

# Tough Kids

DINARA ASANOVA

1983

With a knowingly ironic title, the 'tough kids' Dinara Asanova depicts, swing wildly between intense vulnerability and extreme cruelty. One moment they are childlike and wide eyed: tousling each other's hair during birthdays, dancing with innocent abandon, moved by a film or providing some truly heartbreaking backstories. The next moment they are engaging in behaviour that is shockingly violent and giving unsettling answers to moral questions.

Set in a summer camp, Pasha, an empathetic and patient man, looks after the boys with a casual and boisterous affection which situates him somewhere between brother and father. He gives encouragement freely and it is something that very few of the boys have experienced up until now. On visitor's day, one boy's grandmother comes. He sits with her and helps her with her crochet. Sat under a tree in summer light, it is moment drenched with happiness. She informs the boy that his mother is not here, she has started drinking again and the moment's brief magic breaks.

Professor Catriona Kelly, in an article for the Guardian, describes Asanova's *Tough Kids* as asking, 'Questions that were too often ignored in Russia, and indeed in any society today.' The boys' behaviour is observed with a strange objectivity. We watch them spin out of control, we watch them jubilant, in one disturbing scene we even watch them harass a young couple and sexually assault a teenage girl. These events are all displayed at the same pace; the editing and direction do not seek to dramatise. Asanova's direction pertains to realism, using the natural light of long summer days and largely static camera shots or handheld camera movement. The film becomes a voyeuristic experience that feels a little like watching someone's home video of their holiday. The realism is further reflected in her casting. Some of the boys in the film were amateurs, from the backgrounds depicted. Indeed she tried to help many of these boys, before her tragic death shortly after. Asanova does not shy away from the reality of the boy's behaviour, but what she does is provide a deeper and varied perspective on their lives. This perspective fundamentally leads us to question how society has not intervened in the tragic fabric of

their lives, at least not until the boys became a problem for society as opposed to just a problem for themselves.

The script was written by Yuri Klepikov, an acclaimed screenwriter who is well known for his participation in Vitaly Melnikov's *Mother Got Married* (1970), and Larisa Shepitko's seminal *Ascent* (1977). The script was first offered to Sergei Solovyov, who admits that he could not have done half, or 'even' a quarter of what Asanova managed. Klepikov spoke of the distinctive artistry of Asanova, and her handling of his script: 'Silence is not only a characteristic feature of her films, but a leitmotif that runs throughout her work. Not much is said in her films, and there is no idle chatter at all. But each moment is filled with meaning and depth.' This is certainly true of *Tough Kids*. The dialogue is to the point, at times bordering on coarse. However, frequently, emotions and lyricism are expressed musically. This expounds upon a pre-existing fixation of Asanova's, her 1975 work *Woodpecker's Don't get Headaches* followed a young drummer. In *Tough Kids*, music becomes a place where the boys express their emotions and join together in a bout of emotion and passion. As they walk to the fields they sing an old folksong, the refrain is 'catch me', which develops a sort of poignancy given their dealings with the law and their troubled pasts.

The first time we meet Vova is in court. Had it not been for Pasha's intervention, the boy would have been sentenced without a single question asked about his past. A small and forlorn figure in a large court room, Vova with a shaved head and downward turned face, is noticeably tiny compared to the chairs. His obvious vulnerability as a scared child earns him no sympathy from a cruel court. Asanova was famously drawn to outsider narratives, and most of these she explored through the tension between teenagers and adults. She explained the reasons she was drawn to these stories, 'Childhood is not an island, not a fragment of life, not a pre-life but life itself... Life is not divided into big, medium, small. There is one big one.' With this statement in mind, it is clear that her aims are to show social trajectory: what happens in someone's youth will echo throughout their life and well into adulthood. It is a clear argument for rehabilitation, as opposed to incarceration.