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TRIPLE AGENT

(FRANCE-ITALY-SPAIN-GREECE-RUSSIA)

A Rezo Films release (in France) of a Compagnie Eric Rohmer, Rezo Prods. presentation of a France 2 Cinema (France)/BIM Distribuzione (Italy)/Alta Produccion, Tornasol Films (Spain)/Strada Prods. (Greece)/Mentor Cinema Co. (Russia) production, with participation of Cofimage 15, Canal Plus, Cinecinema. (International sales: Wild Bunch, Paris.) Produced by Francoise Etchegaray, Jean-Michel Rey, Philippe Liegeois. Executive producer, Laurent Danielou. Co-producers, Valerio De Paolis, Enrique Gonzales Macho, Gerardo Herrero, Mariela Besuievsky, Takis Veremis, Yvan Solovov.

Directed, written by Eric Rohmer. Camera (color), Diane Baratier; editor, Mary Stephen; art director, Antoine Fontaine; costumes, Pierre Jean Larroque; sound (Dolby Digital), Pascal Ribier; casting, Audrey Gatimel. **Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (competing)**, Feb. 13, 2004. Running time: 115 MIN.

Arsinoe Voronin Katerina Didaskalou
Fiodor Voronin Serge Renko
Maguy Cyrielle Clair
Boris Grigori Manoukov
Gen. Dobrinsky Dimitri Rafalsky
The General Nathalia Krougly
Janine Amanda Langlet
Dany Jeanne Rambur
Andre Emmanuel Salinger
Alexis Tcherepnine Vitaliy Cheremet

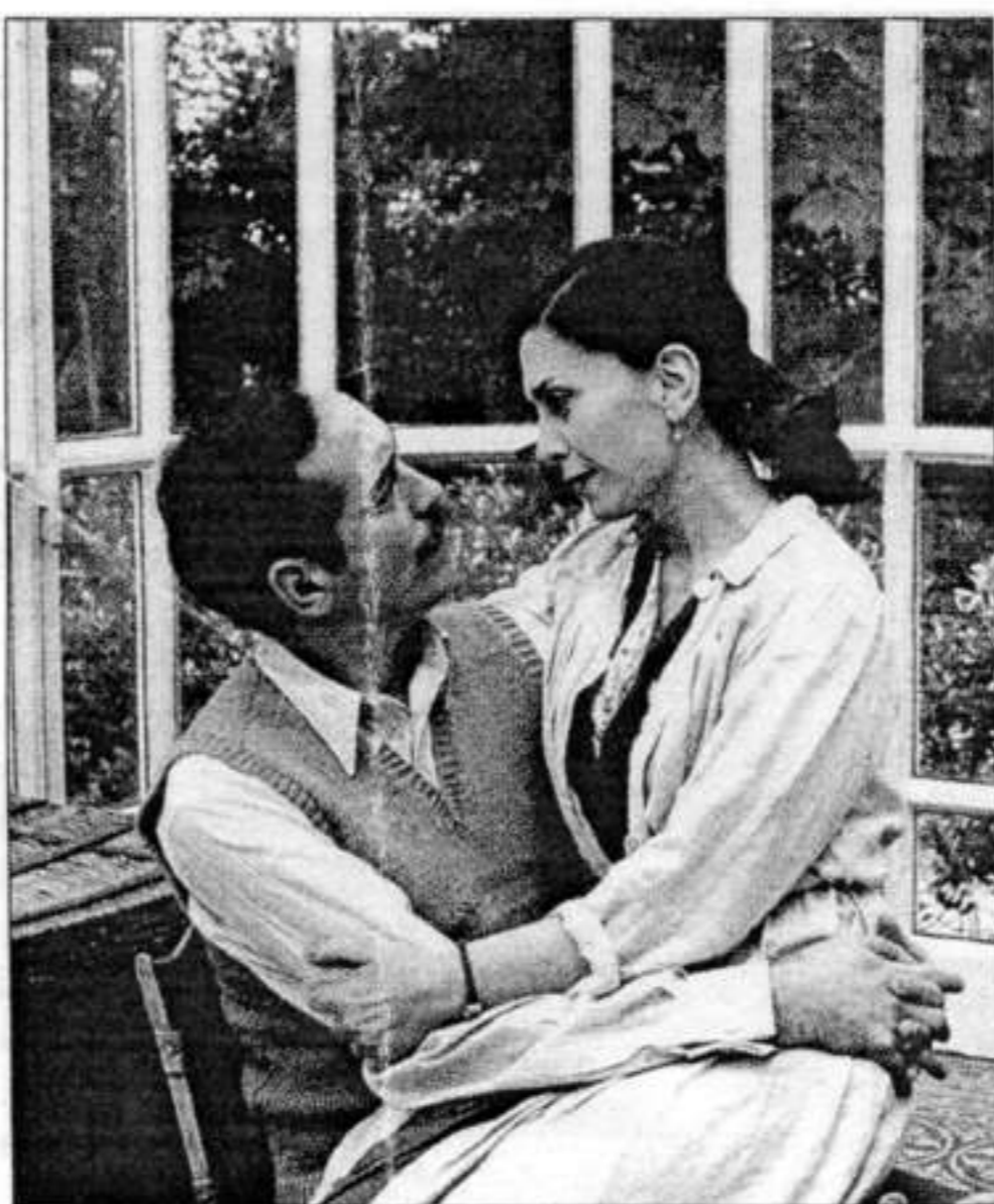
With: Bernard Peysson, Laurent Le Doyen, Emilie Fourier, Alexandre Koltchak, Vladimir Leon, Alexandre Tcherkassoff, Alexandre Koumpian, Jorg Schnass, Georges Benoit.

