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THE FILMS OF ALEKSANDR ROU

Father of Soviet Fairy-Tale Cinema



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Introduction: The Storyteller

To friends and family, he was ‘Sasha’; to colleagues, ‘The Storyteller’; and to movie lovers of the former Soviet Union and modern Russia alike, he was ‘King of the Fairy Tales’ and ‘The Main Storyteller of the Country’.

Half a century after his death, Aleksandr Arturovich Rou (1906–73) remains a cinematic icon in Russia and many other countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. His films continue to screen frequently in cinemas and on television, especially around Christmas and New Year. In the regions where he lived or worked, temporary exhibitions are a regular occurrence; a permanent museum stands in his childhood hometown of Iur'evets, while annual festivals draw tourists to iconic shooting locations in the Galichskii District and in Olenegorsk.¹ His films feature prominently on school curricula and, in 1999, a charitable foundation for children’s cinema education was established in his name: the Moscow-based ‘Fond detskogo kino imeni Aleksandra Rou’, housed in his former apartment. Other posthumous tributes range from the issue of a set of Russian postage stamps to mark the centenary of his birth to the naming of an asteroid in his honour.²

In the West, by contrast, Rou’s work remains little known. Few of his films were distributed in Britain or America, partly as a result of the insularity of the Soviet film industry under Joseph Stalin – a period covering the first fifteen years of Rou’s directorial career. None appear to have received theatrical releases in Australia or other English-speaking countries, although subtitled versions of several titles have since been made available via DVD or streaming services. Those films that secured reasonably wide international distribution often did so in dubbed and heavily cut versions. In the English-speaking world, his best-known title by far is *Jack Frost* (*Morozko*, 1964) but, not, alas, as a direct result of its high-profile award at the 1965 Venice Film Festival. Nowadays, its reputation (and, by association, that of its director) rests mainly, and very unfairly, on the cut and dubbed version shown in 1997 on America’s popular *Mystery Science Theater 3000* comedy show, where it was ridiculed in a running commentary. Russians, variously baffled and offended

by the reactions of the show's American viewers, prefer to allude to George Lucas and Steven Spielberg's reputed admiration for Rou. Spielberg's reported description of Rou's work as 'an independent cultural phenomenon that nobody has ever managed to repeat' and as a forerunner of modern American fantasy cinema has been endlessly recycled by the Russian media.³

During a directorial career that stretched from 1938 to 1972, Aleksandr Rou transformed the landscape of Soviet fantasy and fairy-tale cinema. Previously, folklore and fairy tales, variously Russian and international in origin, had provided the basis for a smattering of silent shorts, but the genre fell into political disfavour after the 1917 Revolution, as I will discuss in Chapter 1. When fairy-tale films re-emerged in the mid-1930s, they initially did so in the form of short animations. Consequently, the release of the live-action *The Magic Fish* (*Po shchuch'emu velen'iu*, 1938), Rou's directorial debut and the Soviet Union's first fairy-tale feature film, was a watershed moment and it paved the way for numerous successors.

Bursting with eye-popping special effects, music and comedy, Rou's lively spectacles continue to delight children and adults alike. Films such as *The Magic Fish* and *Vasilisa the Beautiful* (*Vasilisa prekrasnaiia*, 1939) revitalized traditional Russian fairy tales, while *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (*Korolevstvo krivykh zerkal*, 1963) adapted one of the most engaging children's books of its era. Others, such as *New Adventures of Puss in Boots* (*Novye pokhozhdeniia Kota v sapogakh*, 1958), *The Magic Weaver* (*Mari'a-iskusnitsa*, 1959) and *Through Fire, Water and... Brass Pipes* (*Ogon', voda i... mednye trubny*, 1968) brought to life fairy-tale screenplays by some of the nation's leading children's writers. From the heights of Stalinist propaganda cinema, through Khrushchev's Thaw and into the Brezhnev Stagnation era, Rou's films celebrated and perpetuated the nation's folkloric traditions while constantly refreshing them for new generations of young audiences.

