

# The Game

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Yury Platonov, a successful poet and the son of a famous oligarch, celebrates his 40th birthday surrounded by friends, family, and coworkers, all of whom seem to find joy in little else than singing his praises. With a beautiful family and an established publishing career to boast of, Yury is indeed a man living an absolutely perfect life – or is he? As the man who has it all begins to question whether the perfection that characterises his life is purely coincidental or whether there is something sinister below the surface, intrigue grows and what had seemed a throwaway comment on the lifestyles of the rich and famous takes on darker philosophical tones.

Director Dmitry Astrakhan has form when it comes to these kinds of genre exercises. After three decades in the film world, and even longer as a theatre impresario, he has tried his hand at any number of genres: from romantic comedies like his early hits *Everything Will Be Fine!* and *You Are My Only Love* to the harsh social commentary of *Girls*. He may lack an auteur's signature style, but Astrakhan's adaptability lends itself well to the broad satirical gestures in *The Game*. He takes what he needs from American sources – David Fincher's own *The Game*, Peter Weir's *Truman Show*, even M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* – and retools the material into a statement on the increasingly vapid and detached world of the Russian haute-bourgeoisie.

The more Yury searches for the answer to Astrakhan's central question – do people really want the truth, or is it too painful? – the more the picture-perfect façade of his life begins to fall apart. It is revealed that following a traumatic experience in Yury's boyhood, his billionaire father, Vladimir, has done everything in his power to make sure his son never has to go through something so shocking ever again. The boundary between reasonable and unreasonable soon collapses in this attempt to protect his son's sensitive, artistic soul from being worn down by life's endless stream of disappointments.

As the love he feels for Yury meshes with this deep-rooted fear of life's challenges and the unforeseen, Vladimir quickly assumes the position of puppet master and begins to pull at the strings of every single aspect of his son's life – finding him a faithful wife, an undyingly loyal best friend, and even setting up his career as a poet for sure-fire success. Each actor in this charade is carefully

handpicked for the role, offered a hefty sum for their lifelong cooperation, and is expected to gauge, with immaculate precision, their each and every interaction with Yury. Vladimir thus stands for what Astrakhan sees as Russia's post-Soviet elite's rejection of the adage that money cannot buy happiness.

The decades-long kept secret is eventually unraveled and Yury is faced with the shocking revelation that his whole life has been a charade. This very on-the-nose caricature of life at the top of the heap results in frequent moments of dark humor which fall into stark contrast with voice-over recitals of Yury's deep and philosophical poetry. As if to make the situation even more twisted, the protagonist's subsequent psychological spiral, often filmed to the tune of overwhelmingly generic music that cannot be pinpointed to any sort of time period, creates an atmosphere that becomes as unsettling as the premise of the film itself. Interestingly, when the façade of idealism shatters, the near-farcical tone of the film, even in "genuine" flashback sequences, does not appear to be any less artificial. As the characters continue to interact in perfectly scripted sentences, often reciting their lines with palpably theatrical mannerisms, Astrakhan skillfully blurs the lines between what is authentic and what is but an act.

After being launched into a frenzy of what seems to be outright self-sabotage, Yury finds himself in a position of a 40-year-old man starting his life from scratch having faced no prior hardship. Inevitably, however, the effects of paranoia begin to sink in; is there anything about his life that ever was truly genuine? A heart-breaking husk of his former self by the end of the film, Yury soon returns to living the only way he knows how – in an artificial world full of fake smiles, surface-level relationships, and around-the-clock surveillance.

Puzzling, baffling, and chock-full of over-the-top melodrama, *The Game* is both thriller and comedy, which, in spite (or even because) of Astrakhan's proclivity for inanity, leaves the audience with some truly thought-provoking questions: how does the average person actually live? Are we truly content with the lives we lead, or do we simply pretend to like our jobs, our friends, and even ourselves? Are our own lives any more real than Yury's or are we all simply players in our own, less well-remunerated games of life?