

How 'Viktor The Garlic' took 'Alexey The Stud' to the Nursing Home

ALEKSANDR KHANT

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Aleksandr Khant's award winning debut turns the tropes of indie cinema on its head. The main focus is a road trip between an estranged father and son. The son in question is an angry and disillusioned young man, and it is clear to see why; he lives and works in a dead end town, the interiors are full of colourful clashing prints and the fashion is quintessentially 'gopnik'. Noted for its comic book aesthetic, despite its potentially intimate subject matter, the pacing is fast and the plot explosive. It is entirely, and refreshingly, unpretentious in its depiction of its unsympathetic characters and violence's habit of begetting violence. Stephen Dalton for Screen Daily described the piece as, 'Cloaking semi-serious art house ingredients in lurid action-comedy clothes, Khant's debut feature ticks enough boxes to potentially make a theatrical splash beyond the festival bubble. Imagine Toni Erdmann directed by Quentin Tarantino.'

Viktor, known as Garlic to his friends, has a dream. He wants to buy his mistress a flat. When Alexey, his estranged father, re-emerges in his life he is drawn in by the promise of inheritance. But the inheritance is conditional, he must transport his disabled father to a nursing home. Due to the bureaucratic nightmare of modern Russian processes, this means a trip in a garish red van across the sprawling country with an ailing man in the back. Think Little Miss Sunshine without a heartwarming central message. The desire to give his mistress an apartment is in part an expression of wanting to space from his wife. His wife is a woman who evidently does not like him very much, and it is not unjustified. He shares a child with her he mostly ignores, but evidentially has some desire to not repeat the process of abandonment he found himself victim of.

Alexey is portrayed by Aleksei Serebryakov, who played the lead role in Andrei Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014). It is a career highlight for the esteemed actor, who plays the tough ex-con entirely convincingly. A combination of iron willed and bemused by life, the pair's mutual hatred drives the film's plot. At one point Viktor attempts to kill his father, but he is outwitted by his father's

longstanding criminal history and his ability to think on his feet. The vagaries of their journey and internal power struggle are ever changeable. New familial issues arise over the trip, as do old prison rivalries and violence happens suddenly and senselessly. In one scene, Viktor deliberately winds up the boyfriend of another estranged relative by claiming to want to marry her. In this moment we understand the depths of Viktor's proclivity for violence. He thrives off the base nature of a punch up. Khant's direction is truly commendable in this scene, his ability to direct action is uncanny. By zooming into Viktor from afar, he captures the very moment that Viktor decides to fight.

The characters the duo meet on the way are exceptionally varied. The far reaching nature of his father's chaotic life have affected so many. Some for better, but apparently many for worse. A notable side character is the former cell mate they visit in a strange town on the way. The Russian countryside is an endless sprawl of trees and no life appears outside the window for miles. They occasionally reach and stop at points of civilisation and this always becomes a catalyst for more madness. Normally the bucolic view out the window is accompanied by the pounding Russian rap that Viktor favours, violent refrains or drug references reverberate over the images of lush woodland. Insane acts of violence occur in the midst of those tall green trees. In one highly successful scene, Viktor pulls over and tricks a conman into leaving his car. When the man had been sat inside, he'd changed the station to jazz. We hear jazz over the idyllic view of the Russian countryside. All of a sudden, as Viktor and the man reach a violent altercation, the soundtrack is changes back to a violent, crashing baseline.

Kharmas, a VGIK graduate, was known and commended for his shorts prior to this electrifying release. Now, having won the East to West competition at Karlovy Vary Film festival, he has situated himself as an exciting director. One of a new generation of filmmakers who find themselves unpretentiously investigating the dark underbelly of Russian life with humour and vigour.