

Document Citation

Title	Soviet cinema : Yesterday and today : Pirosmani
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Los Angeles International Film Exposition</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Pirosmani, Shengelaya, Giorgi, 1971

SOVIET CINEMA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Thursday, November 3 - 8pm

(PIROSMANI)

CAST: Avtandil (Avto) Varazi; David Abashidze; Zurab Kaplinidze; Teimuraz Beridze; Boris Tsipuria; Shota Daushvili

CREDITS: Director: Georgy Shengelaya, Erlom Akhviediani; Photography: Konstantin Apryatin Gruziafilm Studios

Released in 1971

Running Time: 85 minutes

Georgy Shengelaya is one of a distinguished family of filmmakers. His father, Nikolai Shengelaya, was one of the pioneers of Georgian cinema, a contemporary of and collaborator with Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko (his films ELISSO and 26 COMMISSARS OF BAKU are classics at home). Georgy's mother, Nita Vachnadze, was a popular star of the young Soviet cinema. Their sons, Gyorgy and Eldar, are both film directors. Gyorgy studied under Dovzhenko and graduated from the Film School in 1972. His short films include ALAVERDOBA and THE REWARD. His first feature, HE DID NOT WANT TO KILL, was followed by PIROSMANI and the recently completed MELODIES OF VERIYSKY QUARTER, which stars the director's wife Sofiko Tchiaureli.

Films about the lives of artists have usually been visually exciting (LUST FOR LIFE, MOULIN ROUGE) but dramatically unsatisfactory. PIROSMANI, a film about the life and work of the self-taught Georgian painter, Niko Pirozmanishvili (Pirosmani), seems almost totally satisfactory on every level, partly, perhaps, because the artist himself is little known in the West but partly also because the director Georgy Shengelaya and his writer, Erlom Akhvlediani, make no attempt to tell an accurate biographical record but rather create an emotional portrait of the man.

Pirosmani was born at the end of the last century in the small Georgian village of Mirzaania and, as a child, worked as servant in the home of a wealthy family in Tiflis. Later, he worked as a conductor on the Trans-Caucasian railways and, at one time, owned a small shop selling dairy products, though he was seldom able to make ends meet. He started painting when he decorated his shop, but later took to painting for local taverns and restaurants in return for food and drink. He used any material available, more often than not a piece of oil-cloth. Although usually appreciated by his fellow drinkers and diners, his highly original works--involving deer with bright eyes, giraffes and lions, feasts and harvesting, drinking bouts and loneliness--were unrecognised by the art world of his time. He died forgotten (neither the exact date of his birth nor of his death is known) but his art survived.

Writing for the London Film Festival programme, Brian Baxter said: "(The film) has a fascinating Georgian setting... (Pirosmani's) work was done before 1920. He resolutely refused to compromise and took meagre pay... he lived alone, unable to establish contact, least of all with the love of his life, a singer who he frequently painted. Most importantly though

the director and his great cameraman (Konstantin Apratin) have succeeded in an audacious experiment, utilising colour control and a visual style based on the painter's technique. The film is shot in muted tones, mainly ochres, browns and luminous golds--occasionally highlighted with red. Many compositions are enclosed within a frame: the walls of a theatre, or shop or cafe. It is a triumph of style enhancing subject."

Furthermore, dialogue is cut to the bone and the story is told in subtle visual shorthand. For example, at one stage, Niko tells a friend he will never marry since he doesn't like children: cut to a scene of him watching the singer he loves in a theatre bar: he is silent and still and apparently moved both by her and her song; cut to him in another, smaller, bar--noticeably older and greyer and drinking a great deal of vodka; he goes outside for air and sees a mother, suckling a baby at her breast, ride by on a cart; he returns, shaken, to the bar, demands more vodka, and drinks until he passes out. It's a beautiful sequence, eloquently expressing the artist's desires, loneliness, a sense of regret at opportunities passed by and his problem with alcohol.

It was a masterly idea to cast Avto Varazi, in fact a painter and not an actor, as Niko Pirosmeni: Varazi gives a superbly understanding performance and, incidentally, was also art director on the film. PIROSMANI is a beautifully made tribute by modern artists of Georgia to one of their great predecessors.

Program present in association with The Los Angeles Film Exposition
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