

# Rusalochka

IVAN AKSENCHUK

1968

Unlike the Disney adaptation of the famous Hans Christian Anderson tale, the Soviet production of *The Little Mermaid*, *Rusalochka*, remains much closer to the original. It keeps the original heartbreaking but beautiful ending. Yet *Rusalochka* adds delightfully Russian details to the film's secondary characters. From a fish with a traditional headscarf, to the sea witch herself, who assumes an exterior and demeanour similar to the one described in the traditional Baba Yaga tale. These loving details only add to the unique and wonderfully immersive world created by Ivan Aksenchuk. One that differs wildly from the Disney's *Little Mermaid* stylistically and thematically. As the aforementioned headscarf clad fish says at the docks in Copenhagen, 'These silly people think that love exists and that mermaids do not. But we all know that it is the other way around, love doesn't exist, but mermaids do!'

This caustic phrase heralds the entry into the colourful kingdom, and a step away from the greyscale Copenhagen docks with its touring parties and marble statues. *Rusalochka* uses a mixture of traditional cel animation and cut out animation. The result is striking and there is no stylistic lean toward realism or humanising the character's features or forms beyond a certain point. Cut out animation, an early form of animation that uses cut out shapes to create a sense of movement and figure, lacks both depth and fluidity of movement. This is, however not a weakness. It instead gives the impression of having stepped into a beautiful illustrated book come to life. This is particularly noticeable in the scenes of the human kingdom: the boats travelling across the water are beautiful, intricate but inherently austere. Conversely this highlights the fluidity of the underwater kingdom, in particular the flowing hair of the mermaids and their graceful tails and arms. This creates a sense of magic and mysticism, as well as a juxtaposition which is aesthetically pleasing.

The mermaid in question, the green mermaid, is a beautiful fluid creature with an enchanting voice. She sings, 'the beautiful should not die, the brave should not die.' A haunting refrain that heralds her own fate. Catching a first glimpse of the prince, she falls hopelessly and recklessly in love. Saving him, and only him, from the ship of sinking sailors she carries him to shore. On her return underwater, her sisters ask her what she saw on land: did she see

the earthy flowers on the shore, did she see the snowy mountains? The green mermaid replies 'I didn't see anything, only him.' She says it again and again, until it becomes a piercing scream of pain. When she meets the sea witch, the witch greets her mockingly, repeating, 'I saw only him' back to her.

Disney has been noted as instrumental in the creation of unhealthy and unrealistic expectations about love for young children. A quick google search with the keywords, Disney, love, expectations, yields a multitude of caustic articles: 'How Disney Ruined Love' reads one title, 'Disney Ruined a Generation's Ability to be Realistic About Love' says another. The general critique being that in a Disney film beautiful people will always end up together, there is an obvious sense of who is good, who is bad, and who will win the moral war for the prize of eternal reward. In short, Disney's creative leap from the stories and folktales the vast majority of its films are based on has resulted in a saccharine, nuance-free landscape where ultimately everything is really easy if you are good, and good tends to be synonymous with beautiful and talented.

In opposition, *Rusalochka* brings the true beauty of love to the fore. The green mermaid is good, beautiful and talented but still she doesn't 'win', which is largely what Disney films tend to present; hidden in a shroud of moralism and behind a cult of perfection. The Prince, her love, sees her like a sister. On the shore she is changed from majestic and magical into something sympathetic but inherently mute, pitiable and strange. However, the Prince is neither painted as cruel or dismissive. For how could he know her sacrifice, a sacrifice that it is clear she made willingly. When the witch tells her of the terrible consequences of the deal, she merely says, 'So be it,' with her head bowed. When her sisters offer her a chance at survival, a chance that would kill the prince, she declines to take it. An act of sacrifice that is sad, and yet so beautiful and poignant. It is an exquisite and painful reminder that love is not about ownership but an unselfish appreciation of somebody else. In spite of the cynical words of the fish, the ending remark summarises the beautiful tale, 'It's about a love that knows no bounds.'