

Asino (2017)

Documentary, Mystery, 167 min.

Directed by ANATOLY VASILIEV.

Written by ANATOLY VASILIEV.

Cast: Donkey Apollo, donkey Ares, donkey Fina, donkey Pirandello, donkey Zeus et al.

Switzerland and Russia: Trikita Entertainment AG

Language: Russian.

Anatoly Vasiliev's first major film plays out like an epic poem – slow in pace, mounting, and a bit difficult to digest. The challenge with understanding this film and the director's vision is that in order to do so one simply needs to immerse themselves completely in the director's world so as to not fall prey to over-intellectualization. The nearly three-hour film is divided into eight novellas of approximately twenty minutes. Each one is dedicated to depicting one of man's often overlooked beasts of burden – the donkey, an animal who despite its historical importance has grown to become a symbol of stubbornness and stupidity.

Vasiliev is relatively new to filmmaking and is renowned instead as a theatre director. In his home country he has often been referred to as the 'father of modern Russian theatre', and he is the founder of Moscow's Theatre School of Dramatic Arts. However, in 2006 Vasiliev moved from his homeland to work in Europe instead, after he began to face censorship in Russia due to the often radical and experimental nature of his work. For this reason, Vasiliev's productions often contrast with traditional Russian theatre, which often focuses on performing well-loved classics. Perhaps it is this background which lends a certain theatrical flair to Vasiliev's film, like watching a play on a stage.

Each of the film's novellas takes place in a different setting with different donkeys, at an unspecified time and location in Italy. The first installment provides a lingering view into a stable, consisting of mostly portraitesque shots of various donkeys, interrupted by a series of cuts to a black screen which include text from various philosophical and literary sources, such as Hemmingway and Aeschylus. These moments seem to speak for the donkeys to the viewer, a theme which is repeated throughout the film. The film's dramatic soundtrack, composed by Giovanni Sollima, is also introduced in the final minutes of these scenes. The second novella switches from a drab stable to a

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lush, green Italian vineyard, where we watch a young boy dressed as Bacchus read from a book to his donkey tied to branches in a rather sweet scene. The next, however, depicts a donkey being led not to a fertile countryside, but instead to a desolate chalk mine where its owner tries in vain to leave it among the rubble and dust. The fourth novella could arguably be the one that most closely resembles a documentary. It depicts the festivities of the Palio Di Siena festival, in which locals attempt race donkeys around a small track, despite the stubbornness of the competitors. The fifth scene follows a donkey walking through the streets of a small town, dressed in a robe. He wanders until he comes to a theatre, where he takes main stage until he is pulled down by two men. The following novella is rather uneventful and is concentrated mainly on a stable hand leading donkeys into their stalls. The two final installments however seem to be the culmination of the entire film, one depicting the death of a donkey and a long probing shot of the dead animal's hanging corpse, and a pensive final shot where a stubborn donkey is pulled across a biblical landscape off screen, where the film comes to a close.

Asino is not a light film, nor one that is necessarily entertaining to watch. Its lingering nature allows you to experience life through the eyes of an animal, including how an animal would perceive the passage of time. Although the length and the seemingly bizarre focus of this film may put off casual moviegoers, Vasiliev's epic film provides an immersive and thought-provoking theatrical experience to those who are willing to immerse themselves in the world of the donkey.

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