

A Frenchman

ANDREI SMIRNOV

2019

Moscow, 1957. Pierre Durand (Anton Rival), a student and member of the French Communist Party, arrives in the Soviet capital from his native Paris to study Russian literature, but soon falls into a hotbed of dissident thought. Although he is in fact a full-blooded Russian, Pierre, by virtue of his adopted French sensibilities, ends up unknowingly walking the fine line between what is acceptable and the unacceptable in the eyes of the Soviet State. Having spent his life in France, far removed from the reality of the average Soviet citizen, Pierre carries himself with an unintentional naivete, with dangerous implications. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Moscow, Pierre is advised to “talk less, and trust no one” – a caution which perfectly encapsulates the modus operandi of the time.

In the battle of nature versus nurture, director Andrei Smirnov emphasises the latter. Pierre, despite his Russian roots, lacks the fear of constant state surveillance and “loose lips” bred into every Soviet citizen. Indeed, he is even outright accused of “drinking vodka like a Frenchman.” Interestingly, it is not just behaviour-wise that our protagonist struggles to adapt to his new life in the Soviet state; he also finds himself struggling to grasp certain concepts familiar to the Soviet mind. For example, although jazz (which the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper refers to as “an instrument of American propaganda”) isn’t prohibited, it isn’t exactly allowed either, as is explained to him by his friends Valery (Evgeny Tkachuk) and Kira (Evgeniya Obratsova). This rather vague definition, whilst perfectly emblematic of Soviet culture of the time, is also skillfully used by Smirnov to create a thick air of tension that hangs over the audience throughout the film – will this grey area of the law be the end for Pierre Durand?

Although the main purpose of his trip to the Soviet Union is to pursue his studies, the other driving factor is the search for his father, a mission he pursues with the help of well-connected writer Nikolai Chuknovsky (Roman Madyanov). An extended scene depicts lunch at Chuknovsky’s apartment: rich Russian soup made with “four types of meat”; a spacious dining room with original Aivazovsky and Shushkin paintings on the wall. When Pierre later visits his mother’s relatives in their cramped communal apartment, all loud chatter and paper-thin walls, the contrast is telling.

It is in this earthier setting that Smirnov is able to immerse the viewers

in the psychology of the time; one simply can’t help but feel paranoid at Pierre’s unintentionally loud tone of voice or clumsy choice of words. With stellar performances by Nina Drobysheva and Natalya Tenyakova, the result is an incredibly moving sequence, full of natural, fluid dialogue, which places the theme of national memory at the forefront of the film. With very frequent recollections of suffering (in, at times, an almost nonchalant, factual manner), Smirnov gives a new life to the voices of a generation that is now slowly fading into history – a people who lost everything after decades of revolution, war, and bloodshed, and to whom figuring out long-lost and often convoluted family ties is of utmost importance. With the film’s exploration of student life and dissidence at the heart of Moscow running parallel to the central narrative of the lost connection between a father and son, Smirnov delicately explores what it means to search for one’s roots in a society that has been subjected to seemingly constant upheaval.

It is in this unstable political climate that the work of Aleksandr Ginzburg (a Russian journalist, poet and human rights activist) becomes particularly important. One of the leading ideologues of samizdat (“self-publishing”) – a practice which involved the reproduction of censored and underground material, passed on from reader to reader – Ginzburg became one of the most outspoken voices in the dissident sphere in the ‘60s and ‘70s. Pierre’s photographer friend Valery works on the editing of the almanac *Gramotei*, run by his friend “Alek” (a reference to Ginzburg); the film milks tension from a late subplot that sees Valery convince Pierre to smuggle a microfilmed copy of *Gramotei* to an émigré publisher in Paris. *Gramotei* itself is based on *Sintaksis*, an underground almanac which Ginzburg himself edited around this time.

The film, however, does not end with Pierre’s delayed flight out of Moscow and the tantalising possibility that the plot has been uncovered by the authorities. Instead, it closes with a sequence depicting Valery’s arrest, which Kira is a helpless witness to. In other words, the film closes with those who had no choice but to stay in the Soviet Union. *A Frenchman* is not just an allusion to the films of the time, nor is it simply a condemnation of Soviet repression; above all, it is an homage to those subversive voices, who risked the little freedom they had because – as Smirnov’s dedication over the haunting final shot puts it – they did not wish to live in lies.