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📷 Aleksandr Rou

## Rou, Aleksandr

👤 Deborah Allison (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/author/deborah-allison/>), 🕒 November 2023

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**b. 8 March 1906, Iur'evets, Russia**

**d. 28 December 1973, Moscow, USSR**

Fifty years after his death, Aleksandr Arturovich Rou remains a cinematic icon in Russia and many other countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Dubbed “King of the Fairy Tales” and “The Main Storyteller of the Country”, he transformed the landscape of Soviet fantasy and fairy-tale cinema during a directorial career that stretched from 1938 to 1972. In the West, by contrast, Rou’s work remains little known. Few of his films received theatrical distribution in Britain or America, and none in Australia, although subtitled versions of selected titles are now available on DVD and streaming services. I strongly urge you to seek them out.

Rou made his directorial debut, *Po shchuch'emu velen'iu* (*The Magic Fish*) in 1938, after having served several years of industry apprenticeship as assistant director to the veteran director Iakov Protazanov at the Mezhrabpomfilm studio in Moscow. It was the Soviet Union’s first fairy-tale feature film, and its success with audiences ensured others would follow swiftly – with Rou at the vanguard. Marking a pivotal moment in the emergence of a new kind of Soviet popular cinema, it set the template for most of Rou’s subsequent work, as well as later entrants within the genre.

Through the course of his career, and into the present day, Rou’s lively spectacles have continued to delight children and adults alike. Films such as *The Magic Fish* and *Vasilisa prekrasnaia* (*Vasilisa the Beautiful*, 1939) revitalised traditional Russian fairy tales, while *Korolevstvo krivyykh zerkal* (*The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors*, 1963) adapted one of the most engaging children’s books of its era. Others, such as *Novye pokhozhdeniia Kota v sapogakh* (*New Adventures of Puss in Boots*, 1958), *Mari'a-iskusnitsa* (*The Magic Weaver*, 1959) and *Ogon', voda i... mednye truby* (*Through Fire, Water and... Brass Pipes*, 1968) brought to life fairy-tale screenplays by

some of the most esteemed Soviet children's playwrights. 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.



(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Through-Fire-Water-Brass-Pipes.jpg>)

### *Through Fire, Water and... Brass Pipes*

Rou was born in Iur'evets, a small town in Russia's Ivanovo Oblast, on the banks of the River Volga. After his Irish father, the Wexford-born Arthur Rowe, returned to the West in the mid-1910s, the young Aleksandr moved with his mother, Iuliia, to Sergiev Posad, about 75 kilometres to the northeast of Moscow. The experiences of his early childhood played a defining role in shaping his future films. Iuliia nurtured his lifelong love of fairy tales, reportedly mixing traditional folklore with stories of her own invention.<sup>1</sup> Equally influential was his upbringing in areas of great scenic beauty, with the rivers, fields and forest landscapes of his childhood later assuming a central place within his distinctive visual aesthetic. Although – or, perhaps, because – his early years were also marked by hardship, with his father's abandonment followed by maternal ill health and financial impoverishment, he would dedicate his life to perfecting his ideal fairy-tale world.

After leaving school, Rou 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 (*Siniiaia bluza*). 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.<sup>2</sup>

Rou's approach to filmmaking owed much to the lessons he learned from Protazanov. This relationship began with the silent religious satire *Prazdnik sviatogo Iorgena* (*Holiday of St. Jorgen*, 1930), although he did not receive an on-screen credit and the title is therefore absent from most of his filmographies.<sup>3</sup> His growing experience and level of responsibility would later lead to credits as Protazanov's assistant director for the political satire *Marionetki* (*Marionettes*, 1933) and the banned romantic comedy *O strannostiakh liubvi* (*About the Oddities of Love*, 1935), in which he also appeared in a small role, and as senior assistant director for the

lyrical melodrama *Bespridannitsa (Without Dowry, 1936)*.<sup>4</sup> Rou regarded Protazanov as both his teacher and mentor, and he would later praise the detail and clarity with which Protazanov selected and guided his cast and planned every technical and tonal aspect of his pictures.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these early influences, Rou's work as a director – like that of all other Soviet artists and filmmakers – also engaged with, and was delimited by, the vagaries of contemporary political and cultural policy. When he applied to direct his first feature, his proposal responded to several recent and interconnected turns of events, which had arisen from wider efforts to enhance the education of the population at large, and of children in particular, along ideologically desirable lines, and from fresh conceptions of how best to do so.

