

A Piece of Sky

HENRIK MALYAN

1980

A Piece of Sky is a 1980 film directed by famed Armenian comedy director, Henrik Malyan. It follows Torik, played by Ashot Adamyan, a shy orphaned boy adopted by his aunt, played by Sofiko Chiaureli, and uncle, played by Frunzik Mkrtchyan. Torik grows up as a kind of Ivan the Fool character. Everyone assumes he is simple, he struggles to fit into village life, or learn his uncle's craft or even find a suitable girl to marry. After his uncle dies, Torik's aunt takes up the challenge of matchmaking to find Torik a wife. Her attempts are unsuccessful. The village families want nothing to do with the son of a donkey saddle maker. Finally, Torik falls in love with a young woman working at a brothel, Anjel. The feeling is mutual and the young couple get married. They face huge disapproval from the traditional community. Torik has to stand up to the bigotry to fight for his happiness. It is one of Henrik Malyan's classic tragic comedies with a deep affection for Armenian history.

The film is based on Vahan Totovents's autobiographical novel 'Life on the Old Roman Road' and his short stories including 'Scenes from an Armenian childhood' and 'Light Blue Flowers'. Vahan Totovents was an Armenian writer, poet and activist. Born in 1893 in the town of Mezre, he lived around Armenia and Turkey, and then moved to the United States to study at the University of Wisconsin. He deeply sympathized with Soviet rule and returned to Soviet Armenia in 1922. His work delved deep into the conflict wrought by the waning power of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, the collapse of the monarchy, traditional values and the old ethics of the time. His writings are at the heart of Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian culture and literature, balancing on the cusp of comedy and tragedy, much like Henrik Malyan's work. Totovents wrote with nostalgia for his childhood days and with deep sadness for the lost history of his people.

Henrik Malyan was one of Armenfilm's leading directors. He is best known for 'Nahapet' (1977), a film based on a novel written by Hrachya Qochar about a man who tries to rebuild his life after losing his wife and child in the Armenian genocide. The film was screened in the Un Certain Regard section of the 1978 Cannes

Film Festival and is widely cited as an exemplary portrayal of genocide in film history. However, Malyan is also renowned for his specific style of light-hearted yet tragic comedies like *We and Our Mountains* (1970) and *A Piece of Sky* (1980).

A Piece of Sky was always destined for success. Boasting an incredible cast of leading Armenian actors Sofiko Chiaureli and Frunzik Mkrtchyan, it is simple and heart warming story. It was so successful that the leading actor Ashot Adamyan was typecast for many years after as only able to play romantic characters in Armenian films. What is interesting of course is that *A Piece of Sky* follows a common plot of Soviet films from the Caucasus and Central Asian Republics: a 'modern' individual fighting for their right to be happy against 'archaic' traditions. However, what makes *A Piece of Sky* so unique and so enjoyable is the tender coming of age story at the story's heart of how a boy learns his culture and then decides to go against that tradition for love.

In the 1930s Totovents was accused of producing works 'lacking in proletarian culture' and exiled to Siberia. In 1938, he was then accused of treason and killed as part of Stalin's Purges. 'Scenes from an Armenian childhood' was first published in 1930 and it is filled with alarming premonitions of impending tragedy. Being turned into a film in 1980 by Henrik Malyan, *A Piece of Sky* does seem like a premonition of sorts. However, not of a tragedy but of impending change; the realisation that some traditions are best left behind and the familiar ways of life need to be challenged.

The Russian title of the film is 'Пощечина' or Slap in the Face. It refers both to the physical slap Torik receives from his uncle and the way he later slaps his friend for judging his new wife. Yet the slap is also metaphorical: Torik's life choices seem to his fellow villagers like a slap in the face. One wonders if the hopeful Armenian title *A Piece of Sky* being translated into the Russian *Slap in the Face* is indicative of a deeper lack of understanding of the societal changes and the geopolitical processes soon to happen.