

Play With Me

ANDREI NAZIMOV

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Young actor Slava (writer-director-star Andrei Nazimov) graduated from Moscow's GITIS film school several years ago, but as of yet his dreams of becoming a famous actor have stalled. His schedule has become an apparently endless series of unsuccessful auditions – an unwanted metaphor for the cycle of frustrations that define his life.

If his problems started and ended at artistic disappointment, then Slava might be able to get by. But, of course, the big city also throws up its share of more practical problems as well. To wit: Slava is three months late on his rent and facing eviction, and has been fired from the cafe where he scraped together cash as a waiter. If Slava's life is to turn into a fairy tale success story, then something dramatic is going to have to happen, and soon. Enter stage left the mysterious and beautiful young Anya (Maria Akhmetzyanova), who spots our hero on the Mosfilm studio lot and whose intentions towards him may be professional or romantic – or both.

Nazimov's film is based on his own experiences as a jobbing young actor, one of a growing roster of self-reflexive films by young Russian artists turning their own struggles in the hyper-commercialised film and TV industries into artistic inspiration; see also Aleksei Kamynin's Russian Spleen, another recent Pick of the Week here on Klassiki. Nazimov doesn't share in Kamynin's cynicism and acid humour, though: *Play With Me* is doleful and disabused, but retains a healthy dose of romanticism. The message, if there is one, is never to give up. Somehow, the world (and the world of cinema) will provide.

The potential for pessimism is tempered in part by Nazimov's decision to jump between storylines and even genres from one scene to the next: some scenes play almost like sketch comedy, some are unabashedly rom-com-esque, some edge towards seriousness. As Slava's relationship with Anya develops, Nazimov lets the world of flopped auditions and money troubles subside for long stretches, instead taking us on a tour with the young couple through some of Moscow's picture postcard locations: the monument to tragic poet Osip Mandelstam, the embankments beneath the Kremlin walls, storied old theatres. For a first-time director, Nazimov does demonstrate in these sequences a deft hand when it comes to that most reliable of film tropes, young love. There is a tenderness and a sincerity in these moments that is borderline refreshing.

In stark contrast to this storyline are the more biting comedic scenes featuring the uproarious Gosha Kutsenko as a tyrannical producer, who doesn't miss an opportunity to rage at his underlings and into whose orbit Slava is pulled by a series of chance circumstances. In these scenes, Nazimov brings his resentment with the behind-the-scenes machinations and grotesqueries of the film business to the fore, and the results are amusing and infuriating in equal measure.

Nazimov is not reinventing the wheel with this debut; this is a curtain that has long since been lifted, to much weightier effect, by a host of actors and directors. But there is nonetheless a value in his own, distinctly Russian-millennial take on backstage life.