

Venice Film Success Tells of Old Rituals, Love

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Applauded by director Quentin Tarantino at the Venice Film Festival, “Ovsyanki” is a mythic tale of love and death.

ST. PETERSBURG — The heroine of Alexei Fedorchenko’s new movie “Ovsyanki,” or “Silent Souls,” — a tender, subservient woman from provincial Russia — is a wordless role. Yulia Aug’s character, Tatyana, does not utter a single word throughout the 75-minute movie, which was an instant success at the Venice Film Festival earlier this year, where it won an International Federation of Film Critics’ prize.

The film tells the story of a funeral but in fact depicts a man’s grief over the loss of his beloved wife. At the start of the film, Miron Alexeyevich (Yury Tsurilo), director of a paper factory in the tiny town of Neya in central Russia, discovers that his wife, Tatyana, has died during the night. He asks his friend Aist (Igor Sergeyevev), who works as a photographer at the factory, to help him with the preparations for her funeral. Together, they wash Tanya’s body, wrap her in a woolen blanket and drive to the banks of the Oka River, where the couple once enjoyed their

honeymoon, and where they now burn Tanya's body.

The cause of death of the middle-aged woman is never disclosed and is apparently not essential to the plot. Fedorchenko's film is not a thriller or suspense drama. It is showing at cinemas with the subtitle "erotic drama," though it offers barely any graphic sexual episodes.

The erotic element is rendered mostly verbally, and in an eerie way, as Miron recounts his adventurous love life with Aist as he drives to the funeral.

"Tanya was very obedient; all her three holes were usable, and it was me who taught her everything," the man recalls with sadness as he transports his deceased wife's body in the back of his car.

While Miron's passion for his wife is discussed and illustrated sparsely throughout the movie, Tanya's feelings for him are mentioned only once — in passing and in a disturbing way. "Some people were saying that Tanya never really loved him, but Miron would not talk about it," Aist thinks to himself as he listens to Miron's lament. In the film, Tanya is alive only as a memory, when Miron relives various episodes from their past in his mind's eye. And even in the scenes when she is alive, she does not talk. The woman simply obeys her husband's wishes.

In an interview after the St. Petersburg premiere of the film, Aug delivered a surprising statement: that the issue of Tanya's feelings for her husband are a secondary issue, and not simply because by the start of the movie the heroine has already been dead for several hours.

"It is no accident that Tanya remains speechless in the film," Aug said. "In an earlier version of the script she had a speaking role, and there were dialogue scenes for her. But the thing is that any dialogue would make her a real character, which is what we sought to avoid. Any speech would have both made her real and killed the message. This woman is surreal, and she is ageless, eternal. ... At one point, people might begin to wonder whether the woman was in fact nothing more than Miron's dream."

The film, based on Aist Sergeyev's novel, has a substantial ethnographic element to it, skillfully blending an array of rituals and legends of the Merya people, a Finno-Ugric race that lived in central Russia. Aist is of Merya descent in the film.

It is remarkable that wherever the film has played, from Europe to the Middle East, many spectators tend to see it as a universal story. A Catalan cameraman who saw the film in Venice told the crew that he felt the story was really about Catalan people, Fedorchenko recalled.

"Even in Abu Dhabi, most members of the audiences found the subject very touching," Aug said. "There were a dozen or so religious people who left during the erotic scenes, but they left quietly, and it was not a demonstration of protest."

After the screening in Venice, renowned filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, chairman of the jury, gave the movie a standing ovation and praised the film. "This is a truly poetic work, and all three actors in the main roles are truly tireless," Tarantino told reporters in Venice.

Actor Igor Sergeyev said that for him, the film's most precious element was the sense of

admiration for a beloved woman that “Ovsyanki” radiates. “In our country, we seem to have totally lost this culture of admiring our loved ones’ bodies,” he said. “Many people tend to find it shameful, perverted or, at the very least, embarrassing. This film shows what sex can become when it is about love.”

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