(French, Russian, German dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

Eric Rohmer's "Triple Agent" is another of his "moral tales" wrapped up in a flim-flam spy story. Probably the only espionage yarn in which people sit around in rooms gabbing rather than taking out guns or chasing each other in cars, film doesn't rank among the reclusive 83-year-old helmer's top-drawer works, but the playfully ironic pic looks likely to enjoy extensive fest outings on the veteran's rep, followed by select art-house rendezvous.

An opening caption teasingly notes the script is based on "a true, unsolved mystery ... with the character names changed and some twists added." More specifically, it's inspired by the September 1937 ab-



RED, WHITE ... OR BLUE: Serge Renko and Katerina Didaskalou star in "Triple Agent," a 1930s espionage drama.

duction of Gen. Miller, president of the (White) Russian War Veterans. His colleague, Gen. Skobline, was accused, but Skobline also disappeared soon afterward, leaving his wife to take the rap as an accessory. She died in prison three years later.

Using writings on the subject and the transcript of the wife's trial, Rohmer has invented a story that fits with all the coordinates of his own universe, in which characters are faced with moral choices and either flunk or rise to them. At core, it's simply about a man who cheats on his wife — but in terms of their trust rather than sexually.

Spanning the years 1936-43, and peppered with newsreel footage of the time, picture is quite a political mouthful to swallow, especially for auds unacquainted with the era's convoluted shadow politics. But as with most of Rohmer's films, it's not necessary to hang on every word and detail: The overall arc of the characters and events swims into focus pretty quickly.

In May '36, Europe is in turmoil, with Bolsheviks scheming against exiled White Russians, Spain about to descend into a civil war and Germany gripped by rising Nazism. Paris is a hotbed of political groupings with agents, double agents and, yes, triple agents, too.

Fiodor Voronin (Serge Renko, from Rohmer's "The Lady and the Duke"), a former Tsarist general, works for the White Russians' association, under Gen. Dobrinsky (Dimitri Rafalsky). Fiodor's wife, Greek-born Arsinoe (Katerina Didaskalou), a former teacher of ancient Greek, whiles away her time as a painter. She's always respected the secrecy of her husband's work and never asked too many questions.

In a typically Rohmeresque conjunction of opposites, the couple gets to know a pair of Communist sympathizers in the same apartment block — Janine (Amanda Langlet) and her husband, Andre (Emmanuel Salinger) — whose cute young daughter, Dany (Jeanne Rambur), Arsinoe asks to paint.

Part of Fiodor's job is to stop the Reds from infiltrating the Whites' ranks, though, as he admits, the Soviets now have bigger fish to fry on the European stage than a bunch of

exiled, broke Tsarists.

When the Spanish Civil War breaks out, Fiodor goes off on more of his mysterious foreign trips. Arsinoe starts to ask more about his job; throughout the movie, these scenes always end with the charming, rational Fiodor abating her unease and the two declaring their mutual love.

However, when a friend (Cyrielle Clair) tells Arsinoe that Fiodor was spotted in Berlin when he should have been in Brussels, Arsinoe begins to wonder exactly which side her husband is working for. She gets further confused when Fiodor, with smooth logic, proposes moving to the So-

viet Union — an idea soon rejected — and even goes along with his wishes when he pulls off his most daring plan.

With his secret rendezvous, Fiodor is simply the espionage equivalent of a philandering, traveling businessman, "cheating" on an overly trusting, loving wife back home. Stripped of all its political talk, "Triple Agent" is a classic Rohmer tale of people negotiating their way through life without making too many mistakes. It's executed with poise, reams of dialogue and direction that's of the simplest, barest kind — mostly two people in a room.

"Triple Agent" is a long way from Rohmer's purely metaphysical dialogues, in which long-legged young beauties tie themselves up in emotional conundrums of their own making. It most closely recalls his "The Tree, the Mayor and the Mediatheque" (1993), which mixed political standpoints with sexual frissons amid a rural community.

However, unlike in "Tree," there's no broad range of characters here to bring variation to the dialogue scenes. Fiodor and Arsinoe's word seshes follow a regular pattern that starts to become repetitive. Rohmer gussies up the film with plenty of docu footage, but pic starts to go around in circles, with only the mystery of who Fiodor is actually working for supplying any interior tension.

Renko is aces as Fiodor, a real charmer with an answer for every question and looking for all the world like a young Henry Fonda with a mustache. Langlet and (more briefly) Salinger bring a similar sophistication to the script. Didaskalou, though with excellent French, is saddled with a rather compliant role that brings decreasing returns.

Period production design is detailed, on a budget, and in Rohmer's closeted world of bedrooms, offices and drawing rooms its stagy look is actually a plus. A coda, largely taken up with docu material scored with Shostakovich's mournful 8th String Quartet, seems out of kilter with the rest of the film, though there's some crucial info at the very end.

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Varia

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