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Stilyagi (Стиляги) Review

Published May 15th, 2009 in Europe & Russia and Reviews. 4 Comments



Musical comedy is hardly a genre most people would associate with modern Russian cinema. Traditionally known and respected for such somber and inquisitive works as Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* (1994), Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2001), and Aleksei Balabanov's *Cargo 200* (2007), post-Soviet Russian directors had generally focused on negative aspects of the Russian experience until the early 2000s, when waves of cash flowing from the country's oil and gas-fueled economic boom finally reached the film industry, resulting in the production of commercially-oriented blockbusters such as *Night Watch* (2004) and *The 9th Company* (2005).

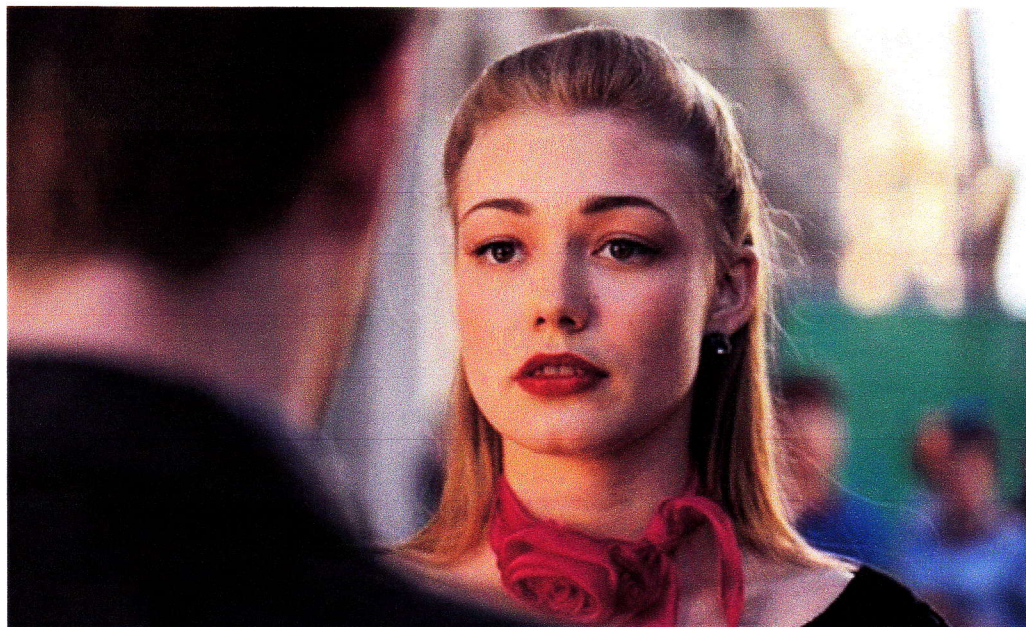
Continuing this trend and taking it in a new direction is Valeriy Todorovskiy's new film *Stilyagi* (Hipsters). Featuring an all-star cast, dynamic script and slick cinematography, *Stilyagi* takes the viewer on an epic joy ride through 1955 Moscow, two years after Stalin's death. At the height of the Cold War in the Soviet Union, the titular *stilyagi* were a bunch of Western-oriented hipsters who loved jazz, exhibited questionable morals and enjoyed dressing with style. Mels (Anton Shagin), a seemingly brainwashed member of the Communist youth group *Komsomol*,

falls in love with Polza (Oksana Akinshina) while raiding an illegal underground nightclub. Polza invites Mels to join her and her friends on the "Broadway" and Mels is dumbfounded when he shows up to the party dressed plainly and looking apologetic. Striving to win Polza's attention, Mels ultimately abandons *Komsomol* and joins the *stilyagi*, chasing after Polza comically throughout the rest of the film as he learns to play the saxophone, dance jazz, and dress like a movie star.



