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The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

Gyula Gazdag

April 10 - 21, 1987

Friday, April 10 at 6:30

Sunday, April 12 at 2:30

SINGING ON THE TREADMILL. (Bástyasétány 74). 1974. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Written by Gyula Gazdag and Miklós Györffy. Camera by Elemér Ragályi. Music arranged by Ferenc Gyulai Gaál. Mafilm-Hunnia Studio (Budapest). In Hungarian, English subtitles. 76 minutes.

With: Ewald Schorm (Mr. Dezső), István Iglódi (Mr. Rezső), Lili Monori (Anna), Róbert Koltai (Péter), Judit Pogány (Böszi), Sándor Halmágyi (Ödön), Mari Kiss (Kati), Zoltán Papp (Jóska), Eszter Csákányi (Tini), László Helyey (Rudi), Hédi Temessy (Elvira), Lajos Öze (Patkó), Hanna Honthy (The Ageless Goddess of the Operetta).

Like Péter Bacsó's THE WITNESS (1969), Gyula Gazdag's 1974 SINGING ON THE TREADMILL is one of the few Hungarian features to have been banned outright. Like THE WITNESS, SINGING ON THE TREADMILL is a comedy--albeit a musical one. But where THE WITNESS is a straightforward burlesque of a Stalin-era show trial, SINGING ON THE TREADMILL is a show that puts the Stalin-era (and more) on trial.

SINGING ON THE TREADMILL takes its premise and some of its music from the operetta Bástyasétány 77--the title is the address of a dilapidated Budapest house which four young couples compete to restore--that, although composed in 1957, was considered too "bourgeois" to stage until the early '60s. Calling their version Bástyasétány 74, Gazdag and Miklós Györffy set the original situation in an elaborate, quasi-allegorical frame. In the film, the operetta is being composed by Messrs. Dezső and Rezső, a pair of clownish, unmistakably bureaucratic librettists (one played by the Czech director Evald Schorm) for characters who have minds--or at least wills--of their own.

Dezső and Rezső write the script but it would be more accurate to say that they transform, rather than create, the film's other characters, who are born in ditches and carried via treadmill to the warehouse where their would-be benefactors work. Dezső and Rezső urge the four couples they have brought together to trust them: "We promise all your dreams will come true. All we ask is patience and discipline." But, try as they do to legislate a happy ending, the authors are continually confounded by the messy recalcitrance of human nature--compelled to threaten their charges, replay the ruined scenes, bring suicide victims back to life, and reorient the couples until even their own confidence is shaken.

A film of formal invention and insolent wit, SINGING ON THE TREADMILL is replete with visual puns (including red filters and rosy pink fades--the movie was Gazdag's first in color) and even a cameo by octogenarian operetta star Hanna Honthy. For an outsider, it can be as dense thicket of signifiers as Jancsó's RED PSALM, but there's no missing Gazdag's audacious conflation of romantic and political illusions. The film manages to burlesque everything from the housing shortage and the national suicide rate to Hapsburg nostalgia and the yearning for social utopia. Like THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE, SINGING ON THE TREADMILL is a merciless satire of the paternal state--in part because the couples are so blatantly childish. At the point at which their schemes, squabbles, and mutual denunciations threaten the Dezső-Rezső regime with chaos, the Eternal Goddess of the Operetta (Hanna Honthy) graciously appears and restores order by crooning a lullabye of the Rakosi era: "A better world is being born for you, thousands of working hands watch over your dreams...so goodnight."

Like Witold Gombrowicz's play Operetta, SINGING ON THE TREADMILL could be said to mix "the monumental idiocy" of its chosen genre with "the monumental pathos of history." The film climaxes in a burst of operetta madness. Cliches run amok: A chorus, dressed in a veritable wardrobe room of costumes, dances the rumba while singing a delirious ode to a Mexican volcano--"The sky is better than the earth!" Finally, all four couples are permitted to

share the house and, swaying in unison, break into the finale from the 1949 socialist realist operetta, State Department Store:

"Life has become so beautiful, our hearts are filled with joy
A new spring is coming and great days are calling us
The rhythm is so happy and we joyfully sing
This brave free life is ours at last."

They remain swaying for a minute or two after the music ends. Then the screen fades to pink, accompanied by a sound loop fashioned from "The Blue Danube Waltz."

SINGING ON THE TREADMILL provoked the greatest scandal of Gazdag's career although the film--which was finished in December 1974, reviewed two months later in Variety, and scheduled for an April release--was not immediately shelved. "I was very surprised that it was accepted without any changes," Gazdag says, "in fact, I couldn't believe it. Then, someone tried to organize a screening at the Young Artists Club and told me that there must be trouble because he cannot get the print. I asked the studio to set up a screening and I drove to Kapósvár. When I arrived, there was already a telegram waiting for me: It was impossible--they couldn't get the print. Then the controversy started. It was apparent that there won't be any premiere--but it wasn't certain what would happen.

"In October the Ministry of Culture decided that the film must be banned and I was invited to a meeting of their advisory council. The members include journalists, scientists, filmmakers, not only functionaries, and each was asked to give an opinion. There was no question to discuss because everything had already been decided but there was complete confusion. Every member of the council had an explanation why it was impossible to release the film but these were all completely different. I remember the most absurd phrases. One sociologist thought the film was a mixture of structuralism and the Frankfurt school and this was a reason for banning it. Another said that it's a film which is more existentialist than Camus--Camus left you a little bit of hope but this film doesn't. Someone else told me that he heard that there are citations from Kádár's speeches in the film."

Gazdag was informed that no amount of cutting would make SINGING ON THE TREADMILL acceptable--a few years later he trimmed the film by 15 minutes to no avail. By the time the movie was released in 1984, its provocative use of Stalin era optimism had been somewhat blunted and absorbed by the culture. In 1976, an associate of Gazdag's staged an extremely successful camp version of State Department Store--although when Gazdag proposed a production of the Soviet operetta Free Wind, he was refused permission.

- J. Hoberman

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