesson in school history classes: most of us have sat half attentive at a desk, and listened to a teacher telling us about Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences'. Or, as it 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 commented "For me the main character is bureaucrat Ogurtsov (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 'deStalinisation' 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 Khrushchev'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 Brezhnev years.



### Eldar Ryazanov

Eldar Ryazanov (1927-2015) achieved fame with signature satirical comedies of Soviet life. The kind of talent that comes along only once a generation, he directed his first feature, *Carnival Night* (1956), at just 28 years old. His most loved works include, *Watch Out for the Car!* (1966), *Irony of Fate* (1975) and *Office Romance* (1977). His films whilst criminally funny, cut to the core of life's absurdities. In his own words, "Where there is humour, there is truth".

### 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 East European cinema, KLASSIKI ranges 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, literally on the hop.

### 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:  
Account no. 69358087  
Sort code 60-15-33

Or please donate at our website:  
[www.kinoklassikafoundation.org](http://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 Ploshmani Theme* and *Jirtan* (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's trustees are Professor Ian Christie, Daniel Jowell QC, Roger Munnings CBE and Justine Waddell. 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, Tatiana Isaeva, Zoryana Mischiy, Olja Mljjevic, Seraphina Paisey and Talitha Piggott.

### Upcoming Klassiki Screenings

Klassiki will screen a new film in our weekly curated series, until February 4, 2021, where encouraged by the success of this weekly film season, we are launching our new VOD platform, [klassiki.online](http://klassiki.online). Please share the news with your friends!

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