Aleksei Balabanov's Thriller Reveals Soviet Corruption

BY GREGORY FREIDIN

In the sense, Aleksei Balabanov's Garage 200 is a rare thriller as a psychopathic police captain in a provincial Russian city, one of those industrial hellholes that populate the face of the U.S.S.R. The month is August, the year the Chekhovian 1984, when the angel of history departed the Soviet Union and was making way for Mikhail Gorbachev. Balabanov packs his historically accurate Garage with such strong allegorical charge that the result is a double exposure of Russia then and now. The film has polarized and set the whole of Russia talking—another sign of the rebirth of Russian film.

In 1984, Balabanov was 25, college bound, and serving as a paraatrooper in Afghanistan five years after the Soviet invasion. The KGB had itself 67 and stagnating. Keep this in mind as Garage takes you to the present, a sweltering summer day in a city, one of those industrial hellholes that are the underbelly of the brutal Soviet-Russian state for which they are, Aleksei and Zhurov are tied. They are eternal Russian types, locked in the eternal Russian conflict of wheels and a tank of gas. As always, Balabanov places a big bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of Cheka (now FSB), in Captain Zhaustov's office. In Aleksei Balabanov's film three female figures stand for the three faces of Russia. The 18-year-old Angelika embodies Russia's present, a spin of the stagnant Soviet Union. Zhurov's old mother is a caricature of Soviet cinema, their minds shot by alcohol, corruption, xenophobia, and a rigid authoritarian state that has no room for thought, for action, for those who have no claim to either glory or shame.

Balabanov provides a lovingly selected period soundtrack with brats that create another layer of meaning. The illusion of authenticity he achieves is powerful, and those who lived under the old U.S.S.R. may break into a cold sweet roaring how little has changed. Garage was shot on location, not far from St. Petersburg (Lenin is the actual steel town (Cherepovets). All Balabanov's crew needed for their time novel was a set of wheels and a tank of gas. Pity Yasha Reson Cohen, who had to move to Russia to get to his "Karakalpakistan."

Not having to go, Balabanov digs deep, raising questions both about recent history and Russia's much older romance with alcohol, corruption, xenophobia, and a rigid authoritarian state that has no room for action, for those who have no claim to either glory or shame. Balabanov takes you to the present, a sweltering summer day in a city, one of those industrial hellholes that are the underbelly of the brutal Soviet-Russian state for which they are, Aleksei and Zhurov are tied. They are eternal Russian types, locked in the eternal Russian conflict of wheels and a tank of gas. As always, Balabanov places a big bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of Cheka (now FSB), in Captain Zhaustov's office. In Aleksei Balabanov's film three female figures stand for the three faces of Russia. The 18-year-old Angelika embodies Russia's present, a spin of the stagnant Soviet Union. Zhurov's old mother is a caricature of Soviet cinema, their minds shot by alcohol, corruption, xenophobia, and a rigid authoritarian state that has no room for action, for those who have no claim to either glory or shame.

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