

## THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

### 29 NOVEMBER 2000 (II:13): BURNT BY THE SUN

(*Utomlyonnye solntsem*) 1994, 134 MINUTES

**Director** Nikita Mikhalkov

**Script** Rustam Ibragimbekov and Nikita Mikhalkov

**Producers** Nikita Mikhalkov & Michel Seydoux

**Music** Eduard Artemyev

**Cinematographer** Vilen Kalyuta

**Editor** Enzo Meniconi

**Production Companies** Caméra One, Sony Pictures Classics, Studio Trite

**Oleg Menshikov**....Dimitri (Mitya)

**Nikita Mikhalkov**...Col. Sergei Petrovich Kotov

**Ingeborga Dapkunaite**....Marusia

**Nadezhda Mikhalkova**.... Nadya

**André Oumansky**....Philippe

**Vyacheslav Tikhonov**....Vsevolod

**Svetlana Kryuchkova**...Mokhava

**Vladimir Ilyin**....Kirik

NIKITA SERGEYEVICH MIKHALKOV (21 October 1945, Moscow) is the younger brother of another important Russian director, Andrei Konchalovsky. Their father wrote the lyrics of the Soviet national anthem, which is probably one reason the two got to make as many films as they did even before the Union's collapse. Mikhalkov is perhaps as famous an actor as he is a director: he has appeared in nearly 40 films, 20 of them before he directed *At Home Among Strangers* 1974, his first feature. The other films he's directed are: *I'm Coming Home* 1968, *A Quiet Day at the End of the War* 1970, *A Slave of Love* 1976, *An Unfinished Piece fo Player Piano* 1977, *Five Evenings* 1978, *Oblomov* 1980, *Family Relations* 1981, *Without Witness* 1983, *Dark Eyes* 1987, *Close to Eden* (aka *Urga*) 1992, *Anna: 6-18* 1993, and *Barber of Siberia* 1998. (You can get the Russian titles on IMDB.)

#### AN INTERVIEW WITH NIKITA MIKHALKOV

*Your film takes place over the course of one summer day in 1936. Why did you choose this period of time?*

My desire to make this film came in response to all the accusations throughout history brought upon my country, accusations made without realizing what was happening at the time. What right do we have, looking with the hindsight of the 1990's, to analyze any of the past eras and condemn them for what happened then? In 1917, the Bolsheviks condemned all that had preceded their revolution, and likewise the "New Bolsheviks" of the 1991 uprising have decided to portray anything that happened after 1917 as horrible.

With this film, I am not looking to judge an era, I am only trying to show through a tragic perspective, the charm of a simple existence: of children continuing to be born, of people loving each other, living their life's moments, and having faith that all that was happening around them was for the best. People cannot be blamed for believing, but one can blame those who misled them. How can one accuse someone of stealing his own life? These are the reasons I have tried to understand this era. I am trying to say that we have all been victims and actors of what has happened, victims of what we created.

*The first part of your film brings to mind both Chekhov and Renoir.*

I never really thought of Renoir, but I know his work very well. Of course, if one looks at a Dacha encircled by trees, illuminated in midday by a summer sun like today's, one can also evoke Renoir. I certainly had Chekhov in mind. It was as if Platonov of "An Unfinished Piece for Player Piano" lived until 1936 and was being observed by Chekhov. At the time, these characters were suffering from dissatisfaction with their lives, so in 1936, the precise price to pay was one's own life. What happened in 1936 is maybe one of the consequences of these people's behavior at the turn of the century. From speakers to thinkers, they all let these things happen. They are responsible by their apathy, their seeing life in such a cynical way, and their disregard of the sanctity of man. It all contributed to debasing our vision of the world.

*In the charm and sweetness of living in the Dacha, your characters taste a happiness illuminated by a "burnt sun."*

