

In Love By Their Own Accord

SERGEI MIKAELIAN

1983

Award-winning director Sergei Mikaelyan's early life was characterised by war. After volunteering for service at the age of 17 he was badly wounded, an event that would stay with him throughout his life. It's no surprise, then, that he would go on to view life and people in general as inextricably bound up with fate. His films, known for their intimate and often humorous portrayals of those victims of fate, are still cherished today as some of the finest 'serious' comedies to come out of the Soviet Union. Introduced as such in the opening credits, *In Love By Their Own Accord* (1983) is an unusual tale of love that garnered international recognition for its tragicomical depiction of late Soviet reality.

Recalling how the idea for the film was born, Mikaelyan cites the influence of psychological conditioning and self-help books: "I made it a habit to drive away sad thoughts and cultivate rosy ones. I wanted to share this experience with someone. Suddenly, I came across a newspaper article about self-training that was beginning to become fashionable. It turns out that I spent most of my life doing it without knowing it! I thought: what if you work on yourself purposefully? I dreamt that after leaving the cinema, the audience would race home, engage in self-training, become better and happier, and there would be a whole craze for self-education, like the fashion for jogging or aerobics." Initially beginning work on the script alone, he then went on to join forces with Alexandr Vasinsky (a journalist for the newspaper *Izvestia*) and actor and director Viktor Merezhko.

The story is termed by some as melodrama and others as lyrical comedy. Simply put, it's a tale of the chance meeting of two people who have not been entirely successful in life, either professionally or romantically, both struggling to find purpose. Igor Bragin (Oleg Yankovskiy) is a handsome former athletics champion turned alcoholic, who now works at a factory. Vera

Silkova (Yevgenia Glushenko, who also starred in Mikhalkov's 1977 drama *An Unfinished Piece for a Mechanical Piano*) is a plain, lonely bookworm and librarian (among other things, she can quote Tolstoy and Schopenhauer by heart). The only thing they do share is a distinct lack of joy in their lives. When Igor comes to her door begging for money (presumably to spend on alcohol), Vera speaks for both of them when saying: "I want to be happy, I want to love my work, I want to fall in love!" And so, with the help of 'autogenic training', they decide to seek happiness and purpose in each other. In the process, they discover truths both about each other and themselves, which ultimately brings them closer together.

Drawing attention to the very fashionable hobby of 'autogenic training' and self-help books, the film also seeks partly to ridicule it. Even Vera, who herself posed the idea, realises that this technique is really no more than a set of boring mantras. In the end, what's more important in human relationships, the film contends, is not the blind following of instructions but an empathetic disposition that actively builds upon real experience with a specific person. Having initially noticed each other's shortcomings, they are forced to be honest to each other from the very start. And ultimately it's Vera who, having hitherto been only punished for her generosity and kindness, eventually saves Igor from himself, and they both come to see beauty in each other.

Mikaelyan had the idea to shoot a sequel following the couple a few years into their relationship. Filming was scheduled to begin in the summer of 2005, but never happened because of the categorical reluctance of Yankovskiy to participate in it. Perhaps this is for the best. For now, we're only left with the image of the clock striking 00:01, signalling the start of their new life. To know what happens next would only ruin the film's magic.