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THE SOVIET SILENT CINEMA

PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE PROGRAM NOTES

**THE MIRACLE MAKER ( CHUDOTVORETS ).**

Production Company: Sevzapkino & First Petrograd Collective of Screen Artists.  
Running Time at 18 fps: 45 mins.

Directed by Alexander Pantalejev. Screenplay by A. Zorin. Photographed by Nikolai Kozlovsky.

With P. Kirillov ( Mizgir, a soldier ), E. Tumanskaya ( Dunya, his fiancée ), V. Kojura ( Nicholas I ), and R. Mamontova ( Empress Alexandra ).

SYNOPSIS

An unmasking of church "miracles".

Russia in the time of serfdom. The keen-witted and resourceful manor serf Mizgir is sent into the army for his "Offences and pranks". While standing guard by the Ikon of the Blessed Virgin at Kazan, and looking at her jeweled setting during a regimental holiday, Mizgir thinks, "My folks' cow died and their hut burned down. They have such misfortune, while here there is such wealth." This thought pushes Mizgir to a desperate act: he breaks the Ikon's glass and pulls a diamond out of the setting. In order to avoid the grim punishment he claims that a miracle has occurred: that the virgin herself gave him the stone. The rumor about this possesses the town, and the people start to gather at the Ikon for worship. The clergy is forced to recognize the miracle and Tsar Nicholas I issues an ukase which confirms that the virgin demonstrated her kindness by giving a valuable jewel to private Mizgir. But he continues in the ukase, that if anyone else takes advantage of the virgin's generosity, he will be sent to hard labor. The government takes the jewel from Mizgir, gives him 125 rubles and leave in return, and most important, permission to marry the serf girl Dunya who loves him.

BACKGROUND

One of the earliest films with an anti-religious theme, **THE MIRACLE MAKER** used comedy to expose the hypocrisy of the church and the false basis of the superstitions of the masses. According to his widow, Lenin liked the film very much, and it remained in circulation on the strength of his approval for quite some time. Later films with anti-religious themes included **FATHER SERAFIN** (1922), **THE ELDER VASILI GRIAZNOV** (1924), **CROSS AND MAUSER** (1925), and to some extent Eisenstein's **THE OLD AND THE NEW** (1929) and Dovzhenko's **EARTH** (1930).

A recent Soviet opinion of this film has come from R. Iourenev, who notes: "The scenes depicting the lives of the landlords were the weakest in the film. Pantalejev did not rise up to denounce serfdom, or expose the inhumanity of the anti-popular regime. The actresses R. Mamontova and L. Bantychева played the mistress and her help-mate in the manner of an inoffensive farce. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of the cruel master and the young serf full of humanity, irony, and driven by a beautiful feeling of love, was considered new and progressive.

"The scenes in the Army were more substantial. The producer was able to show the heavy machine of Nicholas' Army, the inhuman drilling, while at the same time displaying the shades of goodness and intelligence in the soldiers, their love of folk dancing and their clever, salty humour. The military and ecclesiastical characters, upset by Mizgir's behaviour, are very well portrayed. The petit bourgeois types who spread the word of Mizgir's miracle are depicted ingeniously. The film's success rests on the performance of its central character -- Mizgir, played by the young artist P. Kirillov, who had just graduated from the Petrograd School of Film Art where Pantalejev taught. Kirillov's acting is expressive, natural, and simple. Of course, he could not free himself from the forced gesturing which was in fashion at the time. But, he understood the essence of the character. Kirillov's interpretation of Mizgir was patterned after the clever, intelligent heroes found in Russian folk tales. He was the forerunner of characters found in the 'positive comedies'. The positive nature of the peasant-serf ( a clever, amusing subject ), the attack on military and ecclesiastical authorities, the caricature of the mistress, all together made **THE MIRACLE MAKER** a favorite of Soviet film audiences."

The director, Alexander Pantalejev (1874-1948), had been a theatre actor, and also a film director in the pre-Revolutionary Russian Cinema. In the 30's he made popular science educational films.