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Issey Ogata and Kaori Momoi portray Emperor Hirohito and his wife in Alexander Sokurov's "The Sun."

Old Servant Shinmei Tsuji
 Director of the Institute .. Taijiro Tamura
 Adjutant of General Georgy Pitskhelauri
 (Japanese, English dialogue)

By LESLIE FELPERIN

After examining Hitler in "Moloch" and a stroke-addled Lenin in "Taurus," Alexander Sokurov's "The Sun" completes the helmer's dictator trilogy on an up note with Emperor Hirohito surrendering at the end of World War II. Although not as crowd-pleasing as Sokurov's 2002 hit "Russian Ark," at least "The Sun" isn't as rebarbative as his last, "Father and Son." It even packs in a few stylized special effects and has some outright funny moments, a pleasant surprise from a helmer hardly known for laffs. Still, box office forecast predicts heavy weather for "The Sun," with warmer climes in sell-through.

Like the other two parts of the "tetralogy," as Sokurov calls it, main protagon in "The Sun" is a head of state normally vilified by history, introduced just as power is slipping away from him. But Sokurov's Hirohito (Issey Ogata) is a not an unsympathetic character, perhaps the most likeable out of the three films. Indeed, whereas "Moloch" depicted a Hitler deranged by obsessions, and "Taurus" a Lenin near senility, Hirohito here is not only in full command of his faculties, but shapes his own destiny, choosing a path — surrender — that will spare his subjects further suffering. Ironically, he can achieve this aim only by renouncing his status as a divine being, but this seems a relief for a man weary with divinity and the rigmarole of being head of state.

Narrative begins days before the official end of WWII, with Hirohito being awakened for the day by his retainers in the laboratory building to which he's retreated after the destruction of the imperial palace.

His chamberlain (Shiro Sano) goes over his schedule with him: Meet with his generals at 10 a.m., study marine biology at 12 p.m., rest to think deep thoughts at 4 p.m., and so on. Hirohito realistically asks how the schedule will be revised if the allies land in Japan that day, and the chamberlain insists that could only happen if there were no Japanese left alive. Perhaps, the emperor suggests, showing a dry sense of humor, he's

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THE SUN

(SOLNTSE)

(RUSSIA-ITALY-FRANCE-SWITZERLAND)

A Nikola-Film, Proline-Film (Russia), Downtown Pictures (Italy), MACT Prods. (France), Riforma Film production (Switzerland), in association with RAI Cinema, Istituto Luce, with the participation of CTC Television Network, Lenfilm Studio, with the support of Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography of Russian Federation, CNC. (International sales: The Works, London.) Produced by Igor Kalenov, Andrey Sigle, Marco Mueller. Coproducers, Alexander Rodnyansky, Andrey Zertsalov, Antoine de Clermont-Tonnerre.

Directed by Alexander Sokurov. Screenplay, Yury Arabov. Camera (color), Sokurov; editor, Sergey Ivanov; music, Andrey Sigle; production designer, Yury Kuper; art director, Elena Zhukova; costume designer, Lidia Krukova; sound (Dolby Digital), Sergey Moshkov. **Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (competing)**, Feb. 17, 2005. Running time: 110 MIN.

Emperor Issey Ogata
 General MacArthur Robert Dawson
 Empress Kaori Momoi
 Chamberlain Shiro Sano

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the last Japanese left already.

Sure enough, General MacArthur (Robert Dawson) marches into Tokyo and sends for Hirohito to discuss peace terms. American soldiers treat him rudely, hustling him into a car and making him open doors himself. A Japanese interpreter for the general (Georgy Pitshkelaurov) vainly tries to shield the emperor from MacArthur's brusque treatment, but Hirohito takes it all in his stride. Later, Hirohito clowns for the military journalists' cameras, winning from them the affectionate nickname "Charlie" (for his resemblance to Charlie Chaplin).

Thesp Ogata and Sokurov stress Hirohito's peculiar combo of near-childish innocence and pragmatism. On the one hand, he's seen summoning the director of a scientific institute (Taijiro Tamura) to his lab to discuss whether it's possible to see the northern lights in Japan, and then gives the baffled man a bar of Hershey's chocolate, part of a gift from MacArthur. But he also wakes up in a sweat from a striking, heat-hazed dream showing a city's fiery destruction (an atypical use of special effects by Sokurov, that nevertheless looks a little like a scene from a Godzilla movie as directed by Russian animator Yuri Norstein).

As usual, Sokurov's unhurried pacing will test the patience of more fidgety viewers, although the script is more accessible than some of his recent efforts. Kudos also to established thesp Ogata ("Yiyi: And a One and a Two ...") who brings genuine warmth and decency to the lead role as well as an impish wit. Perfs by the English-speaking cast members remain a little less convincing.

Lensing the pic himself, Sokurov bathes the action in a typical greenish tinge that reaches an almost inky pitch in some of the early interiors.

Where "Moloch" and "Taurus" were both acted in Russian, thesp here seem to be speaking only Japanese or English, albeit post-synched with precision. For the record, title on print caught was simply "The Sun," in English.