In 1935, industry leader Boris Shumiatskii had called for the development of “a cinema for the millions”: a new slate of films centred on “cheerful and joyful spectacle”, which would be capable of disseminating appropriate ideological messages in an unpretentious and entertaining manner.<sup>6</sup> With children identified as a prime target for propagandist efforts, 1936 saw the establishment of two new state-controlled production companies with a remit to create films expressly designed for young audiences. Soiuzmultfilm specialised in animation and Soiuzdetfilm (later known as the Gorky Studio) in live-action features. It was at Soiuzdetfilm, which rose from the ashes of the recently dissolved Mezhrabpomfilm, that Rou gained his first experience of children's filmmaking while serving as senior assistant director to Vladimir Legoshin on *Beleet parus odinokii (A Lonely White Sail, 1937)*, a child's-eye view of the aftermath of the 1905 Potemkin uprising.

Equally significant to the inauguration of Rou's career as a director was the contemporaneous rehabilitation of folklore and fairy tales, which had recently returned to the nation's bookshelves after having languished in post-Revolution political disfavour for some years. Addressing the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Maxim Gorky championed folklore as “the oral art of the working people” and argued for its potential to be adapted as palatably populist communist propaganda.<sup>7</sup> A tsunami of ideologically recalibrated fairy tales, both old and new, soon swept the nation.

These developments coincided with, and partook of, a further-reaching state intervention: the introduction of Socialist Realism, which, in the mid-1930s, was decreed the Soviet Union's obligatory artistic method. Founded, in large part, on the paradigm of collective class struggle, this method aimed to shape, rather than reflect, the attitudes and aspirations of the people. Endorsing the three key tenets of the period – ideological correctness (*ideinost'*), Party-mindedness (*partiinost'*) and folk-mindedness, or popular spirit (*narodnost'*) – Socialist Realism's performative function would, the theory ran, ensure that life would come to imitate art and visions of a fully-fledged communist society would thus eventually bear fruit.<sup>8</sup>

The concurrence of Soiuzdetfilm's establishment with a startling revival in the fortunes of Russian folklore and fairy tales made this the perfect time for Rou to carve out a career and reputation in a genre seldom seen on Soviet cinema screens. Nevertheless, political imperatives, and concomitant censorship restrictions, entailed many compromises and Rou's career was not without its disappointments; some cherished projects were abandoned and others greatly delayed. 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.”<sup>9</sup> For the most part, however, Rou proved very good at reconciling the requirements of the various monitoring committees with his preferred approach to storytelling.

Like many other Soviet filmmakers of his time, Rou was far more interested in telling an engaging story than in beating a political drum. He took seriously his duty to help instil good ethics into young audiences, but always sought to do so with gentleness and humour. It was his firm belief that “without a kind smile, without a harmless joke, there is no warmth, no light and therefore no fairy tale.”<sup>10</sup> He would never lose his passion for the genre. Indeed, 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 with a mural of the birch groves, giant mushrooms and other recurrent motifs of the iconic cinematic fairyland he had created.<sup>11</sup>

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Magic-Fish.png>)

### *Magic Fish*

With *The Magic Fish*, Rou swiftly established many of the working practices and directorial trademarks that would come to define his career. The film adapted a recent puppet play by the Russian children’s author and dramatist Elizaveta Tarakhovskaia. Splicing together plot elements from two well-known Russian fairy tales, “Emelya the Simpleton” and “The Princess who Never Smiled”, it also featured some modern twists designed to provide moral and political lessons that suited the climate of the times.<sup>12</sup> Rou collaborated closely with Tarakhovskaia and the seasoned screenwriter Oleg Leonidov on the film script.<sup>13</sup> “The main thing is truth and simplicity,” he would later state, “and, in this regard, we took the first timid steps in the fairy-tale genre, by refusing and cutting out the clichés that had burdened the folktale for a number of years, drowning out the great social truth so richly embedded in folk art.”<sup>14</sup>

This tale of a peasant lad, Emelya (Petr Savin), who returns a pike to the water and is rewarded with a magical formula that makes all his wishes come true delivers the requisite ideological message about class struggle but does so in an enormously entertaining way. "Of course, we do not seek to give any truths in the form of moralising," as Rou explained of his filmmaking method in general. "Children do not like this. The moral of the film is deeply hidden in an abundance of adventures, surprises and sometimes just in funny situations."<sup>15</sup> Constructed according to the Socialist Realist method, drawing on the folkloric traditions that had recently come to be seen as a powerful expression of *narodnost'*, or popular spirit, and answering Shumiatskii's call for the provision of "joyful Soviet laughter", *The Magic Fish* seamlessly blended light entertainment with the propagandist imperatives of Stalin-era filmmaking.<sup>16</sup>

