

"Dark Eyes"

Russian and Italian collaboration sees clearly with dark eyes

BY ELEANOR MALIN

A Russian merchant tourist on an ocean liner shows up in the dining room before it's open. A man seated at a table invites the merchant, a newlywed, to share a drink at his table. During the course of the simple, comic, but ineffably sad tale, we see that the host-storyteller, Marcello Mastroianni as Romano, has messed up relentlessly at every opportunity

Cinema

possible. As a young man, he married money. He lost his will to work, and gave up his dreams of becoming an innovative architect. In exchange for his dreams and ambition, he gets luxury, a loving, or at least tolerant, wife, and to disport himself amongst the wealthy and pampered women available to him.

In response to his wife's announcement of impending financial doom, Romano leaves — he goes to "take the waters" at a posh spa, a weak and cowardly move. His story grows progressively sad and suspenseful; delicate and ethereal to the edges of it, from the inside out, as Mastroianni emotes his sweet, sad and long tale of woe.

Mastroianni turns in, once again, a performance that is subtle, yet courageous. As Romano, he sets the tone for modern kept man, who trades his questing, aggressive nature for

the dependent, passionately impulsive existence of the decadent bourgeois — the pet who plays the buffoon, allowing his wife and family to feel morally and politically superior.

Mastroianni's courtly clowning wins the heart of a naive Russian woman who neither loves nor respects her husband. As Romano brings her true love for the first time, she believes what he tells her — a first for him.

"Dark Eyes" was directed by Nikita Mikhailov, who took four stories by Chekhov and loosely based the plot on them, with some homage paid to Gogol as well. A good part of the film was shot in Russia, and the scenic splendor of the countryside, the Russian mists and some great old Russian buildings add a visual lustre to the proceedings that melds beautifully with the overall literary quality of the script. Elena Sofonova, the "Dark Eyes" (from the Russian folk song "Oichi Chiornia," plays the part of the naive and dependent wife, who is swept off her feet by the entertaining bouncer, Romano. But the flavor here is Russian, and there is no Hollywood ending, rather a compendium of irony, coincidence, and long-running angst, missed metaphors and also-losts.

Though not mainstream in most of the major ways, we get an engaging story, lovely camera work, a lot of energetic humor, and excellent acting. All the actors are competent, including several famous Russian actors we get to see for the first time here, and from Silvana Mangano as Elisa, Romano's wife, and Marthe Keller as Tina, his mistress. Mastroianni himself — he won best actor at the Cannes film festival for his

work — portrays Romano with just the right splashes of lightweight incompleteness and remorseful emotionalism. In all fairness, this part was tailored to him like the linen suit — he approached Mikhailov and asked for a mutual project — so one would expect him to do well. Based on his large body of work, all good, we

would expect him to fill up the part ably. "Dark Eyes," though, must have been made with a great deal of respect and rapport between Mikhailov and Mastroianni, as the resulting film is one of those noteworthy works of art whose sum is considerably greater than its parts.

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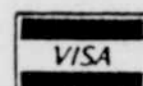


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