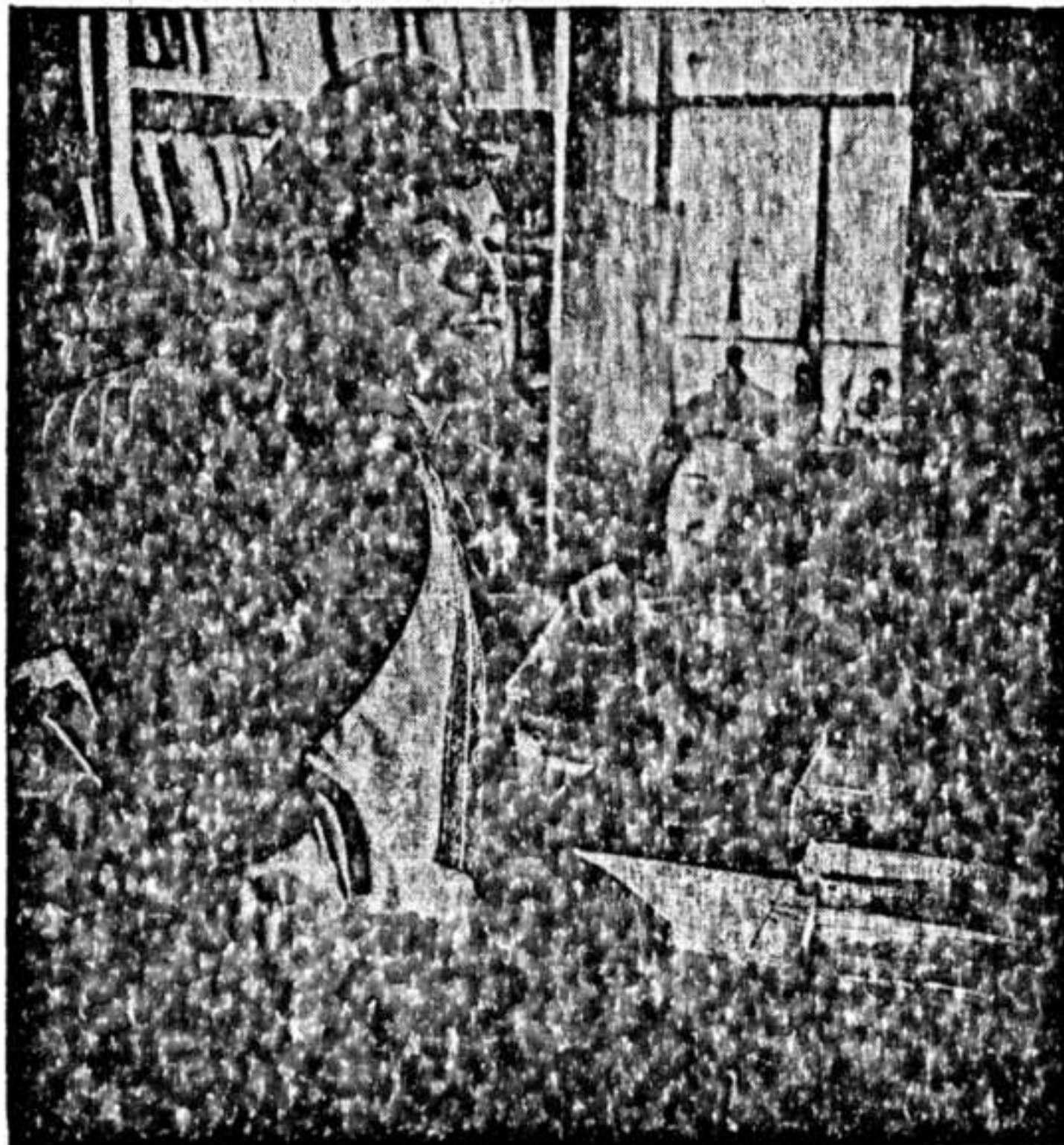


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9. "THERE LIVES A LAD" BY VASSILI SHUKSHIN: Wisdom in Simplicity



The appearance of Vassili Shukshin was one of the interesting highlights of the Soviet film calendar in the early 'sixties. His first films were by no means the best of that period. They were hardly in keeping with the current canon of "seriousness" of many of the films then, marked by intellectualism and sociological pertinency. And yet they wafted a sense of an entirely new kind of seriousness which did not lend itself easily to analysis. As a result, Shukshin was not understood at all or not completely understood. Approaches rained down on his head, on the one hand that his characters were too plain and earthy, on the other—unearthly, bodiless." Perhaps Shukshin smiled to himself when he thought of the critics who advised him to inspire his heroes with loftier deeds and dreams." But when he heard the delighted laughter of his admirers who took his films for daring comedies, he must have felt anything but a desire to smile. The comic impact of what to him were serious films must have been trying.

