

Life for a Life

YEVGENI BAUER

1916

Nata and the Prince sit like statues in her mother's drawing room: cheek to cheek and clutching hands, they test the limits of what a young couple are allowed to do in polite society. As they wonder if they knew each other in a past life, Bauer inserts a dream sequence in which the Prince and Nata are transported to the ancient world; resplendent in white robes they dance around each other, between marble pillars and Grecian plants, as equals and lovers. In their reality, they are neither. Yevgeni Bauer a former theatre designer, in his capacity as a pioneer of early cinema, is known for stunning set design. This artistry quite literally sets the scene and allows him to convey some of silent cinema's most complex and ambitious plots. Bauer is also renowned for his predilection for rendering Dostoevskian nightmares on screen. By Bauer's standards, the aforementioned dream moment between the two lovers is a flight of fancy as opposed to a nightmare; but the ending is quintessentially melodramatic, bloody affair we have come to expect from the old master.

Based on a novel by George Ohnet, two girls are raised by a single mother and millionaire, Mrs Khromova. Musya, her biological daughter, is plain and alongside her she raises her beautiful, adopted daughter Nata. The two girls are like sisters, but it is understood and accepted that Musya will inherit and Nata will not. One of the most interesting elements of *Life for a Life* is Nata's relationship with Mrs Khromova. Khromova is not the stereotypical evil step mother, or indeed woman. She is neither rich heiress or widow, but an active and successful breadwinner. She spends many hours at her factory building their fortune. This is a wild and deliberate contrast with the frivolous Prince who has gambled away his own inheritance and seeks a wife to bail him out. Despite there being an obvious preference for her biological child, there is still love between Khromova and Nata who confides in her freely and easily. She even seeks her counsel on hers and the prince's mutual love. Her mother is sympathetic but tells her to never speak of it, so as not to upset Musya, and calls in the favour of her upbringing.

Unsurprisingly restraint does not come to pass. Nata and the Prince obviously give in to their love. In a scene which echoes their clasped hands, dreams and chastity they kiss in the living room of

the mansion. Heartbreakingly Nata is reduced hurting her family to be with the man she loves. Khromova, in the film's melodramatic climax, eliminates the threat to her family. The film's slogan, A drop of blood for every fear, seen in the film's first frame, comes to make sense. She spares Nata, clearly an expression of love, given her ability to be totally ruthless. The end scene is like a perverse family portrait: Khromova comforts a distraught Musya and Nata stands slightly in front of them, alone in her pain but still a part of the family. As one leaves the parting image, it's apparent that has Nata left this situation physically unscathed, but at what cost?

Nata is played by Vera Kholodnaya. One of the most iconic actresses in Russian history, the Marilyn Monroe of her time, she quickly earned the title of 'Queen of the Screen' and totally enchanted audiences in the pre-revolutionary era. Outstanding beauty aside, in total silence and through the passage of time, she is an unusually compelling actress. In the days of early cinema, before the advancement of camera techniques and equipment, directors often had to choose between close ups or set design. For Bauer the set won, but it was at a loss to characterisation. But Kholodnaya is able to cut through this obstacle. She emotes with her entire body: when she plays spiritual anguish she theatrically writhes through the mansion she lives in whilst breathing heavily and with distress written across her face.

As a viewer we find ourselves transfixed by her charm, grace and ability to emote through physicality alone. In another scene she watches the engagement between her sister Musya and the prince, her eyes filled with grief. She turns her back to the camera to face the festivities. Even then, we find our eyes drawn to her, instead of the bustling scene in front of her. Unfortunately, only five of the estimated 80 films she made during her life survive. Thankfully this collaboration with one of cinema's greatest directors is one of them.

Life for a Life occupies a very specific and sensitive space in history. It was released just a year before the revolution and at the precipice of a changing world. This kind of plot would not be a large feature of Soviet film which was, with the 1920s highly politicised and driven by the demand to educate. In many ways, it simultaneously signifies the end of an era and the birth of cinematic possibility.