

There Is Such A Lad

VASILY SHUKSHIN

1965

There is Such a Lad is a simple, down to earth and delightful tale which follows a truck driver, Pashka, driving around the Altai region, played by the phenomenal Leonid Kuravlyov. Pashka, whilst a little rough around the edges, is a joker with a zeal for life. The narrative details his exploits as he interacts with various people, and gets into adventures during his long journeys on the road.

The film is based on a collection of Shukshin's short stories: Crankshafts (1961), Grinka Malyugin (1962), Cool Driver (1962), and Internal Content (completed and published in 1966). Shukshin's scripts and film ideas often grew from his writing. His unique position as an author and director allowed him to create a fascinating combination of literary and visual storytelling in his works. There is Such a Lad was the very beginning of that journey, a directorial debut at Gorky film studio after feeling unfulfilled as just an actor and writer. Shukshin was passionate about telling the stories of his characters in a complex and nuanced way. Screenwriting, directing, and later acting, for his own films, finally provided him with an opportunity to combine all modes of storytelling.

The film was very well-received by critics, being praised for the organic flow from comedy to tragedy, recognisable characters and deep powerful ideas behind the plot. However, the film was banned from being screened in Moscow for 'ideological reasons'. The film was accused of 'glorifying' illiteracy, focusing on the lives of simple and uneducated working class people at the edge when 'everyone should be striving to study and better themselves. As it couldn't be premiered in Moscow, the film opened at the Palace of Culture in Kirov, now Voronezh. However, the film ended up receiving awards at the first All-Union Film Festival and a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

Despite not being favoured by censorship, 'There is Such a Lad' was a strong start for Shukshin's directorial career. His filmmaking was particularly acclaimed for exploring the struggle between his working class rural background and the city dwelling intelligentsia who dominated filmmaking at the time. Despite the communist ideology of helping the working class rise against the bourgeoisie, the Soviet politics of 50s and 60s were highly focused

on educating the village-dwellers, moving them to the cities and 'civilising' them into being good soviet citizens. People from working class rural backgrounds were looked down on and not particularly represented in film and media. Shukshin focused on these struggles.

His focus on the narratives of rural life is based on lived experience. Vasily Shukshin was born in 1929 in the Altai village of Srostki in a peasant family. His father, Makar Shukshin, worked on the collective farm "Flame of Communism", was arrested in 1933 among other participants in the "anti-collective farm conspiracy", sentenced to death and shot at the age of 21. Shukshin's mother, Maria then took care of the family: Vasily and his younger sister Natalia. After the arrest of his father and before receiving a passport, Shukshin was named by his maternal surname Popov to avoid being labelled as the child of an 'enemy of the people'. After graduating from the seven-year school in the village, Shukshin studied at the Biysk Automobile College. He then worked various jobs as a mechanic before being drafted in the military. As he was discharged from service for health reasons, Shukshin decided to go back to school, get his high school diploma and in 1954, at the age of 25, Shukshin enrolled at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) to pursue a career in directing. Reportedly, to raise money for the trip to Moscow, his mother sold a cow. Being in Moscow, Shukshin always wanted to represent where he came from and give voices to the village dwellers whose stories were missing from the Soviet film discourse.

In 'There is Such a Lad' Shukshin also explores the dignity and heroism of often overlooked rural communities and shows that appearances are only skin deep. Village life is shown through the lens of poetic realism played through the eyes of Pashka. Pashka is an Ivan the fool type character; he is an innocent and gentle joker, always ready to shamelessly take his chances, but simultaneously ready to step aside if someone else is more suited and concern himself with fixing the lives of others. In his dreams, Pashka lives outside village reality, dreaming of something bigger. Several Shukshin stories turned into several stories from the life of such a lad. Shukshin cast Leonid Kuravlyov, his course mate from VGIK with barely any acting experience, as the protagonist. In retrospect, that gamble definitely paid off.