Nevertheless, when Shukshin's first picture, "There Lives a Lad" was received in 1964 as a comedy, he lodged no protests. Why protest when your leading character, the clownish Pasha Kolokolnikov, captures prize after prize for you, as at the Film Festival in Venice or the All-Union Film Festival in Leningrad? Especially if your hesitant objections are drowned out in an ocean of laughter and the picture is acclaimed "the best screen comedy of the year."

Audiences cheer, people have been yearning for comedy, they can't remember when they last enjoyed themselves so much! So why bother? But little by little, the professional critics began to speak up, and cautious hints appeared in their articles: isn't Vassili Shukshin putting too much emphasis on the simplicity of his characters? Won't the impression be created that intellectuality is a bit of a sin? Or, as one serious critic said at the time, "In this day and age, when all the people are studying, ought we to make a virtue of the illiteracy of the hero? In this era of great social transformations—preach homespun

truisms? Seek the meaning of life in the simplest physical pleasures?"

Of course, Shukshin could easily have evaded these serious charges by hiding behind the genre of comedy. But he rejected the opportunity. He knew too well that his film was not a comedy. He said as much at the time, "I am quite bewildered, for I have now learned that what we made was a comedy . . . I was sure that it was going to be a very serious film." Taking him at his word, it behoves us to decipher his new kind of serious cinema.

Shukshin's vision of the world is simple. Exceedingly simple.

Demonstratively, almost offensively simple. He begins every one of his films with a prelude. Nothing has happened yet, the characters have not been introduced, and you do not know what's coming. But you begin to get a sense of the milieu in which the characters will move, you hear the sounds of a modern Siberian village waking up in the morning, and the gay rumble of the Chuisk Highway welcoming another day. You see life visually and not reflectively; life unconscious of the fact that you are looking at it . . .

Shukshin's shots are "genre scenes": the Katun River glisten-

ing in the sun, as pretty as a picture postcard, and the nearby yard of one of the village houses where the local barber is administering a haircut (funny, and very real at the same time). That's what it's all like, especially if you imagine how it's seen through the naive eyes of a village urchin. Shukshin doesn't clean up the shot, and he probably does no double takes. The priceless effect is spontaneity, the living breath of life, and no special angles needed. Life seen as an amateur photographer would show it to us. Just look—and believe what you see! As if anything like this could be invented!

This is not presented as an epigraph to the film or a definition of locale; it is neither an insert nor an excerpt from the intellectual or narrative content; it is sheer prelude, Shukshin's way of preparing us for the appearance of the characters, of giving us an insight, intuitive and piercing, into the full and integrated life which is his basic ethical theme.

The opening scenes are accompanied by a half-forgotten melody distantly echoing something heard in childhood about a daredevil driver who plied the busy Chuisk Highway. From such an unofficial by-lane of life did Shukshin's driver, Pasha Kolokolnikov hail, a clown and a liar and a buffoon, so obviously bent on tom-foollery that we gladly ignore his illiteracies and surrender ourselves to the pleasure of watching Leonid Kuravlyov act him.

Kuravlyov is the exact actor's equivalent of Shukshin's vision of life and the best possible choice for the leading roles in Shukshin's films. It is not surprising that he did not achieve the same natural and convincing results under any other director. He "found himself" right off under Shukshin. Gay, outgoing, trusting, his "foolishness" concealing artfulness, Kuravlyov's Pasha with his stammering, unspeakable idiom, ("you devil's pyramidon" people call him mockingly) and his dreams of "meeting the Right Girl" has become almost a trademark for Shukshin. "There Lives a

Lad" was a one-man picture in respect to direction and script (written by Shukshin), and also to the acting.

In his second film, "Your Son and Brother," Shukshin tried to go deeper, and dissect the life Kuravlyov had conveyed to us so aptly in one bold picture. Here the director tried to do what sooner or later has to be done with any person who walks on air: put him to the test of reality.

Now a succession of figures, a whole patriarchal tribe, emerges from the moist spring atmosphere of the same primeval village. The characters begin to talk and are enmeshed in a tangle of problems such as Pasha Kolokolnikov never bothered his foolish head with.

Shukshin's second film struck a wall of talk and fell apart into a series of narrative episodes. And poor Pasha was made to feel the pinch of adversity.

