The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Office Affairs and Chit-Chat Around the Russian Water Cooler

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April 08, 2016



Shura (R) — a socially active woman from a legendary Sluzhebny Roman (Office Affair) movie — weighs down her timid coworker Novoseltsev with a massive bronze statue.

Облагора́живать: to ennoble



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Imagine that you are a foreigner who has been studying English. You've mastered most of the grammar — except those pesky articles and absurd tenses — and your listening comprehension is pretty good. So you go to the U.S. and meet someone in a coffee shop, who after a nice chat says: "This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." And laughs. There you stand, wondering if you've been insulted, or didn't understand, or said something wrong.

That's a long way of saying: pop culture counts when you're learning a language, even if it's a movie made a gazillion years ago. Not only will you learn a lot about a culture's values, you'll get the jokes around the office water cooler.

And speaking of the water cooler, run to your computer and download — legally, of course — one of the world's greatest movies about the workplace: Служебный Роман (Office Affair). Made by director Eldar Ryazanov in 1977, it is, on the one hand, an old-fashioned Cinderella story about an all-business company director called наша мымра (our frump) by her underlings who is transformed by love.

But like all Ryazanov movies, this one rises above its simple story line by its loving but clear-eyed portrayal of late-Soviet life and people. Here the workplace is a shopping center, where employees sell each other дефицитные товары (goods in short supply) and where the trade union rep is not a noble figure fighting for the workers, but an insufferable busybody: А это Шура — симпатичная, но, к сожалению, активная. Когда-то её выдвинули на общественную работу и с тех пор никак не могут задвинуть обратно. (This is Shura — personable but, unfortunately, very active. Once upon a time we pushed her into social activism and ever since we haven't been able to push her out of it.)

There is plenty of wisdom in the film about work in general, like this assertion that I'm sure is shared by everyone reading this: Лично я хожу на службу только потому, что она меня облагораживает (Personally I go to work only because it ennobles me.) And then the obsession with reports and measuring progress that young managers think they invented turns out to have been practiced decades ago, and even in a socialist system: Если бы не было статистики, мы бы даже не подозревали о том, как хорошо мы работаем. (If it weren't for statistics we wouldn't have any idea how well we're working.)

We also know the bosses who need to take some time out of the office, as evidenced by this short dialog: — Представляете, Бубликов умер! — Как умер, почему умер, я не давала такого распоряже ... ("Can you believe it — Bublikov died!" "What do you mean, he died? Why'd he die? I didn't tell him ...)

And we also know the endless passing of the hat for fellow employees. When one employee is asked to chip in for a wreath for the unfortunate Bublikov's funeral, he responds: Ну да, если сегодня ещё кто-нибудь умрёт или родится, я останусь без обеда (Right, and if anyone else dies or is born today, I'm going to go without lunch.)

And finally, just when you're tired of being pushed around by your boss, remember: It could be worse. — Я уже подписала приказ о вашем назначении начальником отдела. — За что? Что я вам такого сделал плохого? ("I just signed an order naming you department head." "For what? What did I do to you to deserve that?")

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