

## BEANPOLE: YOUNG FILMMAKER BRINGS BREATH OF FRESH AIR TO RUSSIAN CINEMA

*Reviewed by Susan Welsh*



***Beanpole* (Дылда), 2019.** In Russian with English subtitles, 137 minutes. Playing in U.S. theaters. Director: Kantemir Balagov. Producer: Alexander Rodnyansky. The Russian Federation's submission to the 2020 Oscars; included on the shortlist for Best International Feature Film. Balagov won Un Certain Regard's Best Director prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.

What was it like to live in Leningrad *after* the 872-day siege that left an estimated 1.5 million people dead from starvation and German bombing? What would it have been like for a woman who had served as an anti-artillery gunner and survived the war with battlefield wounds that left her unable to bear children? Or one with a concussion that gave her seizures and blackouts? Everyone in their families is dead.

*Beanpole's* young director, Kantemir Balagov, tells why he found the story so compelling: "It is very important to me that my story takes place in 1945. My heroes, like the city they live in, are mangled by a horrible war. They live in a city that has endured one of the worst sieges in the history of warfare. This is a story about them and about people they meet in Leningrad, the obstacles that they have to overcome, and the way they are treated by society. They are psychologically crippled by the war and it will take time for them to learn to live their normal lives."

This beautiful and disturbing film was Russia's submission to the 2020 Oscars, winning a place on the shortlist for Best International Feature Film. The two heroines, Iya (nicknamed "Beanpole," played by Viktoria Miroshnichenko) and Masha (played by Vasilisa Perelygina), are powerfully acted by young women who made their feature film debuts in this movie.

Of the Russian press coverage, an interview by journalist Yury Dud' with Balagov, producer Alexander Rodnyansky, and filmmaker Viktor Bitikov is especially noteworthy and can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glbSMlBhY3o>. (Then there was *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which, as far as I know, is read mainly by people who were in the Komsomol while Brezhnev was still General Secretary of the CPSU. They ran an article under the headline "How Can You Film Such Filth?!" Premier of

'*Beanpole*' with Kantemir Balagov in Attendance Ends in Scandal." It seems that a pensioner in the audience vociferously objected to the two heroines' passionate kiss, although she could not bring herself to actually articulate what the "filth" was that so distressed her.)

The film is receiving rave reviews from leading U.S. newspapers and news websites as it begins screening in this country; *The Daily Beast* called it "stunning" and headlined its coverage, "Is '*Beanpole*' the First Great Movie of 2020?" *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "The film is an improbably thrilling work of art by virtue of its physical beauty and its relentless intensity of feeling about people." I refer readers to such publications for more about the plot and other details.

I focus instead on the fascinating young director. Balagov, age 28, was born in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria three weeks after the August 1991 coup attempt that prefaced the dissolution of the USSR later that year. His is the first generation of Russian youth that does not remember life in the Soviet Union. This generation was traumatized by the poverty, corruption, war, and socioeconomic collapse of the 1990s. Living standards have improved, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but social stratification has worsened and, in many regions, poverty prevails.

In Kabardino-Balkaria (present population 860,000), where Balagov grew up, unemployment reached as high as 90% in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the economy tanked with the post-Soviet decline of tourism, separatist movements and Islamist insurgencies took off in the North Caucasus. Wars raged in nearby Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Georgia. An Islamist rebellion began in Kabardino-Balkaria in the early 2000s, including an attack on the capital city of Nalchik (Balagov's hometown) in 2005 that left at least 80 people dead; violence flared up again in 2010.

That was when internationally acclaimed filmmaker Alexander Sokurov (*Russian Ark*, *Faust*, *Francofonia*) accepted the invitation of Kabardino-Balkarian State University to come and give a film-making workshop, in a region that had never had a film industry. Balagov, who was one of the 12 graduates of the extremely rigorous five-year program (“no weekends off, no holidays,” said one graduate), described his work with Sokurov as crucial to his artistic and personal development.

So what did Sokurov teach?

*The Calvert Journal* asked Balagov in its Aug. 9, 2017 online issue, after the director’s first feature film, *Closeness* (*Теснота*), won high honors at the Cannes Festival. Interviewer Andrei Kartashov wrote that Sokurov, in addition to teaching practical skills, loaded the curriculum with classes in literature and history of the arts and cinema, and let the students choose their subjects freely, asking them to refrain only from excessive violence and religion, two obviously sensitive topics in the North Caucasus. “Sokurov always encouraged us to tell stories of ourselves,” said Balagov. “He would say: ‘Tell us about your life here.’”

When journalist Yury Dud’ asked Balagov why Sokurov is not appreciated in Russia as much as he is internationally, Balagov replied that he is a complicated person, both as an artist and as a citizen: “First of all, he is responsible.”

Dud’: “What does it mean to be responsible? That the person is an activist?”

Balagov: [pause] “It is someone from St. Petersburg who comes to Nalchik to open a workshop to fight back against cultural poverty. Nobody made him come to Nalchik. He’s not from there, it’s not his home. So why?”

