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REVIEW

“Bulgaria Shall Lead Mankind!”

Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov’s *Triumph* (*Triumf*, 2024)

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T*riumph* is the blackest of dark comedies and a perfect example of Bulgarian cinema’s penchant for offbeat humor. The narrative of the film unfolds as a satirical take on the futility of hierarchies, in particular the dangers of leadership, unfounded spiritual belief systems, and blindly followed orders.

Set in the early 1990s, in the rural backwoods of Tsarichina, two peculiar female characters lead a small task force in the search of extraterrestrial artifacts. These objects may hold the answer to the secrets of life, as well as time travel and immortality. After the fall of Communism, the country’s government is desperate to attach its hopes onto this risky new venture and the leaders’ willingness to invest Bulgaria’s finances and military support is limitless.

Slava (Maria Bakalova) and Pirina (Margita Gosheva) are the self-proclaimed psychics who instruct the army on the location of the camp site where they will uncover the alien instruments. The women’s bizarre demands are always met by the clueless and obedient army. Acting as conductors between the earth’s magnetic pulses and the elusive energies of the cosmic rocks they search for, Slava and Pirina’s absurd and self-assured expertise undermines any military superiority of the task force. Possessed by the extraterrestrial forces, they dance, convulse, and vibrate, navigating the men towards misinformation and falsehoods. The buffoonery of the performances seems to channel the absurdity of the film’s premise to comedic effect. The film’s opening sequence sees a team of soldiers arduously digging away at a cavernous bunker, only to immediately refill it with dirt and excavate a few meters away at the flippant behest of Slava and Pirina’s direction. The joke is endured by the soldier’s exhausted looks of disbelief and their furtive glances at their peers as they refrain from impertinent replies to their captain and the two girls.

“Every day is a triumph” professes Pirina during the men’s training sessions

wherein they are coached to practice poses, sing songs, and meditate. The unquestioning soldiers must participate in ludicrous daily prayer rituals that intend to fix the aura of the men so that the alien Gods may favor their task force. The film's funniest scenes have the soldiers embracing and rolling around on the grass, physically uncomfortable with the level of intimacy and awkward gestures they are forced to make with their partners. As they clean huge stones with toothbrushes, Pirina encourages the dubious team members with verbose meaningless jargon ("eighteenth energy circle in the seventh zone") that they unwaveringly accept. She even bullies disbelievers with condescending insults as if to prove her expertise in the invented subject matter. Slava and Pirina's dedication to the cause is filled with such confidence that the audience may suspect there is more legitimacy to their special abilities than first thought.

As their progress is derailed, their mission falls under suspicion. Slava and Pirina's excuses only aim to delay the inevitable: that they will find nothing and that the top-secret case study is a hoax. If it was not for the superstition and religious sensitivity of the highest-ranking military leaders, the fruitlessness of their endeavors would have been unveiled sooner. Recognizing the dwindling trust of the men, Pirina uses her sexual prowess to sleep with the private, colonel, major and general. In every instance she seeks to buy her practical joke more time, trumping the hierarchy of her previous sexual escapade in order to influence the highest level of authority present on site.

The teenage Slava is the film's main protagonist, and her character development follows that of a typical coming-of-age narrative arch. Cajoled into believing she has telekinetic and telepathic powers by an overbearingly motherly Pirina, the impressionable Slava is drawn into the farce. Life on the campsite quickly turns boring and she tires of Pirina's routine when she catches the eye of a young soldier. Losing her virginity, Slava's affair soon transforms into an obsession with the boy, who is beaten when their relationship is exposed by Pirina. Lovesick, Slava's attention for the alien artifact dwindles and she refuses to assist Pirina in the mental reading of the stones and the stars. Realizing her success and faith relies in her accomplice, Pirina drugs Slava and insists to the men that she has lost her extraterrestrial abilities. In retaliation, Slava sabotages codename Triumph and destroys the "capsule to the mothership" by blowing up the archaeological site. Since Slava's real mother was deceased, Pirina took advantage of the absence of a material figure and enabled a confused Slava to be manipulated. Slava's trauma is triggered by the lack of guidance on her sexual awakening and her transition from childhood into womanhood, a sense of guardianship that was always missing from her mentor Pirina. This dramatic storyline elevates *Triumph* from the generic restraints of comedy, humanizing much of the preposterous events in a way that grounds the audience – rather than distancing them – through an empathic and absorbing mother/daughter rift.

Interestingly, the plot of *Triumph* was inspired by real events. The end credits of the film are superimposed against archival photographs, newspaper clippings, and once confidential military records. The real triumph here is proof that fact can sometimes be stranger than fiction.