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Puppet government: Nikita Mikhalkov reduces his daughter, Anna, to a mouthpiece for his thoughts on Soviet politics.

Who's that girl?

Nikita Mikhalkov loses track of his daughter in Anna's cloud of rumination. **By Susan Gerhard**

IN HIS ambitious, gaseous documentary *Anna*, director Nikita Mikhalkov takes smug pleasure in remembering inflatable bear Mishka, "friendly and hollow," floating up into infinity at the 1980 Moscow summer Olympics. It was an event Mikhalkov narrates as being "the last time the empire attempted to display its power and grandeur." But his 1993 film—no less bloated and fuzzy than the big brown symbol of the State—has a similar problem staying on the ground.

You may be enticed by his prospectus: written accounts generally describe the film as a document of his daughter's childhood in a turbulent Soviet Union, with the girl herself revealing the world behind the curtain. Beware the bait-and-switch. Anna the girl is only the window dressing here for Mikhalkov's enterprise in speechmaking and speech-breaking, and though the dimpled blondie could definitely pull in shoppers like an annual clearance sale, she gets very few sentences in this 99-minute production.

"I don't want to possess but rather to approach," Nikita Mikhalkov has said to *Cineaste* magazine. It's unclear how he puts that impulse to use here. One staged interview has young Anna running toward her papa's car to answer questions. When he asks her what she wants most, she replies, "To give good answers." Mikhalkov blames her response on a wickedly homogenizing State, rather than the heat of his own imploring camera. His M.O. was supposed to have been to ask his daughter the same five questions every year (only three of those questions seem to surface here), but "year" is a malleable measure—poor Anna seems to only get camera time when some head of state kicks the bucket, which (fortunately for

the young one), in the era of Brezhnev-Andropov-Chernenko, they do often. The girl's performance is just a footnote, apparently, to a political treatise that's already been written.

Mikhalkov, an actor and a director (*Burnt by the Sun*, 1994) who comes from a long line of artists, has been called the Robert Redford of Russia and drives a Mercedes to his country home in this film; he leaps into history with his tongue so deeply embedded in his cheek you wonder if he will ever swallow again. The "servile masses," angry sports figures, self-serving state parades, missiles, leaders—gathered from what appears to be stock footage—are pasted together with comic urgency. Early days of a hopeful state, filmed with what look like parodies of Leni Riefenstahl's techniques, are unmasked as painfully naive while Mikhalkov adds wistful commentary about the importance of God, the "life of our great and unfortunate land," the "Russian soul," the pagan influence of U.S. commerce, the pitfalls of Gorby's perestroika, and the fragility of Yeltsin's reign.

"But what was the reality of this godless empire whose shadow covered realms far beyond its border?" Mikhalkov muses. "What was it? A naive faith in the enticing but impossible dream of total equality and heaven on earth? Or the wish to be deluded and take part in the gigantic game to delude others in the name of one's own good?"

If at this point you're wondering about Anna's connection to all this, you yourself might be participating in a delusion of Mikhalkov's making. She's hiding in the wings of history sucking her thumb, fearful of her greedy father's gaze. ■

'Anna.' Through Tues/17. Red Vic, 1727 Haight, S.F. \$3-\$6. (415) 668-3994. See Rep Clock for show times.