Rou's spirited and uproarious directorial debut introduced numerous elements that would become celebrated markers of his personal style. These include a barrage of Georges Méliès-influenced special effects delivered with great humour and panache; stellar comic performances; talking animals; and an arresting mise-en-scène that makes much of the Soviet Union's stunning natural landscapes. Several of the actors would reappear in Rou's later pictures, which, over time, increasingly gained the feel of family reunions. Indeed, it is only necessary to watch a handful of his films before experiencing the delicious tingle that comes from revisiting a home from home. Rou's fantasies feel as though they occur in the adjacent times and spaces of a unique and cogently constructed world. In his enchanted kingdom, comedy, music and magic abound, and there is the tantalising promise that one might stumble across familiar faces and places at any time.

One of the most celebrated features of Rou's cinema is his liberal use of magical effects. Peppered throughout each film, they are invariably an integral part of the story world, dictating as well as following its laws of verisimilitude. In *The Magic Fish*, Emelya's wishes materialise on screen through the help of substitution splices, double exposures, reverse motion, time-lapse photography and other low-budget wizardry. Rou fired these effects out in such a volley and with such exuberance that, even though these techniques were not of his own invention, his use of them became a distinctive marker of his particular blend of comedy and magic. As his career progressed, larger budgets facilitated greater technical innovation and sophistication, and it did not take long for him to acquire a reputation as a pioneer of live-action effects work.

Despite the complex effects his fairy-tale features invariably entailed, Rou firmly believed that the miracles of nature outdid anything achievable within the confines of a studio set.<sup>17</sup> Landscape plays an important role in *The Magic Fish*, as it does in all his pictures. Here, Rou draws a contrast between Emelya, a man of the land, and the tyrannical Tsar Gorokh (Georgii Milliari), who remains confined within the oppressive and windowless space of his palace. Class and morality – synonymous under Socialist Realism – are closely entwined with physical environment. In all Rou's films, virtue is inseparable from a close affinity with the natural world. The majestic field and forest landscapes and the water lily lake of *The Magic Fish* all appear again, as do the happiness and satisfactory plenty that derive from a close relationship with the land. Birds and animals are as important to this scheme as the trees and flowers and, in true fairy-tale spirit, many of them speak in human language. A comical cameo appearance by a trio of petulant bears (played, on this occasion, by costumed actors rather than real animals) prefigures a string of increasingly zany and elaborate ursine performances.

Amid the profusion of mechanical and natural wonders Rou presents in *The Magic Fish* we should not overlook the tale's human participants. While Rou's characterisation of such stock fairy-tale figures as a resourceful peasant, a spoiled princess and an ineffectual tsar serves the purposes of contemporary Soviet ideology and Socialist Realism admirably, it also marks the start of practices that would typify his oeuvre. This is especially evident in Rou's representation of the physically and mentally feeble Tsar Gorokh, who he

relentlessly lampoons, providing audiences with a delectable early taste of his flair for comic satire. Throughout his career, Rou would regularly encourage gentle and humorous derision of negative characters by endowing them with absurd clothing, make-up and facial prosthetics at the same time as emphasizing the infantilism of their behaviour.

The inimitable Georgii Milliar rises to the occasion in a superlatively off-the-wall performance as Gorokh. Milliar, the Moscow-born son of an affluent French engineer, would subsequently become the most notable and prolific member of the estimable stock company of regular collaborators Rou assembled over the years, appearing 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 recognisable 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. Rou was an excellent manager, who knew how to bring out the best in his team and who was not afraid to allow individual genius to shine brightly. His rapport with performers is palpable and, like the various writers, cinematographers, production designers, editors and composers with whom he would work repeatedly, they all make their distinctive contributions to what would become Rou's unmistakable house style.

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Vasilisa-the-Beautiful.png>)

*Vasilisa the Beautiful*

Although a popular success, *The Magic Fish* did not please all of the Soviet film industry's ideological gatekeepers. In the wake of criticisms that it was too politically lightweight, and as the clouds of war gathered over Europe, for his second feature Rou turned to a story cast in a more heroic mould.<sup>18</sup> In *Vasilisa the Beautiful* (1939), a courageous peasant, Ivan (Sergei Stoliarov), journeys to a dark and distant domain to rescue his fiancée, Vasilisa (Valentina Sorogozhskaia), from the grip of the frightful three-headed dragon Gorynych. Ivan's undertaking is a transparent allegory for his true mission – a responsibility he shares with every Soviet citizen; namely, defence of the homeland against foreign threat, and the preservation of its national values and traditions.<sup>19</sup> The film set new standards for Soviet fantasy cinema. Combining traditional folkloric elements with an epic quest of a scale unprecedented on Soviet screens, its technical virtuosity and jaw-dropping set pieces have justifiably drawn comparisons with the groundbreaking work of such later international innovators as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson.<sup>20</sup> More than 19 million Soviet cinemagoers flocked to watch the spectacle during its first year of release.<sup>21</sup>

