

Autumn Marathon

GEORGI DANELIYA

1979

"I am not talented. I simply translate talented writers". These are the words of Andrei Buzykin, a hapless man engaged in one of screen history's least sexy affairs. Andrei is a translator and literature professor. He lives in one of the world's most romanticised cities, and yet his life is a desperate and often futile shuffle through the streets as he attempts to go between his wife and his mistress before the famous bridges of St Petersburg, or Leningrad as it was called, are raised every night.

Georgi Daneliya's film is, very accurately, described as a sad comedy. There is a sense of melancholy and nostalgia that pervades: from the gorgeous blues and yellows of Leningrad on film to the juxtaposition of the city's regal grandeur with Andrei's personal entrapment. In fact, the city seems to conspire against him with its bridges and strict bureaucracy.

Despite all of the stunning architecture around Andrei, the film is often shot in and mid range, or a close up. We get flashes of the beauty that surrounds, but aptly we only get it from a limited and short range perspective. This mirrors Andrei's life perfectly, he is a man with no foresight and no scope. He merely jumps from one uncomfortable situation into the next. His wife is understandably terse and offended by his badly concealed affair. She treats him with utmost disdain, not that anyone could judge her for this. When he wakes her to let her know she's going running she snappily replies, 'Great, I could have slept another hour.' His mistress, Alla, offers neither romance or passion. A viewer doesn't get the impression that they are truly in love. She spends her time making demands of him that he openly has no desire to meet- that is leaving his wife and marrying her. Whenever they do spend time together, it is largely domestic. He looks after her when she's ill and helps her around her apartment. What she really wants is a husband, and what he really wants is something fresh and new, a chance at happiness again. What he has achieved is a situation that looks a lot like his marriage, but for some reason he is intent on keeping both farcical situations afloat. Even when he leaves his place of work, with a desk piling up with professional obligations and family commitments to attend to; he finds Alla in the street, ready to argue with him.

However, here in lies the genius of Autumn Marathon. As a viewer it's nearly impossible to hate Andrei, and not just because he's one of those people that are likeable no matter what they do. His affliction is simply too human. This is not to say that there are not moments that induce raucous belly laughter; the aary characters in Autumn Marathon are strokes of comic genius. Bill, the Danish professor, is an absolute joy to behold. Anyone who has learnt a language as an adult can delight in this presentation of the ludicrous naivety and childlike wonder experiencing a new culture induces. Bill is a comical insertion at the dinner table, misunderstanding the passive aggressive comments that fly between husband and wife and constantly asking for translations of new words. Sensible Bill experiences the bad influence of Andrei's neighbour Kharitonov, played by the scene stealing Evgeny Leonov, and is peer pressured into drinking an excessive amount. When Andrei is required to collect Bill from a police holding cell for being drunk, one of the first things he says is, 'Andrei I learnt many new words in there. It was fascinating.'

Hilariously, it is this incident which is Andrei's undoing. His wife, tired of his constant and increasingly unbelievable lies, does not believe he is late because of Bill's incarceration. Alla also reaches her breaking point with the relationship. For a few strange and wonderful moments Andrei is free from his convoluted web. He is a sorry sight, walking alongside a motorway after what appears to be the final argument with his wife, but as a viewer witnessing Andrei's life has been so agonising that having nothing seems better than what has come before. However, this moment of catharsis does not last long. It is dangled in front of us and swiftly taken away. Georgi Daneliya, in an interview about the film, said the State Film Agency were insistent on Andrei either returning to his wife or being properly punished. 'The only thing I can do is zoom in on the sad Buzykin in the finale.' So this is how the film ends, with everybody in the same sorry situation they always were. The last scene is of Bill meeting Andrei for an early morning run. Bill tall and athletic cuts asvelte figure. Andrei, runs alongside him, his ceaseless marathon has yet to end.