

Document Citation

Title	Celebrating Grigori Kozintsev
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Source	<i>Film Society of Lincoln Center</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich (1905-1973), Kiev, Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Gamlet (Hamlet), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1964 [Young Fritz] (Young Fritz), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1942 Yunost Maksima (The youth of Maxim), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1935 Odna (Alone), Trauberg, Leonid Zakharevich, 1931 Korol Lir (King Lear), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1971 Chertovo koleso (The devil's wheel), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1926 Novyi Vavilon (The new Babylon), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1929 Don Kikhot (Don Quixote), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1957 Shinel (The overcoat), Kozintsev, Grigorii Mikhailovich, 1926



A NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL PRESENTATION

The New York Film Festival is sponsored by VOLVO.

This program was organized by the Film Society in collaboration with the Russian Film Committee and Lenfilm Studios, with special thanks to Frigeta Goukasyan. For their help in arranging for the music and musical accompaniment, the Film Society wishes to thank Peter Meyer, Laurel Fay, Svetlana Harris and Maxim Shostakovich.

Long overshadowed by contemporaries such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, Grigori Kozintsev has emerged as a film artist of the first order, the creator of a body of work unique in Soviet and world cinema. Born in Kiev in 1905, Kozintsev was a true child of the Russian Revolution, his creative genius fueled by the chance to overthrow old aesthetic traditions, and to forge brand-new, unfettered art forms. At 16, he co-founded The Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEX), an irreverent theater troupe based in Petrograd, with 20-year-old Leonid Trauberg. Pushing the envelope, Kozintsev and Trauberg looted the richest aspects of circus, music hall, puppet show, stage and cinema (often American comedies) to perform theatrical alchemy. Not until 1924, when FEX mounted a particularly experimental version of

Gogol's *Marriage*, incorporating filmed sequences, did critics deign to take notice. The responses were mostly angry, but the notoriety won the troupe an opportunity to make their first film, *The Adventures of Ofoktyabrina*. Though their debut was a commercial failure, they had, as Soviet critic Yuri Tynyanov pointed out, "snatched at that thing around which the more respectful and less quick-witted had erected taboos: the cinema as an art."

The fortunes of FEX rose in 1926 with the success of *The Devil's Wheel*, which was heavily influenced by American adventure and comedy films, Sergei Eisenstein's revolutionary concepts of montage (Kozintsev asked his FEX colleagues to watch *Strike* again and again), and German Expressionism as projected by Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau, and G.W. Pabst. FEX's next and most achieved silent film, *The New Babylon*, reveled in playful inventiveness—and reconfirmed Kozintsev's appetite for the German Expressionist style. The Gogol grotesquerie of *The Overcoat* was also well-served by Expressionist cinematography, but *The Youth of Maxim* (1935), the first chapter in a Maxim trilogy, was clearly the work of artists who had conceived a unique vision all their own.

THE WALTER READE THEATER

Kozintsev and Trauberg remained partnered in artistic endeavors until the end of WWII, when their *Plain People* was condemned by the Soviet Central Committee, along with Eisenstein's magnificent *Ivan the Terrible*. After working only occasionally during the 40s and 50s, Kozintsev returned to superb form with his 1957 adaptation of *Don Quixote* and his final, Shakespearean opuses, *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1970). This trio of films, born out of literary masterpieces, is celebrated for powerful performances, visual metaphors and compositions, and a raw, even brutal philosophy of life. By the time of his death in 1973—more than four decades after he founded his factory geared to making reality “strange” and thus truer—Grigori Kozintsev had come a long way from his early, optimistically experimental work: this Russian master's last, dark films are signed by an artist whose hard-won vision is entirely personal and individualized. — *Nicholas Elliott*

THE DEVIL'S WHEEL
(1926; silent fragment,
42 minutes) *with*
THE OVERCOAT
(1926; 66 minutes)
(live piano
accompaniment)
Vanya, a sailor, takes his



The Devil's Wheel

girl to a fairground and, losing track of time, becomes an unwitting deserter from his ship. Sheltered by a Mystery Man, the couple soon discover a gang of colorful crooks abroad in Civil War Petrograd. The amusement park represents the kind of suspension of ordinary, even degraded reality through which the FEX collaborators could “make strange” the world, and thereby expose truth. (The Memory / Mystery Man and the expressionistic park scenes oddly anticipate Hitchcockian *mise-en-scène*.) This visually striking film marked the beginning of Kozintsev's collaboration with Andrei Moskvin, a brilliant cinematographer

strongly influenced by German silent classics.

