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The Sweet Music of Melancholy

By Andrew Sarris

Voice April 20 '82

AN UNFINISHED PIECE FOR PLAYER PIANO. Directed by Nikita Mikhalkov. Screenplay by Alexander Adabashian and Nikita Mikhalkov, from the play *Platonov* by Anton Chekhov. A MOSFILM Production released by Corinth Films.

DINER. Directed and written by Barry Levinson. Produced by Jerry Weintraub. Released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY. Directed by John Mackenzie. Screenplay by Barry Keefe. Produced by Barry Hanson. Released by Embassy Pictures.

The late George Jean Nathan once complained that escapism in the theater had acquired a misleading connotation of light-headed frivolity. Nathan's example at hand was *Cyrano de Bergerac*, a genuinely "escapist" entertainment despite its unhappy denouement. If we were to extend Nathan's argument to cinema we might say that *Children of Paradise* is escapist despite the fact that it concludes badly and sadly for its ill-starred lovers. Similarly, the Russian *An Unfinished Piece for Player Piano*, the American *Diner*, and the British *The Long Good Friday* are all engaging, engrossing, and, if you will, escapist entertainments even though their respective endings are clearly downbeat. I have started off in this vein because I wish to avoid the excessive hype that seems to afflict the prose of many of my high-minded colleagues whenever they set out to "save" a presumably worthy film from its presumably evil distributors. Modest virtues are inflated into Homeric feats of artistic achievement, and dingy diners, particularly, are elevated into gourmet restaurants. Although I tend to be sympathetic with any effort to improve the public's taste, I am beginning to suspect that the carefully orchestrated raves that fill the entertainment pages, day after day, week after week, are yielding ever diminishing returns. Perhaps the time has come for critics to be less passionate and more precise, admittedly a difficult task for so vital and so vigorous a profession, but we can at least try.

I was most pleasantly surprised by Nikita Mikhalkov's *An Unfinished Piece for Player Piano*, from a lesser play (*Platonov*) by Chekhov. I have not done any research on the adaptation by Alexander Adabashian and the director, and thus I am not prepared to denounce Mikhalkov for distortions of Chekhov comparable to his distortions of Goncharov in the film version of *Oblomov*. Nonetheless, I suspect the worst inasmuch as it is difficult for me to believe that any Soviet filmmaker can function today without adjusting even the classics to the party line. There are traces here and there also of a misplaced lyricism that vulgarizes Chekhov's discriminating compassion with a blanket absolution.

Yet despite all my cultural fortifications against Mikhalkov's stylistic initiatives, my emotional resistance crumbled completely in the face of a succession of exquisitely stirring characterizations by an enormously gifted ensemble to the manner and manor born. Not the least of these performers is Mikhalkov himself as Dr. Triletsky, an ignoble forerunner of Astrof in *Uncle Vanya*. Similarly, Mikhail Platonov (Alexander Kalaigin) is a less sympathetic version of Vanya himself. The disastrously revelatory action of the film takes place during a day and a night on the decaying estate of Anna Petrovna (Antonia Shuranova). This estate, later to flower artistically into *The Cherry Orchard*, is not the only victim of decay. Platonov, a 35-year-old schoolmaster, is forced to confront both his failures and his

philanderings when he encounters Sophia (Elena Solovei), an old love who reminds him of what might have been. As Platonov's timid wife Sasha (Eugenia Glushenko) looks on fearfully, and Sophia's inane husband Sergei (Yuri Bogatyrev) dithers about ineffectively, Platonov and Sophia summon enough audacity to create a scandal, but not enough courage to escape from the stagnant backwaters into which their lives have drifted. It was all so heartbreakingly contemporary that I winced from the pain of recognition. Mikhalkov and his company have rendered the tragicomic absurdity of the bourgeoisie with so much loving exuberance that *An Unfinished Piece for Player Piano* serves as a splendid demonstration of Chekhov's prescient genius. The demons of decline and fall are with us still both as individuals and as members of an eternally dying class, and therefore I cannot imagine any civilized moviegoer not responding to the rich ironies of this film.