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LIGNE DE VIE

(FRENCH-SWISS-ITALIAN-RUSSIAN)

A UFD release (in France) of an Ima Films/UGC Images/France 3 Cinema/Zagora Films/Jean Vigo Intl./Progress Publishing Group production, with participation of Canal Plus and CNC. Produced by Georges Benayoun, Yves Marmion. Executive producer, Angelo Pastore.

Directed by Pavel Lounguine. Screenplay, Lounguine, Alain Layrac, Pierre-Henri Salfati, Victor Merejko. Camera (color), Manuel Teran; editor, Luc Barnier; music, Pascal Andreacchio; sound (Dolby), Alain Curvellier, William Flageollet; associate producer, Bertrand Liechti. Reviewed at UGC Cine Cite, Paris, May 2, 1996. Running time: 96 MIN.

Philippe Vincent Perez
Oksana Tatiana Mercherkina
Papa Armen Dzhigarkhanian
Pele Sergei Stepanchenko
Vadim Alexandr Baluev
(Russian and French dialogue)

A sprawling, baroque tale of contemporary Russia, "Ligne de vie" is "Nick of Time" meets a poor man's "The Godfather" by way of "Midnight Express." Pic barrels along from ex-

otic locales to threatening set pieces, propelled by muscular lensing and pithy performances. A comic book masquerading as more, it's gripping all the same. This entertaining, ultimately over-the-top pic, hampered by a modest release in France, may unjustly fall by the B.O. wayside. But action fans as well as viewers interested in clocking just how fast Russia is going to hell in a handbasket can drink their fill at director Pavel Lounguine's fountain of excess.

When his flight back to Paris is delayed overnight, broke and visaless French composer Philippe (Vincent Perez) allows a gorgeous, French-speaking Russian sprite, Oksana (Tatiana Mercherkina), to smuggle him out of the Moscow airport for a night on the town. The alluring Oksana, who is the only daughter of Papa (Armen Dzhigarkhanian), an elderly Mafioso as formidable as he is physically unimposing, slips Philippe a mickey.

Philippe has been abducted by Papa to pose as the commercial di-

rector of a huge French mill, the better to fleece the charismatic young leader of one of the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. With help from his extremely persuasive henchmen — jovial, loquacious Pele (who has "Love" and "Hate" tattooed on his knuckles in Cyrillic) and quietly menacing Vadim — Papa convinces the potentate-cum-patsy to bankroll a fictional cotton-treatment plant or die.

Philippe pulls off the phony deal to the tune of millions in cash, but his problems are just beginning. The mark soon realizes he's been taken, and his sense of revenge proves keener than his nose for fraud.

Although their first date ended in kidnapping, Philippe and Oksana are now madly in love. But custom demands that somebody's head be served on a platter.

Although the narrative sounds painfully obvious on paper, its breathless telling keeps the viewer engaged and guessing. As in his "Taxi Blues" and "Luna Park," helmer Lounguine doesn't know the meaning of moderation.

Although these are all stock characters, they feel almost new. Lone exception is Perez, who even the gangsters mockingly refer to as "our little Alain Delon look-alike."

When he's not being merciless, Papa has miraculous healing powers. The wizened Dzhigarkhanian convinces as a selective shark who can stop a man's heart or heal a wound via touch alone. In the international femme fatale pool, Mercherkina is a real find.

From the plains of Uzbekistan to a rave party in central Moscow, the photography is unfailingly energetic, with a sardonically jaunty score reinforcing the extreme atmosphere. Thesps, already endowed with interesting faces, pull out all the stops. Whether it's a massacre in an Oriental brothel or the more subdued spectacle of a man on a meat hook, Lounguine's your man.

—Lisa Nesselson