

Radio Free Europe/Munich
Evaluation and Analysis Department
Background Information USSR

14 December 1960

DEFEAT ON THE SCREEN - LITHUANIA 1960

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Introduction

In the aftermath of destalinization, Soviet theater-goers were surprised and intrigued to find themselves confronted with a wide range of choice of entertainment. In Leningrad during 1956, out of forty new plays produced only 15 carried the standard Marxist-Leninist propaganda message, while 18 were modern plays imported from abroad.¹ In the following years, 1957 and 1958, it was the opera world of the RSFSR as a whole which caused the headaches to Agitprop, because the managers had discovered that Carmen, Rigoletto, Traviata, The Barber of Seville, Czar und Zimmerman, Manon, Tosca, Chio Chio San, etc. were appreciably more popular with their audiences than the standard Russian classics.

One of the difficulties facing the theater managers was that in 1956 there had been a "stay-away strike" of audiences (Teatr, No. 8, August 1960), who were not prepared to pay high prices for socialist realism any longer and who eventually succeeded in forcing the Ministry of Culture to cut its admission prices by 17%. Since then the managers have tended to be judged largely by their takings, instead of by the ideological content of their repertoire, and consequently it is difficult for them to remain on the right side of the cultural watch-dogs of the Party. As the appendix below shows, the cinemas of Lithuania, as late as the autumn of 1960, have been providing a diet of twelve foreign films compared with fifteen communist productions, of which twelve came from the Soviet Union. But it seems that the appeal of the Soviet films is not rated highly, because all the large cinemas in Vilnius were showing foreign imports, with Brigitte Bardot³ and Audrey Hepburn⁴ prominent on the list of stars.

¹Background Information, January 30th, 1957; Soviet Culture, January 15, 1957.

²Background Information, September 12, 1958; Soviet Culture, August 9th, 1958.

³"Babette s'en va t'en Guerre".

⁴"Roman Holiday".

When the present generation of Soviet films began to be thought out two years ago, recommended topics included the formation of the Sovnarkhozy, a new planning system on the collective farms and the reorganization of the MTS (Literary Gazette, 31 July 1958).⁵ Under the circumstances it is not surprising that the Bardot-Hepburn team is more popular in the eyes of the average Lithuanian, but it is interesting that despite the long time-lapse since the neo-Zhdanovist revival in the winter of 1957, and despite the whole paraphernalia of bureaucratic selection of "suitable" titles for showing to the proletariat, box-office results are still permitted to play such a major role.

Moreover this situation is not confined to the peripheral republics. Even in Moscow, at the end of June this year 45 cinemas were showing American films out of a total of 102 in the capital (see USIA report to Congress, quoted by Reuter, September 18th, 1960), and Mr. George Allen has said that the public reaction to them, despite the official anti-American propaganda in vogue since May, was "highly favorable." The Soviet Deputy Minister of Culture, N.N. Danilov, appears to agree with Mr. Allen because he went on record, in an interview with the New York Herald Tribune,⁶ as saying that:

"the showing of U.S. films was not without profit."

It is this pragmatically commercial approach to the cinema which during 1960 has given the citizens of Moscow, Vilnius and even such remote towns as Pyatigorsk⁷ the opportunity of a welcome change from the dreary monotony of the film with a "message".

r.r.g.

⁵Background Information, August 8th, 1958.

⁶August 11th, 1960.

⁷Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 15th September 1960.

BRIGITTE BARDOT AND AMERICAN MOVIES CROWD OUT
"DECENT" SOVIET FILMS -- INDIGNANT PARTY MEMBER COMPLAINS

Elta

November 25, 1960

A fuming letter by a party member, published in the 19 October issue of the Lithuanian CP organ Tiesa, disclosed an interesting situation in the movie theaters of Lithuania. It seems that, for financial reasons, the officials in charge of the theaters have been booking the perennially popular Western films in the large houses. Meanwhile, the perennially unpopular Soviet Russian films were sent to the smaller theaters. Thus, because of a partial response to the wishes of the public, a situation developed which had to become, sooner or later, a cause of alarm for the party. The Communist regime in Lithuania was evidently well aware of the fact that, when Polish theaters had a free hand a couple of years ago, there was not a single Soviet play on the stages of Warsaw. But let us give the floor to the indignant party member who exposed this corruption:

"...To what movie theater should one go? In "Pergale" there is the French comedy Babette Goes to War, in five theaters -- the Indian film New Delhi, in Zvaigzde -- the American Sinbad's Seventh Voyage, in another theater -- Fanfares of Love. One recent week twelve movie theaters of Vilnius offered foreign (Western. Ed.) films, three -- films from the people's democracies, and twelve -- Soviet films. The big theaters were showing foreign films exclusively."

The author of the article then puts his seal of approval on Western films that "permit the spectator to get a better understanding of the reality of capitalist life and of the superiority of the Socialist (Communist. Ed.) way of life." Among such films, he includes the American Marty. Yet his scorn is directed against such American films as Rhapsody and Holiday in Rome (with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. Ed.) Why? According to him, the first one is "a typical 'masterpiece' of American advertising...attempting to show as many as possible fashions, modern cars and machinery, to prove -- see, how good we, the rich people, are." As for the Holiday in Rome: "This film is masterfully made...but, pretending to ridicule contemporary feudalism, it advertises the superiority of the American way of life...."

The author of the article then accuses all the empty movie "masterpieces" from the West of "obvious propagation of bourgeois ideology." And he admits that "there still are bourgeois-minded persons who exult in such breezes of bourgeois ideology and publicize it whichever way they are able to."

The indignant party member then turns his lance against the Lithuanian film newspaper Ekranas Naujienos (Screen News). The newspaper seems to have committed the crime of giving only

three pages to the new Soviet wide-screen film Second Blossoming, while it devoted "six pages to the empty American fairy tale movie /Sinbad's Seventh Voyage/whose only merits are colorfullness and tricks." Yet the supreme offense was committed by the Ekrano Naujienos by starting a new "personality cult" -- that of Brigitte Bardot. Only listen: "...in the issue No. 23 no less than six pictures of B. Bardot in various poses (!) were published.... Soon afterwards, issue No. 26 printed five photos of B. Bardot."

The author of the article is startled to discover that the reviewers writing in Ekrano Naujienos are much more critical of Soviet films than of the Western ones. Even more, "in currying favor with the bourgeois tastes, Ekrano Naujienos informs its readers about the newest scandals among the Hollywood stars, about how many husbands certain stars have, that this one got a divorce, and the other one is waiting for a baby...." As a result of this bardolatry, the author exclaims, a decent and true-blooded Soviet citizen has a hard time of seeing new Soviet films, without mentioning such classics as Tchapayev.

The author has put his indignation before the officials of film distribution. Their reaction was not encouraging: "...they explain everything in terms of money. According to them, financial plans must be fulfilled." "But," the author exclaims, "this is a commercial outlook to ideological activity."

The angry author then quotes Moscow's latest edicts on what films, and art in general, should accomplish: "...to explain deeply and comprehensively the ideas of Marxism-Leninism ...to rouse the working people to the fight for the realization of party's policy, to educate active and stubborn fighters for communism."

Any wonder, then, that the spectators in Lithuania flock to see Brigitte Bardot or Sinbad's Seventh Voyage?