

Document Citation

Title	Shukshin : stories from Siberia
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	manuscript
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	6
Subjects	Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich (1929-1974), Srotski, Altay, Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Dva Fyodora (The two Fedors), Huciev, Marlen, 1958 Strannye lyudi (Strange people), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1969 Vash syn i brat (Your son and brother), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1965 Pozovi menya v dal' svetluyu (Call me from afar), Lavrov, German, 1976 Kalina krasnaya (The red snowball tree), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1973 Pechki-lavochki (Happy go lucky), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1972 Zhivyyot takoj paren (There is such a guy), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1964

Shukshin:

Stories from Siberia

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Shukshin's prodigious career was cut short by a heart attack in 1974, at the early age of forty-five. He was then at the height of his powers as a writer, scenarist, actor and director. His last film, The Red Snowball Tree, had narrowly escaped suppression to become a runaway popular and critical success--and his only film to attract attention abroad (thanks to the hint of scandal).

He also finally received permission to film a cherished project on Stenka Razin, the 17th century Cossack rebel who promised freedom to his peasant followers. For Shukshin the link between this historical subject and his otherwise contemporary stories and films was obvious. His concern had always been 'the fate of the Russian peasantry', which has retained its unquenchable appetite for freedom throughout centuries of Tsarist oppression and the vast upheavals of the Soviet era.

Shukshin was himself a product of these upheavals. Born in a remote Siberian village, he drifted through many jobs and pieced together an education before reaching Moscow in the mid-50s and enrolling at the central film school, VGIK. Before graduating in direction, he had already published his first stories and made his mark as a screen actor. The earthy pose he struck to disconcert city types covered his deeply felt ambivalence. Literature or cinema? The country or the city?

He was now inescapably a man of multiple identities, whose championing of peasant values sharply challenged the cliches of 'socialist realism.' His quirky, provocative stories explored themes untouched since the 20s and his films took up the broken tradition of FEKS and Barnet to create a new genre, both lyrical and authentically popular. This first British retrospective of a major Soviet talent will confirm Shukshin among the modern masters. (A new translation of Shukshin's stories by Natasha Ward

and David Iliffe, Roubles in Words, Kopeks in Figures was published by Marion Boyars last year). Ian Christie. Thanks are due to Sovexportfilm, VNIKI and the USSR Filmmakers Association for assistance with viewings and prints.

Your Son and Brother

(Vash syn i brat)

An old man welcomes his oldest son's return to the village from a prison sentence, not knowing that he has escaped just to spend one day at home before returning to a longer sentence. Two other brothers are now city-dwellers, one an underprivileged labourer and the other a well-connected sportsman. Based on three of his published stories, this is Shukshin's most lyrical (though unsentimental) assertion of village values against the false lure of the city. USSR 1966/Dir Shukshin. With Vsevelod Sanaev, Leonid Kuravlev.

Strange People

(Strannye liudi)

Shukshin's peasants are often touched by 'strangeness'--an eccentricity that reveals their inner protest against grinding hardship. Here, three richly contrasting stories each explore one such protective fantasy. Vasska travels to the Crimea only to discover that his brother has lied about his success. Bronka takes tourists on hunting trips and enthralls them with his epic tale of nearly assassinating Hitler. And in a magnificent final episode, a kolkhoz chairman confides his disillusion to a village sculptor, whose art is his bid for freedom. USSR 1971/Dir Shukshin. With Sergei Nikonenko, Evgeni Lebedev, Vsevolod Sanaev.

Two Fyodors

(Dva Fedora)

Thanks to his 'soldier's face', Shukshin was promoted from student assistant to lead actor in Khutsiev's highly successful debut film, which earned them both a permanent niche in the Soviet popular tradition. 'Big Fyodor' returns from the war to find his home obliterated. He joins forces with 'Young Fyodor', an orphaned waif, and the two set about rebuilding their lives. USSR 1959/Dir Marlen Khutsiev. Plus an extract from Alyonka (1962), Boris Barnet's penultimate film, in which Shukshin played an uprooted Muscovite struggling, like the heroine, to create a new life in Kazakhstan.*

There Was a Lad

(Zhivet takoi paren')

Shukshin's native Biisk region was the setting for his first feature. Young Pashka hitches a ride with a lorry driver and his encounters with an assortment of locals and visitors add up to a two-way satire on peasant innocence and urban pseudo-sophistication. The bemused kolkhoz reaction to a touring show of 'fashions for farmworkers' is a comic gem, but Pashka's eager curiosity and Billy Liar-like fantasies of fame clearly point to a wider horizon than the Siberian steppe. USSR 1964/Dir Shukshin. With Leonid Kuravlev.

* or, if Alyonka doesn't come through:-

Plus Shukshin's final performance as a soldier in an extract from Bondarchuk's version of the unfinished Sholokhov novel They Fought for the Motherland (1975).

Happy-go-lucky

(Pechki-lavochki)

Autobiography and allegory are interwoven in Shukshin's finest achievement as writer, director and actor. Ivan and his wife leave their Altai village for the first time to travel by train to a southern spa. They fall easy prey to a con-man, but are taken up by a folk-song collector who introduces them to the wonders of the city. This lyrical triumph of innocence unprotected includes some of Shukshin's wittiest satire on ~~city~~^{urban} condescension, and a radiant portrait of his actress wife.

USSR 1973/Dir Shukshin. With Lydia Fedoseeva-Shukshina.

The Red Snowball Tree / Snowball Berry Red

(Kalina krasnaia)

The role of Egor Prokudin definitively broke the mould of Soviet heroes and catapulted Shukshin to immortality in the last year of his life. Emerging from prison, he has nowhere to go, except a remote village where a kind-hearted woman with whom he has corresponded awaits him. But salvation beckons too late as Egor bows to his fate in this raw and ~~poignant~~^{moving} summation of Shukshin's art, which was first blocked by censorship then awarded a Lenin Prize. USSR 1974/Dir Shukshin. With Shukshin, Lydia Fedoseeva-Shukshina.

Call Me From Afar

(Pozovi menia v dal' svetluiu')

Shukshin's death in 1974 left a number of unfilmed screenplays (including his cherished Senka Razin project). This gently ironic comedy about a widow's efforts to find a suitable new husband took on a special poignancy as interpreted by the author's widow, and co-directed by two distinguished actors. Both the woman's mischevious son and the shy suitor himself contrive to make the courtship a series of ^{hilarous} ~~embarrassing~~ disasters.

USSR 1978/Dirs S. Lyubshin, G. Lavrov. With Lydia Fedoseeva-Shukshina, Stanislav Lyubshin. Plus an extract from Panfilov's I Want to Speak (Proshu slova, 1973, rel. 1976), with Shukshin as a playwright.