Yes, they all live under a "burnt sun" because they have destroyed all the suns that had illuminated the country for thousands of years. Before the Russian Revolution, God represented the law, the only law which Russians accepted, and they only seemed to follow those laws written by men of faith. After the revolution, the Bolsheviks understood how to use this religious vigilance of the Russian people. They realized they could replace the monarchy and the church with power embodied in the cult of one man, Stalin. Hence people held the socialist system in the same light as the church. How could people have constructed factories and miles of highways in two weeks? People would die on the building sites in order to construct Communism. We heard many slogans over the years, and millions of rubles were spent on the production of flags and parades, but this energy used itself up. Long after the longwinded speeches, one hundred kilometers from Moscow, the flame of belief burned out. Violence was the only alternative to keep the nation's motor running. Nobody is either innocent or guilty in my film. Apparently, Stalin was the evil genius, but he was created by man's hands. The scriptures say that man must not create idols to worship. People did not listen, and they created an idol, and they in turn became its victims. But people do not realize that they become victims because they themselves cannot imagine that they are the creators of their own destruction. In the film, Serguei Petrovitch Kotoy, the Red Army colonel and hero of the revolution, does not exude the image of one who could be accused of treason. When Stalin's political police force, the NKVD, comes to arrest him, Serguei remains very calm, expecting to resolve everything with a simple phone call to the Kremlin. But when the arresting officers turn violent, Serguei understands. This is not a tragedy of a guilty man, but the tragedy of a man blinded by the sun.

***There are instances where "a ball of fire" illuminates the screen as a sort of meteoric announcement of impending disaster.***

These are symbols of the revolution and Stalin's grand purges. At the beginning of the film, the maid reads an article in the paper dedicated to these fireballs that are hitting anything that moves, the Colonel is a strong and powerful man, a little too energetic for his own good. He starts to act differently than others, taking risks. Hence he is terminated for no apparent reason, only that he had stood out. This was truly a characteristic sign of the revolution in Russia.

***Your film seems to transcend the framework of a precise genre, "Burnt By the Sun" is at the same time, a romance, comedy and drama. It could be called a thriller, or simply a European historical work. One could even classify it as a poignant chronicle of an intimate summer afternoon, and its love story: two rival men vying for the woman they love.***

The obstacle "to love" is the universal theme. With Chekhov and Shakespeare, we find the same dramatic techniques--to love, but to not be loved; or to be loved and not to love; or forbidden love--we love each other but we cannot be together.

***Despite what is brewing, this trio appears extremely sincere in its sentiments, its troubles, its hesitations...***

It is very important that none of the three characters lie. Each one in this situation tries to tell the truth, accepting the possible risks. Dimitri tells the truth in the form of a tale making himself look like a victim. Serguei himself refuses to disclose to Maroussia that Dimitri is an agent of the NKVD. He feels that his wife, overwhelmed by the return of her first love, will leave him, but informing her about Dimitri would be unworthy of his military rank. The difference is fundamental between lying and trying to tell the truth, especially when the conditions do not allow for it. Hence one is constrained to saying and doing nothing. This is worse than lying.

***In fact this very "Russian" behavior is one of the elements of suspense in your film.***

Yes, omissions, lies, and suspicion had become instinctive thoughts and acts for Russians. This "half-truth" is one of the themes of the movie.

***The film shows that the system manipulates the emotional lives and affects the inner personality of the individual.***

Of course. However, life continues. Children are born in difficult conditions, but love still exists. When a lion and a lioness mate in a zoo, they forget that they are locked up in a cage! At this time, a man could say to his wife, "Give thanks to Comrade Stalin for the love I have for you. If he didn't exist, we would never have met!" This is very important, even the basis of the film.

***Then examining the scenario gives a new dimension to the film. The confrontation between the two rivals in love turns into a violent dispute.***

Serguei and Dimitri are opposed on a matter of principle. During the October Revolution, Dimitri chose the side of the Whites. Serguei, who had fought for the revolution and had won, tells him, "You Whites who were incapable of defending yourselves, be quiet now." Dimitri had fled to Paris where he was a pianist, then a taxi driver; he composed songs...but Dimitri doesn't mention the conditions of his return. He doesn't mention in the fairy tale that he tells little Nadia that he had agreed to do a little "job" to be allowed re-entry into the country. He thought, like Platonov, "OK, I'll agree this time, but not again. When I get home, everything will be fine." But Dimitri has gotten himself into a terrible mess...

***As the Uncle says, "Confession is the source of justice."***

Confession is the mother of justice. "In five years, you will have confessed to everything. If you do not sign, remember you have a wife and a daughter..." At that moment, of course, everyone signs. With this "confession" justice can be served and the judge starts the process. I am speaking of confession and not of repentance, which is the origin of peace and harmony in Russia.

***All your characters are confronted with choices. Being true to a spouse, or a re-found passion for a first love. Fidelity or betrayal of one's country. "We all have a choice," says Dimitri, "We can talk, can be quiet, we can stay, we can leave. We always have the choice."***

Serguei reproaches Dimitri for having left because he was scared. He thinks that there are two possible solutions and you have to choose one. In Russia it is often said "don't fear your enemy, the worst he can do is kill you. Don't fear your friend, the worst he can do is betray you. But fear indifference. Because by its silence, its tacit accord, it can kill you and betray you." Serguei doesn't impose a decision on his wife, he gives her the freedom to choose between staying with him or going off with Dimitri.

