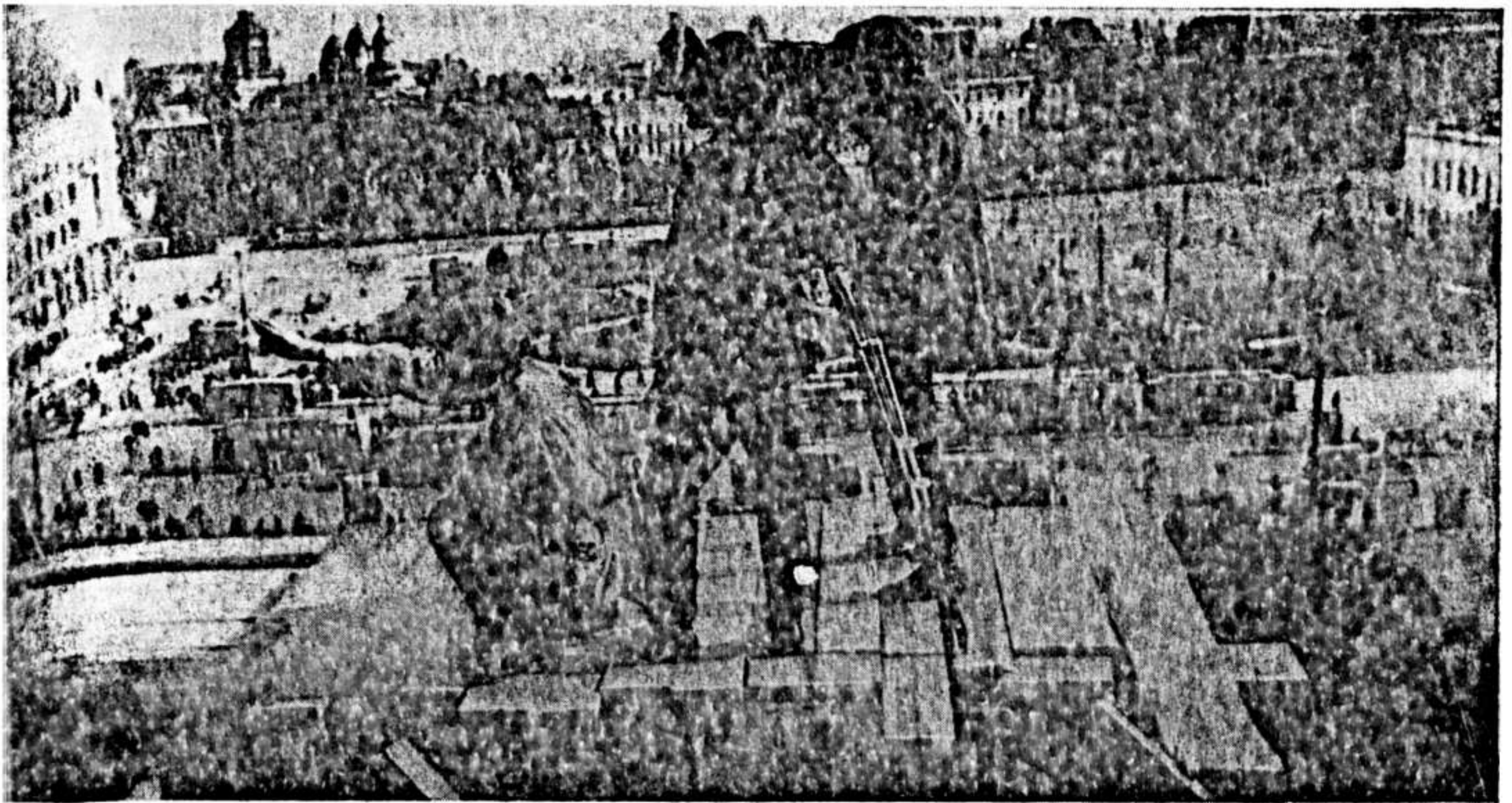


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Moscow, 1927. Shooting the film from the roof of the Bolshoi Theatre, one of the highest points in the city at the time

LENIN'S ANNIVERSARY

THE MEN AND THE TIMES BEHIND "THIRD MESHCHANSKAYA STREET"

The film is celebrating its forty-seventh anniversary. It was made in 1927 by director Abram Rohom in the days of silent films.