With his next film, *Konek-gorbunok* (*The Little Humpback Horse*, 1941), an adaptation of Petr Ershov's much-loved fairy-tale poem of 1834, Rou pushed the technical boundaries further still. In addition to spectacular effects sequences, including one in which a giant lifts the hero into the sky in the palm of his hand, this was the first Soviet fairy-tale feature filmed in colour. Amid the Soviet industry's concerted efforts to catch up with emergent Hollywood technologies, it was originally intended that *The Little Humpback Horse* would be filmed using a three-strip colour process to rival Technicolor, but, like several concurrent productions, this plan was abandoned and it was shot using an inferior two-strip process.<sup>22</sup> Upon its British release, Herbert Marshall proclaimed it the "finest expression" of the two-colour system, with production values "as high as any produced in Hollywood" – although he was forced to concede limitations to the two-strip technology, adding "there is no doubt that if it had been in three-colour, it would have been hailed as a 'world-shaking masterpiece.'" <sup>23</sup>

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Kashchei-the-Immortal.png>).

### *Kashchei the Immortal*

Due in large part to the outbreak of war, four years would pass before Rou completed his next feature, *Kashchei bessmertnyi* (*Kashchei the Immortal*, 1945), although he co-directed a 5-minute contribution to a propaganda portmanteau, *Boevoi kinosbornik 7* (*Fighting Film Collection No. 7*, 1941), in the interim. Produced during Soiuzdetfilm's wartime evacuation from Moscow to Tajikistan and serving the political needs of the day, *Kashchei* is notable for the extent to which its ideological rhetoric has shifted away from class conflict towards a focus on patriotic pride and determination to defend the motherland (here, explicitly Kievan Rus) from the invading army of the titular demon (another memorable turn from the versatile Georgii Milliar). Providing a masterclass in wartime propaganda, *Kashchei* is also an immensely entertaining fantasy, featuring dazzling production design and special effects as well as a comical midsection that served to redouble Rou's growing reputation as a maestro of mirth and marvel.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, as Soviet film production headed into a period of rapid decline, Rou had little opportunity to build on its success. His plans for further fairy-tale films were repeatedly frustrated and the next thirteen years would see his technical expertise diverted to other cinematic subjects and styles.

The dramatic post-war slump in Soviet film production, which owed more to changes in cultural policy than to the damage inflicted by the war years, led industry commentators to dub the period from 1948 to 1952 the *malokartin'e* (cine-anemia), also known as the film famine.<sup>25</sup> Neither fairy-tale films nor, indeed, the pro-

duction of children's films in general were deemed a priority at this time, as the industry ground towards a nadir of just nine films in 1951.<sup>26</sup> Unlike some of his contemporaries, Rou continued to work regularly, but outside his genre of choice.

After the mid-production cancellation of *Skazka o tsare Saltane (The Tale of Tsar Saltan)*, a live-action colour feature based on Aleksandr Pushkin's 1831 fairy-tale poem, in 1948, Rou turned to non-fiction. In 1949, he shot two short documentaries simultaneously. *Artek* and *Den' chudesnykh vpechatlenii (A Day of Wonderful Impressions)* both offered an artistic take on a day in the life of the Artek Young Pioneers Camp on the Crimean Peninsula. He followed them with *Krym (In the Crimea, 1950)*, a propagandist regional travelogue championing the industrial benefits of Russia's recent absorption of this formerly autonomous republic.<sup>27</sup> All were shot in three-strip colour and *A Day of Wonderful Impressions*, the most technically ambitious of the three, marked Rou's first venture into stereoscope – an emergent technology in which Ivan Bol'shakov, the then-Minister for Cinema, was keen to further secure the Soviet Union's budding international pre-eminence.<sup>28</sup>

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/May-Night.jpg>)

### *May Night*

When production numbers began to rise, Rou returned to features, albeit not yet to fairy-tales. Retaining his position at the forefront of stereoscopic filmmaking, his next feature, *Maiskaia noch', ili Utoplennitsa (May Night, 1952)*, broke new technological ground as the first Soviet stereoscopic feature shot in full colour.<sup>29</sup>

Adapting a short story of Ukrainian folk culture by Nikolai Gogol, Rou sought to build on his experiences with *Tsar Saltan* and *A Day of Wonderful Impressions* in order to develop a lyrical style of filmmaking that seamlessly blended the real and the fantastic. A host of faces familiar from his earlier features were joined by three first-time screen actors (Nikolai Dosenko, Tat'iana Koniukhova and Liliia Iudina) as its juvenile leads – a practice Rou would replicate in most of his subsequent films. Four years later, he would complete one further stereoscopic feature: the contemporary pike-fishing comedy *Dragotsennyi podarok* (*A Precious Gift*, 1956), which would be the first of his films to manifest the changing cultural and political sensibilities of the emergent Thaw era that followed Stalin's death in March 1953.

