

The Lady With The Dog

IOSIF KHEIFITS

1960

Anna is first seen in parts, not as a whole. She is an image in white on the shore; her face is darkened by shadow, invisible even. Dmitri Gurov watches her with idle fascination. She walks in the opposite direction. The camera is still, she becomes nothing but a white dress and a twirling umbrella. Then, at a chance meeting in a restaurant, Gurov views her in sections: the nape of her neck, a hand with a ring resting on her thigh and a side profile staring into space. Iosif Kheifits' film perfectly translates attraction from the original text and into the unspoken.

Dmitri Gurov's initial fixation with Anna, or as first knows her, 'the lady with a dog', is a testament to lust, not love. In fact, in the original Chekhov short story from which the film is adapted, we are granted access to Gurov's interior - and it is a bitter place. In the first few pages, the third person narrator explains to us Gurov's frequent infidelities, his low opinion of his wife, his frequent reference to women as a lower race, and his simultaneous realisation that he is unable to keep away from this lower race. Not even for a day. Anna, conversely, cries after they first consummate their affair. She declares that she loves a 'clean, pure and honest life.' We believe her. It is, after all, why Chekhov's story is iconic. Love is presented as an overwhelming force and his characters are treated without judgement. Love has the power to transform the most disaffected cynic. It also has the power to turn saints into sinners, if we are to consider their affair in terms of the moral landscape of the 1900s.

Kheifits does not fall into the easy trap of an excess of dialogue to provide the viewer with the insights the original text would give us. He masterfully uses his medium and tools at his disposal, breathing life and personality into the characters and events most critics view as symbolic. Gurov, played by the highly acclaimed Aleksey Batalov, is able to show us what goes unsaid. Whilst we never have access to his thoughts, his posture, his tone and his gestures tell us all we need to know. As viewers, we watch him transform from a stiff and self interested man to one filled with longing. As Anna expresses her guilt and shame, Gurov eats a watermelon. His light rebukes are accompanied with the sounds of seeds hitting a plate. He initially responds unemotionally to her upset, more interested

in the watermelon and simply waiting for her episode to pass. As an audience, we watch this polite disinterest turn into genuine sympathy and affection. When he suggests they go to Oleander, it is possibly the most selfless act he has ever committed. At Oleander the couple are nearly silent, the diegetic sounds of the sea and an abundance of crickets fill the nearly wordless space. In the distance, the cab driver waits and smokes, the only witness to their moment of illicit connection.

From the bucolic and ephemeral scenes of Yalta we are transported to snowy Moscow; the city's frostiness is reflected in the characters' behaviour. Dinner parties are stiff and proper. Children perform pre-rehearsed poems and Gurov himself is encouraged to play a piece on the piano. As he stares at a candle in front of him, he pulls out of focus and is replaced briefly by a memory of Anna's own face. A New York Times review points to the film's success in evoking Chekhovian fixations, 'Like all of Chekhov's plays and short stories it is a study of character in time and place rather than a forceful film in constant motion.'

The plot appears fragmented, giving us only snapshots of the character's lives. But this is a deliberate narrative device, as the fragments pertain to the linearity of what both characters consider their real life: their relationship, externally whilst together; and their internal alienation whilst apart. The stolen nature of their time, and indeed the relationship's relatively slow progression with regard to time elapsed between meetings, leads to a film which spans multiple cities, all of which take on a sort of mythic resonance. This translates beautifully to the screen. From Yalta, the place love was born and crickets sound, to Saratov and the closed high society Anna inhabits there, to Gurov's intense dissatisfaction in cold and wintry Moscow. Kheifits plays with these places visually, making apparent to the viewer their significance. At the film's end, as a clock ticks loudly in the background reminding them of their limited time, Anna describes them as, 'Migrating birds, who have been caught and forced to live in separate cages.' As the hour chimes once more, they are both sent back to their lives, doomed to be in love.