

'The Master and Margarita': From Favorite Novel to Blockbuster Film

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'The Master and Margarita' poster

"The Master and Margarita" was only released less than a month ago but it has already become one of the highest grossing and most talked about films in Russia in recent years. In the first weekend alone the film amassed almost half a billion rubles. The film is based on the eponymous novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, widely accepted as the most read Russian novel of the 20th century.

Despite its popularity, the film quickly became a target of Z-activists and state propagandists, some even going so far as to call for banning the film and prosecuting the director, Mikhail Lockshin, who happens to be a US citizen.

Lockshin is a relative newcomer. The only other film under his belt is the highly successful "Silver Skates," which was the first Russian-language Netflix Originals movie. "Silver Skates" is an entertaining Christmas caper about a gang of pickpockets skating on frozen canals of St.

Petersburg that also touches upon more serious themes, such as women's rights and the horror of crashing the opposition protests.

"The Master and Margarita" also started out as a possible Netflix original with the backing of Universal as the international distributor, which may have influenced some of the casting decisions. Since the movie was filmed before the war, it was possible to attract some top foreign talent.

August Diehl, who plays Woland, the Devil incarnate, is a high-profile German actor famous for starring in Oscar winning "The Counterfeiters" and Tarantino's "Inglourious Basterds." Pontius Pilate is played by a Danish actor Claes Bang, who was the lead actor in Ruben Östlund's critical darling "The Square."

Some of the Russian cast might also seem familiar to a Western viewer: Yulia Snigir, who plays Margarita, was in Sorrentino's "The New Pope" and "A Good Day to Die Hard," while Yuri Kolokolnikov, one of Woland's entourage, played in such popular TV series as "Game of Thrones" and "The Americans."

Roman Kantor, the screenwriter for "The Master and Margarita," also wrote the script for Lockshin's debut film, "Silver Skates," as well as for the critically acclaimed TV series "To the Lake," bought by Netflix. "To the Lake" was described rather famously by Stephen King as "a pretty darn good Russian series."

When Russia invaded Ukraine, Universal pulled out, and the film's release date was pushed back due to lack of funding for post-production.

Everyone's favorite novel

The film's popularity and the never-ending debate about its pluses and minuses stem from the source material — the novel by Mikhail Bulgakov.

When you ask someone in Russia what their favorite book is, it's very likely that the response will be "The Master and Margarita."

Published posthumously during the "thaw" of the 1960s, "The Master and Margarita" first became the Soviet intelligentsia's cult classic. Parents encouraged their children to read it. People judged each other's character based on their opinion of the novel.

References to the novel are ubiquitous in modern Russia, some of the quotes became memes before there was a word "meme." For instance, "Never talk to strangers" or "Manuscripts don't burn."

New interpretation

The book consists of three semi-independent narratives: Woland and his entourage's arrival in 1930's Moscow, Pontius Pilate's trial of Yeshua Ha-Notsri (Jesus of Nazareth) in Jerusalem, and the story of the Master and his lover Margarita that also takes place in Moscow.

The movie blends all three narratives and adds a meta-element: the Master is writing a novel about Woland's adventures in Moscow. Thus Lockshin equates the Master with the author of

the novel, Mikhail Bulgakov. The Master, played by Evgeniy Tsyganov, does indeed bear some resemblance to Bulgakov.

The film starts with a bang: invisible Margarita flies into the apartment of the Master's arch-nemesis, the critic Latunsky and wreaks havoc. We also see a bird's-eye view of a parallel-universe Moscow in the 1930s filled with skyscrapers, including the never built Palace of the Soviets topped by an enormous statue of Lenin.

The famous opening scene of the novel, where Woland first appears, doesn't take place until forty minutes in, and Lockshin transported it from familiar Patriarch's Ponds to retro-futuristic Moscow (which, ironically, was filmed in St Petersburg).

On the other hand, the fateful meeting of star-crossed lovers, Master and Margarita, happens at the very beginning of the film; in the book they meet mid-novel. Tsyganov and Snigir are a couple in real life, so there's some very authentic chemistry between them.

Jumping between narratives and timelines might be exhausting to the viewers unfamiliar with the novel: now we are in "real" Moscow of the 1930s, now we are in a parallel Moscow of the Master's imagination, now we have traveled back in time to Jerusalem.

The controversy

What started the outcry by Russian patriots is how closely 1930s Moscow in Lockshin's film resembles today's Moscow, including the brutality of the police. Woland's ball looks a lot like what happened at the famous "almost naked" party.

The takedown of the Master by his colleagues at MASSOLIT (a made-up association of writers) is reminiscent of the treatment of many Russian writers in the past couple of years, as writers Dmitry Glukhovsky, Dmitry Bykov, Boris Akunin and many others are on the list of foreign agents.

These similarities are obviously unintended, since filming was completed before the start of the invasion in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Mikhail Lockshin has been targeted by many Z-activists and one of the reasons is his American citizenship.

Lockshin's story is an unusual one. His parents, Arnold and Lauren Lockshin, asked for political asylum in the USSR in 1986. Mikhail was born in the US, but grew up in Russia, graduating from the psychology department of the Moscow State University. In 2022 Lockshin publicly expressed his opposition to Russian invasion of Ukraine and left for the US.

Critical consensus?

Despite the controversy, The Master and Margarita received overwhelmingly positive reviews from critics. Anton Dolin, writing for Meduza, said that "at last the novel... has found not just a worthy, but a successful, completely unexpected cinematic interpretation."

On the other hand, Dolin's former colleague at Iskusstvo Kino magazine Zinaida Pronchenko is less than enthusiastic: "In previous circumstances, we would have considered Mikhail Lockshin's movie a collection of platitudes. In current circumstances, it looks like a revelation."

The Blueprint's Nastya Sotnik and Oleg Zintsov summed up the film as “a conceptual statement unique to Russian mass cinema,” while Timur Aliyev of Forbes Life noted that “as in the 1930s, the novel about the persecution of the creative intelligentsia condoned by the authorities looks extremely relevant in 2024 Moscow, almost 100 years later.”

Lidia Tsoy of Novaya Gazeta Europe seconds that by saying that “the multilayered film works as a spectator's cinematic attraction, as a story of great love, and as a statement about censorship.”

As for when Western viewers will have a chance to form their own opinions, so far there is no information about the film's wider distribution.

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