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SOVIET SILENT CINEMA
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AELITA (AELITA)

Production Company: Mezhrabpom-Russ
Running time at 20 fps: 90 mins

Directed by Yakov Protazanov. Screenplay (from novel by Alexei Tolstoy): Fyodor Otsep and Alexei Faiko. Photographed by: Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky and E. Schöneman.

With: Valentina Kuinzhi, Nikolai Tseretelli, Konstantin Eggert, Yulia Solntseva, Yuri Zavadsky, Igor Ilinsky, Nikolai Batalov.

SYNOPSIS

During the difficult years was threatened by war, an engineer named Los built a machine which could fly to Mars. His motivation in this endeavour is not the dream of discovering an unknown planet, but rather the innumerable daily hassles he must deal with on earth. Los wants to leave this cursed planet Earth, where people are cold and hungry, and the next door neighbor chases one's wife. In a quarrel with his wife, Los, in a fit of jealousy shoots her, and flees from his house, having made up his mind to take off immediately for Mars. Two friends accompany him: a cheerful discharged Red Army soldier who dreams of bringing the Revolution to Mars and the detective who is after Los for murdering his wife. On Mars, Los' heart is won by the Queen of the planet -- Aelita. The Prime Minister's intrigues land Los and his friends in the caves where the Martians slaves are kept. Gussev, with the help of Aelita's servant girl, manages to escape, and instigates an uprising of the Martian slaves. At the last minute, just as the uprising seems to be successful, Aelita, who had previously seemed kind and thoughtful to the Earth people, turns around and betrays them. Los is furious. He wakes up in the Moscow Station where he had ended up while being chased by the detective. The flight to Mars, the romance with Aelita and the Martian slaves revolt was only a dream. Back at home, Los learns that he never hurt his wife, nor did she betray him. The inventor throws his drawings into the fire, and decides to stay on earth---a place he's learned to love again.

BACKGROUND

In the aftermath of the civil war, and with new solvency achieved through the NEP economic experiments, the Soviet film industry was prepared, in 1924, to undertake a production that would rival the foreign films that were arriving in Moscow in the 20's. The production company that had been merged from a state and a private concern, called Mezhrabpom-Russ, chose to film Alexis Tolstoy's story of three Russians, an engineer (Nikolai Tsereteli), a soldier in the Red Army (Nikolai Batalov), and a detective (Igor Ilinskii) who fly to Mars and become involved in a revolutionary uprising among the Martian people: while there, one of them -- the engineer-- has a love affair with the Queen of Mars, Aelita. This monumental story called for an experienced director of spectacles, and so the assignment went to Yakov Protazanov, a leading Russian director before the Revolution who had emigrated to Paris (where he made several films) but who had returned to the Soviet Union in the period of the NEP.

Great publicity preceded the opening of AELITA. In the journal Kinogazetta the mysterious words, "Anta...Adoli...Outa..." appeared. This was simply a Martian message, but it mystified and intrigued everyone. The film got a cool reception from the press, who expected a more "artistic" film, but the people loved it. They identified strongly with the soldier Gussev, a man of the people, devoted to the revolution, and with the amateur detective Kravtsov (a character added to the original story to make a part for the celebrated comic actor Ilinskii), instead of with the petty-bourgeois engineer Los, who the scenarists had designated the hero. Many babies born that year were named Aelita, after the beautiful Solntseva who later married Dovshenko, and who is now directing films based on scripts never filmed by Dovshenko. The film is now well paced, but the acting -especially that of Batalov and Illinskii- is excellent, as is Protazanov's handling of the crowd scenes, and the scenes of Moscow during the NEP period. The art direction is the most famous attribute of AELITA: the sets and costumes reveal in the fantastic Martian landscape a cubist design that resulted from Protazanov's experience of the French art world as well as from the direct influence of the constructivist movement in Moscow (Tatlin, Malevitch).