

Strand Theatre Shelbyville, Inc.

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Alexander Nevsky: September 18, 2009

Written by David on September, 18 2009

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As a native born and bred, expatriate Hoosier, who has returned to Indiana, I have recently attended two events at the Strand Theatre which I never dreamed of seeing in Shelbyville. The first event was a night of poetry reading and the second was Friday's showing of the film, "Alexander Nevsky," by Sergie Eisenstein.

Having spent years wandering the globe, it came as shock, albeit, a strangely joyous one, to experience such events locally. I must commend the Strand Theatre and others involved. Never in the wildest dreams of my youth would I have believed it possible that I would live to see either poetry slams or "artistic" cinema in Shelbyville, Indiana.

As for Friday night's film, my only complaint was the quality of the sound of the 1938 score by Sergei Prokofiev, as his collaboration with Eisenstein was one of the few artistic strengths of this Soviet-era movie. Still, the opportunity to enjoy the work of a pioneer, cinematic father such as Eisenstein more than made up for the scratchy sound of the classic score. For Eisenstein, a man with artistic roots in Russian Theatre, the marriage of visual cinematic effects with music came naturally, and his close collaboration with Prokofiev on this was one of the few joys of his later career.

"Alexander Nevsky" was the first film Eisenstein was allowed to complete in more than a decade. After achieving international fame in 1925 with "The Battleship Potemkin" he was criticized by Soviet authorities for "avant-garde tendencies". Ironically, he was allowed to venture west to Europe and America to study film, only to be deported from the U.S. twice, for the same Avant-garde tendencies. Upon his ultimate return to Russia he was confined to a mental institution and then only granted release after Joseph Stalin purged and shot the head of the Soviet film industry. Eisenstein was recalled by Stalin, who warned him "this is your last one chance," to make a film Stalin liked. The result was "Alexander Nevsky."

Aside from the heavy-handed propaganda of the dialogue, the film was and is a visual and audio extravaganza. Closely-monitored during both the filming and editing, Eisenstein nevertheless did manage to sneak in a few sequences of his famous pioneering camera angles and montage effects during the final epic "Battle of the Ice." Another of the film's strengths was something the director learned during his decade long journey of failure in the West. While in Mexico, Eisenstein hung around with the painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and developed a technique he later came to call "moving frescos." This technique was brilliantly used during Nevsky in the vast panoramic land and skylscapes which served as metaphoric backdrops for the Soviet-enforced Anti-Nazi propaganda of the film.

All-in-all, Friday night's showing of the film was an intellectually stimulating experience and one hopes the Strand Theatre will continue and expand its choices, be it either "Art Cinema" or movies so bad that they are good. Shelbyville needs just such venues.

Images on this post:

Archive File: 2009-09-18_alexander-nevsky:-september-18,-2009.pdf

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