

Man from Podolsk

Semyon Serzhin, 2020

Screenwriter(s): Dmitriy Danilov, Yulia Luckshina

Place: Russia

Studios: Novye liudi

Length: 92 minutes

Language: Russian

Marianna Jaśniak, University of Warsaw

A Short Story on How to Escape the Banality of Life

First there was a successful stage play, written by acclaimed poet, novelist and self-avowed pessimist Dmitrii Danilov. As a theatrical production, *A Man from Podolsk* was neither unambiguous nor particularly demanding. Viewers and critics alike appreciated the play's Kafkaesque atmosphere and its ability to make the hero's struggles relatable, qualities which earned the production a Golden Mask Award for the 'Drama – Best Playwright' category in 2018. For director Semen Serzin, adapting this production into a full-length film was a logical decision. From his perspective, this remarkable story could not remain confined to the space of the theatrical stage.

The story's main character, everyman Nikolai Frolov (played by Vadik Korolev, front-man of indie band *OQJAV*), is not having a good day. He arrives at Kursky railway terminal with a simple objective: to board the correct train to travel back to his hometown of Podolsk, Russia. Life, however, is full of surprises and Nikolai's miserable and dull existence takes a new turn. Initially, circumstances are not exactly encouraging: Nikolai is first robbed by a 'Gypsy' traveler, only to be dumped by his girlfriend. But this is merely a prelude to a series of truly unfortunate events. The actual story unfolds when our hero suddenly finds himself under arrest. Two policemen drag him to a murky police station, where a bright senior lieutenant, an attractive female captain and an easy-going policeman take Nikolai under their wing.

Thus begins the absurd pretence of an interrogation, which may lead viewers to feel entrapped in a world reminiscent of *The Trial*. Nikolai desperately awaits some sort of rational explanation for his situation, but his efforts are in vain. Instead, he is asked the most ridiculous questions, which reveal new information about him. We learn about his education (a history graduate despite his total lack of passion for the discipline), his hometown (Podolsk of which he knows next to nothing), his occupation (writing for an obscure local newspaper) and his marital status (divorced). Nikolai's infuriatingly apathetic approach to life is redeemed by his one passion and *raison d'être* – music. He plays for a band called *Liquid Mother* and is a devout fan of industrial music. However, when asked about the band's apparent lack of success, Nikolai characteristically absolves himself of any responsibility, instead laying the blame on Russia and her citizens. Conveniently, Russians are just not ready for this kind of music.

Nikolai's increasingly outraged interrogators reach their breaking point when he is not even able to recall what occurs on the other side of the window on his daily commute between Moscow and Podolsk. It is then that the audience discovers the simple reason behind his unexpected arrest: Nikolai exists in a debilitating state of malaise that is unacceptable in the eyes of his captors. Concrete measures are then taken to cure Nikolai of his malady.

Nikolai's indifference towards almost everything and his deep discontent toward his country make him an extremely miserable person. He is shocked when the police officers he expected to be moronic turn out to be well-read and cognisant of niche music genres. Nikolai himself had long given up on life and progressively transformed into the human embodiment of a passive *homunculus loxodontus* (a sculpture and later Internet meme). But potential salvation awaits Nikolai, provided he is willing to change.

This was not a political play originally, and it follows that it is neither a political film. In a subversion of the popular image of police officers as the lowliest lifeforms of society (given their frequent abuse of power) Serzin portrays law enforcement officials as selfless volunteers on the frontlines of the war against stagnation and banality. Perhaps this chaotic and psychologically challenging story was written to demonstrate that it is possible to find peace in an absurd world. Greyness and mediocrity are always temporary – the choice is ours to make.

What can you see from the window on your way to work...?

