

# The Snow Queen

LEV ATAMANOV

1957

The Snow Queen is a hand-drawn animated film directed by Lev Atamanov, based on the 1844 story by Hans Christian Andersen. The plot follows two friends, Kai and Gerda, children whose families live opposite each other in a small Nordic town. The Snow Queen, a powerful deity, abducts Kai and turns his kind, sympathetic heart to ice, making him cruel and indifferent to others. Gerda sets off to save him, facing various adventures and challenges, ultimately rescuing Kai from the claws of the Snow Queen.

Most well-known Soviet animators at the time had a part in the creation of The Snow Queen which utilized traditional hand-drawn animation. These artists, working at the studio Souzmultfilm, joined together to create the various settings such as the Nordic town, the Royal castle, the robber's cave and the snowy expanses of the Queen's domain into one unified theme. It was a huge team effort: animator Alexander Vinokurov created the world of the Snow Queen, Leonid Shvartsman created the characters, while Fyodor Khitruk brought them to life. The team was held in place by the direction of Lev Atamanov. Fyodor Khitruk later recalled animating Ole Lukoye, the narrator of the story, as one of the most significant characters of the two hundred characters he had animated in his many years of work. The Russian poet and children's writer Nikolay Zabolotsky wrote the poems for the soundtrack. Playwright Nikolai Erdman was one of the scriptwriters. The tale deviated from Andersen's story by editing the religious undertones which would have not been suitable for Soviet screens.

The animation style of the Snow Queen's face differs drastically from the appearance of the rest of the characters. This is due to the fact that the Snow Queen was drawn using a "rotoscoping" technique from the actress Maria Babanova (in Soviet animation this method was called "éclair" - after the brand of the manufacturer of the long table on which all manipulations were carried out). As one of the most acclaimed actresses of Soviet Union, Maria Babanova was filmed as if in a live performance with makeup and costume. Then the footage was transferred to celluloid and into frame-by-frame drawings. Thus, the Snow Queen took on the mannerisms of the actress. Janina Zheimo, who voiced Gerda, also participated in the "rotoscoping" of her character, but only for a few scenes.

According to Leonid Shvartsman, work for The Snow Queen

lasted two years. The animators researched at the Lenin Library. The studio would be filled with thousands of drawings every day that had to be checked and corrected. The character Ole Lukøje was first modelled on the seven dwarfs in the film Snow White. However, Shvartsman later drew inspiration from Lev Atamanov himself in drawing the character.

Although unable to travel to Denmark, where Andersen wrote his work, for background study, the animators were still allowed to go to Riga, Tallinn, and Tartu. The city square in the film is modelled after the city of Tallinn. According to the memoirs of Leonid Shvartsman the animators found new hope for the animation industry after the Khrushchev's оттепель (thaw) era began. That hope definitely runs as a thread throughout the film, possibly that hope is what made the film so beloved among Soviet and international audiences.

The film quickly became a cult classic in the Soviet Union and abroad. Even at the height of the Cold War, Universal Pictures acquired the film for US theatrical distribution, a massive stepping stone considering the tension between the two countries. The Snow Queen raised the iron curtain, by becoming the first purchase of a Soviet film by any major American company.

The major cultural impact of The Snow Queen is undeniable. In the US, in the 1960s and 70s, it became a good tradition to show The Snow Queen during New Year holidays. Even Hayao Miyazaki said that Atamanov's film 'The Snow Queen' had a decisive influence when he chose what he would do in life.

The original fairytale is based on a combination of folklore from different cultures. In Scandinavian lore there are references to the Ice Maiden, the embodiment of winter and death. Similar characters are known in Japan (Yuki-onna), and in the Slavic tradition (Mara-Marena). In Russia, Marena is actually the figurine that is to this day burnt at Maslenitsa, a holiday celebrated during the last week before Lent, and which symbolises the passing of winter and arrival of spring. The scarecrow-like figurine of Marena is burned to get rid of the cold and bring forth a warm spring. However, the traditional role of Marena had been, indeed, as a goddess of death as she ruled in the winter months. This makes the abduction of Kai by the Snow Queen even more menacing and his rescue a miracle.