

Russian Film Festival opens with "Viy"

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By Barry Paris / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

If you were a 19th-century Ukrainian peasant in a dark foggy forest, the last thing you'd want to do is get in touch with your roots — for fear of disturbing the “Viy.”

'Viy'



Ratings explained

Rating:R in nature for frightening images

Nikolai Gogol's most terrifying tale concerns that hideous title character who, when summoned by a demonic force, rises up from underground in a gigantic tangle of tree roots and branches. His most horrific trait: eyebrows that descend to his feet, raised only with the aid of two slave-demons and a pitchfork.

Make eye contact with him, and you die.

Viy's delayed entrances are worth waiting for in director Oleg Stepchenko's eye-popping film, opening the 18th annual Russian Film Symposium tonight. Eight years in the making (and 128 minutes in the running), it broke box-office records for Russia last year and was (badly) retitled “Forbidden Empire” for the U.S.

Mr. Stepchenko's screenplay loosely retains Gogol's 1835 plot, with plenty of liberties: Witchcraft seems to be involved in the death of a rich merchant's beautiful daughter. Nearby, some traveling seminarians ask an old woman at a spooky farmhouse to put them up for the night. She casts a spell on one of them, Khoma, climbs on his back and rides him around the countryside to rival Harry Potter on his broomstick.

The dead girl's father forces Khoma to stand vigil over her body and pray for her soul for three nights, through all manner of curses. Khoma draws a sacred chalk circle around himself for sacred protection.

Mr. Stepchenko expands and juices up the horror story with a “Tom Jones” element in the form of roguish Jonathan Green (British star Jason Flemyng), English cartographer, who sets out across Ukraine to “redraw the boundaries of the world” in a high-tech carriage. This unabashed filching of Bram Stoker's Jonathan Harker in “Dracula” provides for many foul demons, corrupt priests and dangerous Cossacks to be outwitted.

“Viy’s” fabulous production design, gorgeous photography and state-of-the-art CGI effects are stunning from the first water-sprite scene. Mr. Stepchenko’s extravagant use of CGI is better than Hollywood’s, because it’s in service to the story. Khoma is the Exorcist ahead of his time. Max von Sydow had it easy by comparison.

In vodka veritas. Booze is a rampant catalyst. Hitchcockian birds fly out of the sepulcher, a coffin sails into the air and turns into a battering ram against the church doors. When the Viy is finally summoned, it’s to everyone’s chagrin and to a deliciously Gogolian — or Edgar Allan Poetic — ending.

(In Russian with English subtitles. Screening tonight only at 7:30 p.m. in the Pittsburgh Film Makers’ Melwood Screening Room, 477 Melwood Ave., Oakland. Here’s a full schedule for the [Russian film festival](#) that runs through Saturday.

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