

# The Diamond Arm

LEONID GAIDAI

1969

The real life Swiss smugglers who attempted to transport precious gems with the use of a plaster cast probably hoped for anonymous infamy, or, at the very least, limitless wealth. Unfortunately for them, neither came to pass. Leonid Gaidai, upon reading a news story about their attempted heist, was inspired to direct *Diamond Arm* (1969). The smugglers' loss was very much cinema's gain. This is not just a great Soviet comedy, but one of the best crime comedies ever made.

The film met with enormous commercial success. It is one of the Soviet box office's highest all time performers, with a phenomenal 77 million theatre admissions. Perhaps even more startling is the fact that half a century has passed since the film's release and it is still hilarious. This is, in part, due to Gaidai assembling all the right ingredients: incredible acting, international intrigue, an incompetent duo and a doleful protagonist. However, its longevity is also due to Gaidai himself. Crowned 'The Soviet King of Comedy', he had a crystal clear philosophy of humour, which he practiced in his films: "A cinema comedy should have as few words as possible and those words must be laconic, sharp and take unerring aim."

There are many scenes in *Diamond Arm* which would be hilarious to watch just by themselves. This is in large part due to the film's characteristic slapstick physicality. In one scene Semyon Semenich, (the luckless protagonist) and Gesha (the henchman) take a fishing trip. We watch Semyon unwittingly thwart Gesha's bungled attempts to knock him out. An accomplice of Gesha feeds pre-caught fish to Semyon's bait underwater. Gesha meanwhile dances around behind Semyon with a series of weapons, ready to apply blunt force. Semyon catches fish after fish. Thrilled with his yield, he looks back to his 'friend' for congratulations at just the wrong, or rather, right moment. It is five minutes of slapstick genius and not a single word is spoken.

A great portion of the power of this scene can rightfully be afforded to the exceptional acting talents of both Yuri Nikulkin as Semyon and Andrei Mironov as Gesha. Yuri Nikulkin was nicknamed 'The Russian Buster Keaton', famed for his woeful expressions and abilities as a comic foil. He was the perfect middle-aged everyman. Nicknamed

Uncle Yura by children and adults across the USSR, he was their iconic sad clown. Coupling ignorance with vulnerability, his pained expression as he reels in the fish simultaneously breaks our hearts and reduces us to laughter. Mironov, in counterbalance to this, portrays his character with desperate flourishes. The sweat literally becomes visible on his brow as he manages to portray anxiety, desperation and physical pain with only his facial expressions and body language.

This 'gone fishing' scene showcases Gaidai's strengths as a comedic director. He was capable of developing a daring, visual language as a conduit for comedy. When *Diamond Arm* was filmed, underwater cameras were unavailable. He got around this by creating a resin cover for the camera, and so was able to film the actor feeding fish to the line. Gaidai would have had to tell the viewer what was going to happen below the surface. He would have filmed an actor in an oxygen tank about to swim to the bottom of the ocean, and made the only visible action occur between Semyon and Gesha. But, Gaidai knew that the underwater perspective elevated the scene from funny to comedy gold.

*Diamond Arm*, and indeed the other films of Gaidai, have been noted for their specificity. They are quintessentially Soviet films, thematically and in execution. Ultimately, this is what adds to their comedic success. The *Italian Job* (1969) and *The Pink Panther* (1963), other seminal crime comedies from the 1960s, are certainly as steeped in their own contexts as Gaidai's film. Great works of comedy are insightful: they speak truths about society and human nature. In *The Italian Job* (1969), the portrayal of Cool Britannia treads a fine line between celebration and parody. *Pink Panther* (1963) takes a 'behind the scenes' look at wealth and glamour which provides an insight into the damaged lives behind the mirage. Similarly, the 'Sovietness' of Gaidai's work produces a kind of bittersweet and satirical depth. Be it Semyon Semenich's initial attempt to buy his wife a fur coat (which transforms into his cruise ship ticket alone), the faceless chief or even the Swiss smugglers who inspired the story, the detailed characterisations build a sophisticated and humorous critique of the senseless materialism and obsession with status of late 60's Soviet culture.