



Dr Zhivago: romance and revolution Hollywood style

Coming In From The Cold

A long-awaited cultural thaw is under way in the Soviet Union, forming a vital part of the new spirit of *glasnost* or 'openness'. Censorship has been under sharp public attack over the past year. The film makers' and writers' unions, with help from the Communist Party central committee, were overhauled last summer, and in January a big experiment was launched to give theatres more artistic and financial independence. Previously unpublished literary classics and unreleased films that have been gathering dust for many years are beginning to appear.

This is only a start, but people are already making comparisons with the renaissance in Soviet culture in the years after the 20th party congress in 1956. Certainly there is a new sense of excitement and involvement in the main centres. Literary journals are selling out fast and are becoming ever harder to find. Theatres which

were playing to near empty houses are at last finding an audience.

The publication of long forbidden authors is a landmark. So far these include a selection of the 'white' Russian writers like Nabokov, Gumilev and Khodasevich; while the lifting of the partial ban on more home-grown poets and novelists such as Pasternak, Mandelstam and Bulgakov is simultaneously under way.

The announcement that *Dr Zhivago* is to come out next year has made headline news in the West. In the Soviet Union there is also much interest in the strong rumour that a long-suppressed novel by Rybakov, set at the time of the purges and dealing with Kirov's assassination, will come out soon. Among new prose writings, the most talked about are the recent novels of Aitmatov (*The Executioner's Block*) Rasputin (*The Fire*) and Astafev (*The Sad Detective*). All of these deal, in one way or another,

with a sense of loss of moral purpose in Soviet society, and with a search for ways of filling the gap. There are divisions in the literary community, in particular between the Russian 'cultural nationalists' who want to protect a Russian national identity, and those concerned with more universal aspects of a political/moral regeneration. But there is a deep, common yearning to keep open a political space in which the arts will be allowed to breathe more freely.

In the theatre world, a clear sign of the times is a wave of dramas that hit out at subservience, corruption and social apathy, and give strong support to the current moves towards a democratisation of Soviet society. An intriguing example is Shatrov's *Dictatorship Of Conscience* in which a group of journalists on a youth paper organise a 'trial' of Lenin, and of the whole Soviet political experience, taking as their model a

similar event that was put on in Lenin's lifetime. Prosecution witnesses from past and present attack the violence, elitism, and loss of moral values that they see as the natural outcome of the socialist project. Defence witnesses insist on separating the distortions of past practice from the still untapped potential for democracy. Lenin is absolved, but can be vindicated only when *everyone* makes a contribution.

Other current plays deal critically with the ethos of political officialdom (eg, Misharin's *A Silver Wedding*) and, more generally, with the pursuit of private material interests at the expense of a wider social-moral purpose (eg, Petrushevskaya's *Three Girls In Blue* and Dozortsev's *The Last Visitor*). Another play, that is now much in demand, Stavitsky's *Sholom Aleikhem Street 40*, for the first time confronts the issue of Jewish emigration, and gives an empathic description of conflicts in a family in which some members have decided to leave.

In the cinema, the major event has been the recent release of *Repentance*, by the Georgian director Abuladze. The central character, Varlam Aravidze, has the mannerisms of Stalin, and manages to combine the physical attributes of Beria, Hitler and Mussolini. The action, set over several decades in a Georgian town, sees the round-up of numerous 'enemies of the people', who are repressed after interrogation about their involvement in impossible conspiracies. After the death of the big chief, the daughter of one of the victims keeps on digging up Varlam's grave, explaining that to let him rest in peace would be to condone what he did. The film has been variously interpreted, but has made a big impact.

Other indications of the cinema thaw are the release of films, again on historical themes, by the brilliant Leningrad director, German (*My Friend Ivan Lapshin* and *The Road Check*), and a retrospective of Tarkovsky now showing in Moscow. Abdrashitov and Mindadze, a

very gifted director-writer team from the middle generation of film makers, have just brought out their sixth controversial work, *Dangerous Games*, which deals with a youth who decides to become his own law enforcer by fraternising with criminals and then exposing them.

The political reasons for the more adventurous cultural policy are not hard to find. The reformist wing of the party leadership is seeking, almost desperately, a relationship with the intellectuals in which they can serve as allies in the current process of 'reconstruction' and in the struggle against the forces of inertia. 'You cannot imagine', said Gorbachev last summer, 'how much we (the central committee) need the support of such a group as the writers'.

What are the prospects for such an alliance? So long as the main political impulse for democratisation comes from above, it is not easy. If people follow the prevailing winds, they will be criticised for being obsequious. But if they take too literally the call for boldness and creativity, political support cannot be guaranteed. So far it has been difficult to make the shift from an expose of social problems to an analysis of their historical and current roots. The experience of the Stalin period, though touched on obliquely, has nowhere yet been tackled head-on. That is why Efremov, chief director of the Moscow Art Theatre, has warned that 'we must take to its completion the work begun by the 20th party congress', so as to avoid the same errors in the future.

Yet the big changes that have already happened on the cultural scene in the past two years should warn against any categorical judgements about where the limits of 'openness' might lie. At present a vital political space *has* opened up, and the more advantage the intelligentsia takes of it now, the more difficult it will be for any conservative opposition to effect a reversal in the future. •

Nick Lampert