Is there a place in contemporary Russia for the genius artist? This question has been asked before in recent Russian cinema with various results (see, for example, my review of Metamorphosis). One thing is certain, though, from these films: the artistic mind is bound to suffer and to endure torment in Russia and elsewhere. This is also the case with Anna Matison’s farce After You’re Gone. Here the answer is yes, there is a place for the artist, but it comes at a cost.

In After You’re Gone, Sergei Bezrukov plays Aleksei Temnikov, a ballet dancer who has fallen from stardom in the 1990s and gone back to his provincial upbringing in the town of Klin, situated halfway between Moscow and Tver’. Temnikov is a sensitive man, but also socially inept, which—together with a pronounced stammer—makes up the complex character of a troubled artist. He is rich, runs his own studio, and owns a pharmacy, as well as a Ferrari. However, he only drives his Ferrari from his backyard building to the street where his studio is located. There, he is enticed (and bribed) from officials, whose children need training; yet his VIP master-class is full of middle-aged women who cannot dance. In short, Temnikov’s genius is ruined and wasted in Klin. He is a Mozart who has turned into a Salieri. On top of that, Temnikov’s lover is pregnant and wants to marry, while he does not; and his old lover turns up with a 12-year-old daughter, whom he has not met before, nor has he paid any child allowance. All the components of the plot are well-known thus far.

His daughter, played by Bezrukov’s actual daughter Anastasiia, wants to know her father. Or, as she puts it, to understand him. This encounter causes a near-nervous breakdown in Temnikov, or enough, for that matter, to cause his old injury to resurface with irreparable consequences. This time it is fatal: in six months Temnikov will be paralyzed. He can only walk or stand, but not sit. No more Ferrari flashing.

The couple, Anna Matison and Sergei Bezrukov, have previously made the new-year film The Milky Way (Mlechnyi put’, 2015), with Matison as director and scriptwriter and Bezrukov as male lead. They seem to have a film-making tempo that defies contemplation, reflection or intellectualization. After You’re Gone was made on a fast production line; Matison wrote the script together with Timur Ezugbaya, and the film went into production in the same year. At first, this shows in the heavy-handedness of the characters development. They seem extremely stiff and formulaic in the opening of the film, as if cut from rough figures. For example, Bezrukov’s stammer is annoying at first, but recedes into less frantic proportions as the narrative evolves.

My reading of the film will not dig deep, as I think that would be missing the point. However, I found the relationship between the cinematic and the real world intriguing. In other words, the way the film points beyond the framework of cinema in order to make a point about what is being depicted. This is, in my view, how the film manages to grow on the viewer.

First, there is Bezrukov’s affection for dance, which he explains in an interview to the radio station Komsol’skaia Pravda. He is fan of Pina Bausch and her “Tanztheater,” and although he is too old to perform classical ballet, he still manages to keep up with modern dance. Bezrukov is in some way Temnikov, but then he is not quite so. Bezrukov’s own pieces are in the film, pieces which are made up mostly from improvisation. The whole story of the genius-but-troubled dancer also points to Soviet ballet’s most well-known exports, Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, but also more contemporary dancers, such as the Ukrainian performer Sergei Polunin, who stood at the centre of Steven Cantor’s documentary Dancer (2016). However, the connection between ballet
and cinema does not stop there. Baryshnikov’s most famous screen role is probably that of Alexander Petrovsky in Sex and the City (1998-2004), but, of course, White Nights (dir. Taylor Hackford, 1986) came even closer to imitating the real life of a defected dancer on screen. Baryshnikov is an idol for Bezrukov—a dancer who manages the crossover from classical to modern, from stage to screen, in an admirable way.

According to Bezrukov, Baryshnikov is a free artist, but here I have concerns about the connection between fiction and reality. The free male artist is currently being scrutinised through the #metoo campaign, where notorious male geniuses in the world of cinema have been taken aback by their female counterparts’ accusations of sexual harassment. It seems that the “male genius,” as indicated in the #metoo cases, has had an almost “artistic” license to pestering others with intimidations. And Aleksei Temnikov is insensitive in this sense: he is rude towards the all the women around him, as well as, for example, a male critic. His poor social skills, his involuntary stammer, and the compulsion to speak derogatorily to others can, of course, be part of a psychological condition, such as Asperger or Tourette syndrome. But that would have been another film.

Temnikov never becomes likable, because his fall from Ferrari to trolleybus is never really believable. There is constantly an ironic distance to the story and its commentary on actuality. The scene on the trolleybus is a good example: it serves as a sort of magical realism converged through the camera movement, which moves fluidly in and out of the bus while the three young female co-passengers resemble fairy-tale figures more than Muscovites. The reference to Georgii Danelia’s I Walk Around Moscow (la shagaiu po Moskve, 1964) through the focus on Moscow’s public transport is not obvious, but still detectable. In a comparison between these two films, the magical element is at the forefront in Matison’s film: it is an artificial world construction, while in Daneliia’s film—no less artificial—realism protruded beyond the screen. In After You’re Gone the evening sets on, the night falls on Moscow, while I Walk Around Moscow showed the city in a morning haze shining on the new dawn of the capital.

This Moscow allegory leads me to the last entanglement with reality that Matison manages to pull off, because Moscow at large rejects Temnikov's idea; it is instead St Petersburg and the Mariinsky Theater that realize the project of Symphony for Three Movement. The dance scenes in the film are from the Mariinsky’s production of this ballet from 2015. Indeed, the Mariinsky appears as a co-producer of the film and Valerii Gergiev’s appearance demonstrate the Theater’s support of and involvement in the production.

However, it is the modern exiled Stravinsky whose work is chosen over Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev, with the orchestra conducted by Valerii Gergiev. In musical terms, it is like choosing abstract over representational painting, Malevich over Repin. And Temnikov has very strict opinions regarding the role of music; it should not be taken lightly, as the pop music that his daughter is listening to. Music is art, according to Temnikov, which seems to re-enforce the Frankfurt School’s division between entertainment and art. But is this really what the film is arguing?

It is this light dealing with reality that makes it difficult to probe into a deeper analysis of the film. As for its investigation into the mind of the genius artists, it is a fair contribution. The formation of national heroes, as shown at the film’s end with the talk-show and documentary, is a good example of scrutinizing media and the representation of heroism. The way in which the film scorn the talent show is admirable, asking questions like “what do we value in artistic performances?” Values of professionalism seem long gone, as none of the students at Temnikov’s studio want to be professional dancers, which returns us to the Mozart/Salieri discussion.

However, this does not make After You’re Gone self-reflexive. Although mediation ultimately kills Temnikov, the comic takes the upper hand in the film. If the satire is meant to aim at conservative, or neo-conservative musical values, then Matison and Bezrukov need to turn down the speed of production and turn up self-reflexive irony.

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