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Agonia
(Agony)
(RUSSIAN-COLOR/B&W)

Moscow, July 28.

Sovexport release of Mosfilm production. Features entire cast. Directed by Elem Klimov. Screenplay, S. Hungin, I. Nusinob; camera (Sovcolor), L. Casashnikov; art direction, Sh. Abdussalimov, S. Voronkob. Reviewed at Moscow Film Fest (non-competing), July 21, '81. Running time, 145 MINS.

With N. Petrenko, D. Romashin, O. Hine, A. Freindlih, L. Broneboy.

Held up for six years by the Russian powers-that-be and their censors, this frenzied, frantic but controlled epic look at the two crucial years before the Russian Revolution, 1916 and early '17, its politics, decadence and especially the relationship of Rasputin and the Czar and the Empress was the only filmic event and revelation of the recent lacklustre Moscow Film Festival.

It was shown in the regular competing hall the last night of the fest and was the hardest ticket. The film effectively amalgamates black and white stock footage and scenes from early Soviet films to the color episodes of the narrative part of the film. They mesh effectively.

Early stock footage lays out a Russia with a downtrodden, poor populace still in ferment despite the bloody put down of the attempted revolution in 1905. The Czar is seen painting and is visited by a high ranking official who feels he must get rid of Rasputin, a self-styled holy man who has found power and a place in court by helping the hemophilic Prince over a crisis.

Rasputin is shown at the parties with lovely women all around, food and drink and some snuggling, but hardly an orgy as far as the film is concerned.

As prodigiously played by N. Petrenko, Rasputin seems part charlatan, lubricious monster, shrewd and canny interpreter of the corrupt political scene cleverly using the Empress as his buffer who feels he is a saint and hates everything else about Russia. She was from German royalty.

Then comes World War I. At home, the upper classes cavort in clubs, dances and even play at country life to painted backdrops as the war bogs down. The Czar takes little part, but does decide to visit the parliamentary house where he gets a standing ovation.

He is a weak man, but not averse to ordering bloody reprisals when it was necessary to put down earlier rebellions.

Famine starts and most aristocrats insist Rasputin must be sent off. At a club, the sweaty but charismatic Rasputin is enamored of a lovely woman, but her husband, an officer, beats him up. The man is arrested. The wife comes to him to help her husband but Rasputin becomes frightened and says she wants to kill him.

Finally, Rasputin is dismissed. He goes back to his farm, richly stocked after all the money he has amassed. He is insulted by others and puts on his old clothes, covers himself with mud and goes to the Czar and Empress to try to get back in their good graces. He has a fit in which he mutters the name of a town.

The Czarina notes it as one that the Czar's staff says cannot be taken. She insists he give an order for Rasputin has deemed the victory. He does so and the Russian army group used is completely wiped out.

Finally, some aristocrats kill

Rasputin. It is hard, for poison and some early bullets seem to have no effect.

Elem Klimov emerges a director of stature and strength in managing to keep the excesses of the regime and times in hand.

Many historical characters get their names on the screen. Perhaps some knowledge of Russian history at this time would help. However, it is the torrential flood of Slavic excesses and more mordant asides in the stock imagery that keeps the film alive and explosive throughout.

Perhaps not as easily accessible as other historical local films, "Agonia" should find selective audiences everywhere on its sheer visual bombast.

As to its censorship, one story had it the supreme chief disliked it for its look at Russians even if they were pre-revolutionary enemies, or the Czar was more weak than decadent.

At any rate, fests will be clamoring for it. —Mosk.

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