

# The Wishing Tree

TENGIZ ABULADZE

1976

A user IMDB review of Tengiz Abuladze's film, entitled 'Puzzle' begins as follows, 'Beauty of nature. Force of traditions. Sad love story. A myth. Lost time. Wisdom, fool, expectation, nuances of cruelty. And the verdict - cold and harsh.' Most submitted user critical responses on forums, sites and blogs tend to use a similar listing technique to describe *The Wishing Tree*, (1976) and their experience and impression of it. In an internet world full of posturing and over-explanation, it is particularly wonderful that the majority of viewer responses appear to acquiesce to the experience; and the privilege awarded to the unspoken in Abuladze's work.

Set at the turn of the century, in pre- revolutionary Georgia, Abuladze's film is based on the stories of Giorgi Leonidze. Leonidze, who was born prior to Georgia's absorption into the Soviet Union, had to express his patriotism in the 1930s through a literary return to the mythological and folkloric foundations of Georgian culture, instead of contemporary preoccupations. He was raised in a village in Kakheti, and his memoirs are a blend of memory, myth and fiction that serve as the basis for Abuladze's film. The village in *The Wishing Tree* is a place that hums with spiritual reverence and a deep association with the mythologies that underpin humanity. There is the fortune teller, who was once a beauty and now waits endlessly for her lost love, having let her youth slip through her fingers whilst she pined. She is ridiculed constantly by the other villagers for her missed opportunities and lofty aspirations. There is the holy fool, who walks around in search of a tree that can grant wishes; the village's 'loose woman', ostracised by the other women; and the tale of a forbidden love that ties all the various plot threads together.

*The Wishing Tree* is the second in Abuladze's loose trilogy, released between the better known precursor and successor, *The Plea* (1967) and *Repentance* (1987). It is a beautiful film in its own right and a valuable piece of the puzzle when it comes to understanding Abuladze's artistic motivations and perspectives. In Leonidze's original text, Marita's death is accompanied by a storm over the social injustice of her exile, and the villagers respond with reverence for her memory. However, in the film Marita dies alone

in the mud and her grandmother is the only one that mourns. This is a signal of Abuladze's deep-seated despair at Georgia's fate. Changing the ending to one far more desolate, and in combination with the message of the other films in the trilogy, his perspective is apparent. This is further emboldened by the clear link between Marita and Georgia itself. She serves as a feminine symbol of a vibrant and beautiful motherland, and the tragedy in the way she is treated. The embedded relationship between people, nature and symbols that Abuladze displays is cyclical. In one scene Marita and Gedia go for a walk alone. They sit on the side of the hill and she tells him that, 'The dew on the grass is the earth's tears... everything on earth has a soul.' This statement strengthens the amorphous connection between events and nature.

The film starts with a death and ends with a death. At the beginning the white horse dies after grazing on the grass on the far side of the hill, it is said that this is due to the vengeful spirits of Georgia's enemies whose blood was spilled there. The horse's death is a striking image, a white horse lying down amongst red flowers is the tragically beautiful essence of folklore and mythology. At the film's end a pomegranate flower grows, 'like Marita's face', perhaps a symbol of Georgia's potential for replenishment and the cyclical nature of life. The imagery is one of the uniquely powerful aspects of Abuladze's films. Myths and folklore are predominantly oral traditions, and a certain amount of imagination is required to conjure images of long extant or fantastical events.

However, in Abuladze's hands legend comes to life, haunting and ethereal in its execution. The images of Marita being pulled through the rain and mud gain a religious quality. The white painted face of the fortune teller wildly trying to disguise her age, develops a certain pathos. The Holy Fool in tattered robes, with his ear placed to the ground, evokes a sense of the ancient and primordial. The user review, 'Puzzle' is exactly right when it notes that *The Wishing Tree* is not exactly a film, but an object for meditation that uses the ancient archetypes to take the viewer on a journey through forbidden love and the loss of a nation.