

# See and Celebrate Mikhail Bulgakov's 'Heart of a Dog'

**See the film and tour Bulgakov's Moscow**

By [Anna Dolgova](#)

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A room in the Bulgakov Museum with the real Prof. Preobrazhensky's desk. **I. Pushkin / Bulgakov Museum**

This year will mark 30 years since the release of the Soviet cult film “Heart of a Dog” directed by Vladimir Bortko. This film is the most famous adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's story of the same name.

The premiere of the film took place in 1988, exactly one year after the publication of the novel in the Soviet Union; Bulgakov wrote it in 1925 but was never able to publish it.

In this story, Prof. Preobrazhensky (Prof. “Transformation”), a brilliant surgeon tolerated by the young Soviet regime despite his ardent opposition to Bolshevism, takes in a stray dog and names him Sharik (“Little Ball”). After fattening him up, he implants in Sharik the pituitary

gland and testicles of a recently murdered violent, alcoholic thief. Sharik slowly becomes transformed into the “new Soviet man” — crude, violent, and ruled by his base instincts. Sharik — now Sharikov — goes out into the world and gets a job catching and strangling stray cats and eventually denounces the professor and his assistant to the secret police. Another operation is quickly done, and Sharikov becomes Sharik once again.

Unlike the book with the same name, the film was not only based on Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel “Heart of a Dog,” but also on his other works. A satire on a newly existing communist state and Soviet man, “Heart of a Dog” conveys all the inconsistencies that affected society after the emergence of a new political regime in the 1920s.

“Heart of a Dog” was awarded many prizes, including the Golden Screen prize at the International Film Festival in Warsaw and the Grand Prix at the international festivals of television films in Dushanbe and Perugia. In 1990 Vladimir Bortko and Yevgeny Yevstigneyev, who performed the role of Professor Preobrazhensky, became laureates of the Vasiliev Brothers State Prize.

Yekaterina Mtzturidze, press secretary of Roskino (State Cinema), told The Moscow Times that the film is rightly considered one of the greatest masterpieces of Soviet cinema, particularly for the style of the production — filmed in sepia — and the extraordinary performances of all the actors, but especially Yevstigneyev, Boris Plotnikov as Dr. Bormental, and Vladimir Tolokonnikov as Sharikov. Mtzturidze said that the acting of Yevstigneyev and Vladimir Tolokonnikov, whom Bortko approved after a long casting call with many possible actors for the part, is one of the best in the history of Soviet cinema.

### **The real Preobrazhensky and other Sharikovs**

The events of the novel unfold at 24 Prechistenka Ulitsa in Moscow in December 1924. At that time, Bulgakov’s uncle, Nikolai Pokrovsky, lived at that address with his dog. It is said that Bulgakov’s uncle was a prototype of professor Preobrazhensky. Petr Mansilla-Cruz, director of the Bulgakov Museum, described Pokrovsky to The Moscow Times. He was a “successful doctor and a private practice, but also a gracious man, a representative of the Moscow intelligentsia.” His desk has been preserved in the room where his famous nephew lived.

Mansilla-Cruz said that Sharikov can be portrayed more positively than he is in Bortko’s film. For example, in the Italian version of “Heart of a Dog” directed by Alberto Lattuada, all the characters are completely different. For the creators of “Cuore di Cane,” Professor Preobrazhensky is a negative character and Sharikov is a positive and cheerful character. Sharikov can be interpreted as a victim of a rather brutal experiment — a victim who has no voice or ability to influence what is happening.

Mansilla-Cruz said that, “It’s fun to see other interpretations of Bulgakov’s story. If you compare the two films, Soviet and Italian, you’ll how differently people read the text and how many different meanings and possibilities of style it contains.”

### **Legacy of a masterpiece**

Like the book, the film is complex, multifaceted and does not give an unambiguous answer to the question of what good and evil are. Mansilla-Cruz said that, “there is no short and simple

moral at the end. Bulgakov created these characters not to put one on top of the other, or to call one bad and the other good. He had other aims.”

Even though the film premiered in 1988 during the era of perestroika and glasnost, when all of the Soviet period was being questioned, it is still of interest today — and not only in Russia. Yekaterina Mtzturidze said she thought “Heart of a Dog” would be always of great interest in all other communist or post-communist countries. But it is also universal tale of the dangers of human experiments.

You can see the film with English subtitles [here](#).

### **See it in person**

To learn more about Mikhail Bulgakov and his Moscow — especially the Moscow of his masterpiece, “The Master and Margarita,” join The Moscow Times Clubs walking tour this Friday evening at 7 p.m.

The group will walk around the Patriarch Ponds’ neighborhood, where the first scenes of “The Master and Margarita” take place. You’ll stroll around one of Moscow’s prettiest — and now priciest — neighborhoods with a guide who will not only tell you where Voland sat on a park bench and where Berlioz lost his head, but also about what the area was like in the 1920s when Bulgakov lived here.

The tour will end at “The Bad Flat” (10 Bolshaya Sadovaya Ulitsa, Apartment # 50) where Bulgakov lived and worked, and where there is now a museum.

The tour, which includes tickets to the museum and drinks, is 1200 rubles per person.

And yes: Begemot, the Cat Who Was Kidnapped, will be available for adoration.

For more information and registration, go to The Moscow Times Clubs [site](#).

**Related article:** ['Begemot' Cat Abducted in Central Moscow's Bulgakov House](#)

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