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Nastassja Kinski on Film, Polanski, Love

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Kinski shot to fame in 1979 after starring in Roman Polanski's "Tess."

ST. PETERSBURG — Actress Nastassja Kinski can be seen on the big screen Friday in "Maria's Lovers," the 1983 film by Andrei Konchalovsky about a soldier returning home from war to his unfaithful sweetheart. It is being shown as part of a retrospective to the director.

Kinski, who has also worked with directors Roman Polanski and Wim Wenders in a long, distinguished career, spoke with The Moscow Times on recent a visit to the St. Petersburg.

Your career is closely connected with Russia and Russian filmmakers. How emotional was this visit to St. Petersburg for you?

I am very moved and touched. It has been a while since I made my last movie. At the opening press conference I almost felt dizzy in front of so many cameras.

Was it any better in the evening on the red carpet?

Of course! It was a totally different atmosphere. I physically sensed the warmth of the public,

the people who greeted me. Naturally, this visit to St. Petersburg brought back so many precious memories. Nearly 20 years ago, the Russian director Andrei Eshpai was filming Dostoevsky's "Insulted and Injured" here, and I played Natasha. It was an incredible emotional drain and huge challenge because Dostoevsky is one of the deepest novelists in the history of literature, and the demands of the prose itself were enormous.

Andrei Konchalovsky's film "Maria's Lovers," where you played the central female character became one of your best films. What makes it special for you?

Yes, "Maria's Lovers" is indeed a very special movie. It carries a message that is very close to my heart and my own values. The message there is that war claims people's lives not only in the direct physical sense, when people die from bombings, killings, wounds; it destroys them from within, burns them out. People's souls die as well; they become filled with sorrow, revenge, mourning, painful memories. Love is the only force, the only source of energy that brings hope and gives one the strength to survive. Love fills the future with meaning.

Would you call Konchalovsky a friend of yours?

Yes, indeed. We haven't spoken in ages and haven't seen each other for a long time, but for true friends, it doesn't really matter. If it is genuine, it won't go anywhere, won't vanish, won't fade.

What makes you and Konchalovsky so close?

I always admired his capacity for compassion and understanding. When I was in my early 20s, he helped me understand something very important about life. We cannot always be perfect, and we should not try to, Andrei told me. Everyone has the right to make mistakes, and we need to learn to forgive ourselves. However, and most importantly, one must remember about the moment of truth — when your every word, every gesture carries a huge meaning; when it is crucial that you do not lie, do not ignore one's plight, do not pretend that something does not concern you. A moment of truth, a sort of situation that puts a human being through a tough test usually happens most unexpectedly, at the worst possible time, when we are exhausted, demotivated, preoccupied ... and here is a situation when you need to make a choice and show whether or not you have a heart.

You gained international fame after playing Tess in Roman Polanski's take on the Thomas Hardy novel. What did you appreciate about working with Polanski?

Roman took months to prepare me for the role of Tess. We read together a lot, traveled to England. What was especially precious about Polanski is that he became the first director who gave me respect as an actress. It meant the world to me. It was through working with him that I developed a taste for the finer things in life. I have learned to identify a fake quickly. He helped me with a sort of navigation in life, he taught me what is best in the world of filmmaking, who the best actors, actresses and directors are. Together we watched "Gone With the Wind" with the fabulous Vivien Leigh. I really enjoyed talking with Polanski about life. We would talk about his youth in Poland, his student years, his first experiments in filmmaking. These recollections are very dear to me.

What do you respect yourself for?

I never give up. There have been serious losses, disappointments and failures in my life, but every time I had the strength to get up and carry on. And I do not like to blame the past. Everyone has a past. It's not an excuse to allow your life to go straight into the waste bin. If you do not sober up, your drama will win you over and eat you from within.

What was this disappointment that was such a catastrophe?

There is a wise old fable about two brothers who grew up in a terrible family with an alcoholic father, a lot of violence at home, and a mother who did not care at all. One of the brothers grew up and became a criminal, a brutal beast, worse than his father. The other one, on the contrary, became an honest and successful self-made man. Then people asked each of them how they managed to become what they had become. And then these very different brothers gave an absolutely identical answer. They said: You know what my family was like; did I really have a choice? The point of this story is that there is always a choice and several ways to go, no matter the starting point.

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