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FILMS FROM THE ARCHIVE

Monday, March 15 (6:00) and Tuesday, March 16 (2:00)

FATHER SERGIUS* (OTETS SERGII). 1917-18. Produced by the Yermoliev Company, Moscow. Directed by Yakov Protazanov. Scenario by Protazanov and Alexander Volkov, based on the story by Lev Tolstoy. Photography by Fyodor Burgassov and Nikolai Rudakov. Design by Balliuzek, Loshakov and Vorobiev.

CAST: Ivan Mozhukhin; Vladimir Gaidarov; Vera Orlova; Alexander Volkov; Natalie Lissenko.

6:00 Monday: English titled version, ca. 96 minutes.
2:00 Tuesday: no English titles, ca. 110 minutes.

FATHER SERGIUS is theatrically distributed in the U.S.A. by Artkino Pictures, Inc.; and distributed non-theatrically (with English sub-titles) by Brandon Films and by the Department of Film of The Museum of Modern Art.

FATHER SERGIUS was the last and most important film made before the October Revolution.

In his story, Tolstoy tells of a handsome officer at the court of Nikolai I, a Prince Kasatsky who "broke with his beautiful fiancée (after she confessed to him that she had been the mistress of the Czar)...and retired to a monastery to become a monk." Tolstoy examines the actual events, the motives of pride and passion behind this move and follows the prince, now Father Sergius, through the multitude of temptations he encounters as acolyte, priest, hermit, healer, and as a wandering holy man, begging for bread. The intimations in the story about the private life of Nikolai I and its revelations of corruption and ordinary human weaknesses in the priesthood made it a literary scandal in its time.

Protazanov and Volkov had considered filming it before 1917, but to film such highly censorable material was clearly an invitation to trouble. The February Revolution loosened some of the earlier restrictions, particularly those on religious subjects, as the bonds between the Church and the State were less tight than in tsarist days. This was the opportunity for the film; Yermoliev granted a larger budget than usual, and FATHER SERGIUS was begun.

The finished film, besides being a faithful transcription of Tolstoy, compels more than an antiquarian's attention. Few concessions have to be made for its age. Only the actors' make-up obtrudes. Its episodic story and the stages in the life of Father Sergius are shown with a skill exceptional anywhere in 1917. It may not have the epic quality of Griffith's contemporary work, but it stands comparison with Berstrom's BERG-EJUVIND, produced the same year, in intensity of character revelation and in the frank violence of its emotions. . Mozhukhin

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never excelled this convincing performance in its depiction of a man's life, eternally pursued by the desires of the flesh; and Lissenko's temptress is far more real than most temptresses. The romantic reality of the emotional situations is reflected in the director's use of real settings (The Moscow Nobles' Club for the ball, the actual monastery interiors, etc.***) and the employment of non-actors in a number of bit roles in the latter half of the film. The ordination scene provides unique documentation on the Greek Orthodox ceremony. The entire film shows a tendency to break the hampering traditions of the pre-war French technique. Protazanov seems to be constantly seeking the flexibility of the close-up.

The upper-class exodus during the October Revolution was joined by almost the entire Russian cinema, which literally took the industry, apparatus and all, with them. The actors and production group of FATHER SERIUS finally landed in the film studios of Paris....Mozhukhin died in miserable poverty in 1938. In 1923 Yakov Protazanov returned to Soviet Russia.

-- Jay Leyda (Museum of Modern Art Film Notes)

* Silent film. Original piano score by William Perry.

** The ballroom with the chandeliers is the Hall of Columns in the House of Trade Unions, Moscow, built by M.F. Kozakof between 1780 and 1790. (Information courtesy of Bernard Hanson).