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# MOTHER AND SON

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A Zero Film, O-Film (Berlin)/Severnij Fond (St. Petersburg) co-production. Produced by Thomas Kufus.

Directed by Aleksandr Sokurov. Screenplay, Jurij Arabov. Camera (color), Alexei Fjodorov; editor, Leda Semjonova; art direction, Vera Zelinskaja, Esther Ritterbusch; sound, Vladimir Persov, Martin Steyer. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Panorama), Feb. 20, 1997. Running time: 75 MIN.

With: Alexei Ananischnov, Gudrun Geyer.

**T**here are only two approaches to the unique, painterly films of St. Petersburg helmer Aleksandr Sokurov: Love 'em or stay out of the theater. The diaphanous "Mother and Son," a non-narrative concentrate of soulful emotion and whispering landscapes reworked with special lenses and optical printers, will polarize auds more than ever. Many card-carrying Sokurov fans acclaimed pic a masterpiece at its Berlin premiere, which indicates a strong run at specialized fests and spotty TV sales. For nonbelievers in a receptive mood, the film is an effortless 75-minute float through a museum of restful images. Most filmgoers are unlikely to buy a ticket.

Sokurov and scripter Jurij Arabov dispense almost entirely with story to convey the tenderhearted pain of an adult man faced with his beloved mother's imminent death. Setting is an artistically crumbling house in the midst of fields and forests, where son Alexei Ananischnov lovingly cares for the frail, sickly Gudrun Geyer. He reads her letters and fairy tales, fixes her meals she won't eat, picks up her fragile body in his strong arms and carries her for "walks" in a magical landscape. When she quietly passes away, he feels desperately alone.

Trying to psychologize such symbolic characters would be pointless, and the viewer has no choice but to go with the slow, dreamlike flow of fixed-frame images. It is apparent that Sokurov and his young cameraman, Alexei Fjodorov, were inspired by German painting, especially the romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich. Using a variety of techniques to alter the images, from deliberately misusing anamorphic lenses to inserting brooding clouds with an optical printer, they create landscapes evoking that favorite Russian mood of bittersweet nostalgia. The two characters are tiny brushstrokes in a larger composition, and the overall effect is that of fine art reproductions carefully sonorized with rolling thunder and birdcalls.

Pace, as in other Sokurov films, is slow, slow, slow. While other experimental filmmakers are keen to manipulate the temporal element of film, he simply waits for a train to pass in the distance, and when it is finally out of frame, the shot is just about over. Soundtrack is classical Glinka and Verdi.

It is interesting to note that, abstract as they are, Sokurov's films end up recouping their low costs in the end, unlike most Russian movies. Attesting to the director's international following, "Mother and Son" was made with German financing and shot partly in Germany.

—Deborah Young