***Chekhov never wanted to get involved in politics. Do you think that an artist, a filmmaker should be a witness to his time?***

I never belonged to the party. I do not give myself ideological or political duties. For me, the love triangle between Maroussia, Serguei, and the little Nadia is the framework for the story I tell. There are two ways of telling a story, and you can have an overall view on the characters, but I prefer getting close to the intimate lives of my characters. Then the whole world is reflected in the intimacy of their story. I believe therefore that the vision is more just, more caustic, and more involving for the spectator.

Today it is very important to bear witness because the young ones do not understand. Nadia, my eight year old daughter, for example, doesn't comprehend the word "Soviet." She even had a hard time pronouncing it. It is not about bragging to them about the charms of the Soviet Union. I think the sun rises no matter what the ruling powers may be, but you have to warn, in form of the aptness of another sun...it's not about choosing what we think the best moments of our history are. You have to realize that there are historic moments, but also shames, injustices, indignations, and humiliations. You have to understand clearly that we are all responsible, that certain people among us must carry the weight of this responsibility. But it doesn't help anything to point fingers and say "this one is wrong." It is not possible for me as a Russian to say that "this is good and that is not." As Pushkin said, "That would be like trying to explain harmony by algebraic calculations." In Russia, a thief can give his shirt to a stranger. This stranger can then rob a house, but if the house catches on fire, he will do everything he can to save the sleeping baby. Good and bad are intertwined. That is the harmonious reality and paradox of Russia.

***Why did you take on the role of the Colonel Serguei Petrovitch Kotov?***

I decided to play this role for the unique reason of helping the performance of my daughter, Nadia. I thought that at my side, it would be easier for her to be natural and spontaneous, certain scenes being especially delicate on an emotional level. Nadia revealed herself to be an amazing acting partner. She can work 18 hours a day without ever complaining. Nadia had no idea of the story in advance. We played each scene without her knowing what happened in the next one.

***The whole story of the film takes place on one summer afternoon. The shooting took place over the course of 14 weeks, last summer and fall, on location around Moscow. Technically, this must have posed some major problems with keeping lighting the same.***

It was a catastrophe! We started shooting at the beginning of summer in a crippling heat. At the end of the fall, it was four degrees below zero when we shot the scene returning to the beach with my daughter...Nadia and I were running around almost naked while in front of us the continuity girl was in a fur coat and wearing gloves and boots. We also had to recreate entirely the forest for about 50 yards around the Dacha because snow had started falling. We had to stick 150,000 leaves onto the tree branches! My director of photography Vilen Kaluta is truly a lighting genius.

***The truck lost on the road seems to be a metaphor for the present situation in Russia. On a broader scope, what contemporary reading can one make of your film?***

Presently, the reform initiatives can seem to be like a "burning sun" because they are not on a nationwide scale; they are conceived with the mentality of a prefect and not the head of a state. We rejected everything without saying what could have been positive. I think that Russia must look back, rediscover what is right and good in its past and find its foundations again. It is necessary to peel away the successive layers, clean up. But "Burnt By the Sun" is not a film about nostalgia, on the contrary it turns toward the future. I want to warn the viewers instinctively by disturbing them with feeling. "Burnt By the Sun" is simply a film about life. About our life in 1936 which was both wonderful and miserable. About our life now, which could be miserable, but also magnificent, like a summer day in the sun with a light breeze blowing through the trees, and love...

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For more on the film, visit the Sony Classics site: <http://www.spe.sony.com/classics/burntbysun/burntbysun.html>...Information on the former Soviet Union can be found on the Library of Congress's [www.ibiblio.org/expo/soviet.exhibit/entrance.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/soviet.exhibit/entrance.html)...

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**Join us next week, Wednesday 6 December, for the final film in our fall 2000 series: Joan Chen's *Xiu-Xiu, the Sent-Down Girl*...**for cast and crew info on almost any film: [imdb.com/search.html](http://imdb.com/search.html) or [allmovie.com](http://allmovie.com)...for information on major American films, including detailed plot summaries: [www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org)... email Bruce Jackson: [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)...email Diane Christian: [engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu)...for the series schedule, links and updates: [www.buffalofilmseminars.com](http://www.buffalofilmseminars.com)... for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us.

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