Women of War

Kantemir Balagov’s visionary history

GRISHA FREIDIN: For me, your film was striking, first of all because you were able to look at Russia’s holy of holies, the Great Patriotic War—the Blockade of Leningrad—in a totally new way: a story of two young women veterans making a go at life in the fall of 1945 in subpolar Leningrad. This is both daring and symptomatic. It is daring for a man who grew up at the periphery of Russia, whose last name is not Russian, to take on a central, defining moment for the country’s self-image, the legitimacy of its state, and to challenge its deepest dogma. Symptomatic, because in Russia (as elsewhere), the center doesn’t hold, and a new strong vision comes, as it did a hundred years ago, from the periphery. What moved you to make this film?

KANTEMIR BALAGOV: It all began in 2015 when I read Svetlana Alexievich’s The Unwomanly Face of War. I was dumbstruck. I realized my total ignorance: I understood nothing about the war, neither about the feats of courage, nor the acts of evil. But the greatest revelation was the actual role of women in the war. I had absorbed the stereotype that women served only as medics or, in any case, away from combat. Wrong! I had no idea what they had to go through, the tectonic inner shift they had to experience, the biological, psychological shift. Men, too. A human being, a biological being, who can generate life, enters war and is totally surrounded by death. How can you live after that in peacetime? This question shook me to the core. The [spiritual] destination of these women both captivated and astounded me. I felt it my duty as a human being, as [a] citizen, to tell their story. Russian cinema today is quasi-patriotic. It carries a subtext, “We can do this war thing again—we aren’t afraid of anything,” etc. But every war film should be anti-militaristic. So for me, it was a challenge to avoid focusing on tempting absolutes: feats of courage or the opposite. Absolutes distort what a Soviet person was all about.

You gave war a female face—and body! It is unprecedented. Not quite. Larisa Shepitko’s Wings (1966), is a striking film about a young woman [pilot] after the war, though it is set some years later. It was a source of inspiration for me, along with Alexei German’s My Friend Ivan Lapshin (1985) and Mikhail Kalatozov’s The Cranes Are Flying (1957).

But Wings is about peacetime; Ivan Lapshin is set in the 1930s. Only Kalatozov’s Cranes is an iconic war film, but you seem to debunk it. His cranes are harbingers of springtime, of hope. Your birds come from The Dying Swan ballet, both in the hospital scene where an amputee is imitating a swan and towards the end, when Beanpole tries to take off her bra and is frozen in the pose from the finale of The Dying Swan.

Yes, you can say that.

Viktoria Miroshnichenko plays Beanpole with such power. Did you shape the film around her, or did you choose her because she fit your original concept?

Our main criterion in casting was height. The principle that guided me was yin-yang, not just in psychology, but physically. I needed someone arresting because my heroine is a composite character, with origins in Andrey Platonov’s stories: Yasubka, Pro, Dzban. I wanted to find an actual person of this type, and Viktoria Miroshnichenko does resemble them a little, not 100 percent, but the way she moves and
In Beanpole, you re-gender war. The old Homeric formula—“men go to war, fight, and get the girl”—frames our war mythology and propaganda. But in Beanpole, those who go to war and fight are young women, and they don’t exactly get the girl or the boy. Is this why sex in your film is never right? Copulations are odd, to put it mildly, and lovemaking never really works.

Yes. And this is why in Russian the film is called Dylda [meaning an awkward giant who is not quite bright]. For me, the word means being ungraceful, disoriented, lost in space; but my characters, befuddled as they are, have feelings just like the rest of us, and like us, they have sex and make love, if in a state of befuddlement. It was really important for us to show this disorientation in the aftermath of the war. What you say about Homer is right. I despise machismo and testosterone excess. But this was more a matter of the unconscious intuition than design.

Your film could not have come out of any other country but Russia. You are a man of Russian culture through and through. But you deviate from the Russian tradition in one important respect: you have no saints. Remember the saying Solzhenitsyn liked: without a righteous person, no village can stand. There isn’t even a hint of one. Nor are there any evil actors.

I owe this to literature. When I studied [for five years] in Alexander Nikolaevich Sokurov’s film workshop, we had a great emphasis on Russian and foreign literature. It was Sokurov’s principle: a film director must read more books and watch fewer films. He always instructed us, using his film about Hitler (Moloch, 1999) as an example, that we must always try and justify our protagonists, because they will be judged in any case, without us. We must not place ourselves, as authors, above the protagonist. It is hubris, and I try to avoid it. I prefer to walk their walk alongside them, not above them. In any case, this is how I see it done in literature. As an author, I am always interested in justifying the amoral choices of my characters, in understanding their motives and showing to the audience that, under the circumstances, they could not have done otherwise. But one must avoid judging them from a high moral ground and pronounce what is right and what is wrong. Why? Because I myself do not know what is right.

Do you expect to be criticized in Russia for your treatment of same-sex love, “advocating homosexuality?”

Love should not have gender; for me, this is obvious. But the [Queer Palm] nomination, I think, tends to simplify the complex of motives making up my characters, limit their range as human beings. Above all else, a human being needs another human being; gender comes second. This is why I find it a bit constraining to have my characters viewed through the prism of same-sex love. But I am not going to protest against it.

You were very lucky in your choice of the cinematographer, Ksenia Sereda. You needed a woman’s eye, right?

Yes. Fortunately she was able to join us as a director of photography. But a woman’s eye? Every human being has a male and female side. Speaking of myself, I try to understand my own femininity with the help of my heroines.

The next film I want to shoot will be about men, and in this way, I intend to explore and understand my own male side. It is through my characters that, among other things, I study my own self and why my first two films were about women.

The women’s bathhouse scene, brimming with nudes, brings to mind The Turkish Bath, the erotic painting by Ingres, modeled on a male gaze of a certain kind. But the one produced by Sereda’s lens is utterly different. Intentional?

That’s curious. We were influenced, rather, by archival photos.

And then, the echoes of Vermeer, his light, the color that you called in some interview “the rust of humanity.”

Yes, the shot of Beanpole in the hospital comes from Vermeer’s Girl with a Pearl Earring.

With a bit of Botticelli’s La Primavera.

Yes, in a way, it’s a composite image.

To circle back to politics: You are going against the grain of the official take on World War II in Russia; not head-on, but the sensibility of Beanpole is subversive. It is about loss, not victory.

Whether it is or not—time will tell. I try to be apolitical. To the extent art gains in political relevance, it loses in artistic merit. But there is a political subtext in whatever we do, because we cannot exist without politics. But when you intentionally go after a political end, your art begins to suffer from calculation, and loses value as art.