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Russia's Holocaust Drama 'Paradise' Opens Across the Country

By Andrei Muchnik

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Olga (Yuliya Vysotskaya) and Jules (Philippe Duquesne) **The Walt Disney Company CIS LLC**

"Paradise (Rai)," the latest movie by one of the leading luminaries of Russian cinema, Andrei Konchalovsky, opened at theaters across Russia last week. This holocaust-themed movie coincided with the Week of Remembrance, a relatively new tradition in Russia that started in 2015 to commemorate the liberation of Auschwitz.

"Paradise" received a Silver Lion award at the Venice Film Festival last year and was short listed for best foreign language film for 2017's Oscars. It was snubbed in the final selection of nominees. The movie focuses on three characters whose lives become intertwined by the events of World War 2. One is Olga, a Russian princess and a member of the French Resistance, played by the director's wife Yuliya Vysotskaya, another is Jules, a police officer working under the Vichy government (a brilliantly cast Philippe Duquesne) and Helmut, an SS officer of some repute, played by newcomer Christian Clauss.

Approaching the age of 80, Andrei Konchalovsky took a very different approach to filmmaking with 2014's "The Postman's White Nights." It heralded a return from the realms of the fantastical, exemplified by his award-winning TV series “The Odyssey,” to more serious human dramas.

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“The Postman's White Nights,” a rather introspective film with some documentary elements taking part in a village in Russia's North. The film also won a Silver Lion, but Konchalovsky, known for his criticism of Hollywood, decided not to take part in the race for an Oscar nomination.

“Paradise” also uses documentary, or rather mockumentary, elements. It was filmed in black-and-white and its main narrative is interspersed both with flashbacks and scenes of the three main characters sitting in what feels like solitary confinement, yet turns out to be something entirely different. In these scenes each character speaks his or her own language, so you can hear Russian, as well as German and French, spoken throughout the film.

Konchalovsky takes a very clean approach to the holocaust: there's almost no blood on the screen, and we see most of the concentration camp's victims only on photographs. At the same time, Helmut's meeting with Heinrich Himmler is so surreal that it wouldn't be out of place in the popular alternative history sci-fi series "The Man in the High Castle."

“Paradise” is a film about each character's version of paradise and how their concept of it changes throughout the course of their lives. You can watch it with English subtitles at either Pioner Cinema or the 35 mm movie theater. Just remember that Konchalovsky, an avid user of Facebook, asked his viewers not to drink Coke or eat pop corn while watching the movie.

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