

# FROM RUSSIA WITH REAL LOVE: ALEKSANDR ROU AND THE ART OF ENCHANTMENT

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From his directorial debut in 1938 through to his death in 1973, the Soviet filmmaker Aleksandr Rou created a magical world of fairy-tale and fantasy cinema. In Russia and Eastern Europe, where his films met with enormous popular success, his reputation remains strong, with his influence on contemporary filmmaking frequently acknowledged by both creators and critics. Yet only in recent years, as the rise in streaming has made his work more available to international audiences, has it begun to receive due recognition in the West.

Across titles ranging from such trailblazing early works as *Vasilisa the Beautiful* (1939) and *The Little*

*Humpback Horse* (1941) to colourful fantasies like *Jack Frost* (1964) and *Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair* (1969), the continued fondness for Rou's films among the generations that grew up with them springs from many sources. These range from affection for the famous fairy stories they adapted and for the beloved performers that enacted them to the pleasures derived from the wit of their scripts, their meticulous visual detail, and their munificent supply of imaginative special effects. Yet amid the ongoing outpouring of appreciation for such qualities as these, another theme emerges.

Within online discussion groups, praise for Rou's



*Mikhail Pugovkin in Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair (1969)*



*Baba Yaga's cat in Jack Frost (1964)*

consummate technical craftsmanship is closely entwined with perceptions of his personal qualities and of his motivation for telling these tales. Much of the joy of his films is rooted in the widely shared confidence that they were made by someone who had a heartfelt love of fairy tales and who genuinely cared about sharing this passion with his audience. One fan, who averred that Rou's films 'are still watched with pleasure and interest to this day because the director put his soul into them', summarised sentiments expressed by numerous fellow enthusiasts.

In our new world of ubiquitous AI-generated content, the premium placed on the human touch continues to surge. Excitement about the democratic possibilities for creating elaborate images, videos, music, and text with a few swiftly typed prompts is tempered by widespread dismay at their often-deceptive inauthenticity and by a growing frustration with torturous torrents of slop. As a result, the attractions of creative originality, painstaking craft practice, lived experience, and care and consideration for the viewer, listener, or reader are greater than ever.

Long before the scourge of the slop, film fans' appreciation for the artisanal nature of hand-drawn cel animation, puppetry, stop-motion, and practical effects had already survived the advent of digital technologies.

The charm and affect emerging from every carefully planned stop-motion manoeuvre of Willis O'Brien's pioneering work on *King Kong* (1933) or the Disney animators' scrupulously observed and executed *Bambi* (1942) remain undiminished by later technical breakthroughs. Similarly, in Rou's films, the artistry of the production design and the ingenuity of their effects express not just creative imagination but also loving respect for their audiences.

Rou's fairy-tale films overflow with magic and mirth. During his earliest days as a director he expanded on the groundbreaking work of the cinema's first master of enchantment, Georges Méliès. In *The Magic Fish* (1938), Rou employed an abundance of classic trick photography techniques. Thanks to the aid of reverse motion, double-exposures, substitution splices, and hidden wires we see a pike leap from the water into the hero's hands, buckets of water climb a hill by themselves, winter turn instantly into summer, and characters pass through solid walls atop an invisibly propelled stove that serves as an eccentric mode of transport.

As Rou's experience and production budgets grew, the practical effects he employed increased in size and sophistication. Among the most memorable moments in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* are a battle with a three-headed dragon (an impressive eleven-metre puppet), a col-



*Sergei Stoliarov in Vasilisa the Beautiful (1939)*



Ninel' Myshkova in *The Magic Weaver* (1959)

lapsing cliff, and a gargantuan arachnid quizmaster. In *The Little Humpback Horse*, we watch the hero fly through the air, walk along a moonbeam, stand on the hand of a giant, and visit an undersea kingdom. In the post-war period, the production design and effects work of such films as *The Magic Weaver* (1959) and *The Night before Christmas* (1961) continued to scale new heights.

During the course of his career, Aleksandr Rou established and incrementally embellished a unique and distinctive cinematic world. But, if Rou was the popularly crowned 'King of the Fairy Tales', he did not deny

his talented crew of wizards, minstrels, questers, and jesters their own seats at the high table, and the threads they wove into his magic carpet are often personally recognisable. We find an example in production designer Arsenii Klopotovskii's flamboyant matte backgrounds for *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (1963), in which he fashioned buildings into the fantastical forms of spiders, toads, and a sinister bird of prey, and which are answered by his cheerful zoomorphic architectural designs for *Barbara the Fair*.

The actors cast their own spells. The wonderful Georgii Milliar, who appeared in almost all of Rou's

films, is especially unforgettable. His idiosyncratic performances were often enhanced by outlandishly original hair and make-up, which helped transform him into a succession of magical beings ranging from a furry, pig-snouted devil to a grinning frog-man. Here, as elsewhere, the artifice may be obvious, yet the wealth of wondrous creations with which Rou filled his films continues to captivate, whether one diagnoses their inner workings or not. Contrasting impulses run hand-in-hand in the viewer's mind. While trade secrets behind the more seamless practical effects serve as intriguing puzzles—much like the pleasures of watching a stage illusionist—so long as the story and characters continue to engage, the fantasy world remains immersive.



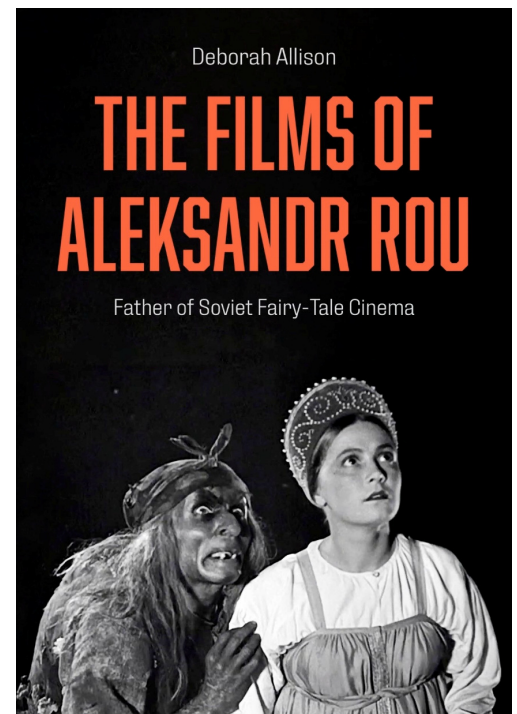
*The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (1963)

One of the projects Rou left uncompleted when he died was a film called *Honest Magic*. Subsequently placed in the hands of a less accomplished director, the eventual result proved no great shakes—but it's a shame Rou never got to use the title, as it encapsulates his creative method perfectly. The true magic of his films lies less in the mechanics of their illusions than in the palpable ingenuity and effort behind their paintings, puppetry, performances, prosthetics, and practical effects, and in the warmth and humour of their delivery.

In a world where images can now be generated at unprecedented speed but without any trace of soul, the affective power of sincere and loving craftsmanship is a gift to cherish. For real movie magic, Rou remains at the top of his class. Seek out his films and prepare to be enchanted.

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