



***Melody for a Street Organ***  
**[Мелодия для шарманки]**

Ukraine, 2009  
Color, 153 minutes  
Russian with English subtitles  
Director: Kira Muratova  
Screenplay: Vladimir Zuev and Kira Muratova  
Cinematography: Vladimir Pankov  
Art Director: Evgenii Golubenko  
Cast: Olena Kostiuk and Roma Burlaka,  
with cameos by Zhan Daniel', Georgii Deliev, Renata Litvinova, Nina Ruslanova, Oleg Tabakov  
Producer: Oleg Kokhan  
Production: Sota Cinema Group

Stories of orphans have long been a staple of Russo-Soviet cinema, going as far back as *The Road to Life* (Nikolai Ekk, 1931), one of the first sound films made in the USSR. Orphans have returned to constitute a mini-boom in the post-Soviet period—they are featured literally in such films as *Bastards* (Aleksandr Atanes'ian, 2006) and *The Italian* (Andrei Kravchuk, 2005). If we understand the category of orphanhood to include the larger crisis of the missing or inadequate father or (much less commonly) mother, the list of examples can be extended almost without end. Some of the most vivid examples from the last decade would include *A Driver for Vera* (Pavel Chukhrai, 2004), *Russian* (Aleksandr Veledinskii, 2004), *Vanished Empire* (Karen Shakhnazarov, 2008), *Once Upon a Time in the Provinces*

(Katia Shagalova, 2008), and *The Fly* (Vladimir Kott, 2008). The parental bond is sometimes restored, sometimes replaced, sometimes abandoned, but all of these films share a faith in the power of redemption and the need for the reestablishment of the social bond between parent and child or between individual and society. Cruelty, suffering, and loneliness serve to highlight by contrast the enduring value of human compassion and the strength of the social bond.

Kira Muratova will have none of this. Her signature style, one of the most immediately recognizable in 21st-century Russian cinema, forecloses any kind of redemption based on human values or social cohesion. People in Muratova's cinematic world are unsuited for any kind of social bond. Indeed, the problem of communication is a commonplace in all of Muratova's films and *Melody for a Street Organ* gives us ample opportunity to experience both the flood of verbiage emanating from the film's characters and the utter lack of any real communication between or among them. It would be almost a relief for the viewer if Alena and Nikita, the two small heroes of the film, were simply treated with cruelty. Their appeals to the world around them are most often met not with rejection, but with a maddening refusal to acknowledge their needs at all. By extension, the film is also very unwilling to acknowledge the viewers' need to make sense of the film's meaning. It tantalizes us with details that suggest a social or symbolic message. The fact that the children have a common mother but two different fathers cries out for a symbolic interpretation, but the film refuses to give us enough information with which to construct such a meaning. There is no lost identity to be constructed, no place in society (or any kind of symbolic network) to be taken up.

As with any film by Muratova, the central question is the director's attitude toward humanity itself—what is often held to be her misanthropic view of the human condition. The camera work itself lays bare Muratova's approach to the human material of

her film. In one of the visually most striking shots of the work, we see the waiting room of a train station from above: the sleeping passengers are sprawled about the furniture as so many human dolls, twisted into bizarre contortions. Humanity is indeed simply material for Muratova, props that she sets into bizarre positions and inscrutable configurations. She denies her puppets any real human dignity and puts them on display as if to force us, the viewers, to contemplate how little dignity humanity itself deserves. Although the film is beautifully shot and constructed, it denies us any real visual pleasure as the camera compulsively dwells upon the very scenes from which we automatically and naturally wish to look away. Psychotic religious seers, street children turned gangsters, the rotting dregs of society all become fascinating objects of contemplation for Vladimir Pankov's camera eye.

And yet, as Nancy Condee notes in her review of the film, it must also be granted that Alena and Nikita are themselves "vulnerable and wholly intelligible children" (*Kinokultura* 26). Although the film does not cohere as a search for love, or shelter, or family, the viewer is called to feel sympathy for them as victims of their circumstances. While the children are presented in the opening shots of the film as just two more ridiculous playthings in Muratova's cruel puppet theater, they emerge as figures for whom we feel pity. It is this that distinguishes this work from many of Muratova's earlier films. Although *Melody for a Street Organ* is as merciless as any of her films in its disdain for human dignity, it does not ridicule us, the viewers, for our feelings of human compassion.

The film is also notable for the veritable showcase of acting talent that Muratova has gathered into her films over the years. Oleg Tabakov, Renata Litvinova, and Nina Ruslanova are just three of the many well-known actors with whom Muratova has worked over the years and who give short but memorable performances in this film. *Melody for a Street Organ* was awarded the top prize

for Best Film at the 2009 Kinoshock festival of films from the post-Soviet region, as well as the FIPRESCI prize at the 31st Moscow International Film Festival.

**Kira Muratova (1934- ):**

Muratova was born in Soroca (in present-day Moldova) and completed her studies at the State Institute for Filmmaking (VGIK) in Moscow in 1962. After directing two films together with her husband, Aleksandr Muratov, she began her solo directing career in 1967 with *Brief Encounters*, the first of her many films to be banned and/or severely censored by the authorities during the Soviet era. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Muratova has emerged as one of the most important cinematic *auteurs* of her age. Her late-perestroika film *Asthenic Syndrome* marked the peak of so-called *chernukha* filmmaking, and her post-Soviet work continues to challenge both ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. Despite her long association with Odessa Film Studios, all of her films to date have been in Russian.

**Filmography:**

- 2009 *Melody for a Street Organ*
- 2007 *Two in One*
- 2004 *The Tuner*
- 2002 *Chekhovian Motifs*
- 2001 *Minor People*
- 1999 *Letter to America*
- 1997 *Three Stories*
- 1994 *Passions*
- 1992 *The Sentimental Policeman*
- 1989 *Asthenic Syndrome*
- 1987 *A Change of Fortune*
- 1983 *Among the Grey Stones*
- 1978 *Getting to Know the Big Wide World*
- 1971 *The Long Farewell*
- 1967 *Brief Encounters*

Gerald McCausland