Rou's films stand out from the crowd of other Soviet fairy-tale films made across this period, despite sharing many common characters and narrative elements and despite the compromises associated with working in a state-operated and rigorously censored industry. This context impinged on creative decisions in ways that cannot be understated, making each film a fascinating document of the dominant ideology of its day. Even so, in an industry where film production was organized according to a decentralized director-unit system, in which directors enjoyed, in many respects, a higher level of creative autonomy than did many of their western counterparts, the capacity to cultivate an individualistic style remained substantial. 'While trying to be a propaganda factory,' Maria Belodubrovskaya observes, 'the Soviet film industry was run as an artisan's workshop'.⁴ No matter how rigid their ideological framework, all of Rou's feature films bear the clear imprint of his personal stamp.

Rou's main rival for the crown of the nation's favourite was his almost exact contemporary, Aleksandr Ptushko (1900–73), who made his feature debut just three years earlier and whom Rou outlived for a mere nine months. As directors, both worked exclusively in live-action cinema, but, whereas Ptushko began his career by following the example of the Russian-born stop-motion pioneer Wladyslaw Starewicz (1882–1965) in weaving his magic through the incorporation of puppet animation, Rou cast his spells with a barrage of magical effects of the kind pioneered by the French director Georges Méliès (1861–1938).⁵ Furthermore, whereas Ptushko's post-war work gravitated towards epic themes and styles, Rou's films are generally shorter, more hectic and a great deal funnier. Ptushko, as his career progressed, came to resent his entrapment by what he regarded as the limitations of children's filmmaking but Rou's commitment to it remained inexhaustible, as did his joy in personally presenting his films to, and interacting with, his young audiences.⁶

Friends, colleagues and casual acquaintances alike remember Aleksandr Rou as a fat, cheery man, who was energetic, quick-tempered but easily appeased, open to creative ideas, who treated people with great kindness and decency and who never lost his childlike sense of wonder. On set, he was a strict disciplinarian and ran a tight ship. Armed with a fat album of storyboard paintings, he planned meticulously before shooting quickly, while telling jokes to keep the atmosphere light and rewarding good work with cups of tea from his ever-present samovar.⁷ More than one veteran of the *Jack Frost* location shoot likened him, in both character and appearance, to the film's eponymous Santa Claus-like figure.⁸ The same ethos suffuses his films, which, barring those made under the shadow of the Great Patriotic War, are awash with warm-hearted geniality.

Rou was born in Russia on 8 March 1906 (new calendar). His Irish father, the Wexford-born Arthur Rowe, had arrived in the country a year or two earlier to establish a modern, mechanized flourmill. Soon after his arrival, Arthur met and married Iuliia Karageorgia, a Russian-born woman of Greek descent, and set up home in Iur'evets, a small town in the Ivanovo Oblast, on the banks of the River Volga. For reasons that remain unclear (conjectures range from pre-Revolutionary political instability to marital problems exacerbated by alcoholism), in the mid-1910s he abandoned his family and returned to the West, leaving his wife and child in difficult financial circumstances.⁹ It is widely reported that Iuliia suffered from ill health and that the young Aleksandr engaged in a variety of odd jobs, including selling the work of local artisans at the town market, in order to help make ends meet.¹⁰

As Rou seldom discussed his personal life with journalists, accounts of his early career are sketchy and sometimes contradictory, with few adding much to the details reported by the scholar Kira Paramonova in her 1979 monograph. After

leaving school, it seems he studied at an industrial and economic ‘technicum’, or technical college, in Moscow. There, in the early 1920s, he became involved with the influential Blue Blouse agitprop theatre movement (*Siniaia bluza*).¹¹ He subsequently went on to study at a Moscow film academy founded by and named after the Russian film pioneer Boris Chaikovskii. After graduating in 1930, he continued his dramatic studies at the M. N. Ermolova Theatre School while also working in his new job at the Mezhrabpomfilm studio, where he became a regular assistant to one of its leading directors, Iakov Protazanov (1881–1945).¹² By this time, his peer group included many actors; his affinity with them is palpable and his films are distinguished by the quality of their casting and of their comic performances.

