

# The Beginning

GLEB PANFILOV

1970

Initially, Gleb Panfilov wanted to make a biopic of Joan of Arc. There was no official ban but funding was repeatedly denied. For a while there were talks of French producers funding the film, but they wanted an iconic French actress to take the lead role. Panfilov could not imagine the story without Inna Churikova, his muse and wife and so he began writing a script specifically for her. Churikova has described the process as follows, "Gleb wrote everyday and composed the script. I sat opposite and looked with loving eyes as he read it to me." Panfilov and Churikova have enjoyed a creative relationship that is often compared to Aki Kaurismäki and Kati Outinen. Both directors care about talent over glamour, and create films that speak to the extraordinary qualities of superficially ordinary people. Both of their leading ladies are extraordinary character actresses, who imbue their roles with raw and relatable emotions. The giddy power of *The Beginning* rests in Churikova's exceptional performance. Charting a journey from awkwardness via heartbreak into dignified and talented maturity was played so compellingly that the public fell totally in love with her. It takes a special kind of actress to play a role filtered by another role. Not only is her role as Pasha powerful, her role as Pasha as Joan of Arc and as an evolving actress is equally convincing. In 1991 she was recognised as a People's Artist of the USSR.

The film begins with the film within a film. We are immersed unknowingly in a production of Joan of Arc as we watch Churikova play Joan at the trial. After ten minutes the director calls "cut". We are suddenly shown a series of photos of Churikova, or Pasha. Then, seamlessly we are immersed in Pasha's life. The significance of the Joan of Arc film does not become clear until much later. One even forgets about the first ten minutes as we are drawn into learning about this strange but sincere young woman. We first experience Pasha as herself at a ballroom dance. She stands awkwardly on the sidelines, her friends are all invited to dance and she is left with their bags. Eventually, a young man, Arkardy, invites her to dance. Her excitement is naive and unbridled. When the band stops playing, she begins to scream for them to play more basically crying as she does. The juxtaposition between Pasha as the dignified Joan and as her slightly hysterical self is funny and tender.

Pasha is a provincial girl of simple tastes and stereotypical dreams. After she is given her role as Joan of Arc, she sits with her friends at the table and tells them with comedic pomp and sincerity that her ideal role would be Mary Stuart, a queen who died for the man she loved. It is fascinating that the provincial girl who longs for love, romance and marriage is the actress chosen to play Joan, who so famously subverted gender norms. Yet, the two women share an uncompromising idealism. Pasha approaches everything with bizarre intensity. The encounter with Arkardy is all it takes for her to fall hopelessly in love with him. Arkardy is married, but this does not dispel Pasha. For a brief time, he moves in with her and she cooks him an elaborate three course meal. She is constantly harassed for help by her neighbours and friends, which she gives freely. In her role as Baba Yaga at the local theatre group, her performance is spirited and devoid of vanity as she throws herself around the stage in a wig and fake witch's nose.

Whilst it is Panfilov's filmic love letter to his wife; Pasha's relationship with the director is a strange one. He believes absolutely that she is the lead and the film is impossible without her. Nevertheless, he treats her with something just short of contempt. However, this is nothing in comparison to the treatment Pasha endures at the hands of the rest of the crew. She invites her friends to watch clips of the film with her, and the screenwriter openly ridicules her acting in front of her. The crew humiliatingly throws out her friends. Pasha storms out after them, her unforeseen opportunity does not thwart her morals and she is unyielding in the face of their continued aggression. Whilst a fairytale-like role of a lifetime has been offered to this young provincial girl, the role does not come with the imagined glamour and perks. In spite of this, Pasha is a true artist. She may, understandably, long for beauty and romance yet she also commits to her work with total artistry. Essentially, using the structure of a film about Joan of Arc and the parallel story of Pasha's maturation into an artist, Panfilov displays purpose as life's overriding principle. Of his film he said, "I am convinced that no matter what profession one has, one's life is only fruitful when it is enlightened by a great idea. This is what I passionately yearned to make a film about."