

Document Citation

Title	Soviet silent cinema. Part 2 : 1926-1927 : Three thieves
Author(s)	Jay Leyda Sonia Volochova Paul Babitsky John Rumberg
Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	1975 Oct 02
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	Ilinsky, Igor, Soviet Union Protazanov, Iakov Aleksandrovich (1881-1945), Moscow, Soviet Union Raizman, Iulii (1903), Soviet Union Russian literature -- Film and video adaptations Motion pictures -- Censorship
Film Subjects	Protsess o trekh millionakh (The case of the three million), Protazanov, Iakov Aleksandrovich, 1926

Three Million Case

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

October 2 - November 18, 1975

THREE THIEVES

SOVIET SILENT CINEMA

Part 2: 1926-1927

By special arrangement with Gosfilmofond, the Soviet State Film Archive, and the Pacific Film Archive of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, the Department of Film will present the second of a three-part retrospective of Soviet cinema in its silent period. This program is the most comprehensive ever mounted outside the U.S.S.R. of the classic and revolutionary films of the Soviet Union.

Part I, comprising 29 titles, covered the years from 1918 through 1925, and was presented in 1974 from March 7th through April 15th. Part 2 limits itself to the two peak years, 1926 and 1927, and will include forty titles to be exhibited from October 2nd through November 18th. Part 3, completing the silent years of Soviet filmmaking, will be announced in the future.

The works in the retrospective were selected from a list of surviving Soviet silents in the Gosfilmofond Archive by Professor Jay Leyda in consultation with Victor Privato, Director of Gosfilmofond, and Tom Luddy, Program Director of the Pacific Film Archive. Professor Leyda is the author of the definitive text in English on the history of Russian and Soviet cinema, Kino.

The majority of the prints in Part 2 will contain only the original Russian intertitles. Some of the films which will complement the program will be from the Museum's own collection, and many of these will have English intertitles. Almost all the films will be in 35mm.

Synopses and detailed information will be distributed at each screening. The documentation for the notes has been supplied through the generosity of Gosfilmofond, Jay Leyda, the Pacific Film Archive, Jacques Ledoux of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique (Brussels), Vlada Petric and Andy McKay. Additional information is also drawn from the Museum's own Study Center files. The Department of Film owes a special thanks to Sonia Volochova who is not only translating from original Russian sources but who is assisting in the compiling of these notes as well.

Saturday, October 25 at 3:00

.. . .

With the showing of four Protazanov films (THE FORTY-FIRST, DON DIEGO AND PELAGEYA, THREE THIEVES, and THE MAN FROM THE RESTAURANT) on three successive days (October 23, 24, 25), and the earlier showings of two others (AELITA, 1924, and THE TAILOR FROM TORZHOK, 1925), we hope to remedy the neglect accorded one of the seminal figures in film history. That Protazanov is known at all is due, in the main, to repeated showings over the years of FATHER SERGIUS (OTETS SERGII), 1918, one of the Film Department's first acquisitions, and to the efforts of Jay Leyda (in his model history of the Russian Film, Kino) to put him in proper perspective. Those who have seen FATHER SERGIUS are aware of its powerful dramatic impact. Two of the films being shown, THE FORTY-FIRST and THE MAN FROM THE RESTAURANT, are also dramas, the other two, DON DIEGO AND PELAGEYA and THREE THIEVES, reveal this director's flair for comedy.

Properly speaking, Protazanov (February 4, 1881 - August 8, 1945) is, in technique and style, outside the revolutionary mainstream of the period, more "old guard" than "avant garde." His contribution consists in demonstrating that traditional methods, too, could serve ideological ends.

His traditionalism is not surprising. His career began when the screen was still in swaddling clothes (1907), and he directed his first film, THE PRISONER'S SONG (PESNYA KATORZHANINA), in 1911. The many films that followed revealed an original talent, dramatic sensitivity, and most important, a mind attuned to the potentialities of the fledgling cinema. Of his numerous pre-revolutionary films one is of special interest: DRAMA BY TELEPHONE (DRAMA U TELEFONA), 1914, which exactly follows Griffith's THE LONELY VILLA (1909). Leyda conjectures Protazanov may have copied a Danish or German print of Griffith's original. (*Kino*, p. 143). One of his greatest assets was his ability to entice noted stage players to appear in his films and to exact great performances from them, vide Ivan Mozhukhin in FATHER SERGIUS, Ada Voitsik and Ivan Koval-Samborsky in THE FORTY-FIRST. His films were very popular, and, along with Pyotr Chardynin and Vladimir Gardin, he was one of pre-revolutionary Russia's leading directors.