From the start, Rou preferred to work with familiar cast and crew – a proclivity the Soviet director-unit system of production facilitated.¹³ His earliest films as a director feature several actors and technicians with whom he had previously worked when an assistant to Protazanov. Some of these creative relationships lasted for decades. Particularly worthy of note among Rou’s collaborators is the versatile comic actor Georgii Milliar (1903–93), the Moscow-born son of an affluent French engineer, who appeared in all but two of his feature films, often in multiple roles. Playing a host of unforgettable characters, which are variously pompous, fawning or fiendishly malevolent, Milliar is a formidable presence and is usually quickly recognizable under his often-outlandish costumes and make-up. The leeway Rou permitted him to develop these personae ensured the films they made together boast the most iconic creations of Milliar’s prolific career and the men’s professional reputations soon became closely entwined.

As time went on, Rou developed an estimable stock company of regular collaborators. His rapport with these performers is visible on screen and, like the various writers, cinematographers, production designers, editors and composers with whom he worked time and again, they all make their own distinctive contributions to the development of what would become Rou’s unmistakable ‘house style’. He respected his actors’ professionalism and several of them have described how he encouraged them to develop their characters in their own ways with minimal guidance; yet he also offered great professional and personal support to inexperienced performers. During the later years of his career, he would increasingly cast personally selected ‘new discoveries’ in lead roles, some of whom had no prior acting experience.

Rou’s approach to filmmaking owed much to the lessons he learned from Protazanov. This relationship began with the silent religious satire *Holiday of St. Jorgen* (*Prazdnik sviatogo Iorgena*, 1930), although he did not receive an on-screen credit and the title is therefore absent from most of his filmographies.¹⁴ His growing experience and level of responsibility would later lead to credits as

INTRODUCTION

Protazanov's assistant director for the political satire *Marionettes* (*Marionetki*, 1933) and the banned romantic comedy *About the Oddities of Love* (*O strannostiakh liubvi*, 1935), in which he also appeared in a small role (Figure I.1), and as senior assistant director for the lyrical melodrama *Without Dowry* (*Bespridannitsa*, 1936).¹⁵

Vladimir Shveitser, head of the Mezhrabpomfilm script department, who would later write screenplays for three films Rou directed, amusingly recalled a first encounter in which the young assistant stood behind Protazanov holding a bunch of planed canes. The director signalled his displeasure with the progress of the shoot by snapping and discarding each cane in turn as Rou patiently fed him more.¹⁶ This was not, apparently, a procedure Rou chose to adopt in his own directorial career. He would later speak instead of the detail and clarity with which



FIGURE I.1: Aleksandr Rou in a cameo role, Iakov Protazanov (dir.), *About the Oddities of Love* (*O strannostiakh liubvi*), 1935. Soviet Union. © Mezhrabpomfilm.

Protazanov selected and guided his cast and planned every technical and tonal aspect of his pictures.¹⁷ He regarded Protazanov as both his teacher and mentor and, when a conflict with the studio arose during the shooting of *The Magic Fish*, it was to Protazanov that he turned for advice.¹⁸

As one of Russia's early film pioneers, Protazanov had worked exclusively in silent cinema up to point at which Rou first came to work for him. By this time, he was a master of expressing ideas in visual terms, without recourse to dialogue. This is especially notable in the eloquence with which he uses natural landscapes in *Without Dowry*. Rou would, for his part, develop into a master of sound as well as image. His own films are usually chock-a-block with witty dialogue, music, songs and comical sound effects, but, like *Without Dowry*, they also show a highly developed ability to conjure a mood wordlessly using extensive shots of the natural world. Indeed, this would become one of his main authorial trademarks.

Rou's sympathy with nature was deep-rooted. After his father's return to the West, the boy (by then, aged around 8 or 10) moved with his mother from Iur'evets to Sergiev Posad, about 75 kilometres to the northeast of Moscow. Both towns lay in areas of great scenic beauty, and the rivers, fields and forest landscapes of Rou's childhood later assumed a central place in the visual scheme of his films.

