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NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS

April 4 - April 15, 1975

Presented by

THE FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER and THE DEPARTMENT OF FILM OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Friday, April 4 (6:00)

Sunday, April 6 (8:30)

PIROSMANI U.S.S.R. 1971. Georgy Shengelaya. Production Company: Gruzia Film Studio. Script: Georgy Shengelaya, Erlom Akhvlediani. Photography: Konstantin Apyatin (Sovcolor). Editor: M. Karalashvili. Art Director: Avtandil Varazi, V. Arabidze. Set Decorator: T. Ivashenko, V. Rurua. Music: V. Kukhianidze. Costumes: G. Kurdiani. Sound: O. Gegechkori. Leading Players: Avtandil Varazi (Niko Pirozmanashvili), David Abashidze, Zurab Kapianidze, Rosalia Minchin, Givi Alexandria, Alexander Rekhviashvili, Amir Kakabadze, Teimuraz Beridze, Boris Tsipuria, Shota Daushvili, Maria Gavramadze, Nino Seturidze. English subtitles. 85 minutes.

Director Georgy Shengelaya is, at thirty-seven (born on May 11, 1937), one of the leading lights of the currently very active Georgian film industry. (His family in fact goes back to that industry's beginnings: his father was the director Nikolai Shengelaya, one of its founders, and his mother was the Georgian cinema's first star.)

He studied at the Soviet State Film School under A. Dovzhenko and graduated in 1963. His short films include ALAVERDOBA and THE REWARD. His first feature HE DID NOT WANT TO KILL was followed by PIROSMANI and the recently released MELODIES OF VERA QUARTER.

"PIROSMANI, a film about the life and work of the self-taught Georgian painter, Niko Pirozmanashvili (Pirosmani) makes no attempt to tell an accurate biographical record but rather create an emotional portrait of the man."....

-Georgy Shengelaya

"PIROSMANI is a surprising visual meditation on the life of the primitive Georgian artist Niko Pirozmanashvili, who was born in 1862 and died, neglected, of alcoholism and starvation in 1919. Shengelaya's film constructs a series of impressionistic tableaux from incidents in Pirosmani's life, and deliberately forgoes scenes of emotional fireworks and clashes of character. Within this systematically muted style, however, Shengelaya is able to lend superficially bland scenes a cumulative emotional force. Each tableau takes its style from Pirosmani's own paintings, with simple lines and pastel colors, figures poised suggestively in space, and a further resonance derived from references to the work of the French impressionists. Avtandil Varazi as Pirosmani (he is also the film's art director) performs a suite of variations on a theme of intense withdrawal and loneliness sparked by sudden (if rare) moments of expansive confidence. The major pitfall for a film as fastidiously stylized as this is that it inevitably runs the risk of simply providing a super-elegant framework for the artist's work, and Shengelaya never fights completely free of this particular trap (the device of consistently seeing life through the artist's eyes seems contrived at times). But the film does persuasively explore the relationship between the artist (not The Artist), his creations and his particular society. It recreates a dream-like, non-verbal, almost unconscious level of activity. There is an extraordinary sequence in which Pirosmani is recognized by local dignitaries and called on to say a few words; quietly, but with evident enjoyment, he sketches out his plan for a huge tea house filled with paintings where everyone can come to talk about art. The artist's return to his own town is equally strange, portrayed as it is as the return of a ghost who passes invisible and unnoticed among his former friends.

(more)

The mood of this sequence seems remarkably close to the kind of despair that is communicated in Dovzhenko's Notebooks about the consequences of his own lack of favor in high places. (Shengelaya is interestingly quoted as being a disciple of Dovzhenko, and Dovzhenko saw himself as primarily a Ukrainian artist in much the same way that Pirosmanni felt himself to be a Georgian one.) The Christ-like pattern of suffering and redemption (specifically, Pirosmanni's three days virtually in the tomb) is treated without undue fanfare.

The temptation to reduce Pirosmanni to a handful of casebook labels, à la Hollywood, is happily resisted, even if it is difficult not to feel at times that the reasons for his withdrawal -- at least in the first instance -- are left a little too cryptic. It is worth adding that Pirosmanni's paintings are remarkable in themselves, and are referred to in the film with a rare lack of pretension. His painting of a giraffe draws curious visitors from the town, who ask what it is. 'A giraffe', the innkeeper replies; 'It died. Couldn't stand the climate.'

-Verina Glaessner, Monthly Film Bulletin,
(August, 1974)

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