

Film festival offers glimpses of Russia

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By Barry Paris / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Russian Film Symposium marches on to its own unique beat, heedless of Hollywood, with two more stunningly original films, tonight and Saturday night at the Melwood Screening Room in Oakland:

In **“Angels of Revolution”** (★★★★☆), the Stalinist government summons ace cultural commissar Polina (Darya Yekamasova) to assemble a dream team of the best and brightest avant-garde minds for a mission in the Kazym area of Siberia’s tundra: to “civilize” and develop a proper socialist culture for the Khanty and Nenets tribes there.

Trouble is, the best and brightest indigenous minds resist. Interaction with outsiders is forbidden by their pagan goddess, who lives on an island surrounded by sacred cats.

Maverick director Aleksei Fedorchenko takes a dark chapter in Soviet history — the forced collectivization of the Kazym in the 1930s — to its brutal conclusion in a highly unconventional way: through a cornucopia of visual and verbal juxtapositions, natural and surreal imagery, and slices of the reindeer herders’ everyday life. Playful film references abound. So do theatrical stagings and telltale puppet shows.

How avant-garde is Polina’s dream team? One is a composer writing a cantata for whistles and steam engines. Another is making propaganda movies with flying dogs. A third is a futurist sculptor chiseling the world’s first monumental statue of Judas Iscariot. Others will demonstrate constructivist coffins and a collective crematorium.

Violence will be perpetrated by — and upon — them. They can’t understand the arrest and execution of friends back at the State Latvian Theatre in Moscow, nor why a Kazym boy weeps over a dead owl he calls “my sister,” before tossing the bird’s limp corpse away.

Mr. Fedorchenko’s angels masterfully — if elliptically — nail the revolution’s paradox:

Utopian dreams can only transform Kazym if Kazym's inhabitants are willing to be transformed.

Suffice to say, they are not.



“The Land of Oz” (★★★★☆) It's Dec. 31, that most magical winter holiday in Russia, when our heroine finds herself in a strange big city. But this isn't your grandma's (or Frank Baum's) Oz. It's bad-boy director Vasilii Sigarev's land, where his Dorothy is Lena from Tartarstan. She's not seeking an imperial capital but a prosaic street in a nondescript neighborhood in the grimy Urals city of Ekaterinburg, where she somehow previously found a job in a kiosk shop on Torforezy Street. Her skills seem to be somewhere between limited and nonexistent, but never mind — she got the job. All she has to do is get to it, but her recurring question, “Do you know where Torforezy Street is?” fails to produce a correct answer. She is continually foiled by the kindness and unkindness of strangers, including a Tin Woodsman-type named Roman and a horny Internet-addicted poet who's more cowardly than Bert Lahr's Lion.

Her Toto is Roman's dog Dyudya, who attaches himself to her after Roman sets off a huge firework called “The Hiroshima” on his own head, and is presumed dead.

The Wizard, of sorts, is the long-suffering kiosk owner, who awaits Lena's delayed arrival while enduring the kinky scatological harangues of a dangerously deviant friend. Russian censors are very prudish about obscenities, but the dialogue here is chock full of hilariously vulgar language. Hapless Lena (Yana Troyanova) keeps telling people, “My sister broke her coccyx” — with predictably crude responses. Her personality is on the comatose side. She prefers the doggie to the dubious male piggies she encounters.

The name of this land, in Russian, can be read two ways: (1) as “OZ” and (2) as the number “zero three” — the equivalent of our 911 emergency. That double meaning well suits a place where absurdity has replaced Bolshevik (and all other) logic.

But what great nighttime ice-and-light shows it contains, with psychedelic cinematography to match — a Felliniesque bombardment of sense and the senses! No moral or political messages. Not optimistic, or pessimistic, either. The citizens of this odd Oz are amazingly resilient, even when frostbitten. Lena just might click her snowshoes and find it someplace like home.

(In Russian with English subtitles. Both films are R in nature for language and violent images. Screenings are at 7:30 p.m., tonight and Saturday, in the Pittsburgh Film Makers' Melwood Screening Room, 477 Melwood Ave., Oakland. For more details and the full schedule of films, visit www.rusfilm.pitt.edu.)

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