

# Doctor

GOSHA KUTSENKO

2016

Doctor, prolific cinematic polymath Gosha Kutsenko's 2016 melodrama, explores the real-life difficulties in the daily life of a neurosurgeon. Inspired by the death of his mother, who had been battling a brain tumour for two years, Kutsenko both wrote and starred in his directorial debut, bringing to the table a strong and convincing performance informed by personal tragedy. Not for the squeamish or fainthearted, the film features plenty of footage taken straight from the operating table – bloody close-ups showcase the painstaking, incredibly precise work of the brain surgeon at work. Viscera aside, though, the film focuses less on the physically demanding side of the job and the incredible skill required as it does on the emotional toll it extracts – one that is so often left untold and unappreciated in medical dramas.

Doctor Yury Mikhailovich (nicknamed Yum), played by Kutsenko himself, is one of the best brain surgeons in the country. Revered for his merits by friends, colleagues, students, and patients alike, Yum's talented hand makes the work of a brain surgeon look easy. However, the reality of his life is much grimmer than it appears. Next to his already stressful job and the added strain of inconsiderate strangers, broken mobile phones, and the crumbling relationship he shares with his wife, it seems that Yum only finds happiness in frequent phone calls to his lover and conversations with a beautiful new intern. Our protagonist is stretched thin by the ever-escalating demands of those around him: long shifts spent caring for patients, answering streams of questions, bearing bad news, horrifying diagnoses, and unfavourable prospects – sometimes to close friends and colleagues.

The film goes out of its way to find ways to pull afresh on the audience's heart strings: through the heartbreaking effects of illness on children; through the emotional pain suffered by families affected; and

through Yum's now-sick first love, who comes into his office asking to be operated on by him alone, and forcing him to manoeuvre through a complex situation full of drama and bittersweet memories.

Although he successfully deals with this constant mental strain through sarcastic, witty jokes, humour and sarcasm can only take one so far. Soon enough, the cracks in Yum's psyche begin to show. Having spent 25 years witnessing the pain and suffering his patients and their families undergo at the hands of a merciless illness, Yum reaches a disillusioning conclusion – he is not saving anyone; he is simply prolonging their life by a few years, which for a man in his position can only mean more misery. Plagued by the fear that he himself will end up hopeless and prone, he asks a close friend and colleague that, in the case of such an event, she simply put him out of his misery: "If something happens to me, kill me! Just inject 400 units of insulin into my veins and that's it! If you love me, you'll kill me!"

Soon after, in a darkly ironic twist, we do indeed get the unedifying spectacle of Yum lying in a hospital bed, having sustained near-fatal injuries when a speeding truck crashes into the rear of his stationary car. His prospects are slim, as he already knows, having personally assessed the scans of his brain injuries. In the final instance, Kutsenko adds a note of ambiguity to this bluntly tragic ending; the film closes with a shot of Yum walking past his car instead of getting into it, prompting the audience to ask the unanswerable question: what if?

It might not win any awards for subtlety, but Kutsenko's Doctor is nonetheless a raw, honest, and sadly timely depiction of what it means to be a medical professional, and how the difficulties of the job take a toll that too often goes unnoticed.