

# THE MOVIES

Beauty and the Beasts in *A Slave of Love*

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

WE DON'T often see Soviet movies these days, so I went to *A Slave of Love* (Mosfilm) hardly knowing what to expect. The film shows us, before the titles, an audience in a theater watching a magniloquent silent film called *A Slave of Love*. The police stop the performance, seize a man, take him into the streets, smash him against a plate-glass window, and throw him into a truck. Then come the titles, and soon we are in the Crimea where the company that made *A Slave of Love* is at work on a new movie.

It is 1919. The Bolsheviks have established themselves in the north, but General Denikin's White troops still control the Black Sea coast. Caught in the cross-currents are the movie people, oblivious to politics, scrounging for film, determined to keep on turning out their ham melodramas as if nothing has happened. We are, one of them says, like "children forgotten in a nursery when the house is on fire."

I don't know whether the film industry breeds the same types everywhere or whether even the Soviet cinema takes its models from Hollywood, but the characters are instantly recognizable—the harassed producer; the fat director, screaming at the actors, smoking cigars, worrying about his weight; the star, beautiful, flirtatious, pouting, temperamental. Only the cameraman is different, an enigmatic, withdrawn young man who spends much of his time gazing longingly at the star.

Reality hovers in the background. The company is waiting for the male lead, only to learn that he has stayed in Moscow and joined the Revolution. They find a new lead, a poseur with a falsetto voice. The star and the cameraman begin to fall in love. General Denikin's local intelligence chief calls on the troupe and gives the star a bouquet. It is summer with bright sunlight and brilliant flowers. When the cameraman takes the star for a spin in his open roadster, the dust rising from the road envelops the car like a sandstorm.

Gradually we understand that the cameraman is a revolutionary, secretly taking pictures of White atrocities for the Bolshevik underground. The star helps him conceal a reel of film from the police. She is drawn into the underground because she loves the cameraman, because she is a romantic who

likes to play roles, because she thinks it is so "wonderful to be wrapped up in a cause, to be doing something useful. I want to exist, the way a tree exists, or a blade of grass." Deliberately or not, the film offers a sketch of a type not unknown in the United States—the movie star as fellow traveler.

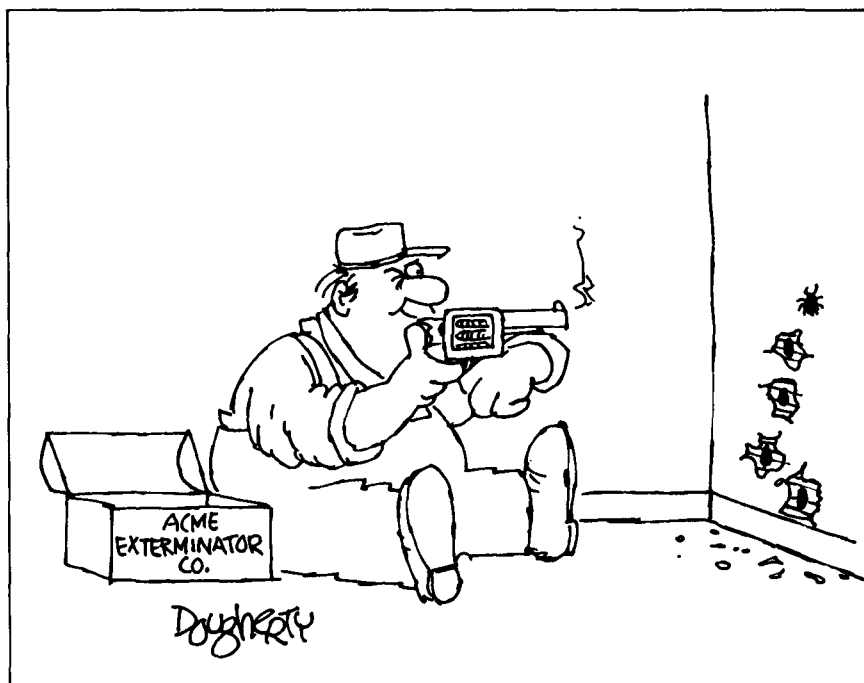
The atmosphere darkens. It is autumn. The Red Army moves south. The White intelligence operation closes in on the underground. The pretitle sequence is repeated, at last in context. The cameraman is shot down as he drives his car across an empty square. The intelligence chief and his agents search the quarters of the film troupe looking for the reels of atrocity film. The Red underground rescues the film, kills the intelligence chief, and sends the star back to her hotel in an empty streetcar. The motorman jumps from the car and betrays her to the Whites. They pursue her on horseback as the car careers down the tracks. As they gain on her, she cries out, "You're worse than beasts."