Between these projects, Rou made his sole film away from the Gorky Studio (as Soiuzdetfilm was renamed in 1948) to help relaunch the languishing Armenian film industry, which had not completed a feature for five years and had never previously made one in colour. *Taina gornogo ozera* (*Secret of the Mountain Lake*, 1954), a modestly budgeted contemporary children's adventure drama shot in a primarily realist mode bears little stylistic resemblance to Rou's other features, barring a six-minute fantasy episode that dominated the publicity materials. None of his regular actors appears, and, despite an overall tone of geniality, it lacks the comic sparkle of his most popular titles.

In 1957, the latest in a series of film policy developments saw the Ministry of Culture mandate a renewed focus on children's film production, and the Gorky Studio began to increase its output accordingly.<sup>30</sup> Its Artistic Council concluded that they were squandering Rou's talents on projects outside his specialist area of fairy-tale films and determined to find him a more suitable property.<sup>31</sup> This resolution would lead to Rou's triumphant re-emergence, alongside his almost exact contemporary, Aleksandr Ptushko (1900–1973), as one of the two leading directors of Soviet fantasy and fairy-tale cinema.

From this point on, all Rou's films centred on folklore, fairy-tale and fantasy subjects, but with notable stylistic, tonal and ideological differences from his Stalin-era fairy-tales. Barring two projects that had been in protracted development since the 1940s and early 1950s respectively – *The Magic Weaver* (1959) and *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (1963) – and his final film, *Zoloty roga* (*Golden Horns*, 1972), which he made at a time of resurgent Russian nationalism, Rou's post-war fantasies are largely devoid of the themes of class conflict and patriotic fealty that had marked their predecessors so strongly. Adapted, for the most part, from original screenplays by contemporary Soviet children's playwrights and poets, Rou's films of the Thaw period and beyond are frequently characterised by witty infiltrations of modern-day sensibilities and cultural references into the equally recognisable realms of traditional folklore.

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/New-Adventures-of-Puss-in-Boots.jpg>)

*New Adventures of Puss in Boots*

Rou's first fairy-tale of this era, the Sergei Mikhalkov-scripted *New Adventures of Puss in Boots* (1958), was deeply indebted to Italian and French, rather than Slavic, fairy-tale sources. The strikingly modernist mise-en-scène and up-to-date cultural allusions of the Kingdom of Chess – a fairyland into which a pampered young city girl, Liuba (Ol'ga Gorelova), enters while she sleeps – spoke to a generation of youngsters with different experiences and outlooks to their parents, as well as reflecting broader changes in prevailing Soviet notions of child psychology and social responsibility. Nevertheless, it also features many of Rou's established trademarks, including his signalling of character morality through a recurrent set of associations with specific flora, fauna, and natural or manufactured landscapes. Familiar faces within the cast include Georgii Milliar in the dual role of the kindly Court Jester and the wicked Queen of Spades.

He followed *Puss in Boots* with *The Magic Weaver* (1959), which, after sixteen years in development, was strongly marked by its wartime origins. Based on an original script by the playwright Evgenii Shvartz (who died shortly before the film entered production), it centres on a courageous army veteran (Mikhail Kuznetsov) and his efforts to rescue the captive Maria (Ninel' Myshkova) from the underwater kingdom of the evil wizard Vodokrut XIII (Anatolii Kubatskii). Among several reasons for the long delay in green-lighting

this production were concerns about the clarity of its political message, including fears that some viewers might interpret the representation of Vodokrut's totalitarian regime as a thinly veiled attack on Stalinism – an eventuality that did, indeed, come to pass.<sup>32</sup>

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Kingdom-of-Crooked-Mirrors.jpg>)

### *Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors*

Four years later, *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (1963) offered a similar breadth of interpretative scope that would have been impossible before the Thaw. Based on a 1951 children's fantasy novel by Vitalii Gubarev, who also supplied the screenplay, it is located in a dystopian kingdom of political corruption – stunningly designed by Arsenii Klopotovskii and Aleksandr Vagichev – where mirrors intentionally distort reality. Here, 8-year-old Olia (Ol'ga lukina) joins forces with her mirror-self, Ailo (Tat'iana lukina), to defy a degenerate political system that opposes Soviet ideology. Like *The Magic Weaver*, its rhetoric of social responsibility bespeaks its Stalin-era origins, even as the film accommodates alternative ideological readings. Indeed, the figurative flexibility of its depiction of a power-hungry ruling class that conceals its machinations from the public eye by means of carefully controlled distortions has seen its title slip into the common parlance of societal dissent, be that directed within or beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union.

