East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

Joy As an Act Of Resistance

Olga Gibelinda's *Queens of Joy* (*Korolevy radosti*, 2025)

VOL. 149 (NOVEMBER 2024) BY JACK PAGE

Set predominantly in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, *Queens of Joy* documents the lives of three drag queens in their local night club Kletka. Diva Monroe, Aura, and Marlene aim to prove that a positive outlook can overcome any tragedy. United in their diversity with a like-minded LGBTQ+ community, these drag queens endure the war in Ukraine by regularly celebrating their alternative lifestyle and flaunting their freedom. Hardened by their past trauma as they wasted their youth wrestling with their true identities, they seek to rise above the nation's suffering. In an effort reflective of their unique personalities, they also organize supportive fundraisers for the fifty thousand other LGBTQ+ members actively enlisted in the Ukrainian army.

The film's most central storyline lies in Diva Monroe and her journey of self-discovery, which was visibly affected by the war in Ukraine. Refusing to abandon her homeland, Diva Monroe chronicles her life in Kyiv through social media postings. Gradually, she readopts her Ukrainian native language and avoids speaking Russian as an act of protest. Inside her apartment, Diva Monroe live streams the nightly shelling. She advises that the Kyiv air defense system shoots down most missiles, but there is still plenty of damage caused. Yet, like herself, many citizens remain in the city center despite the surrounding dangers. By continuing to live amidst their native surroundings, they find a way of fighting back against the Russian army. It is this kind of resistance or rejection of the war that the documentary builds its ideology upon. There is courage in carrying on and a defiance to thrive rather than survive in the midst of a war zone. Why cry when you can laugh? Why hate when you can love?

Backstage, Diva Monroe, Aura, and Marlene hatch their latest business plan to promote a drag night at Kletka. There is an acute sense of sisterhood and professionalism on display as they organize the evening's musical numbers over champagne flutes and store-bought chocolates. As they adjust each other's wigs and fix their make-up, they offer both sincere words of

encouragement and well-meaning jibes. Although these drag queens are considered celebrities in their relative social circles, the venue itself is somewhat unglamorous. The unceremonious backstage room is full of empty shot glasses and ashtrays piled high with discarded cigarette butts. Cramped amongst the flamboyant costumes and elaborate accessories, these grounded friends seem their most comfortable, rubbing elbows with the trashy bric-a-brac that adorns the walls. As if applying warpaint, Marlene announces, “This make-up both calms me and gives me strength.” If this drag act was temporarily abandoned due to the war, it would be as if Diva Monroe, Aura, and Marlene had been unlawfully silenced or censored. Against the odds, these drag queens end their show with a bidding war in which the prizes will raise money for the two-hundred-and-sixth territorial defense battalion. In particular, these funds will aid the Ukrainian army in purchasing military vehicles and wheelchairs for refugees in Kharkiv. These inspiring drag queens and their parties not only embody the spiritual rebellion of the Ukrainian people, but they also provide practical support and services that the army can use in the fight against Russia.

Interestingly, the typical prejudices the main characters expect to face in relation to their gender or sexual identity are significantly backgrounded in the context of current Ukrainian affairs. That is not to say they are non-existent: the inclusion of the drag queen’s strife in the documentary lends a balance to the film, one that counteracts the scenes of merriment and revelry. For example, when applying for a postgraduate course in clinical psychology, Diva Monroe is frustrated that her former male birth name has yet to be updated on her personal records. Marlene struggles to find a job as a restaurant hostess since the front of house team inform her that the job description indicates that they accept “female only” applicants.

Navigating a career in the military alongside her stage persona, Aura has a particularly tough adjustment to make. Her Ukrainian-born uncle has opted for Russian citizenship and enlisted in the Russian army. Aura is reminded of how the Ukrainian army’s priorities have changed since the war, in that they no longer concern themselves with sexual orientation or gender presentation. “I don’t like faggots, but they’re our faggots,” she quips, laughing at the military’s offensive show of camaraderie to soldiers like herself. Aura also reveals her mother is undergoing chemotherapy and in a tender moment of acceptance, asked her advice on which wigs she should wear after losing all of her hair from the cancer treatment. While visiting an abandoned village, Aura supplies her aunt Ira with essentials such as basic food and detergent. Regardless of the lack of water or electricity, her aunt’s neighbors explain they cannot move elsewhere since their generation grew up in the area and know no other alternative location. When there is a shared, main enemy, the very things these drag queens are often chastised and marginalized in society for become trivial matters. The war in Ukraine is a catalyst for the protagonists’ self-reflection, but it also leads to a countrywide sense of introspection, where

a nation discovers what really matters in times of crisis and that is a celebration of togetherness.