

Burnt By The Sun

NIKITA MIKHALKOV

1994

In a moment that made award history, Nikita Mikhailkov introduced his daughter and co-star, Nadezhda Mikhailkova, at the Oscars: 'This was the first time in my life that I didn't have a problem with the actress.' He left the stage with his daughter on his shoulders to the heartfelt applause of the audience. *Burnt by the Sun* (1994) won the Best Foreign Language Oscar in 1995, and a large part of the film's appeal lies within the on screen relationship between Comrade Kotov, played by Mikhailkov and his daughter, Nadia, played by Mikhailkova.

Kotov's family are properly introduced at the bathhouse, after the dangerous and electrifying opening with Mitya and a brief segment of them dancing to 'The Weary Sun', the summer light and countryside provide a snapshot of family happiness and wholesomeness that counterposes the erratic energy we know will pervade the film. Kotov, his daughter Nadia and Maroussia, his much younger wife, are pictured together first in a moment of familial bliss and intimacy. Even as the tensions between the parents escalate, Nadia's wide eyed trust and innocence provides a heartbreaking counterpoint to the onslaught of personal and social horrors that pervade *Burnt by the Sun* (1994). Deceit is one of the film's major themes, and this comes in the erratic form of Mitya, played phenomenally by Soviet star Oleg Menshikov, who one day barrels into their summer home and becomes an active catalyst for tragedy.

After the summer haze of joy and love Mitya's arrival heralds a new atmosphere; one that is dark, tense and heady. As an audience we feel something about to break. It is rather like the heat before a summer thunderstorm, almost intoxicating in its heaviness. Nadia, a small child and susceptible, loves Mitya in spite of her father's obvious antipathy toward him. Mitya is loved by Maroussia too, the pair had had a relationship years ago, ended only by his sudden and unexplained disappearance. There is a great deal of tension in the house: Mitya hates Korov, Korov hates Mitya, Maroussia doesn't know what she feels and Nadia as a child is oblivious to the deeper dynamics. This strange body of interrelations and proximity parallels the disconcerting political furore happening outside the house. Stalin's bid for power is reaching a fever pitch,

and the characters stand on the eve of both the Great Purges and WWII. This political confusion is made explicit from the offset. It is wired into their lives and histories; Kotov was a former Red Army general and often brags about his personal connection to Stalin. Conversely, in a frantic game of who is who, Mitya is an aristocrat and White Army veteran turned NKVD agent. It is made clear, that the afterlife of the characters post revolution have been strange, and their roles have become amorphous and constantly shifting. Kotov, once a revolutionary, now appears to be the complacent and wealthy man he once railed against. Mitya's agenda is convoluted, his arrival in their family home carries with it many motives: revenge, a desire to see Maroussia and to carry out his orders to eliminate Kotov on false charges. Despite his hatred of Kotov, deeply personal on two counts, it is clear that this is a me or them situation and his actions toward Kotov are more about necessity than revenge. This, coupled with his move from the White Army to the NKVD shows that none of this violent bloodshed is about ideology. Instead all of it is about power.

Rustam Ibragimbekov, the script's co-writer alongside Mikhailkov, stated that the intention was to display the conflict through the eyes of a child, Nadia. Indeed, it is Nadia's ultimate fate that we foresee and follow. This individual childhood and life, defined by the tragic machinations of power, makes the brutality of those years through the distorting lens of time, even more personal. We learn of Nadia's path after the main events of the film. As the image of Stalin rises over the field, given an ironic salute by Mitya, we understand that this is the sun that bears down on its citizens with no regard for the personal. The title has significance in two ways, first as the Russian title for the tango 'The Weary Sun' which we saw the family dance to, a tango that became synonymous with wartime; and as a symbol for Stalin whose impositions similarly became the baseline refrain for the lives of so many in the Soviet Union. The film ends in tragedy for the main characters, no matter their ideologies or history. As noted by Steven Gaydos for *Variety*, 'The script steers clear of political posturing, instead focusing on what Mikhailkov is really interested in: the universal human dilemma of lives caught between personal, peaceful dreams and the violent traumas of historical forces.'