

Carnival Night

ELDAR RYAZANOV

1956

Carnival Night is an enduring classic in Russia today. Released shortly after Stalin's death and in the early years of the so called 'Thaw Period', the musical's lighthearted, yet incisive derision of bureaucracy is symptomatic of the massive political changes sweeping the USSR.

We've all heard about it. The speech that shocked the world. It is a staple lesson in school history classes: most of us have sat half attentive at a desk, and listened to a teacher telling us about Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences'. Or, as it has come to be known, Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech'. Delivered to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party on the 25th of February 1956, Khrushchev denounced the cult of personality that had been fostered under Josef Stalin's regime. The consequences of this speech, some intended, some unintended and many drastic, were to truly change the world.

In December 1956, at the tail end of that fateful year, Carnival Night was released. There is no doubt that Eldar Ryazanov's feature directorial debut has withstood the test of time: for over half a century, the formidable talents of Ryazanov and Lyudmila Gurchenko have charmed millions of viewers across the former USSR and beyond. There are many elements to the film's success. It is certainly possible to point to its vibrancy, the iconic musical numbers and innocent yet irreverent comedy that conspire to make it a timeless classic. The plot is simple and effective: Gurchenko, as witty heroine Lena Krylova, conspires against the boring plans of newly arrived Comrade Serafim Ogurtsov for a New Year Celebration. Lena is young, intelligent, a little sarcastic and enormously talented; in direct opposition to this Serafim Ogurtsov is bad humoured, pompous and unimaginative. The ensuing game of cat and mouse, with Ogurtsov as the unwitting prey, is comedy gold.

Ryazanov commented "For me the main character is bureaucrat Ogurtsov (whose name roughly translates as Pickle). He alone gave us the opportunity to make the film satirical and topical. I described the role to the great comic actor Igor Vladimirovich Ilyinsky like this, 'Pickle is not like today's bureaucrats, who have grown up in soft armchairs. He has initiative, openness, simplicity... He is democratic without cronyism or overfamiliarity. In him, there are all the qualities

of a hero. Except for one thing - Pickle - is a complete idiot.'" Whilst there is no barrier to enjoyment as modern viewers, it is hard for us to understand what such a film, made at such a delicate moment in history, truly meant. In the years following Stalin's death on the 5th of March 1953, so-called 'deStalinisation' had been secret and public mourning had been loud. It has been said that even Stalin's victims wept. But, faced with the reality of thousands of prisoners returning home from Stalin's gulags and the inevitable changes that was bound to bring, it was necessary to address what had until then been unspoken. The ramifications of Khrushchev's speech were extreme. People were so shaken by the content they began committing suicide.

March 1956 saw demonstrations in Georgia, furious at Stalin's denunciation, Tbilisi began rioting and calling for an independent Georgia. Trains were arriving in Moscow from Tbilisi with their windows smashed. Meanwhile, in October 1956, a Hungarian revolution was beginning. In Russia people were slowly adjusting to a more free society. For modern viewers like ourselves, it is easy to forget the absolute political chaos surrounding the making and release of Carnival Night. When taking this into account, it quickly becomes evident that the film became far more than a light, musical comedy. It is also an enduring message of hope. The film is centred around treatment of talent. Ogurtsov's desperate attempts to quash this talent mirrors the totality of Stalinist censorship and, yet, in Ryazanov's film, talent prevails. Humorously following Lena and her friends plans to overturn Ogurtsov's decrees, Ryazanov reminds us that laughter, talent, creativity and expression are profound acts of dissidence.

William Grimes, in a tribute to the late, great Ryazanov described Carnival Night as 'a harbinger of the post-Stalin thaw and the emergence of a new postwar generation.' To understand this postwar generation, it is necessary for us to remember and respect how rapidly that world changed. Free expression was groundbreaking. In the film's most famous scene, Gurchenko leads the song 'Pyat Minut'. It is a musical number, that over half a century later, remains a popular festive song in Russia. When she smilingly sings, 'Time is rushing us to the future, and the old year is losing power,' she speaks to a hopeful generation, sandwiched between Stalin's personality cult and the decay of Brezhnev years.