Despite the frustrations of these films' protracted development periods, the delays in translating scripts to screen yielded significant benefits. Although some of their complex special effects reprise techniques Rou had used since the 1930s, others entail a level of sophistication that would probably not have been achiev-

able in earlier years, and *The Magic Weaver* is greatly enhanced by the vibrant hues of an Agfa-derived colour process unavailable when the film was first conceived. Imaginative, sprightly, augmented by Rou's extraordinary attention to detail and replete with numerous fine performances (the cheeky effervescence Rou draws from the Lukina twins merits special mention), both number among the director's most accomplished and enjoyable works.

In between these films, Rou directed two other well-received features. With *Khrustal'nyi bashmachok* (*Cinderella*, 1960), a prestigious screen adaptation of a Bolshoi ballet production, he created a singularly enchanting blend of theatre and cinema. Although unfolding almost entirely on a theatre stage, its unusual degree of multimedia hybridity, which incorporates a great number of magical cinematic optical effects, sets this adaptation apart from other ballet films of the era. It was released to great acclaim in Britain and America, where *Variety's* critic opined, "this is far and away the best filmed ballet seen to date and surpasses all previous Russian efforts as well as British productions in this limited field."<sup>33</sup> In 1961, Rou's adaptation of a second Gogol story, *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki* (*The Night before Christmas*) – the first film for which he took sole credit as screenwriter – is more densely woven with folklore and fairy tale motifs than *May Night* had been. It offered Rou abundant scope to develop the dark humour and delicious sense of the macabre that run through Gogol's writings and which chime with memorable episodes in many other of his own works but, filmed in the deep snow of Russia's northernmost Kola Peninsula, its dominant flavour is one of wintry festivity and the film remains a perennial seasonal favourite.

In 1963, Rou entered into what would be the most significant creative relationship of his late career as he commenced production on the first of three films scripted by the established writing duo of Mikhail Vol'pin and Nikolai Erdman. This partnership would produce *Morozko* (*Jack Frost*, 1964), *Through Fire, Water and... Brass Pipes* (1968) and *Varvara-krasa, dlinnaia kosa* (*Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair*, 1969) – although Vol'pin and Erdman, frustrated by what they regarded as Rou's interference in the script process, removed their names from *Barbara the Fair* and its screenplay is consequently credited to Rou and the pseudonymous Mikhail Chuprin.

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Jack-Frost.jpg>)

### *Jack Frost*

*Jack Frost* marked the moment from which Rou would re-enter the world of Russian folklore for good; breaking, in this process, from Soviet cinema's increasingly westernised characterisation of fairy-tale domains.<sup>34</sup> The film breathed new life into classic folkloric character types and tales and swiftly captured the hearts of a new generation. It would bring Rou a wider audience than ever before and, garnering multiple international awards, propelled him on to the global stage.

Many aspects of its effects-laden magical world reprised his previous works; gorgeous landscapes of birch groves (which Rou came to consider the foremost emblem of his creative work), water-lily lakes and snowy vistas are populated by such familiar figures as talking animals, a mushroom-man and a comical band of robbers.<sup>35</sup> Georgii Milliar takes the second of his four turns in the role of Baba Yaga, while another of Rou's protégés, the 15-year-old ballerina Natal'ia Sedykh, shot to fame in the leading role of the good and innocent Nasten'ka. By this point, a network of self-reflexive quotations of his previous films had come to be one of Rou's distinctive authorial markers, yet his style also continued to develop. The qualities imbued by Vol'pin and Erdman, which included razor-sharp dialogue (much of it in verse), witty sight gags, and gentle barbs at the absurdities of modern life, proved an ideal match for Rou's own cinematic sensibilities. Like so many of his other collaborators, they left their own manifest imprints on the pictures he directed, even as he drew succour from their expertise and dexterously assimilated it into his own evolving style.