The dappled light of birch groves, which Rou came to consider the foremost emblem of his creative work, became particularly iconic, but his films eulogize all the rich variety of the Soviet Union's natural landscapes, from the arctic wilderness of the Kola Peninsula to the hotter climes of Tajikistan.¹⁹ In line with his preference for working with familiar cast and crew, he returned to favoured locations time after time. On the coast of Yalta in the Crimean Peninsula lie the oft-filmed 'Rou Rocks'; some 1,500 kilometres to their north, the village of Gigirevo came, for a time, to be dubbed 'GigiRou' after it became his preferred location for summertime shoots.²⁰

Despite the complex effects work his films invariably entailed, Rou firmly believed that the miracles of nature outdid anything achievable within the confines of a studio set.²¹ The varied scenery he captured played an important narrational role, not only signalling shifts to episodes of prosperity or peril but also, through a series of recurrent associations, suggesting moral interpretations of characters and their actions. Birds and animals were as important to this scheme as the trees and flowers and, in true fairy-tale spirit, many of them spoke in human language. In all Rou's films, virtue is inseparable from a close affinity with the natural world; cities, by contrast, are represented with deep misgiving – barring only his infrequent depictions of contemporary Moscow.

Rou's love of fairy tales was fostered by his mother, who reportedly mixed traditional stories with others of her own invention.²² Although his first experience of children's filmmaking was in a very different genre – as senior assistant director

to Vladimir Legoshin on *A Lonely White Sail* (*Beleet parus odinokii*, 1937), a child's-eye view of the aftermath of the 1905 Potemkin uprising – when he applied for permission to direct a film of his own it was to fairy tales that he immediately turned. Having languished in post-Revolution political disfavour for some years, folklore and fairy tales had recently returned to the nation's bookshelves. It was the perfect time for Rou to carve out a career and reputation in a genre seldom seen on Soviet cinema screens, yet it was also a move born of a genuine passion that he would never lose. Such was his enthrallment that, in the last decade of his life, he would ask his regular production designer, Arsenii Klopotovskii, to decorate the hallway of his new apartment at 6 Eisenstein Street, next door to the Gorky Studio (his long-term employer), with a mural featuring the birch groves, giant mushrooms and other captivating motifs of the iconic cinematic fairyland he had created.²³

The Soviet rehabilitation of folklore and fairy tales in the 1930s arose, as I discuss in Chapter 1, from the ease with which they could be turned to propagandist purpose. Political imperatives, and the concomitant censorship restrictions, inevitably entailed many compromises and Rou's career was not without its disappointments; some cherished projects were abandoned, others were greatly delayed, and none of his films entered production without considerable prior script interference. His daughter, Tat'iana Zarubina, would later describe him as 'a man who passionately loved fairy tales and was devoted to this genre, but who was nevertheless associated with the industry, with production and with far-from-fairy-tale characters from the repertoire departments; beaten and therefore cautious'.²⁴ Yet, for the most part, Rou proved himself very good at reconciling the requirements of the various monitoring committees with his preferred approach to storytelling. Although a committed patriot, a Party member since 1943 and a very active supporter of the Young Pioneers organization, he was, like Protazanov and many other filmmakers of his time, far more interested in telling an engaging story than in beating a political drum.²⁵ He was a firm believer in his duty to help instil good ethics into young audiences, but he always sought to do so with gentleness and humour.

Rou's stalwart friend and collaborator, the actor Georgii Milliar, once observed, 'A fairy tale should reflect the philosophy of the era and not chase cheap topicality. Then it will not become obsolete.'²⁶ All of Rou's films are intimately connected to the time and place of their creation, but the universal themes of the fairy-tale genre in which he excelled, and the imagination and playfulness with which he imbued them, has ensured their continuance as a source of unabated pleasure. It is my ardent hope that this book will help to bring his films to wider attention in English-speaking countries, introducing them to new viewers as well as augmenting the appreciation of his oeuvre among his existing fans.

‘We were born to make fairy tales come true’ was a much-quoted slogan of the Stalin era in which Aleksandr Rou began his career.²⁷ In political terms, this pledge remained unfulfilled; its embodiment in Rou’s distinctive brand of cinematic enchantment, by contrast, leaves a legacy that the passage of time has not diminished.

