

FILM REVIEW: Paradise (Konchalovsky, 2016): Russia

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Russian Director Andrei Konchalovsky premiered his latest work, *Paradise,* at the Sala Grande Theater during the 73rd Venice International Film Festival.



Olga and Helmut enjoying a summer moment before the atrocities of war interrupt their passionate relationship in Andrei Konchalovskyâ??s *Paradise*. (Photo courtesy of ASAC Images/Biennale Cinema di Venezia)

Paradise tells the story of three individuals, Olga, Helmut and Jules as their paths cross amidst the trials and tribulations of WWII during the Hitler regime. Olga, played by Yulia Vysotskaya the real-life

wife of Director Konchalovsky, is an aristocratic Russian woman and a member of the French Resistance arrested for hiding Jewish children during a surprise Nazi police raid. As part of her punishment she is sent to jail where her path crosses with Jules, a French-Nazi investigator, played by Phillipe Duquesne, who has been assigned to investigate her case. Olga pumps up her feminine wiles with what appears to be some success to get Jules to lighten her punishment. However, events take an unexpected turn and Olga is sent off to a dark, dirty hellish concentration camp. While managing to survive and stay alive, Olga catches the eye of Helmut, played by Christian Clauss, a high-ranking German SS officer, played by Christian Clauss, who oversees the campâ??s operations with an auditorâ??s acumen. Helmut had previously fallen madly in love with the upper-class Olga and still felt the yearnings of love. Slowly and with the utmost care initially, the two embark on a tumultuous and destructive relationship leading to a conscious break in Olgaâ??s mental state of what constitutes Paradise with the impending Nazi defeat looming.

Konchalovsky takes the viewer on a compelling journey into the past utilizing what appears to be archival footage and documentary style interviews from the three main characters. He sets the film in 1942 early with the use of a text overlay during the filmâ??s prologue and quickly introduces the audience to the world of Olga as a high-class, fashion editor for Vogue magazine. With the blink of an eye, the tone of the film is changed irrevocably as Olga is shown being grilled all night long about why she would hide Jewish children and lie to the police about it. And, Konchalovsky doesnâ??t stop there. He enters into power relationships via sexual manipulation, eavesdropping, concentration camp internment and the visceral art of kapo survival.

In the end the paradise unveiled falls into a similar vein to the spiritual realities of war and the fight for what is right displayed in Laszlo Nemesâ?? Academy Award nominated *Son Of Saul*. Also, like *Son Of Saul*, Konchalovskyâ??s *Paradise* has gotten the nod to be Russiaâ??s entry for Best Foreign Language film. This comes on the heels of Konchalovsky garnering a Silver Lion for Best Director at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival.

Along the way Konchalovsky pays tribute to Russian cinema history with *Paradise*, shown in black and white with reflexive characteristics of film reels unwinding on the big screen harkening back to the days of Dziga Vertovâ??s *Man With the Movie Camera.* Paradise editor Ekaterina Vesheva poured through scores of newsreels in search of the filmâ??s soul while keeping an authenticity to resonate within documentary sensibilities.

In line with achieving further authenticity, Konchalovsky wanted unknown actors audiences wouldnâ??t recognize from well-known projects. Not an easy task for a casting director to find three actors with Russian, German and French language abilities who could carry out the characters monologues with maximum believability. Consequently, casting was carried out simultaneously in three countries with Elina Ternyaeva as the Russian Casting Director, Uwe Bunker was in Germany and Constance Demontoy worked in France.

Such attention to detail continued with copious research into character development and environmental factors of female camp internment. Purportedly, Konchalovsky handed a compulsory list of 40 books for Clauss to read in preparation for his role as Helmut. A triangle of trust was being created between

director, actor and audience. Julia Vysotskaya, a prominent television presenter and stage actress shaved her head, lost significant body weight and endured the rigors of the filmâ??s highly intense, emotional scene work. Furthering the look and feel of the 1940â??s war era with authentic costuming and set objects were Costume Designer, Dmitry Andreev, and Production Designer, Irina Ochina.



Yulia Yvotskaya and Philippe Duquesne square off as Olga and Jules in sexually charged scene fron

While the list of Holocaust films continues to grow, Konchalovsky submits a rare twist with an exquisite aura and an emotional delicacy. Artistic, informative and transcendent, *Paradise,* permeates more than one metaphysical level. Highly recommended.

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