*Through Fire, Water and... Brass Pipes* (1968) incorporated and extended many of the elements that had made *Jack Frost* so popular. Yet, in line with Rou's customary practice of adapting his approach to suit the mood of the times, the film also manifests some notable shifts in style and tone. With Leonid Brezhnev replacing the ousted Khrushchev as Party Secretary, the Thaw was starting to re-glaciate and *Brass Pipes* expresses, in a gentle way, the pervasive irony that was a broader cultural manifestation of the growing cynicism that had already begun to characterise this era. With *Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair*, Rou continued to renew his cultural references. It features a wide array of up-to-date visual puns as well as a new kind of heroine (Tat'iana Kliueva) – feisty and rebellious – designed to resonate with the youth culture of the late 1960s.

Doubtless buoyed by his string of consecutive critical and commercial hits, Rou embarked on writing his next feature in conjunction with his old friend Lev Potemkin, who had no prior writing experience but who had performed in six of Rou's previous films, dating back to *The Magic Fish*. The result was the zesty, zany and somewhat chaotic *Golden Horns* (1972), with which Rou hoped to refresh the structure and style of children's cinema, and which caters to a younger age group than the films he made with Vol'pin and Erdman. Although it would be hard to make a convincing case for its complete success, *Golden Horns* is packed full of joyous moments, many of which are coloured by the surreal absurdity increasingly noticeable in Rou's work. Acknowledging its flaws, and unaware that it would be his directorial swan song, Rou sought to redress its shortcomings as he set to work on developing further projects.<sup>36</sup> A second script co-written with Potemkin, which he intended to direct himself, was executed by his former Gorky Studio colleagues in accordance with his detailed pre-production notes. *Finist – Iasnyi sokol* (*Finist – The Bright Falcon*, Gennadii Vasil'ev, 1975) arrived on Soviet screens on 30 December 1975, in what had become the customary and prestigious New Year release slot for the latest Rou fantasy, and is dedicated to him.

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Rou-on-the-set-of-Jack-Frost.jpg>)

*Rou on the set of Jack Frost*

Aleksandr Rou's death at the age of just 67 was, and remains, keenly felt by the Soviet filmmaking community, as it has been by his numerous fans. In the 21st century, his films have received continued exposure in Russia and Eastern Europe through television and theatrical retrospectives. A thriving nostalgia industry has further perpetuated their reputation through collectors' merchandise, as well as documentaries featuring cast, crew and prominent representatives of Russia's contemporary critical and filmmaking establishments. His influence on later fairy-tale filmmakers remains ongoing. Among those acknowledging it is Dmitrii D'iachenko, director of Disney Russia's *Poslednii bogatyr'* (*The Last Warrior*) trilogy of domestic blockbusters (2017–2021).<sup>37</sup>

Modern fan-generated discourses about Rou's oeuvre make clear that his folklore-based films are those that continue to inspire the greatest passion. His documentary work of the film famine era is now largely forgotten by the wider film-watching public, as are his once-lauded achievements within the stereoscopic format – although, in 2016, *A Day of Wonderful Impressions* was honoured with a new restoration and subsequent festival screenings.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Rou's role in developing the cinematic language of the live-action fairy tale and his establishment of its aesthetic, kinetic and auditory conventions remain widely acknowledged, as do his impeccable casting decisions and skill with actors. Online discussion threads express high praise for his films' engaging stories and characters, their impressive special effects, their host of terrific performances – especially those of Georgii Milliari – and their many memorable and quotable lines.<sup>39</sup>

One of Rou's most exceptional qualities as a director was his unflagging ability to suffuse his films with an air of ingrained warmth and authenticity despite the political requirements by which they were delimited. Throughout his career, he created films that offered simple moral lessons in entertaining, engaging and reassuring ways. Audiences appreciated the sincerity of his bright and optimistic philosophy, and this perceived integrity has ensured that affection for him as a public figure is as strong as it is for the films he directed. "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. 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.

## Filmography

- *Po shchuch'emu velen'iu* (*The Magic Fish*, 1938)
- *Vasilisa prekrasnaia* (*Vasilisa the Beautiful*, 1939)
- *Konek-gorbunok* (*The Little Humpback Horse*, 1941)
- *Boevoi kinosbornik 7* (*Fighting Film Collection No. 7*, 1941): segment "Rovno v 7" ("At Seven O'Clock Precisely"), co-directed with Al'bert Gendel'shtein
- *Kashchei bessmertnyi* (*Kashchei the Immortal*, 1945)
- *Artek* (1949)
- *Den' chudesnykh vpechatlenii* (*A Day of Wonderful Impressions*, 1949)
- *Krym* (*In the Crimea*, 1950)
- *Maiskaia noch', ili utoplennitsa* (*May Night*, 1952)
- *Lernayin lchi gaghtbik'y* (*Secret of the Mountain Lake*, 1954)
- *Dragotsennyi podarok* (*A Precious Gift*, 1956)
- *Novye pokhozhdeniia Kota v sapogakh* (*New Adventures of Puss in Boots*, 1958)
- *Mari'a-iskusnitsa* (*The Magic Weaver*, 1959)
- *Khrustal'nyi bashmachok* (*Cinderella*, 1960)
- *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki* (*The Night before Christmas*, 1961)
- *Korolevstvo krivyykh zerkal* (*The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors*, 1963)
- *Morozko* (*Jack Frost*, 1964)
- *Ogon', voda i... mednye truby* (*Through Fire, Water and... Brass Pipes*, 1968)
- *Varvara-krasa, dlinaia kosa* (*Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair*, 1969)
- *Zolotye roga* (*Golden Horns*, 1972)