In place of the light, gay and clever "Ivanushka Durachok" (Ivan-the-Fool), we had to listen to a dour village grandpa spout his homespun philosophy: "Where did you get your strength, eh? Here. So use it here. Don't go traipsing off to the city (this to his eldest son, a wrestling champ) making a laughing stock of yourself, riding your 'cultured' body around town. Wow, look at that strong man! And now that young fool is also off to town (this about his second son, a student). What's he got to do there? He ought to be kicked out, instead of you teaching him how to get himself a suit of rooms real fast!"

Does it follow from the above that only the village is good and the city is bad?

No, there is no watershed in Vassili Shukshin's mind between the city and the village, between the educated and those who do not know what "pyramidon" is, between those who live "out there" and those who live "here."

The idea is that it's not important where you live; what matters is how you live.

Shukshin's basic ethical theme is the importance of a full, integrated life for the individual here and now, a life in which a man can be true to himself every minute of the day.

The watershed is between people who are true to themselves, and people who are imitating themselves. That's what divides people into two categories, a "there" and a "here."

Shukshin once confessed: "It annoys me to hear this talk about the 'common people.' There are no 'common' versus 'cultured' people; no such insulting superficial divide exists. There is only one inner criterion, the criterion of personality, of human dignity."

Thus the old man and his speeches about how the city has spoiled his sons must be heard not as a lecturer speaking from the rostrum, but a living man in pain. His tone is more important than his words, as actor Vsevolod Sanayev, the old man of the film, obviously senses. His eyes do not say what his lips are saying. The strange words he utters! "Riding around in subways, living in town flats!" he mocks, but his eyes are very sad. To live out such a long life and not earn the respect of one's own son! To be told, (not in so many words, of course) "Here, you simple old man of the people, I've brought you some presents from the city. Take them and enjoy yourself, you country bumpkin!"

To Shukshin human dignity is an irreducible magnitude the measure of which is qualitative. It presumes unselfish honesty and excludes cold calculation. The portrait of the happy-go-lucky driver Pasha in his first film was the most striking embodiment of that unselfish outgoing quality. Pasha Kolokolnikov, a replica of the clever Russian folklore hero Ivan-the-Fool, proves a better and purer man than most because he acts out a parody on the stupidity of the situations in which he is placed. One of Shukshin's favour-

ite twists is for the clever men to behave foolishly in foolish situations and the simpletons to reveal the greater understanding and humanity.

Take a situation like this. Two people are going to be married. The match has been arranged by the parents. There are practical considerations involved. In the classical version, honest feeling is supposed to revolt against such an infraction of personal freedom. That's how it was in the classics—but not in Shukshin. In his version, he invites us to see what happens when honest feeling coincides with an arranged match. Must the parties to it stage a revolt then? Shukshin places two characters in such a topsy-turvy, burlesque situation, and brings in his harlequin Ivan-the-Fool alias Pasha Kolokolnikov to put things right. The proposed match is between Uncle Kondrat and Auntie Anisya. The elderly couple are devoured by shame, while Pasha, the matchmaker who really ought to feel shame, chatters on gaily and struts.

"Ladies and gents, wh-what has brought us here to-to-today?"

The secret of his self-assurance is that he knows better than any of the others what is involved; he has read the hearts of Uncle Kondrat and Auntie Anisya and understands their desire to be together, although the intermediation of the matchmaker embarrasses them. As for Pasha, he is still playing the part of the fool, in which he feels like a fish in water. Yet he's the only one who has correctly gauged the lay of the land, who sees what is true and what is pretense.

He also knows why he ran to the burning gasoline carrier and, risking his life, drove it off and prevented an explosion. But he won't say why, because if he starts talking about it and telling people how it really happened, they'll say he's showing off: "Look at me, I'm the brave guy who stopped the explosion—what do

you know about that?" An unerring instinct tells him that to talk about the act is an affront to the act which sprang from an inner impulse. It must not be cheapened by talk.

A woman journalist asked him, the manner of her profession:

"What made you run towards the burning truck?"

"Idiocy."

That's about all the answer she deserved; foolish answers for foolish questions. And so Pasha clowns, and acts the fool, and winks:

"You laugh at me as though I'm a fool, what can you expect of a fool?"

Pasha's sly pretense of stupidity is a form of existence for a man in a burlesque situation. Such is the serious idea of Vassili Shukshin's films which were so lightly taken for comedies. It's like a clown in the circus lifting dumbbells that everybody thinks are made of cardboard, he laughs and everybody laughs with him. But the dumb-bells are real iron ones, and nobody realises it... There is wisdom in simplicity. That's the truism Shukshin's films illustrate—if you don't interpret them too simplistically.

Lev Anninsky, film critic