

# Magdena's Donkey

TENGIZ ALUBADZE & REVAZ CHKEIDZE

1956

Tengiz Abuladze is regarded as one of the most important figures of the post-war film renaissance in Georgia. He eventually came to prominence under perestroika, when the final film of his 20 year trilogy, 'Repentance' (1986), was banned due its expose of Stalinist terror. Although less well known outside of his homeland, Revaz Chkheidze likewise can lay claim to starting what could be termed as a New Wave in Georgian cinema. The two collaborated in 1955 on Magdena's Donkey, which was both directors' debut fiction film. A year later it won Best Short Fiction Film at Cannes Film Festival, bringing international recognition and acclaim to a film community hitherto unknown to the world.

The story is simple, truthful and dramatic, with a beautiful score by Archil Kereselidze. It was adapted from a widely read and beloved children's short story by one of Georgia's first feminist writers, Ekaterina Gabashvili, known for her stark depictions of peasant life. It follows poor widow Magdana (Dudukhana Tserodze) at the turn of the 20th century in a small village that overlooks a bustling town below. Everyday she ventures along the rural roads and hillsides selling a yoghurt-based drink (matsoni) to the locals, scrimping together what she can for her children.

Making the difficult journey to and from the market is back-breaking work, but it's their only source of income. Her luck suddenly changes when she stumbles across a badly beaten donkey, which she nurses back to health. They call him Lurja (meaning 'blue-eyed'), and he later becomes an indispensable assistant to the widow, and a source of hope and joy for her children. Their luck, however, doesn't last long. Avaricious court officials take the side of the donkey's wealthier owner, a coal merchant named Mitua, who had initially left the poor animal for dead. He sues Magdana and bribes the judge, and has the donkey eventually returned to him. Though it seems good may exist in Gabashvili's universe, there can be no justice.

What elevates this deceptively simple period drama is its neorealistic approach, which gently pushed the ideological boundaries of Soviet cinema at the time. At surface level, it remained within the tradition of socialist realism: Magdena occupies the role of working class citizen in opposition to bourgeois corruption, and therefore the film serves as an adequate denunciation of Russia's Tsarist past.

On a more subtle level, however, what we are witnessing is an important stylistic turning point not only for Georgian cinema, but Soviet cinema in general. Abuladze and Chkheidze seamlessly blend past and present, or rather the two coexist harmoniously: low-angular close-up shots of the films' heroes, shot in gorgeous black and white, are an obvious nod to early Soviet silent film aesthetics; whilst the move away from melodrama to a grittier, dramaturgical depiction reflects a developing trend in early 1950s European cinema, in particular Italian neorealism pioneered by the likes of Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica. Magdena's Donkey, however, takes these influences and explores them in a specific cultural framework on Georgian soil, whereby the village becomes a locus for introspection on a national level.

Although it may not reach the more ambitious polyphonic heights of Abuladze's later works, the film laid the groundwork for what would later be considered the hallmark of Georgian cinema of the post-Stalinist period: a general though accurate portrayal of everyday life in all its randomness and simplicity, stories told almost artlessly and without pretence, where the disparate stories of local peoples and places grant expression to an entire nation. Indeed, Abuladze put it best himself when he said that art is 'the creation of harmony from chaos, the extraction of form from formlessness.'

Magdena's Donkey is a wonderfully accessible introduction to the increasingly complex and idiosyncratic ways the two directors would later go on to develop this philosophy.