

The Most Charming and Attractive

GERALD BEZHANOV

1985

Gerald Bezhanov's film follows the tropes of an American romantic comedy but with a delightfully Soviet twist. Whilst charming in its own right, looking back on it now also provides ultimate nostalgia value, as it is so seeped in cultural artefacts: the fashion, the pingpong, the underground market of western clothing; the office culture and the gender dynamics. Even the black eye Nadia sustains at the beginning of the film is as a result of a now extinct social duty to help police control the streets.

Nadia is certainly not a Hollywood heroine. She is genuinely down to earth, uninterested in glamour and having given up on the prospect of men, she tells her friend Suzanna, 'Men are a class that simply do not exist for me.' Bezhanov was, at the time, an inexperienced director but he fervently believed in the script. He knew that the key to making *The Most Charming and Attractive* a success would be the casting. He chased Irina Muravyova for the role, an unconventional and optimistic move for a new director: 'Without Muravyova there would be no picture. For six months I followed her, knelt and begged her husband...she is a unique actress! Both creative and sympathetic.'

Muravyova was already highly regarded, in demand and difficult to convince. She had already showed incredible talent in her roles in *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979) and *Carnival* (1981) and consequently turned down a multitude of roles. Watching *The Most Charming and Attractive*, Bezhanov's obsession explains itself. It is rare that an actress is so composed, so natural and so utterly believable. As Nadia, she strikes the perfect balance between practical optimism and a secret and self-aware wit at the absurdity of her situation. This comes out at unexpected moments, catching us off guard as an audience. Her comedic moments are memorable, for instance when she plays into her colleagues' attempts to impress a woman on the train by pretending to be a travelling band, by doing a fake acapella set which exposes them as frauds. Her relationship with Suzanna, the former classmate and a force of nature, also provides similarly hilarious material.

After her and Suzanna's chance meeting on a bus, she submits to Suzanna's 'scientific' charm regime sceptically, possibly just as a good-natured gesture to her friend, as opposed to any

real desire to ensnare Volodya, the office heartthrob complete with a dodgy mop hair cut and a penchant for his walkman. Her reservations are met with obstinance from Suzanna. 'Consider me your doctor, and just take the treatment I am prescribing you.' This is another unusual and charming element to this romantic comedy, when compared to the unachievable glamour of its Hollywood cousins. Even their attempts to be glamorous are haphazard. When Suzanna takes Nadia to the black market trader he accuses of Nadia of being 'from the Urals' when she balks at the prices. Beyond this, Suzanna and Nadia are two highly intelligent scientists, and are quite openly respected as such by their colleagues. Fundamentally, they are regular 1980's women. This realism is reflected in the sets and cost, the whole film only cost 500,000 roubles and they used a real research institute to film in. Even the fashion is taken directly from the actresses' own wardrobes.

There is a glorious and bittersweet reality to the relationships presented. The revelation that Suzanna's husband cheats on her, which he admits himself is nothing to do with Suzanna and is instead because of his need for passion, is poignantly human. This revelation is not a point of tension or drama, more the slow burning discontent that pervades many relationships. Nadia refuses to cover for him and her troubled look speaks volumes. As viewers we do the work to piece together Suzanna's motives in aiding Nadia; we also understand that she will not leave her husband and Nadia will probably never directly mention the incident to Suzanna.

Another moment which reflects the film's penchant for authenticity is Volodya's disinterest in Nadia, despite her transformation. Even at a concert where Nadia has calculatedly given him a free ticket, he is more interested in chasing a young woman standing in the queue. However, this disappointment is turned into another moment of practical optimism from Nadia who simply takes it into her stride. The end of the film sees Nadia return to playing table tennis with her colleague. When Gena sees her come downstairs he breaks out into a smile so large and honest it would melt the heart of the most cynical viewer. The closing shots of the duo playing table tennis are all that is needed for a satisfying end. This is one of the most charming romantic comedies out there.