The FEX collaborators found fertile ground for eccentricity in *The Overcoat*, “a fantasy on the theme of Gogol.” Bashmachkin, a minor clerk, is infatuated with a woman he does not realize is a whore. His obsession is later transferred, with tragi-comic results, to a cloak he has saved up for. The actors' highly formalized performances border on modern dance, and Bashmachkin's haunted world is expressionistically rendered, with heroic and powerful camera angles suggesting the overcoat's inflation of a little man and,

The Overcoat



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later, with God's-eye-views of a terminally exposed soul.
**Sunday, October 1:
2 and 6:30 pm**

ALONE

(1931; 80 minutes)

One of the first Soviet sound films, *Alone* was based on the true story of a young woman graduate of Leningrad's teacher-training college who tackles a new job in Siberia and nearly dies when her sleigh-driver abandons her on a vast snow-covered plain. Almost suppressed upon release for "individualism," *Alone* was voted by a committee of workers to be a lifelike story, and the film went on to commercial success. Elena Kuzmina's performance as the young teacher is superbly natural and unforced, and the young Shostakovich introduced himself with a splendid musical score. Realistically conceived, *Alone* is also surprisingly modern: Elena Kuzmina shares her name with her character, anticipating New Wave and post-New Wave merging of real and fictional character.

Sunday, October 1:

4:30 pm

Tuesday, October 3:

2 and 6:30 pm

DON QUIXOTE

(1957; 110 minutes)

This beautiful wide-screen adaptation of Cervantes'



Don Quixote

classic is considered by many to be the best ever filmed. Kozintsev recreates an arid, dusty Spanish wasteland as fitting geography for a doomed quest for the ideal. The director's use of color is unusual in its sophistication and restraint, his Sancho Panza is a fallible Everyman, and in the unforgettable Nikolai Cherkasov (*Ivan the Terrible*, *Alexander Nevsky*) Kozintsev finds not a sad joke, but a noble creature, a knight errant defending the good in humankind.

Sunday, October 1:

8:45 pm

Wednesday, October

4: 2 and 7 pm

The Youth of Maxim



THE YOUTH OF MAXIM (1935; 95 minutes) and YOUNG FRITZ

(1942; fragment,
24 minutes)

The hero of Kozintsev-Trauberg's Maxim trilogy passed into Russian folklore as the archetypal hero of the Soviet Revolution; so beloved was the character that the actor who incarnated him, Boris Chirkov, was asked to endlessly play and replay the role for other directors. Maxim is a young Russian factory worker who gradually becomes a Marxist revolutionary in the days before the October Revolution. Free-flowing, bound together by an apparently arbitrary series of incidents in Maxim's life before and during the Communist Revolution, the trilogy was actually the result of a long, painstaking process of artistic selection. Kozintsev-Trauberg's cinematic retort—in the form of stark realism—to movies that turned the revolution into "adventurous fiction" was originally to be called *The Bolshevik*, but that was officially forbidden and, indeed, this most popular of Soviet films was nearly banned altogether. One of Kozintsev-Trauberg's rare WWII films, *Young Fritz* is the story of a teenager turned fascist who even joins the Gestapo. Written in verse by famous poet and translator Samuil Marshak.

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• **THE YOUTH OF MAXIM and YOUNG FRITZ:**

Monday, October 2: 2 pm

Tuesday, October 3: 4 and 8:15 pm



THE NEW BABYLON

(1929; 80 minutes)

FEX's last—and dazzling—silent sizzles with visual glamor and glitter. For ten weeks in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian War, as the Germans advanced on Paris, a group

of revolutionaries created the Paris Commune, an experiment in democratic government. An entire cross-section of Parisian citizenry comes alive during the rise and fall of this noble effort, but the film especially focuses on the love affair between Louise (Elena Kuzmina), a shop-girl in the great department store known as the New Babylon, and a heroic young soldier (Piotr Sobolevskii). The story grew out of the directors' travels to Paris, and their study of Marx, Zola, and the paintings of Manet and Renoir. Image and music are interwoven in *Babylon*, and its innovative approach to sound and silence has earned it praise as a "multimedia artwork."

Monday, October 2:
8 pm

HAMLET

(1965; 149 minutes)

Based on Boris Pasternak's translation, Kozintsev's *Hamlet* is highly atmospheric, charged with visual poetry and strongly accented by a brilliant Shostakovich score. In somber, windswept Baltic settings, Kozintsev has found a powerful physical equivalent to Shakespeare's Denmark: his interpretation is marked less by trendy psy-

chological insights than by a strong awareness of the state of Denmark and its relation to the central drama. According to French critic Georges Sadoul, Kozintsev's *Hamlet* "is perhaps the best film based on Shakespeare. It brings the ancient Kingdom of Denmark face to face with the real world in characterizing Hamlet as sincerely motivated and revolted by injustice, crime and tyranny."

Intense performances are delivered by Innokenty Smouktensovsky (Hamlet), Mikhail Nazvanov (Claudius), and Anastasia Vertinskaya (Ophelia).

Wednesday, October 4: 4:15 and 9:10 pm

Thursday, October 5:
2 and 8:45 pm

KING LEAR

(1970; 139 minutes)

One critic has written that "of all Shakespeare's tragedies, *King Lear* is perhaps the best suited to Russian adaptation, being the longest, wildest, starkest, and most replete with pain and suffering at all social levels." In this translation by Pasternak, the play's somber tone is further heightened by striking cinematography that captures the chaos of battle as well as the aged king's deepening moods of madness. As Lear loses command over his lands, his daughters, and finally himself, the tragedy moves inexorably to its shattering climax. With Dmitri Shostakovich's superb score.

Thursday, October 5:
6 pm

King Lear

