

We'll Live 'Till Monday

STANISLAV ROSTOTSKY

1968

Melancholic is the best word to describe Stanislav Rostotsky's elegant melodrama. It is a film in which light and darkness are shown to be intrinsically entwined, and this interrelation is explored in a deceptively gentle manner. Underneath Kirill Molchanov's romantic, and slightly ghostly, melodies and the gorgeous black and white cinematography, is the human condition laid bare. This unflinching dive into the complexities, and often inherent sadness, within individuals is explored through three days in an ordinary Soviet high school.

Schools are a microcosm in which life's major themes are continually played out. The students are discovering a multitude of emotions for the first time and the teachers, at varying stages in their lives, are entering new life stages themselves. Their own trials and inevitable ageing play out beside a responsibility to cultivate youthful minds. A major tension in *We'll Live till Monday* is the disparity between the young and old. The film starts with a boisterous and joyful scene: a white crow is loose in an English lesson. The students' newly graduated teacher, Natasha, leads the charge on attempting to capture the bird. After Ilya Semyonovich, masterfully played by Vyachslav Tikhonov, bears witness to the unruly scene and derides her, she responds by re-entering the room and killing the crow. Natasha stands as the bridge between the students and the more mature teachers. Her crush on Ilya Semyonovich is beginning to move from charming to pathetic as she grows older. Her mannerisms are somewhere between the students and the older teachers. After her conversation with Ilya, her enthusiasm is affected by the attitude of her superiors. This leads her to behave in a brutal way. In this film, Rostostsky continually questions the cyclical nature of society and how we are taught to model ourselves on flawed individuals, often developing their own flaws through example or misinterpretation.

The literature teacher, Svetlana Mikhailovna, is a pertinent example of a well meaning woman whose own neuroses interfere with her ability to help the children. She sets her class the task of writing an essay on the meaning of happiness. When Nadia, a beautiful and popular student, writes that her dream is to marry and have children Svetlana is outraged. She attempts to confiscate Nadia's essay and calls her shameful. After the class her hostile demeanour

drops. To Natasha, she reveals her own sadness, saying that all she does is 'deal with other people's happiness', holding the children's essays aloft. Ilya Semyonovich is a mysterious and caustic figure. The school's principle, who has known him for years, describes him as a man who is 'easy to respect, but hard to love.' He is frequently cold to Natasha, despite her obvious love for him and in one scene even publicly reduces another teacher to tears. But at heart he is an idealist, albeit moral to a fault. Against his conscience, he gives an academically challenged child a passing grade instead of a failing one so he may remain in his dance institution. When the mother of this child comes to visit him, he derides her parenting. As she leaves she shouts of her hardships, of her husband's alcoholism and the difficulties in raising her son. Ilya is left stunned. The force of his principles pales in comparison to the desperation of lived experience. When Ilya asks to leave the school, the Principal tells Ilya he is happy with administration and happy to believe whatever 'new truths the newspapers print'. He questions why Ilya is unable to do the same. Ilya's disillusionment is visceral and understandable.

Beyond the normal disparity of a generational divide, Ilya and the principal were former soldiers. That recent tragedy lingers over society, largely unnoticed by the post war generation. In one scene Ilya passionately describes an 1905 uprising to his students. He describes Lieutenant Schmidt as having the 'precious gift of feeling other people's pain more acutely than his own' and defies his students to question the flaws of historical figures. Their ignorance and cynicism juxtaposes his fervour. It is clear that it is the unfortunate fate of the former soldiers to be hopelessly misunderstood by the postwar generation.

The fundamental melancholic beauty that rests at the heart of Rostotsky's film is summarised perfectly by Gena, a poetic student. He tells Nadia, the girl he is infatuated with, 'Rationally I know as a person you're nothing special, yet I try to disregard it.... Everyone needs to be in love, with someone or something.' In the same way Gena picked Nadia, Natasha picked Ilya and Ilya picked heroism. The camera's lens watches their futile dance sympathetically. It is a hopeless way to be, but a beautifully human one none the less.