The high production values combine brilliantly with hilariously written song lyrics and a beautifully composed soundtrack to produce a musical comedy of exceptional quality. Every scene, every detail – from the film’s color composition to Mels’ name (which we eventually learn stands for Marx Engels Lenin Stalin, the four “fathers” of Communism) – has been thought out and serves a unique purpose. Unlike most musicals, *Stilyagi* never bores the viewer with superfluous dance numbers or pointless art scenes as its musical elements are so finely interweaved with the story and the lyrics so funny and intellectually stimulating, one would seriously need to have taken tranquilizers to fall asleep.

Another upside is the contentious issue of the film’s historical relevance and its representation of mainstream Soviet society as a mass of grey, same-looking, pathologically repressed people who are – as the lyrics put it – “chained with one chain, joined by a single goal [Communism]” (“*skovanie odnoj tsepyu, sviazanie odnoj tselyu*”). *Stilyagi* makes an important point by painting outcasts as those elements in society that have not lost their sanity amid the insanity so prevalent in the mainstream and reinforces this idea in the film’s final scene where Mels and Polza are running with modern punks through the streets of present day Moscow. Another observation to make here is how incredibly pro-American this film is. In *Stilyagi*, the United States and its cultural products are presented as offering a much-needed escape from the Soviet Union’s monotone world of the *jlobi* (“hicks”). Ironically, the *stilyagi*’s superficial perception of Western culture always remains distinctly Russian, and the film illustrates this in the scene where Fred shares his impressions of America with Mels.



Stilyagi stands out as a meticulously crafted musical comedy that sets a new benchmark for Russian productions in its genre. Its original storyline and refreshing energy are complemented by gorgeous cinematography and an amazing soundtrack. The lightheartedness of the film is endearing and makes it highly accesible to an international audience. Those looking for a feel-good movie will not be disappointed, while those craving social commentary or a more intellectual experience will surely find it by paying attention to minute details and looking beyond the gloss. All in all, a joy ride recommended without reservation to anyone in the mood for something funny and different.

Stilyagi

Director: Valeriy Todorovskiy

Starring: Anton Shagin (Mels), Oksana Akinshina (Polza)

Genre: Drama | Music | Romance

Runtime: 130 mins | Country: Russia | Language: Russian

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SCREENDAILY

Hipsters (Stiljagi)

7 July, 2009 | By Dan Fainaru



Dir: Valery Todorovsky. Russia 125 min

An energetic, impressive production already garlanded with four Nikas (the Russian Oscar) for best film, production design, costumes and sound, Valery Todorovsky's attempt to revive the immediate post-Stalinist era may appeal initially to Russian audiences, but should easily navigate international markets after an enthusiastic reception at Karlovy Vary.

A portrait of a grim period, *Hipsters* is almost a Russian version of *Grease* - as fanciful and unrealistic as its American counterpart, but with more of a political subtext to sustain it. It's set way back in 1955, when, in an attempt to establish their independence against the backdrop of grey uniformity surrounding them, young Russian rebels ("hipsters") copied American fashions, hairdos and slang. Featuring a cast of young energetic hopefuls and several seasoned veterans in cameo roles (Sergey Garmash, Oleg Yankovsky), critics might carp that *Hipsters* offers perhaps an overly gentle and forgiving image of that time, hiding behind colorful sets and costumes which border on caricature. But general audiences are likely to be much more forgiving.

Hipsters centres around a shy, nerdy Communist youth (*komsomolchik*) called Mels, played by Anton Shagin, who falls for luscious blonde hipster Poly (Akinshina) and turns his back on his pretty but strict brigade commander girlfriend (Brik). He takes up the tenor saxophone instead, raises some hell of his own and ends up marrying his blonde bombshell and even having an unlikely child with her before Todorovsky wraps it all up in a rousing finale.

Hipsters' score, a lively mélange of updated Soviet hits and fresh numbers written specially for the film, pumps away energetically, while clever art direction blends real-life locations with studio sets to create a world apart. Throughout it all, the cast seems to be having the time of its life.