I found *A Slave of Love* an attractive and affecting movie. It is true enough that the revolutionaries would turn out to be worse than beasts. A top Cheka official boasted in 1920 that from January 1918 to July 1919 the Cheka had arrested 86,893 people, executed 8,389, and sent 9,496 to the camps. But this

fact does not invalidate the emotions of members of a movie troupe living under the White terror in the Crimea.

It is true also that once or twice the ideological symbolism of the film becomes excessive. When the cameraman tells the star that "a new world is being born," a preposterous gale suddenly blows up to underline the point of drastic upheaval. At the film's end, the camera sweeps from the streetcar up into the sky, incongruously religious in its suggestion of the heroine's ascension to heaven. Moreover, the color is often garish; the hero appears to have orange hair. And the subtitles are clumsily written and timed.

For all these defects, director Nikita Mikhalkov has a sure instinct for human relationships. His evocation of the wrangling camaraderie involved in film-making is reminiscent of Truffaut's *Day for Night*. He manages with sensitivity the deepening in mood, from the idle self-indulgence of the movie troupe at the start to the grim shocks of reality at the end. Elena Solovey as the star has a shrill and insistent voice, but she is visually quite perfect and wholly convincing in her transformation from self-centered frivolity to bemused commitment. In a modest way *A Slave of Love* is an atmospheric triumph. Cinema 5 is to be commended for arranging its American release. ●



# TELEVISION

PBS in the Fogbank of Faith

by Karl E. Meyer

THE TROUBLE WITH most religious programming is that it is the opiate of the already converted. This reproach scarcely applies to "The Long Search," a 13-part public television series that ambitiously attempts a grand tour of the City of God in a spirit of sympathetic inquiry rather than pious exhortation. However flawed the result, the programs have a redeeming merit—they can be viewed without wincing even by unbelievers.

More than three years ago Ronald Eyre and a BBC crew embarked on a quest that encompassed 13 countries and involved close encounters with adherents of every major creed. Eyre, a playwright and director of whom I know nothing, seems to be yet another Englishman born with a silver tongue and a trouper's poise; his literate presence keeps the programs from dwindling into travelogue.

Still, the very requirements of television conspire to render God invisible. It is the pageantry of worship that the camera catches, and when the search is over, it is the people we remember, not the creed. This difficulty was apparent in the two excellent programs that inaugurated the series this month. (The one-hour programs will continue weekly through December on most Public Broadcasting Service stations; consult your local television listings for times.)

In the premiere program, the setting was Indianapolis and the subject American Protestantism. Producer Peter Montagnon and his crew were uncannily skillful in capturing the certitude of born-again fundamentalists (heaven is as real a place as Chicago, a preacher informs us), the guilt-ridden liberalism of affluent Methodists, and the early Christian simplicity of a black revivalist congregation.

The fare, however, was visual and not spiritual. A compelling sequence, showing two teenage girls singing an anti-Darwin hymn ("I'm no kin to the monkey, no, no, no"), a wonderfully human snapshot, told more about Middle America than it did about the ways of God. In short, every television success was a theological defeat.

This was even more true in the second program, *Footprints of the Buddha*, filmed in Sri Lanka and visually dominated by aging monks in saffron robes.

I never did get a clear sense of Buddhist beliefs, save in the most general terms, but I was enthralled by a sequence in which a 10-year-old boy became a novice. His gleaming head freshly shaved, he knelt at the feet of monks whose wizened features recalled *Lost Horizon*.

Confusing (to me) was a sequence in which the statues of Buddha were extolled as icons embodying spiritual truths, and yet a few minutes later the same seer told Eyre that statuary is "the kindergarten department of the spiritual life."

Thus "The Long Search," judging by the three installments I've seen, is at its most impressive when it presents the living image and at its feeblest when concerned with doctrine. It has persuaded me that we may never glimpse the *Imago Dei* through the eye of television, though I was still curious how Eyre would wind up his quest in the final program, to be shown in December.

In that program Eyre, dressed in a white cable-stitch sweater and seated in

his London apartment, strove for a chatty tone as he discussed celestial mysteries. No, he does not believe that God is a great white face in the sky; yes, he does believe that God exists, and that all the great world religions are like different climbing kits for mountaineers ascending the same great peak. I am afraid he did not fairly state the intellectual difficulties involved in belief but relied instead on verbal dexterity to mask the fogbank at the peak of the mountain.

Perhaps I am unfair in expecting more, given the deep emotions the subject necessarily arouses. (It is unimaginable that a Voltaire or a Mencken would ever get equal time on religious programming.) In any event, "The Long Search" at least attempted to examine, rather than exhort, and full credit for the venture should be given to its coproducers: BBC, Time-Life Television, and R.M. Productions in Munich. It is presented by KCET of Los Angeles, and has as underwriter (aptly) the Xerox Corporation, the *deus ex machina* of modern communications. ●

