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ABELITA

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21

9:30 PM

ABELITA
(USSR, 1924)

DIRECTED BY YAKOV A. PROTAZANOV. PRODUCED BY MEZHRABPOM-RUSS, FROM A STORY BY COUNT ALEXIS N. TOLSTOI. SCENARIO BY ELEKSEI FAIKO AND FEDOR OTSEP. PHOTOGRAPHY BY YURI ZHELYABUZHISKY AND E. SUNEMAN. SETS BY V. SOMOV, S. KOSLOVSKI, AND ISAAC RABINOVITCH. COSTUMES BY MME. ALEXANDRA EXTER, OF THE MOSCOW KAMERNY THEATRE. 9 REELS. SILENT (22 FPS) 35mm. WITH RUSSIAN INTER-TITLES. TRANSLATION WILL BE READ AT SCREENING.

In the aftermath of the civil war, and with new solvency achieved through the NEP economic experiments, the Soviet film industry was prepared, in 1924, to undertake a production that would rival the foreign films that were arriving in Moscow in the 20's. The production company that had been merged from a state and a private concern, called Mezhrabpon-Russ, chose to film Alexis Tolstoi's story of three Russians, an engineer (Nikolai Tsereteli), a soldier in the red army (Nikolai Batalov), and a detective (Igor Ilinskii) who fly to Mars and become involved in a revolutionary uprising among the Martian people: while there, one of them—the engineer—has a love affair with the Queen of Mars, Aelita. This monumental story called for an experienced director of spectacles, and so the assignment went to Yakov Protazanov, a leading Russian director

before the revolution who had emigrated to Paris (where he made several films) but who had returned to the Soviet Union in the period of the NEP.

Great publicity preceded the opening of AELITA. In the journal *Kinogazetta* the mysterious words, "Anta . . . Adoli . . . Outa . . ." appeared. This was simply a Martian message, but it mystified and intrigued everyone. The film got a cool reception from the press, who expected a more "artistic" film, but the people loved it. They identified strongly with the soldier Gussev, a man of the people, devoted to the revolution, and with the amateur detective Kravtsov (a character added to the original story to make a part for the celebrated comic actor Illinskii), instead of with the petty-bourgeois engineer Los, who the scenarists had designated the hero. Many babies born that year were named Aelita, after the beautiful Solntseva who later married Dovshenko, and who is now directing films based on scripts never filmed by Dovshenko (her latest, *THE GOLDEN GATE*, will be shown here in a Russian-only version soon). The film is now well paced, but the acting—especially that of Batalov and Illinskii—is excellent, as is Protazanov's handling of the crowd scenes, and the scenes of Moscow during the NEP period. The art direction is the most famous attribute of AELITA: the sets and costumes reveal in the fantastic Martian landscape a cubist design that resulted from Protazanov's experience of the French art-world as well as from the direct influence of the constructivist movement in Moscow (Tatlin, Malevitch, etc.). Protazanov used AELITA as a laboratory in which to test all that he had recently learned abroad, and though it is far from his best film (he later made such important silents as *THE FORTY-FIRST*, *THE CASE OF THE 3,000,000*, *THE FESTIVAL OF ST. JORGEN*), it remains an enjoyably eclectic work. It was also the first Soviet film to make an impact abroad.