The economic and ideological dislocations of war and revolution brought an influx of émigrés from the Russian film world to Germany, and, especially, Paris. Protazanov was one to these émigrés.

d "A natural interchange of material and techniques took place between the Russian and the French filmmakers. The French avant-garde of the early 1920's found much to admire, imitate and borrow wholesale from the Russian work. Marcel L'Herbier, particularly, demonstrated this influence in his work of that time. When Delluc began direction on his own, his handling of Eve Francis produced results remarkably similar to Protazanov's **direction** of Natalya Lissenko. On the other hand, Protazanov, now Jacques Protozanoff, politely adapted French literature, Zola's Pour une Nuit d'Amour and Paul Bourget's Le Sens de la Mort, for the Thiemann studio. Of the latter film Delluc pointedly said, "Le Sens de la Mort est un excellent film français. Il a été fait par des Russes" Quite aside from the quality of the film, it will probably be remembered solely for the appearance in a minor role of a young actor, Rene Clair, whose observation of Protazanov at work may well have been a spur to his own talents."

(Leyda, *Kino*, pp. 116-17)

Invited to return in 1924, Protazanov resumed his Russian career with the science-fiction romance AELITA, 1924 (shown in Part I of Soviet Silent Cinema). It was followed by the more "agitational" HIS CALL (YEVO PRISYV), 1925 (U.S. release: Chicago, December 3, 1926, the only Soviet silent film premiered outside New York, for a special audience, two days before BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN). Other important films, in addition to the ones listed above, include: THE LASH OF THE CZAR (BELY ORYOL), 1928 (U.S. release: February 11, 1929); AN HOUR WITH TCHEKHOV (CHEKHOVSKY ALMANAKH), 1929 (U.S. release: September 5, 1933); HOLIDAY OF ST. JURGEN (PRAZDNIK SVYATOVO YORGENA), 1930, TOMMY, or SIBERIAN PATROL (TOMMI, or SIBIRSKY PATRUL), 1931 (U.S. release: May 13, 1932); MARIONETTES (MARIONETKI), 1934 (U.S. release: 1934); WITHOUT DOWRY (BESPRIDANNITSA), 1937; SALAVAT YULAYEV, 1941. His last film was NASREDDIN IN BUKHARA (NASREDDIN V BUKHARE), 1943. Some of the films he directed abroad were DER LIEBE PIELGEFAHRT (Germany), L'AMOUR ET LA LOI (France), POUR UNE NUIT D'AMOUR (France, 1919), JUSTICE D'ABORD (France, 1919), a remake of his 1917 PUBLIC PROSECUTOR (PROKUROR).

He died as he had lived -- working on a shooting script.

The Three Million Case⁽³⁾

THREE THIEVES (PROTSESS O TRYOKH MILLIONAKH). 1926. Released August 23, 1926.
U.S. release: New York, October 29, 1933. Comedy. 6 reels. Mezhrabpom-Rus.
Russian intertitles. ca. 75 minutes.

Alternate English titles: THE TRIAL OF THE THREE MILLION; THE THREE MILLION CASE;
THE CASE OF THE THREE MILLION; A LAWSUIT FOR THREE MILLION.

Scenario (from Umberto Notari's story and play, The Three Thieves) and direction:
Yakov Protazanov. Photography: Pyotr Yermolov. Design: Isaac Rabinovich. Assistant
director: Yuli Raizman. Director's assistant: Ya. Urinov. Make-up: N. Sorokin.
Still photographer: I. Bokhonov.

Cast: Igor Ilinsky (Tapioka, the ragamuffin-thief); Anatoli Ktorov (Kaskarilya,
gentleman-thief); Mikhail Klimov (Ornano, the banker); Olga Zhisneva (Noris, his wife);
N. Prozorovsky (Guido, her lover); V. Fogel (man with binoculars); D. Vvedensky
(burglar).

Source of data and credits: Soviet Fiction Films;
An Annotated Catalog
Moscow, 1961, pp. 163-64.
Translated by Sonia Volochova

Synopsis

A banker named Ornano, trying to profit from the famine which has raged for years in northern Italy, undertakes a speculation for which he needs a large sum of money. He sells his house for three million rubles to a religious community, after bribing the "holy fathers" who direct it. The banker's wife, [Noris] sends her lover Guido a note telling him that he will find the money in their house. The note falls into the hands of the adventurous Cascarilia; who enters the house during the night. Here he unexpectedly meets his friend the thief Tapioca, but the banker arrives. Tapioca escapes and Cascarilia demands that Noris keep her husband with her until a given signal. Noris has to submit, and Cascarilia flees with the money. The police arrest Tapioca, taking him for the thief and put him in prison. On the day of his trial Cascarilia appears in the courtroom and announces himself as the thief. In response to the doubt in the room, Cascarilia throws packets of counterfeit money into the room. Everybody scrambles to gather up the money and, taking advantage of the chaos, Cascarilia and Tapioca escape.

In the epilogue, a street urchin tries to steal Tapioca's gloves. Tapioca surprises him, telling the unfortunate thief that it is not the gloves that are important but the "sacred law" of property.

