

# Mother Got Married

VITALY MELNIKOV

1969

In Melnikov's film we get see St Petersburg from two perspectives. The film begins with black and white film images of construction, first we see scaffolding erected. Then, in an aerial shot we see materials pulled up to the top. Next, we see women chipping away at wood, their head scarves covering their mouths so they do not breathe in the dust, these women notably do not have any form of protective gear. Shortly after, we see the fashionable streets of Leningrad, filled with people in expensive clothing and in western cars. Whilst the focus is on Boris and his mother Zina, a working class family, Melnikov makes the fact his film is a tale of two cities evident throughout. Boris' aunt works in the centre as a tour guide, and walks people through the city's landmarks, the recent history of war, now turned into a tourist attraction.

Boris is played by the exceptional Nikolai Burlyayev, who famously starred in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*. He embodies the charm and awkwardness of teenage years. Boris or Borya, as he prefers to be called until a girl tells him he should use his 'adult name', is undeniably hardworking. During the day he works at a cafe, and at nighttime he takes on cash in hand labour jobs in the city. This relentless schedule is undertaken so he can afford a present for his mother. The pair are like ships in the night. Boris often returns just to sleep whilst his mother sees Viktor, her new boyfriend or works. Zina works in construction. With her predominantly female colleagues she is renovating a majestic building.

There are wonderful scenes featuring these women, who sunbathe on the roof in their breaks and discuss their lives with a great deal of humour. The house belongs to an old man, who is a the image of the quintessential Leningrad intellectual. He and Zina talk at the window and enjoy Bach together; whilst Bach is an unknown name for Zina the music speaks for itself; and both enjoy its transcendental and unifying experience in one of the film's most touching images. In fact, music is a integral element in *Mother Got Married*, the melancholic rise and fall of classical music accompanying everyday activities such as physical work and casual conversation, imbues the quotidian elements of people's lives with a quiet sense of beauty.

After the majesty of Leningrad, with the grand cathedrals and broad avenues, as viewers we are shocked when we see the suburb where Zina and Boris live. It is a place where the roads are half built, and fields are surrounded by electrical pylons. It is evidently designed to serve the greater needs of the city, as perhaps are the suburbs inhabitants who face long commutes into the centre for work but are only able to afford life on the city's edge.

The major point of tension within Melnikov's film is between mother and son. Having lived relatively co-dependent lives, as just the two of them, Viktor's introduction has shaken the delicate balance of their relationship. Viktor is a tractor driver. He is honest, kind and loves Zina but he earns Boris' vitriol. Interestingly, alongside the palpable jealousy, Boris treats Viktor with derision for his lack of cultural interest. Boris has a portrait of Antoine de Saint-Exupery hanging on his wall, a nod to his inner sensitivity. When Viktor does not know who that is, he mocks him, not regarding him as good enough for the family despite his genuine and kind hearted nature.

The relationship between mother and son, underpins the entire film and is profoundly complex. Both the script and the performance by the main characters successfully delve into the many layers of love, aggression and affection between two people who have relied upon each other for years. Boris, whilst mature and hardworking outside of the house, is prone to petty behaviour and ridiculing his mother in the family home. In turn, his mother, who has undeniably sacrificed a lot for Boris remains relatively tone deaf to his understandable feelings of rejection.

The stages of their relationship throughout the film swing from high to low. Having been each other's everything, they are forced to reorient to a new relationship, and to answer whether their former insularity can be replaced by a new kind of caring. Zina asks Boris whether he can bear her having another child, he replies he can bear it. The last scene of the film sees Boris frantically comforting his mother. He brings her a glass of water, ready to take on a new role as her caregiver.