

Remembering Eldar Ryazanov – in His Own Words

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Служебный роман: office affair

This week in Russia has been colored by sorrow: Eldar Ryazanov, one of the country's most famous and beloved film directors, died at the age of 88. Since his death, television stations have been replaying his films from the 1960s through 1980s, and Russians — who are among the greatest quoters in the world — are slipping lines from his films into just about every conversation.

This is always hard on us foreigners. Someone says an odd little sentence like Он, конечно, виноват, но он ... не виноват (Of course he's guilty, but ... he isn't guilty) and everyone laughs. You stand there with an uncertain smile on your face until someone explains that it's a line from *Берегись Автомобиля* (Watch Out for the Car), said in defense of a 1960s Soviet Robin Hood by the great actor Oleg Yefremov. One more cultural allusion understood.

My favorite bit in that movie is when a fussy little car owner — a guy who made enough money to buy a Volga from selling electronics under the counter in a state commission shop — is describing some minor problems with his car to his enormous, laconic mechanic. He complains about a problem with steering. Поглядим (We'll take a look), the mechanic says. And it makes this ticking noise when you switch gears. Послушаем (We'll listen). And yesterday it smelled of gas. Понюхаем (We'll smell it.) Over the years when I would explain in excruciatingly boring detail some little glitch in one of my Zhigulis, my (big, laconic) mechanic would just say: Поглядим. Послушаем. Понюхаем. And laugh.

Another favorite Ryazanov movie with an automotive theme — cars, in their rarity, had particular meaning in the late Soviet period — is Гараж (Garage). It takes place in an organization called НИИ Охраны животных от окружающей среды (the Scientific Research Institute for the Protection of Animals from the Environment). Уже смешно! (It's funny already.) The institute's co-op has to eliminate several garages to allow for some road construction, and the party bigwigs think they can just kick out the least privileged employees. But at their meeting a young scientist locks them all in a building to force them to resolve the issue fairly. Over the long and hysterical night — Будь проклят тот день, когда я купил машину! (Cursed be the day that I bought a car!) — all the truth of misuse of authority, bribery, nepotism, and protectionism come out. Попрошу факт продажи Родины зафиксировать в протоколе! (I ask that evidence of selling out the Homeland be entered into the minutes!)

I also love Служебный Роман (An Office Affair), partially to watch the actress Alisa Freindlikh's transformation from "наша мымра" (our frump) to a knockout, but mostly because of the incredibly rich life of the staff. The office is like a big village, with the secretary Vera the town gossip and expert on all things feminine. From her I learned: Именно обувь делает женщину женщиной (It's shoes that make a woman a woman). Write that down.

In the film Вокзал на Двоих (Train Station for Two) you can learn about спекулянты (speculators, black marketeers) selling melons. In the Soviet era, speculation was a serious crime, but the vendors don't see it that way. They're performing a service: Я не спекулянтка! Мы посредники между землей и народом. (I'm not a speculator! We're middlemen between the earth and the people!)

Ryazanov was our middleman between reality and people, and I'm sorry he's gone.

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