

Bitter Harvest Movie- Review

A refreshingly bad film in an era of 'just passable' movies.

By Amelia Navascues.



For Director, George Mendeluk, the film, 'Bitter Harvest' was a certain kind of labour of love. A collaborative project with Ukrainian Canadian writer Richard Bachynsky, the film has awaited anticipation for many, as the first period drama shedding light on aspects of 1930s Stalinist Russia, told from a Ukrainian perspective.

Mendeluk is the first in Hollywood to address the horrors of the Holodomor tragedy, a cover up genocide hidden under the premise of Stalin's farm collectivisation policies. Holodomor, an artificial famine killing between two and seven million Ukrainians under Soviet authorities in the 1930s is a tragic chapter of Ukraine's past, but despite best intentions and timely release, audiences are only offered endless feelings of cringe in a failed epic that sadly fails to deliver on almost any account whatsoever.

The film is anything but thoughtful. For many, the period is a deeply sensitive period of Ukraine's past, and until recently has been a publicly concealed aspect of history. It's an era deeply deserving of a responsible treatment on film. Unfortunately, in 'Bitter Harvest', the actual tragedy is the film itself, where the artificially generated famine blurs quietly into a grey backdrop of death and gloom which are given little in depth attention, where another glossy predictable romance plot takes to the foreground instead.

Better recognised as a director on the small screen and more light-hearted movies such as 'Doin Time' (1985), 'Deck the Halls' (2005) and must-see, B-Grade summer flick, 'Meatballs III: Summer Job' (1980), 'Bitter Harvest' is a departure from Mendeluk's typical tele-comedy genre-work, and it certainly shows.



The film follows the love story of Ukrainian countryside sweethearts, Yuri (Max Irons), the son of a Cossack, and the dream- farm-girl-next door, Natalka (Samantha Barks). In early sequences, the two are seen flitting through the Ukrainian countryside, doing

little farm work, and frequently take to the woods to express their love to each other in what appears to be some greasy Vaseline-up lens work that screams 1970s porn.

The couple are separated by intervening Soviets early in the film, leaving aspiring artist, Yuri to flee to Kiev to make short-lived reactionary resistance art, as newly concentrated Soviet revolutionaries increasingly banish any form of creative expression whatsoever.

Meanwhile, Natalka is left to protect the farms back at home, fighting Soviet intervention at the frontline, and at times resorts to more immediate drastic measures.

One scene of worthy mention (spoiler alert) features Natalka poisoning a Soviet troop member with a tainted borscht soup, after she is forced into providing him a meal and pushed to wear a spaghetti strapped evening dress for what seems to be the worst date of all time. The poisoned borscht then leaves the brutishly depicted Soviet spiralling into a deranged acid-trip styled sequence which appears to have little relevance or coherence to the broader story at all.

At one point, the Soviet's perspective, in his borscht-made madness renders Natalka's head into an image of an older woman (his mother?). The reason is unclear and unexplained for the rest of the movie. The poisoning allows Natalka to escape and seems to be a point of celebration and success by the villagers afterwards. A small, but local victory in the active community's resistance against the Stalinist regime.

It's worth mentioning that the Soviets are presented in a pretty one dimensional fashion, that feels almost pre-USSR collapse Cold War Hollywood. Further, the acting is

so wooden and laboured at times, it almost feels like puppetry (the actor that plays Stalin was so sensationalised I thought he may have been another awkward CGI remake attempt).

As far as plot inconsistencies, bad acting and clumsy cinematography go, bad borscht isn't the only case in the film that forces back sad and begrudging laughter. Heavy-handed symbolism is also a feature rife throughout, as the movie features countless close-ups of extreme slow motion horses who fight in an open farmland over didactic voiceovers about the nature of war, alongside some overused 'innocent child flashbacks of swimming through water' imagery.

'Bitter Harvest' brings melodrama, romance and a shallow attempt to retell history with some pretty atrocious acting. The film at too many times feels almost black comedy in its inexcusable inauthenticity, and barely scrapes the surface on a tragic period of history that truly deserves far more filmic justice.

Check it out, if not only to say you've seen possibly the best worst film of 2017 thus far. If not, 'Meatballs III: The Summer Job' will surely suffice in providing similar sensations.