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Russian Cinema in 2023: New Names, Powerful Performances and Banned Films

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Khudozhestvenny Cinema in Moscow. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

The general view this year in Russia is that there are no good films. But Russian film critic Larisa Malykova does not agree. "That's what people say when they don't go to movie theaters and don't know about new films. And then good films often have problems with distribution, so people can't see them. The year 2023 followed the very difficult year when European and American film companies left Russia," she told The Moscow Times. "But filmmaking is a long process, and today we are seeing films that were started about two years ago. So I can't say anything about global changes yet."

Perhaps it's impossible to see all the films released this year, but here are four trends we spotted and recommendations for films that might be seen on online platforms.

The year of fairy tales

Malykova has noted that directors became interested in shooting more fairy tales as a form of escapism and a chance to talk about some issues safely.

“Directors are shooting about 30 fairy tales. The New Year’s holidays will be fabulous. For example, we can watch new versions of the Soviet films ‘The Bremen Town Musicians’ (Bremenskie Musykanty) and ‘The Adventures of Buratino’,” she said.

Cinema expert Vsevolod Korshunov analyzed box office receipts and told The Moscow Times that, “In 2023, Russian audiences, as before, prefer escapist films that take them away from reality into a fairy tale from childhood or into outer space. So the film 'The Wish of the Fairy Fish' directed by Alexander Voitinsky, collected more than one billion rubles in ten days and was seen by 8.5 million viewers,” he said.

“The Wish of the Fairy Fish” is an adaptation of a traditional Russian fairy tale about a boy named Emelya who saves a magical pike that grants wishes. Emelya wastes the first two wishes and only has one left, which he wants to use when he falls in love with a princess. But nothing is ever simple, even in a fairy tale.

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Exploring difficult themes through fantasy

Malykova says that 2023 began with the almost unnoticed film “Bullfinch” (Snegir) directed by Boris Khlebnikov. It is not strictly a fantasy; it is a disaster film, a free adaptation of Georgy Vladimov's novel “Three Minutes of Silence.”

In the center of the story is an old fishing ship called "Bullfinch" that plows the sea in search of a rich catch of fish. Two students graduating from the naval college are on the ship for practical training and see that reality is very different from what they imagined. “It is about generational conflicts and an archaic society that devours its children,” Malykova said. The film opened the 45th Moscow International Film Festival (MIFF). You can watch it here.

Malykova also noted the film “Year of Birth” directed by Mikhail Mestetsky. It is a tragicomedy with aspects of fantasy. The film is about a dreamer who wants to organize the biggest musical festival in his town. “With a bit of fantasy, we can remember the year 1990 and the years that seemed romantic,” Malykova said. “'Year of Birth' is a story about growing up, believing in miracles, and pursuing a dream.

“There is a paradoxical situation with one of the most ambitious films of the year, ‘Fairy Tale’ directed by Alexander Sokurov,” film critic Vsevolod Korshunov told The Moscow Times. The film follows into purgatory Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, and Winston Churchill and listens to their conversations, as well as conversations with Jesus and Napoleon. Korshunov said that, “although it had its world premiere in August 2022 at the 75th Locarno Film Festival and was scheduled to be screened at the Moscow Karo.Art Film Festival on October 2023, it was denied a screening license by the Russian Culture Ministry. However, more than 1.3 million people have seen it. I think this is the most important film of the year.

The director explores the nature and psychology of power. It is a strange and terrible tale about rulers, masses and the monstrous lack of communication between them."

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Women directors

"Most *films d'auteur* are shot by women [in Russia] — Natalia Meshchaninova, Ilya Malakhova, Svetlana Samoshina, Oksana Bychkova, Anna Kuznetsova, and others. One of the best of these films of this year is, I think, 'One Little Night-Time Secret' directed by Natalia Meshchaninova. It is the story about violence in a family told in an original way. This is a very modern film in every way, which had its premiere at the 52nd International Film Festival Rotterdam," Malykova told The Moscow Times.

The film tells the story of Mira, who is 14 years old and lives with her mother, little sister, and stepfather. She also lives with a secret. At her first New Year's party, Mira gets to know a group of older kids, falls in love, but can't forget her problems.

Malykova also noted the film "Vacation" directed by Anna Kuznetsova, which is about the conflict of generations. The actress Daria Savelieva played the lead role. "In my opinion she's the actress of the year," Malykova said.

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The rise of the film industry in Yakutia

In September 2023, the film "Ayta," an award-winning thriller by Yakut director Stepan Burnashev, was banned in Russia. Russia's Culture Ministry revoked the movie's distribution license. The official reason was "destructive information that contradicts the principles of the unity of the peoples of Russia." In spite of this, it has become the highest-grossing film ever in the Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

"Ayta" tells the story of a standoff between indigenous residents of a Yakut village and an ethnic Russian policeman wrongfully accused of raping and killing a local teen girl. "They criticize it as xenophobic, but the film is about struggling against xenophobia," Malykova said.

Malykova said she is confident that Yakut films will develop in spite of the problems; they are absolutely original and tell about people and topics not seen in other films. But they need to be shown at various festivals around the world, and 2022 was a difficult year in their development. "The directors are trying to change the situation, but without any success," Malykova said.

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