The twenties is a decade that has gone down in history as an extraordinary period of class upheavals and revolutionary transformations of world-wide significance. Films portraying revolutionary events of that was then the recent past brought a graphic and detailed picture of this period alive for posterity.

Part from historico-revolutionary pictures, other films were made in the years which told of the atmosphere and way of life of those days, the moral and ethical prob-

lems relevant to the immediate situation; films which both made a study of the people of the period and attempted to mould them anew.

"Third Meshchanskaya Street" is one of the best films of this second type. It gained immediate popularity and provided material for impassioned controversy, both in the film world and among the general public.

This was how it all started... In the cosy bustling canteen of the film factory on Potylikha in Moscow, at a table piled high with plates and glasses, a significant encounter took place: it was between Victor Shklovsky who was

already a well-known literary critic and historian and script-writer, and Abram Rohom who had made himself a reputation thanks to the bold, striking films "Bay of Death" and "The Traitor." Shklovsky was a regular visitor at all the Moscow film factories: he used to pop into meetings, argue away and talk as he went scattering abroad ideas for scripts.

On that particular occasion he mentioned a possible subject for a script to Rohom. They both agreed it would be interesting and that it would provide an original illustration of the moral and ethic controversies of the day. The creative partnership soon developed on a harmonious and frank footing between these two like-minded men, who had been fortunate enough to light upon one another. Here was a fruitful alliance between literature and the cinema so indispensable to their mutual enrichment.

The original pair were soon joined by cameraman Grigori Giber,

designer and assistant director Sergei Yutkevich and three actors—Lyudmila Semyonova, Nikolai Batalov and Vladimir Fogel. A colourful group of talented artists was thus assembled.

Grigori Giber was a cameraman for whom no problem was insuperable: he was an expert when it came to newsreels (it was he who filmed the famous newsreel where Lenin is seen drafting theses at the Comintern Congress—some of the finest documentary footage showing Lenin ever made), scientific and educational films and propaganda material.

Side by side with him was the serene and elegant Sergei Yutkevich, also still a very young man but an artist who had already made his name.

Then there was Nikolai Batalov, an actor from the Moscow Art Theatre who had already proved himself to be a remarkable master of screen-acting in the parts of Red Army soldier Gusev in

"Aelita" and Pavel Vlasov in the film adaptation of Gorky's "Mother": these successes had enabled him to create an important bridge between the famous theatre and the world of the cinema.

At that period, actress Lyudmila Semyonova, one of the most popular actresses at Forreger's Theatre of Miniatures, was just trying her paces in the cinema. This actress, endowed with graceful plasticity of movement, a combination of authority and femininity and a temperament that included an unexpected side that bordered on the eccentric if not the grotesque, made her name in the film "Third Meshchanskaya Street": it was here that her personal gifts came into their own in her rendering of an interesting character enhanced by most precise psychological and social detail.

The third major role was played by Vladimir Fogel, Lev Kuleshov's highly talented pupil. His unusual, highly individual and most sensitive gifts that allowed him to give most expressive renderings of a wide variety of parts enabled him to explore new frontiers in each new film he turned his hand to. He had had considerable acting experience before taking part in "Third Meshchanskaya Street" and had already won popularity, although he was only twenty-five. His best performance at the time had been as Michael Dennin in Kuleshov's film "By the Law." This remarkable portrayal of a tragic character so rich in psychological nuance and containing interesting touches of the eccentric, had been a model of mature skill. In "Third Meshchanskaya Street" he scored a second triumph. Soon afterwards, his tragic early death interrupted what promised to be a meteoric career.