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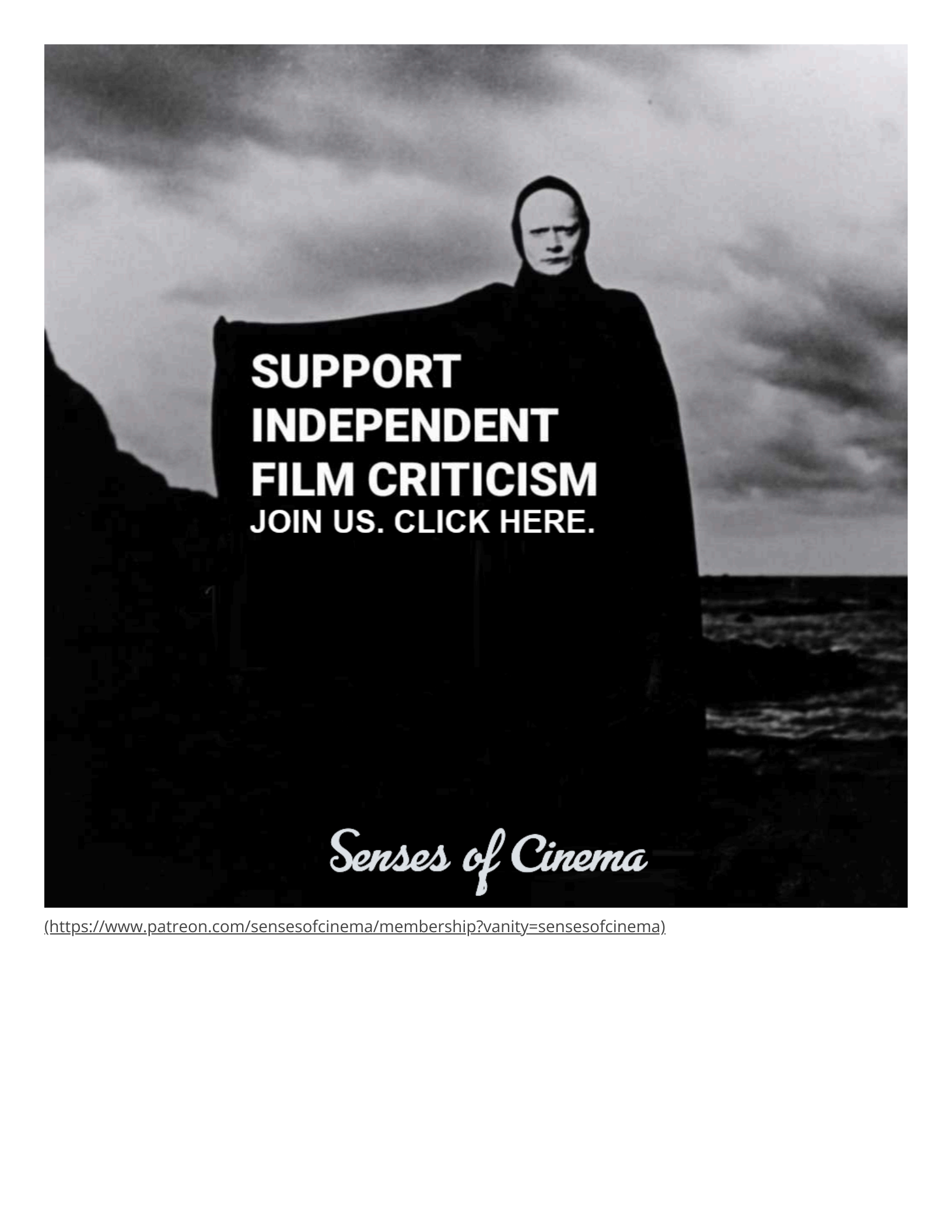
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