

# Van Goghs

SERGEI LIVNEV

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In February 1999, Sergei Livnev made a judgement call: Russian cinema was dead. The writing had been on the wall since the previous year's financial crisis, which had put paid to his ambitious plans as chairman of Gorky Studio; attendances were down, the numbers of theatres were dwindling, and domestic production was at historic lows. Seeing no future in the ruins, Livnev moved to America.

His road back to directing, which culminated in 2019 with the release of *Van Goghs*, was a long one. Livnev had two features to his name as a director when he left Russia – *Kiks* (1991) and the cult classic *Hammer and Sickle* (1994, available on Klassiki) – but had struggled to find an authentic creative voice and had turned to producing the films of others. Even after returning to Russia in 2006, he continued to work in production, a state of affairs which, he admits in a recent interview with *Klassiki*, had long left him unfulfilled. "On the one hand, I wanted to say something about myself; but on the other, I was afraid to tell the truth," he says of his early career. "I decided to drop it, to just produce films, [which is] much safer. After more than 20 years of doing this, I realised that it's not interesting for me at all and there is nothing bad about letting people know what I'm really like. There's no shame here. I decided to make a film that would talk about things that were of interest to me."

That film, *Van Goghs*, turned out to be a curveball for those familiar with Livnev's provocatively postmodern '90s work. A father-son drama that addresses such heavy themes as depression, suicide, abuse, and dementia, it is remarkably lacking in pretence and remains light on its feet even as its characters descend deeper into the gloom. Gone are the stylistic flourishes of old, replaced by a minimalist *mise en scène* and an unforced naturalism in the performances. The unobtrusiveness is very much the point, as Livnev explains: "With *Van Goghs*, I didn't need any genres, any style, any cinematic language. I don't care how I express things, only what I feel."

The profundity of the feelings in question may go some way towards explaining why it took Livnev so long to express them. "I was interested in making a film about how to live when you don't know how to live, [when] you don't want to live, when you can't

love anybody, when you don't have any belief in life," he says. "This has its roots in our relationships with our parents." *Van Goghs* is the story of Mark Ginzburg, a suicidal conceptual artist based in Tel Aviv, who returns to his hometown of Riga to care for his dying father, Viktor. A celebrated conductor now in his dotage, Viktor is charming, effusive, self-involved, and insecure. His relationship with his son has been marked by years of neglect and deception, grievances that bubble inextricably to the surface as each confronts their own mortality in the dull light of middle and old age.

What emerges is a detailed examination of regret and guilt, and the ways in which they can distort one's emotional world. The entire principal cast here is in their fifties or older; the sense of time running short, of accumulated disappointment, is striking. While the film revolves around the bruised masculinities of father and son, Livnev is alive to the ways in which the women in their lives have also been marked by their dysfunctions: Mark's ex-wife (a touching turn from *Little Vera* star Nataliya Negoda) and his current fiancée, Viktor's former lover turned housekeeper, and ultimately the surrogate mother that Mark never knew he had all round out a portrait of middle-class malaise that manages never quite to tip into self-pity.

Livnev walks that tightrope with the help of a sterling cast and crew. He is reunited with Aleksei Serebryakov, the star of *Hammer and Sickle*, whose inarticulate and sardonic style is perfectly suited to the wounded, vulnerable Mark. Viktor is brought forcefully to life by the formidable Daniel Olbrychski, a veteran of numerous Polish classics, including the early works of Andrzej Wajda. The award-winning cinematography, meanwhile, is from Yuri Klimenko, who has worked with some of the former Soviet space's foremost auteurs (Ali Khamraev, Alexei German), shooting here with restraint and respect for the centrality of the lead performances. Finally, the off-kilter score is by another returning collaborator of Livnev's wild youth who, like Serebryakov, has since gone on to prominence – Leonid Desyatnikov, who here reworks themes from *Hammer and Sickle* to wonderful effect. There is something fitting about that artistic recycling. As *Van Goghs* acknowledges, the past cannot ever be dismissed. As Mark ultimately comes to realise, we are the products of our most painful moments – but we have the power to choose whether or not they define us.