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Andrei Rublev

Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. 1969. N/R. 3hrs 25mins. In Russian with subtitles. Anatoly Solonitsin, Nicolai Sergeev.

If the lunatic visions of *Intolerance*, *I Am Cuba*, *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*, *Come and See* and *Apocalypse Now* somehow didn't sate your craving for cosmically insane, quixotic historical epics, *Andrei Rublev* just might be the overdose you're seeking. Andrei Tarkovsky's two-part, 3½-hour masterpiece is a visionary's superstore. It's easy to imagine Herzog or Coppola seeing it in the 1970s and getting the jolt of courage it took to chase their own fever dreams. But *Andrei Rublev*, which chronicles the life of the titular Russian monk and icon painter in the early 1400s, is arguably the most ambitious historical epic of them all.

Conjuring a medieval Russian countryside in violent transformation (famine, invasions, pagan sexual rites and religion-related massacres), Tarkovsky uses Rublev (Solonitsin) to represent every artist, man of faith and basically decent human being on

the planet. Are Christian pieties of any use in a world ruled by predatory evil? Maybe not: Rublev and his fellow monks largely stand in impotent awe as state-sanctioned rapes and tortures occur all around them. Although in demand for his expressive frescoes, Rublev can't bring himself to paint a Last Judgment scene that a prince has commissioned because he feels the faithful peasantry sees enough misery in real life. Across the two decades covered in the film, brutal realities overwhelm his appetite for art and religion and even render him mute.

The film's meditative first half, focusing on spiritual quarrels between the monks, is so spare and inert that it seems Tarkovsky has gotten a little too absorbed in his own philosophizing. But his constantly prowling camera (the movie was lensed mostly in silvery widescreen black and white by Vadim Yusov) sustains just enough tension to lure us to part two, when all hell breaks loose. Here, Tarkovsky whips out two astonishing sequences that could stand as great films of their own: a bloody



SLOW BURN Monk and icon painter Rublev (Solonitsin, far right) is gradually driven mad by the untold suffering he witnesses in Tarkovsky's fiery epic.

Tatar invasion that wipes out the cathedral and village of Vladimir, leaving Rublev to commiserate over the corpses and his destroyed paintings with the ghost of his old mentor; and the royally commissioned construction of a gigantic bell, supervised by an or-

phan who reminds Rublev of himself. In both episodes, Tarkovsky pulls a gasp-inducing poetic image out of nearly every shot while maintaining a full-blooded, visceral narrative flow. (Opens Fri; Film Forum.)

—Steven Boone