

***Leviathan* / 'Leviathan' (2014)**

Drama, 140 min.

Directed by ANDREI ZVIAGINTSEV.

Written by ANDREI ZVIAGINTSEV and OLEG NEGIN.

Cast: Aleksei Serebriakov, Elena Liadova, Vladimir Vdovichenkov, Roman Madianov.

Russia: Non-Stop Productions

Language: Russian.

Russian director Andrei Zviagintsev won international acclaim last year with this sweeping drama about a citizen fighting a crooked mayor's attempt to seize his land. *Leviathan* feels huge in scale despite the provincial subject matter, and is steeped in a palpable atmosphere of oncoming doom. It builds a steadily growing momentum that propels the viewer through its running length of nearly two and a half hours.

The story is a parable about the imbalance of power between the individual and the state—a theme that comes with some biting political commentary, given the setting of contemporary Russia. Although Zviagintsev has said he did not set out to confront authority in numerous interviews, the subversive undertones are hard to miss. The local government is presented as a borderline mob enterprise in which all branches collude to protect the mayor in increasingly shady ways, and the temptation to see this as a direct analogue of Vladimir Putin's administration is increased by the portrait of the Russian leader hanging prominently in the mayor's office. In another scene, a group of friends with guns uses pictures of past Russian leaders for target practice.

The title, referencing the treatise on government by Thomas Hobbes, suggests that the ultimate target of the film is not Putin's Russia, but corrupt state institutions in general. The bitter enemies at the centre of events—aggrieved car repairman Kolia (Aleksei Serebriakov) and venal politico Vadim (Roman Madianov)—are depicted as two sides of the same coin, similarly short-sighted and foolish men. They are both brutish, often drunk, and eager to crush one another. The only real difference between them is power—one has it and the other doesn't. The failed institutions that keep each in his place mean that the ending is almost a foregone conclusion, though that makes it no less devastating when it arrives.

Although it doesn't get its hands as dirty, the church comes off almost as badly as the political establishment. Vadim's closest advisor is a bishop who provides a spiritual sanction for the mayor's deeds in his pursuit of power by any means necessary. Towards the end of the film, the bishop delivers a long sermon on the divinity of truth and the undying splendour of the Russian people, which in itself is a rather stern but ordinary religious address; following the events that have just unfolded, however, the Orwellian ironies of his preaching are almost unbearable. The pronouncements of religion are as empty as the judgements of the court—just another means of control.

Performances are uniformly strong, but Madianov stands out as Vadim—part drunken buffoon, part ruthless gangster. It is easy to imagine the role tipping into soap opera territory, but Madianov invests the mayor with enough authority and humanity to keep the part grounded. Sergei Pokhodaev as Kolia's unhappy son

Roma convincingly carries some of the film's most emotional scenes, and Elena Liadova pours a tremendous amount of expressiveness into a slightly underwritten part as Kolia's even unhappier wife.

The almost entirely bleak plot is mercifully leavened with bursts of humour. Some of these are darkly satirical, such as the theatrical courtroom scenes in which a court adjudicator reads extremely long judgements in a breathless, rapid-fire patter. Others are as simple as a toilet-related gag that leaves Kolia and his son giggling helplessly. These moments are a welcome relief and they avert any danger that the film could turn into a monotonous parade of horrors.

There is a deliberate grandeur to *Leviathan*; from the plate shots of the Russian peninsula that bookend the film (beautifully shot by cinematographer Mikhail Krichman and underscored with pulsating string music by Philip Glass), to the enormous whale skeleton washed up on the beach. The visual symbolism is not particularly subtle, and neither is the script's direct references to its thematic inspirations (Hobbes and the Book of Job). But broad strokes are the point—*Leviathan* is an epic, and its impact is crushing.

SAMUEL FOSTER

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