

The Musical Comedy Films of Grigorii Aleksandrov: Laughing Matters. By Rimgaila Salys. Bristol. Intellect. 2009. 352 pp. £25. ISBN 978-1-84150-282-3.

Grigorii Aleksandrov's musical comedies were among the most popular films produced by the Soviet film industry during the Stalinist 1930s and 40s, and their cultural legacy endures in the post-Soviet present: their songs are regularly used in Russian advertisements, and the genre itself was revived by the director Valerii Todorovskii in his 2008 film *Hipsters*, which makes a number of knowing nods to Aleksandrov's films.

Building on Richard Taylor's groundbreaking work on the 1930s Soviet film industry, scholars have explored Aleksandrov's musicals from a variety of perspectives over the course of the last two decades. Rimgaila Salys's study is, however, the first book-length, English-language analysis devoted to them. As such, it is an important contribution to the existing body of critical work inspired by these films.

In each of the book's four chapters, Salys explores one of Aleksandrov's pre-war musicals, considering them in the order of their making. Thus, Chapter 1 focuses on *Happy Guys* (1934), Chapter 2 considers *Circus* (1936), Chapter 3 examines *Volga-Volga* (1938) -- famously reputed to be Iosif Stalin's all-time favourite film -- and Chapter 4 explores *The Radiant Path* (1940). Each chapter is subdivided into two sections, with the first providing an account of the production history of the film in question and the second a critical and interpretive analysis.

These analytical sections encompass a wide range of issues, including 'topicality and cultural context, narrative development, genre paradigms, comedy, formal filmic devices, the interplay of music and lyrics with narrative, and the encoding of socialist values through myth, fairy tale and folklore, and gender' (p. 4). Throughout, Salys makes good use of

secondary sources, offering a thorough and useful synthesis of existing scholarship as well as proposing a number of new insights.

The book's most valuable contribution, and its originality, is, however, located in the first section of each chapter, in which Salys chronicles 'the untold story of the making of these films' (p. 3). Drawing on an impressive range of primary sources -- memoirs, letters, articles and reviews from the contemporary film press, and archival materials, such as official studio documents recording meetings, speeches, and discussions about the films -- Salys reconstructs the films' complex production histories in meticulous detail. Her fascinating accounts trace the numerous revisions made to their different scripts, outline the composition of the songs, describe the filming process and detail the films' reception by industry officials. They also include a wealth of engaging and frequently entertaining details about the filmmakers' personal experiences, which leave the reader with a strong and vivid sense of the real people behind the creation of these films.

The book's analysis suffers slightly from its lack of a concluding chapter, and it is disappointing that Salys omits to consider the post-war musical *Spring* (1947) on the grounds that its 'song and dance numbers [...] are mostly motivated realistically' (p. 16): this later film, which was Aleksandrov's final collaboration with the composer Isaak Dunaevskii and also 'his last real success' (p. 10), has received relatively little attention from scholars. The absence of a bibliography is also regrettable, as hunting through the endnotes to locate individual references is a time-consuming and frustrating task. These observations should not, however, detract from the many merits of this full and fascinating study, which develops our knowledge and understanding of Aleksandrov's pre-war musical comedies, as well as of the socio-cultural and ideological context in which they were created, and of the complex nature of filmmaking in the Stalin era. For these reasons, this well-researched book will prove

extremely valuable to scholars and students of this period of Soviet filmmaking and to readers interested in the cultural politics of the Stalin era more broadly.

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