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Mikhail Platonov and his wife Sashenka (Alexander Kaliagin and Evgenia Glushenko) at the estate of the General's widow

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

Unfinished Piece **NEW FILM**
for Mechanical
Pianos

"AN UNFINISHED PLAY FOR A PLAYER PIANO"

("Neokonchennaya pyesa dlya mekhanicheskogo pianino")

Based on stories by Anton Chekhov
 In colour, 2,769 m

Script: Alexander Adabashian and Nikita Mikhalkov

Direction: Nikita Mikhalkov

Camera: Pavel Lebeshev

Sets: Alexander Adabashian and Alexander Samulekin

Music: Eduard Artemiev

With: Antonina Shuranova, Elena

Solovei, Evgenia Glushenko,

Alexander Kaliagin and Yuri

Bogatyrev

Mosfilm Studio



Sophia (Elena Solover)

"An Unfinished Play for a Player Piano" is based mainly on Chekhov's early play known as "Platonov" and also on some of his short stories. Why did the young director Nikita Mikhalkov turn to a play that is admittedly not among Chekhov's best? Chekhov himself regarded this work as a first and tentative venture into play writing, a kind of grab bag from which he later drew protagonists and situations for other plays.

To Nikita Mikhalkov this film was important on a number of counts. He was trying his hand at a new genre, psychological drama. He interprets the play in a way that makes it absorbingly interesting for people in their thirties, the generation to which he himself belongs.

In one of the final scenes the main character, Platonov, cries out in anguish: „It's all over! I'm thirty-five!!" The realization dawns on him after an inner upheaval that compelled him, at long last, to take a sober look at himself and the people around him, at life in general. Platonov has reached the age when one takes stock of oneself, reflects on the transience of time and the meaning of life. This is the settling of accounts with one's conscience. A recurring motif of the picture is that one should not put off heart-searching indefinitely. One should do it now. ▶



Yakov, a servant
(Sergei Nikonenko)



Pavel Shcherbuk (Oleg Tabakov)

► Indolence and lack of purpose corrupt the heart and mind. But the rush and vanity of everyday pursuits can be equally corruptive for the soul. The film, then, is about the spirituality of man as opposed to mechanical existence.

It opens with some wonderful shots of Russian landscapes, a river, park, copses. Gathered on the lawn in front of a country mansion, in the peaceful lazy warmth of early summer, is the cream of provincial society: a General's widow, mistress of this "nest of gentlefolk" run to seed; a debonair doctor, the life and soul of the company; the widow's honeymooning good-for-nothing stepson; a capitalist, one of a new breed of enterprising, practical men; and a kindly old landowner. Nice, pleasant people all of them, at first sight.

In the beginning a gay, carefree atmosphere reigns, but events take a serious and dramatic turn as the narrative unfolds. This is Chekhov as perceived by Nikita Mikhalkov in 1976. He steers the film to a different denouement than in the original play. Instead of Platonov's murder there is a pathetic and farcical attempt at suicide. This is more in keeping with the spirit of Chekhov's mature works (he was seventeen when he wrote the play) and with the inherent logic of character development, which makes it interesting for the present-day viewer.

But what sort of man is Mikhail Platonov? To begin with, he is a person above the common run. His appearance in the country estate of the General's widow upsets the lazy pace of life there. This man