"Mezhrabpom-Russ, where the scenario department was more forceful than in other studios, had nothing prepared for the anniversary year. They made grand announcements of the literature made ready, this year, for the indefatigable Protazanov: a scenario by Maxim Gorky on the Stenka Razin rebellion (the manuscript was found among Gorky's papers after his death), a film of Dostoyevsky's Eternal Husband, and, grandest of all, a collaboration by Protazanov with Nemirovich-Danchenko on Tolstoy's War and Peace. None of these projects was ever seriously begun. Instead, Protazanov made films that were far less grand and possibly more interesting, the first two in a form that became associated with his name -- the satirical comedy: THE TAILOR FROM TORZHOK (commissioned as publicity for the State Lottery Loan) and THE THREE MILLION CASE... both with much the same cast, Ilinsky, Ktorov, Zhizneva, who were also to play in his later comedies. Though THREE THIEVES was frowned upon as "an ordinary drawing-room comedy", the two comedies were agreeably successful at the box-office."

-Jay Leyda, Kino, p.204

...A LAWSUIT FOR THREE MILLIONS (1926), directed by Yakov Protazanov from his own scenario began as a sharp social satire about three thieves - a banker, a gentleman and a petty pilferer - but developed instead into a Western-type drawing room comedy. The press upbraided Protazanov for uncritical imitation of Western genres and for failing to treat satirically the aspects of bourgeois life which appeared in the film. According to the critics, the "class enemies" seemed too good-natured and kindly."

Paul Babitsky and John Rimberg,
The Soviet Film Industry, p. 119

What seemed to be little more than a Western drawing-room comedy to the propaganda-oriented Soviet film critics was, on a number of counts, morally reprehensible to the New York censors. They ordered the following cuts:

- Reel 1: Eliminate subtitle: "I will give you personally a rake off for your poor".
- Eliminate all scenes of priest looking at statue and touching breast of statue.
- Reel 2: Eliminate all views of thief actually lowering himself by rope, through skylight, into room of house.
- Eliminate view of thief putting loot into bag.
- Reel 3: Eliminate all views of thief actually cutting out dial of safe.
- Reel 4: Eliminate subtitle: "Three million! - the fellow has found favor with the Lord" and accompanying scene of Priests raising their hands in thanksgiving, sanctimoniously.
- Reel 5: Eliminate view of thief actually taking watch from lawyer's pocket.
- Eliminate view of Priest looking at woman significantly as she leaves prisoner's cell, then making sign of the cross in disrespectful manner before entering cell.

REASONS: "SACRILEGIOUS", "INDECENT" and "WILL TEND TO INCITE TO CRIME"

Source: The censorship files deposited by Vlada Petric with the Film Department's Film Study Center.

According to Jay Leyda, Kino, p. 204n), there were two earlier film versions of Notari's story: THIEF (1916), directed by M. Bonch-Tomashevsky, and CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT (1923), directed by Pyotr Chardynin.

Biographical information

Protazanov's assistant, Yuli Raizman (December 15, 1903 --), branched out on his own in 1927. After an unremarkable start, the comedy CIRCLE (KRUG), 1927, co-directed with A. Gavronsky, he surprised the film industry with a forceful drama of life in a Siberian prison camp, IN PENAL SERVITUDE (KATORGA; U.S. title: IN OLD SIBERIA), 1928, (U.S. release: New York, July 21, 1929). By this time, the inception of sound was creating the usual difficulties. Raizman's THE EARTH THIRSTS (ZEMLYA ZHAZHDET), 1930, a silent film, was re-released in 1931 with an added sound track of music, song, and noise. One of his biggest projects was the large-scale documentary BERLIN, 1945, awarded the Stalin prize. Other important films include: FLYERS (LYOTCHIKI), 1935, (U.S. title: MEN ON WINGS; release, 1935); THE LAST NIGHT (POSLEDNYAYA NOCH), 1937; MASHENKA, 1942 (U.S. release: 1942); RAINIS, 1949; THE TRAIN GOES EAST (POYEZD IDET HA VOSTOK), 1948 (U.S. release: 1949); LESSON OF LIFE (UROK ZHIZNI), 1955; THE COMMUNIST, 1958; and YOUR CONTEMPORARY (TVOI SOVREMENNİK) 1968.

The film's star, Igor Ilinsky (1901 --), was one of the foremost Soviet comedians, both stage and screen. His theatrical career began with Fyodor Komissarzhevsky in 1917; his screen career, in 1924, in Protazanov's AELITA. In 1958 he won the best actor prize at the first Moscow Film Festival for performance in CARNIVAL NIGHT (KARNAVALNAYA NOCH), 1956. His best known silent films, in addition to the above, are Protazanov's THE TAILOR FROM TORZHOK (ZAKROICHİK IZ TORZHKA), 1925, and Sergei Komarov's MARY PICKFORD'S KISS, 1927 (shown October 5 & 10). Grigori Alexandrov's musical comedy VOLGA-VOLGA, 1938, is one of his outstanding sound films.

-Sonia Volochova