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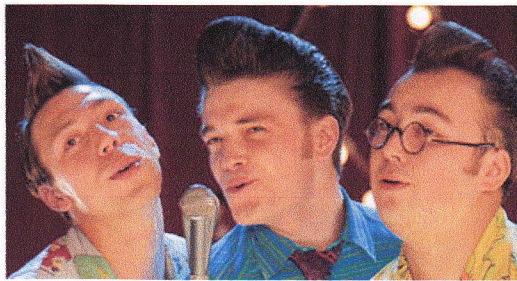
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FILM REVIEWS

Hipsters -- Film Review

By Duane Byrge, October 27, 2009 05:26 ET



"Hipsters"
Film Festival.

Bottom Line: A visually stunning and energetic musical satirizing repression in the Soviet Union.

CHICAGO -- A saturnalia for the eye, "Hipsters" is an old-fashioned musical outlined amid the stark repression of the 1950s Soviet Union. An in-your-face dance upon the graves of the Khrushchev era, this lively entertainment is an audience favorite and won a Silver Plaque for its art design at the Chicago International Film Festival and the best film award at the Middle East International

A phantasmagoria of color and dance, "Hipsters" is, admittedly, more sheen than substance, though its general theme is a smackdown of the stolid, Orwellian world of communist Moscow.

In this boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-back-other-girl swirl, Elena Glikman stars as a rebellious teen whose brightly colored wardrobe and anti-establishment lifestyle smacks in the gray face of the collectivist, dowdy society. She's the forbidden fruit for a conscientious communist teen (Anton Sagin), a young square who yearns for a more livelier life. Inspired by the girl, he dons bright colors, flaunts a pompadour and drops his zealot/communist girlfriend (Evgeniya Khirivskaya).

Although the plot stumbles around between romance and political tract, it's a visual feast, and the performers are vivacious and spirited. Credit co-writer/director Valery Todorovsky for the captivating visuals and heightened pace that captures the spirit of youthful rebellion and romance.

Tech credits, especially Vladimir Gudlin's sparkling production design and Konstantin Meladze, are magical.

Venue: Chicago International Film Festival

Production company: Red Arrow

Cast: Oksana Akinshina, Anton Sagin, Evgeniya Khirivskaya, Maksim Matveev, Igor Voynarovskiy

Director: Valeriy Todorovskiy

Screenwriters: Yuriy Korotkov, Valeriy Todorovskiy

Producers: Elena Glikman, Vadim Goryainov, Leonid Lebedev, Ilya Neretin, Valery Todorovsky, Leonid Yarmolnik

Executive producers: Maxim Koropstov, Elena Kozhanova

Director of photography: Roman Vasyanov

Production designer: Vladimir Gudlin

Music: Konstantin Meladze

Costume designer: Alexander Osipov

Editor: Alexey Bobrov

No rating, 135 minutes

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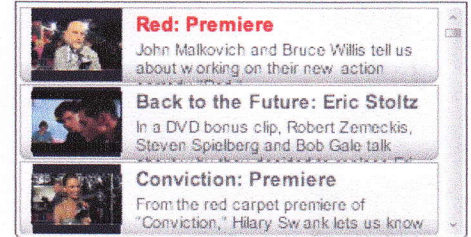
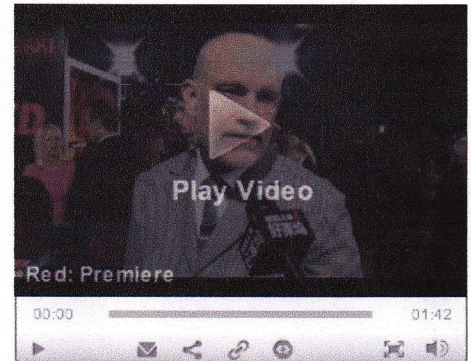
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