NOTES

1. The Aleksandr Rou Museum of Fairy Tales is located in his childhood hometown of Iur'evets. Temporary exhibitions are typified by *Magicians Come to People* at the Ivanovo Regional Library for Children and Youth (2016) and *Storyteller Aleksandr Rou* at the Murmansk Regional Scientific Library (2016). Annual festivals include ‘Festival’-konkurs Po shchuch'em u veleniiu’ in the Galichskii District, and ‘Festival’ novogodnei skazki Morozko in Olenegorsk’ (shooting locations of *The Magic Fish* [1938] and *Jack Frost* [1964] respectively) and ‘Deti i skazka. Pamiati A. Rou’ in Ivanovo.
2. International Astronomical Union, ‘5412 (Rou)’, Minor Planet Center, accessed 22 April 2023, http://www.minorplanetcenter.net/db_search/show_object?object_id=5412.
3. The origins of these claims are unclear. In vague terms, they date back as least as far as 1997. Natalia Sirivlia, ‘Kashchei bessmertnyi i Nibelungi’, *Iskusstvo kino* 3 (1997), <http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/1997/03/n3-article15>. The Spielberg ‘phenomenon’ quotation dates back at least as far as 2015. Dina Borisova, ‘Velikii i Vsemogushchii Rou: strana volshebnogo kino’, *Daily Culture*, 10 March 2015, http://dailyculture.ru/stati/kino/velikiy_i_vsemogushchii_rou_strana_volshebnogo_kino/. The ‘forerunner’ reference appears on several undated websites, including ‘Akterskii sostav Morozko. Prevratnosti sud'by’, Autogear, accessed 22 April 2023, <https://autogear.ru/market/article.php?post=/article/233809/akteryi-morozko-prevratnosti-sudbyi>.
4. Maria Belodubrovskaya, *Not According to Plan: Filmmaking under Stalin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 7. For a detailed account of the director-centred mode of production see 90–129.
5. Although Ptushko did not direct any cel-animated films, he served as screenwriter and artistic director for some short films in this format.
6. Iuliia Khomiakova, *Vyiti iz uchitel'skoi* (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Itoriia, 2019), 43; Sergei Kapkov, *V gostiakh u skazki Aleksandra Rou* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Rodina, 2021), 264.
7. Mikhail Pugovkin, *Vse eto bylo by smeshno...* (Moscow: Rutena, 2000), 60.
8. Anastasiia Assorova, ‘Korrespondenty VM pobyvali v derevne Gigirevo Odintsovskogo raiona, gde snimal znamenitnye fil'my rezhisser Aleksandr Rou’, *Vecherniia Moskva*, 28 December 2016, <https://vm.ru/society/681706-korrespondenty-vm-pobyvali-v-derevne-gigirevo-odincovskogo-raiona-gde-snimal-znamenitnye-filmy-rezhisser-aleksandr-rou>; Natali'a Leskova, ‘Aleksandr Rou. Zhizn', pokhozhaia na skazku’, *Vecherniia Moskva*, 11 January 2013, <https://vm.ru/entertainment/591423-aleksandr-rou-zhizn-pokhozhaia-na-skazku>;

