

Office Romance

ELDAR RYAZANOV

1977

Directed by comedic powerhouse Eldar Ryazanov, *Office Romance* was and remains one of the most domestically popular Soviet films. Released in 1977 to widespread acclaim, the film serves as proof of Ryazanov's famous statement: "Where there is humour, there is truth". Set in Moscow, *Office Romance* presents the unlikely love story of a shy male employee, Anatoly, and his overbearing female boss, Lydmila Kalugina, whose professional and personal interactions gradually align against the odds.

Ryazanov is perhaps the most important Soviet filmmaker to go underappreciated in the West. Not because of his grand theoretical innovations, like his silent-era predecessors; nor for his spiritual rigour, like his contemporary Tarkovsky. Ryazanov instead set the tone for mainstream cinema during the period in which Soviet film finally developed a robust, popular consumer culture. Brezhnev's "Stagnation" is remembered today as a period of grey monotony and receding idealism, but in material terms it marked perhaps the first extended period of stability and comfort in Soviet history. This was the period when cinema attendance – and TV ownership – climbed to new heights, and Ryazanov's gentle but astute comedies provided the perfect commentary.

He was a genuine box office sensation in this period. *Office Romance* followed two years after the release of Ryazanov's iconic *The Irony of Fate*, which also starred the nebbish, endearing Andrei Myagkov as the male lead. That film had been made for television, to be screened on New Year's Day; another sign of the director making the most of this new avenue in viewers' hearts and minds. That film, about a man and woman brought together on New Year's Eve by a series of drunken misunderstandings, poked gentle fun at the uniformity of Soviet social housing – a sign of Ryazanov's keen social conscience, if not any great appetite for dissidence. In the words of scholar Natalya Chernyshova, "what makes many films of the Brezhnev era so interesting is precisely the fact

that, instead of simply parroting official propaganda, they provide evidence of the complexities of the cultural intelligentsia's own relationship with consumption." Ryazanov himself argued that art was to "help people understand morally complex situations, to see what is good and what is bad. Art must, I think, preach high morals, but it should do so unobtrusively."

Likewise, there is more to *Office Romance* than its title lets on. True to Ryazanov's principles, the film presents a realistic image of everyday life. The petty grievances of normal people are treated with sincerity. Myagkov's Anatoly struggles to bring up his sons as a single parent; his colleague and friend Olga is desperately but unrequitedly in love with their senior colleague Yuri, recently returned from the West. One of Lydmila's co-workers spends her whole time pestering colleagues for money for birthdays and retirements – one morning, she commemorates the death of a colleague who walks in the door the next minute.

While hardly a pioneer in this regard, Ryazanov also demonstrates a sensitivity towards his female characters that Western romantic comedies often fail to grasp. While her female employees, all stylishly dressed and their hair well set, devote time at their desks to applying and perfecting their makeup, Lydmila walks into the office early with her scrubbed face and traditionally masculine boy-cut. There is a marked contrast between the boss, who wears ill-fitting suits, and her secretary, who, while she would earn much less, dresses in stylish Western clothes bought on the black market. As the film develops, it becomes apparent that Lydmila's persona to the outside world is a shell in which she hides in order to protect herself. Her relationship with Anatoly seems to give her the confidence to change this persona, accept her feelings, and become comfortable with her emotions as opposed to suppressing them. Ryazanov's unobtrusive genius is slowly but surely given full flight in this gem.