This small close-knit team was welded together by a remarkable sense of co-operation.

The film was shot within 27 days.

The characters are a construction worker, a printer and a housewife.

All are socially amorphous, but this is not a shortcoming of the script; it is a deliberate dramatic device. The authors sought thereby to stress the fact that a hermetically sealed personal life, cut off from the life of society, the inward-looking character of the micro-world of married and family life as opposed to the macro-world outside give birth to unhealthy phenomena in a working-class milieu.

The mould of trite philistinism imperceptibly starts to corrode the ordinary, outwardly satisfactory and tranquil existence of the characters concerned. The emotional side of their lives becomes increasingly empty. Love loses its inspiring deep quality and becomes confined more and more to the double-bed, begins to suffocate in its soft pillows and to be reduced to little more than another bedroom accoutrement, an item of day-to-day life like sleep, dinner and cups of tea.

Two workers who have recently returned from fighting in the ranks of the First Cavalry Army during the Civil War are shown to us as two friends very unlike each other, both in appearance and character. Later, when tested by love and their attitude to a woman, they are shown to be unpleasantly alike, in fact as far as their characters are concerned they are twins, two chips off the same block.

The triangle in this film is completed by a woman who is a prisoner of Third Meshchanskaya Street, the four walls of her home, her kitchen, her bed. She is discontented with her futile and empty existence. Her infatuation with her husband's friend starts abruptly, and it is not so much the woman in her which leads her to be unfaithful to her husband, as a vague revolt against her drab existence. However, this second man is no better equipped to understand and help her than her husband is.

The woman shows herself to be superior to the two men and to

possess more spiritual resources: in the end, she breaks with the tangle of her former life which she has come to find intolerable and decides to leave it behind her, to go to work and start a new life.

As they relate this story, the makers of this film never overstress their moral judgements with regard to the heroes. Through a detailed analysis of characters, situations, moods, they seek to bring to their audiences an awareness of the poverty of such a mode of life.

Third Meshchanskaya Street is one of the really old Moscow streets near Sukharev Market that was a bustling hive of sordid speculation in the Moscow of the 'twenties, when NEP was in full swing.

The room in a semi-basement on that street where the film's characters live, is overflowing with domesticity, it is crammed with objects which expose the habits and inclinations of those who live in it, their customs and their morals.

However, Third Meshchanskaya Street is by no means all Moscow. There is a second Moscow that is far more important— an enormous city, the first socialist capital. Here it is filmed in simple, yet most graphic terms reminiscent of Vertov's documentaries, shot from the top of what were then Moscow's highest buildings, the Central Telegraph Office then under construction and the Bolshoi Theatre.

The "documentary" passages inserted in the psychological fabric of this film are used in a bold, new, experimental way. Indeed, much in this film is bold and novel, understandably enough seeing that it was made by bold men in search of new methods. The highly topical material stimulated them in their searchings.

Within six months of its release, it had already been seen by more than a million people. The picture also enjoyed a big success in Europe. In Germany, it was shown

under the title "The Sofa and the Bed," and as "Moscow Basements" when released in France; it was also shown in Britain, Poland and Czechoslovakia where public and press alike greeted with ecstatic applause.

This success was not really surprising seeing that this film shows the Revolution through a different, highly interesting prism, an ethical one. It showed the world that the homeland of the Revolution was concerned with questions of a new humanism, moral education, and it exposed the lie that socialism goes hand in hand with exaggerated rationalism and soulless regimentation.

This film aroused audience interest in and respect for an art which in a quiet, frank, straightforward and honest way, focuses attention on the complicated world of human emotions. Ivor Montague, a leading British expert in the cinema and a firm friend of the Soviet Union, pointed out that this film adopts an entirely new humane, moral and dignified approach to the hackneyed triangle theme.

This is hardly to be wondered at for everything in the film, the traditional and the experimental, were subordinated to one of the main tasks of our new social order, the enrichment of our emotional lives and the formation of the New Man.

Irina Grashchenko