

Letter to Brezhnev

Review by Lois Wadsworth

Chris Bernard's delightful first film introduces newcomers Alexandra Pigg and Margi Clarke in a romantic comedy with a new wave lift.

As their ship approaches Liverpool harbor, Peter (Peter Firth) and Sergei (Alfred Molina), Russian sailors due for 24 hour shore leave, grin at each other and laugh gleefully. "Beatles," the large bearded man chortles. Down in the city, a couple of street-wise girlfriends with no money—Elaine (Alexander Pigg) and Teresa (Margi Clarke)—leave Liverpool's depressing working class taverns and head for a new wave club uptown. This adventure is unwillingly financed by a sleazy businessman who loses his wallet while dancing with Teresa; a chase ensues, but happily, the pair escape. Elaine and Teresa are as irreverently refreshing as smart-mouthed John Lennon at his Liverpoolian best—they are just what these sweet Russian sailors on a goodwill mission need. Sergei and Teresa's common language is sexual; in the next room, Elaine and Peter stay up talking all night and fall in love. Their brief time together is suffused with tender, endearing moments. When he must go back to his ship, they kiss goodbye through a cyclone fence, symbol

of the barrier between their countries which now separates them. Elaine is discouraged from going to Russia by the British government, her family, and every opinionated arsehole in Liverpool; at Teresa's instigation, she writes a letter to Brezhnev.

On one level, *Letter to Brezhnev* is a film about a young woman falling in love and overcoming obstacles to be with her lover, and on another level it is new wave social commentary—a blend of gritty city savvy and non-political one-world philosophy. The Liverpool that director Chris Bernard, writer Frank Clarke (Margi's brother), and cameraman Bruce McGowan reveal is ambiguous—both garishly lovely and profoundly depressed economically. Elaine's on the dole and Teresa stuffs giblets back into chickens and steals a wing here and a thigh there at a fryer processing plant where she works. The inevitability of their situation informs the film and gives it a bittersweet quality. In a revealing exchange, Elaine tells Peter she doesn't have a job. Peter says in Russia you don't eat if you don't work; he asks Elaine if that means she doesn't eat. Elaine laughs and says it isn't that bad



"Elaine and Teresa are as irreverently refreshing as smart-mouthed John Lennon at his Liverpoolian best..." in Chris Bernard's "Letter to Brezhnev."

yet, but later in the film we see her sister Josie (Angela Clarke) outside the chicken plant receiving a bag of stolen pieces from Teresa, which tells us how bad it really is. Both women want to get out of their dead end lifestyles; Elaine's love for Peter represents that possibility, and she jumps at it. Teresa, on the surface the harder and more assertive of the two, is probably stuck in Liverpool. By the end of *Letter to Brezhnev*, we care

a lot about what becomes of these madcap, swearing, raunchy working class young women and their simple dreams for a better life.

Letter to Brezhnev has received great acclaim in international film circles, at least partly because it appears to inject the nearly dead and boringly predictable British film establishment with some spicy originality and vitality. *Letter's* barrage of blue language is certainly a first for an industry

Americans identify with the polite intelligence of Alastair Cooke and *Masterpiece Theatre*. The film wasn't shot on location—for Chris Bernard and many of the people who made the picture (including Alexandra and Margi), Liverpool is home turf. The production addresses issues of love and peace with verve and style—John Lennon's non-conformist working class hero lives again in Pigg's and Clarke's spirited performances!



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