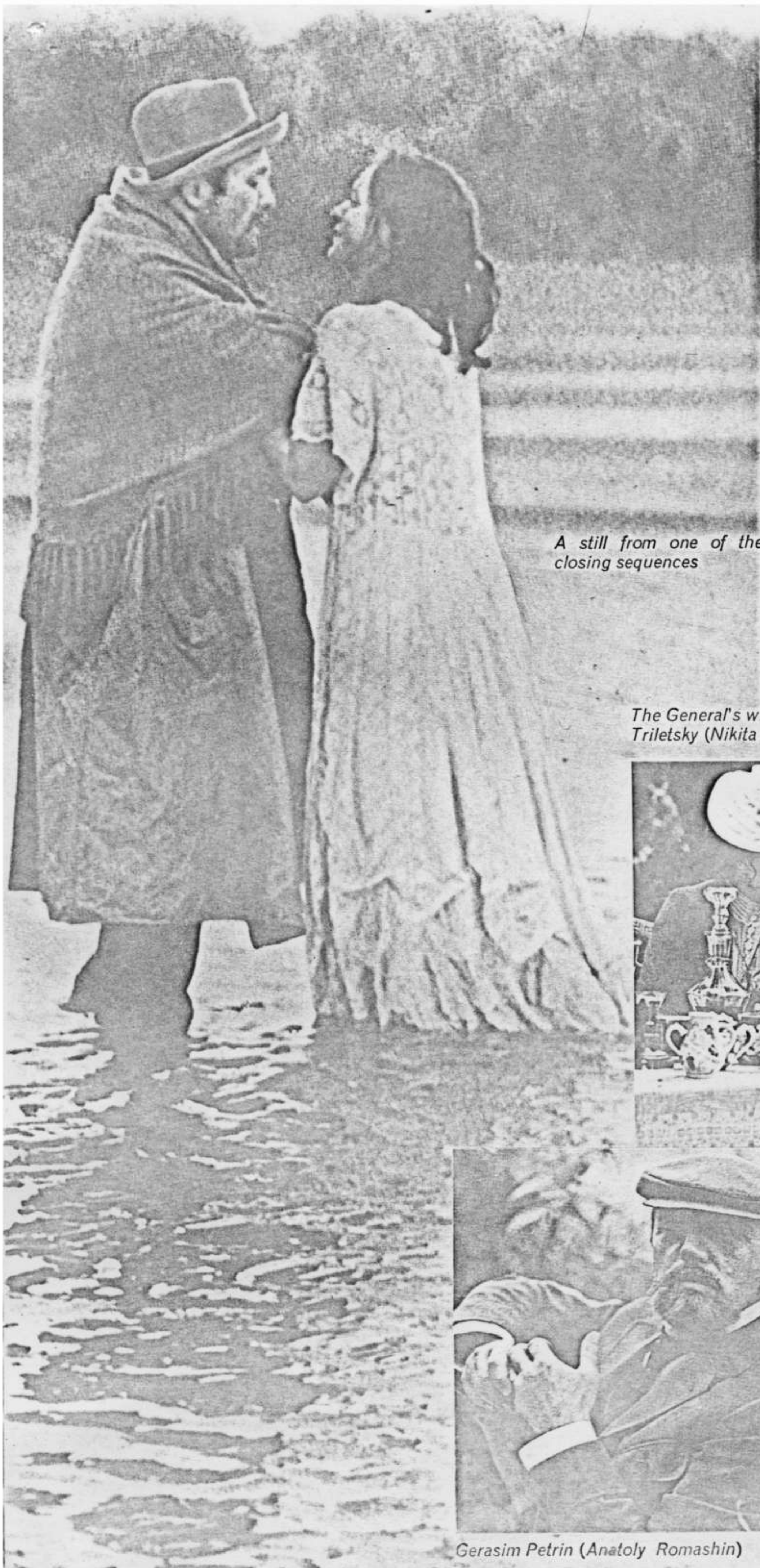
(superbly played by Alexander Kaliagin) has a kind of magnetism about him. He dominates local society and stirs it up. As the narrative progresses a complex cobweb of personal relationships reveals itself. It turns out that Mikhail Platonov, an intelligent and charming man, is carrying on a banal affair with the General's widow, a fading society belle. His relations with his wife, Sashenka, are complicated. He has a past romantic involvement with Sophia, the widow's daughter-in-law.

Platonov's character reveals itself gradually. Meeting Sophia, his first love, he begins to talk seriously, or so it seems, about the social problems that engage the minds of the local intelligentsia. But after a certain point we realize that Platonov is not serious, that he is subtly mocking the local philanthropists with their "theory of small deeds". Platonov has long lost faith in anything or anyone, including himself. We see a man who has betrayed his ideal and forfeited his integrity. Once embarked on the path of compromise, Platonov lost his idealism and the desire to understand and remake life. He does not protest at the meanness and triviality of life but accepts it with resignation. His marriage is loveless and his love affair tepid. "Now I know for sure that if you betray and lie once, you are unable to extricate yourself from the chain of betrayals and lies," he says.

In the life of everyone there comes a moment of decision. A person corrupted by indolence and inaction is often unprepared to make decisions. Platonov's mo-

ral fibre is too weak for him to start a new life. All that remains is to hurl himself from a cliff into a river—which turns out to be knee-deep.

The characters do not arouse our sympathy. They are debunked, leading us to reflect on the moral values of man and his duty to himself and society. Director Nikita Mikhalkov plays the part of Doctor Triletsky. Behind his buffoonery one is aware of the drama of a man who is a hollow shell, who has lost faith in himself. On the night of confessions, when all the main events in the film happen, he admits: "I'm ashamed to live... knowing that your life is so futile. Most of all, knowing that there is nothing ahead".



A still from one of the closing sequences

The characters are relentlessly exposed. Sophia (actress Elena Solovei) briefly finds herself at the focus of a dramatic situation before we discover that she is just a starry-eyed effete daughter of the rich who toys with the idea of alleviating the lot of the masses. Her charity programme is to feed peasant children from nursing bottles. Sophia's lip-service to the need to work by the sweat of one's brow merely emphasizes her inanity. The only person who deserves our respect and sympathy is Platonov's ingenuous wife, Sashenka. That role, as played by actress Evgenia Glushenko, comes as a revelation. She is the only live and sincere person in that phoney and parasitic world. What places her above the others is her selfless love for Platonov. She has been blessed with the great gift of understanding and forgiving. She is a symbol of hope and faith. 'We shall see a new, pure and bright life, new wonderful people who will understand and forgive us. This is the only way to love,' she says to despairing Platonov at the end. The final frame shows a sleeping boy who has nothing to do with all the feuds and worries of the adults. The sun is rising as a symbol of hope.

Margarita KVASNETSKAYA

The General's widow (Antonina Shuranova) with doctor Triletsky (Nikita Mikhalkov)



Gerasim Petrin (Anatoly Romashin)



Belated repentance