- ‘Aleksandr Rou. Volshebnik XX veka’, *Moskva Tsentra*, 8 March 2016, <https://caoinform.moscow/aleksandr-rou-velikiy-skazochnik-xx-veka/#gsc.tab=0>; Ol'ga Nikonova, ‘Podarki dobrego kinoskazochnika’, *Lavry Kino* (blog), 31 January 2014, <https://lavrykino.wordpress.com/2014/01/31/подарки-доброго-киносказочника/>; Sara Rubinshtein, script ed., quoted in ‘*Morozko: istoriia sozdaniia odnogo kinoshedevra*’, *Smotrim*, 6 January 2012, <https://smotrim.ru/article/916996>; Elena Stepunina, ‘Rou i ego komanda’, *Krest'ianskie vedomosti*, 14 November 2010, https://www.agronews.ru/news/68819.html?sphrase_id=25693 [link no longer available].
9. Viktor Posudnevsky, ‘The Wexford Roots of Russia’s Fairy-Tale Filmmaker’, *Irish Times*, 14 September 2011, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/the-wexford-roots-of-russia-s-fairy-tale-film-maker-1.598910>; Anastasiia Mak Keib, ‘V poiskakh brata’, *Russkii mir*, August 2020, 40–43. Conflicting accounts of the date of Arthur Rowe’s departure range from 1914 to 1917.
 10. Kira Paramonova, *Aleksandr Rou* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979), 6.
 11. Instituted in 1923, the Blue Blouse movement encouraged the formation of workers’ theatre collectives across the Soviet Union. For a detailed account of its functioning and ideology see Robert F. Crane, ‘From Kamchatka to Georgia: The Blue Blouse Movement and Early Soviet Spatial Practice’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2013), http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/18379/7/Crane_ETD_May_15.pdf.
 12. Paramonova, *Aleksandr Rou*, 14, 22.
 13. Belodubrovskaya, *Not According*, 96.
 14. *Strana volshebника Rou (Land of the Wizard Rou)*, 2006), directed by Irina Isaeva, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7QHJBBUSfw>.
 15. On the reasons for banning *About the Oddities of Love* see Belodubrovskaya, *Not According*, 181–82.
 16. Muzei kino (Moscow), ‘Aleksandr Rou doma u skazki’, accessed 22 April 2023, <https://www.museikino.ru/exposition/themes/aleksandr-rou-doma-u-skazki/>.
 17. Nina Sputnitskaia, *Ptushko. Rou: Master-klass rossiiskogo kinofentezi* (Moscow: Direct Media, 2018), 176.
 18. Paramonova, *Aleksandr Rou*, 35.
 19. Paramonova, *Aleksandr Rou*, 5.
 20. Oksana Zhukova, ‘Boris Grachevskii: “Dlia skazki Rou iskal po Krymu led i golubei”’, *MK v Krymu*, 12 December 2014, <https://crimea.mk.ru/articles/2014/12/12/boris-grachevskiy-dlya-skazki-rou-iskal-po-krymu-led-i-golubey.html>; Stepunina, ‘Rou i ego komanda’.
 21. Paramonova, *Aleksandr Rou*, 17.
 22. ‘Volshebники prikhodiat k liudiam’, Ivanovskaia oblastnaia biblioteka dlia detei i iunoshestva (2016), accessed 28 April 2023, <https://iv-obdu.ru/vystavki/arkhiv-vystavok/volshebniki-prikhodyat-k-lyudyam/>.
 23. Muzei kino, ‘Aleksandr Rou doma u skazki’; Marina Makeeva, ‘Kinoskazochnik Aleksandr Rou rabotal i zhil na ulitse Sergeia Eizenshteina’, *Zvezdnyi Bul'var*, 17 March 2021, <https://zbulvar.ru/kinoskazochnik-aleksandr-rou-rabotal-i-zhil-na-ulitse-sergeya-eizenshtejna/>.

24. Tat'iana Zarubina, 'Moia azbuka', in *Vospominaniia o Evgenii Shvartse*, ed. Evgenii Binevich (St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 2014), ebook.
25. Denise J. Youngblood, 'The Return of the Native: Yakov Protazanov and Soviet Cinema', in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1991), 120.
26. R. Ialovetskaia, 'Samaia obiaitel'naia Baba-Iaga otechestvennogo kino', *Pravda*, 8 November 2003, <https://www.pravda.ru/showbiz/39391-millyar>, previously published as 'Georgii Milliar', in *Aktery sovetskogo kino*, vol. 7, ed. A. M. Sandler (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 158–69.
27. This phrase is drawn from the opening line of the song 'Ever Higher' ('Vse vyshe', 1930) by Pavel German and Iulii Khait, also known as 'The Aviators' March' due to its subsequent adoption as the anthem of the Soviet Air Force. James von Geldern and Richard Stites, eds., *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 257.