*Beanpole* producer Rodnyansky added that Sokurov’s influence is that of “an uncompromising artist, a person defending culture’s right to exist to save humanity.... He has a strong moral core.... Without being in political opposition to the government, he is a true *Intelligent*, in the classical sense that was established in 19th-century Russian culture. An *Intelligent* is a person who is not indifferent, who cannot tolerate injustice.” Sokurov intervened unsuccessfully with President Vladimir Putin in 2016 on behalf of imprisoned Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov (Sentsov was released in September 2019 in a prisoner swap).

## A Voice of His Generation

Balagov believes that trauma is essential to cinema. It is what differentiates a “mass product” from a movie that is “one of a kind.” When casting his films, he always looks for actors who have experience with trauma. As he himself does.

Rodnyansky points out that the young director, in his meticulous preparation for writing and directing *Beanpole*, reading through archives and diaries from the time, learned that in Leningrad “an enormous number of people, survivors of the blockade, committed suicide. They just ran out of hope and the desire to live” (Dud’ interview).

Balagov told *Novaya Gazeta*: “In one of the diaries, I read something that amazed me: ‘During war, you have only one goal—to survive [ВЫЖИТЬ]. But afterwards, you have to go on living [ВЫЖИВАТЬ]. That is a lot harder than war.’”

So why do I call this grim story and its director’s perspective a “breath of fresh air”? Because unlike the usual fare of World War II patriotic adventure films, horror flicks, and endless morbid probes of dysfunctional families in a corrupt and blood-soaked society



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(*The Stoker, Leviathan, Elena, Loveless, Bury Me Behind the Baseboard*), *Beanpole*'s heroines are trying to find a way to heal themselves, to find a path forward.

In a statement to the press on the release of *Beanpole*, Rodnyansky wrote that “Kantemir has a huge advantage over some—if not most—contemporary directors: He combines true knowledge of the classical cultural tradition with the fact he is a voice of his generation. Even though he knows and appreciates the filmmaking masterpieces of the past, he transforms them through his own unique experience and makes them part of his style and message, which are very much contemporary and urgent.”

Rodnyansky (b. 1961) told Dud' that Balagov has “a special talent. He is uncompromising! Look, I belong to a generation of people with a lot of apprehensions. We are constantly looking at internal zones of self-censorship, for some inner comfort. Kantemir doesn't even think about that. He doesn't stand on ceremony, calls things the way he sees them, says what he thinks needs to be said. He answers his own inner questions, rather than the questions of some social environment, and he doesn't check what he is doing against what other people may think of it. It never occurs to him to do that! ... So, I set my course on the young generation.”

If Balagov is “a voice of his generation,” what is that voice telling them?

To pull themselves out of their trauma, indolence, and cultural pessimism. To work, like Iya and Masha, to heal themselves, even if “not all wounds can be healed.” *Novaya Gazeta* asked Balagov (May 17, 2019) how a person of the 21st century can hope to understand a person of the mid-20th century (in this case, in immediate postwar Leningrad). He replied by underlining the role that art can play: “Through literature—that's the only way. It conveys the experience of life, an exchange of experiences, the details that make up the whole substance of life. And internal changes take place through literature. Through the mood, the intonation of a film, its voices, its consonance.”

Balagov describes the impact of art/literature on him in his Director's Statement introducing *Beanpole*: “The book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, by Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich, was my main inspiration for this film. This book opened a whole new world for me. I came to realize how little I knew about the war and how little I knew about the role of women in the war.... Leningrad was especially important for me as it was the city that survived this terrible siege, and the consequences of the siege played an important

part in the film. It was vital for me to feel this space and background in the film, and you can feel it even now, in today's Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). We feel the consequences of war in the space where the action takes place, and in the color palette of the film. But most importantly it's in the fates of our heroes. It was important for me to show the consequences of war through people's faces, eyes, physiques, bodies, not just through abandoned or destroyed buildings.”

Balagov's friend and fellow graduate from Sokurov's workshop, Viktor Bitikov, told Dud' about his personal transformation through Sokurov's mentorship. He had been successful, making decent money as a “showman,” playing in comic variety shows and performing at corporate get-togethers. “I wasn't realizing myself as a person,” he said. “It was just awful, plain impotence. I couldn't care less. ‘Yeah, so some old lady in Ryazan had a tragedy, so what? [Да и плевать!] Yeah, there was a blockade in Piter, so what? Yeah, millions of people died in the Second World War, so what?’ I'm not like that anymore.... Now I can suffer because of the Piter blockade. I think compassion like that is a very important human quality.”

So Balagov and Bitikov want their generation to change, to know their history as it was lived by real people, with all their trauma and suffering and hope.

Balagov talked with Dud' about the changes he would like to see in the North Caucasus: “The first thing I want is for young people to have a way to change themselves. Some impetus. Some help for the youth. Because right now, there's complete neglect.” There are places to play ball in Nalchik, but no art centers. The graduates of Sokurov's short-lived 2010-15 workshop are languishing in Kabardino-Balkaria or have left for careers elsewhere (Bitikov drives for a courier service). “We don't get any support for our self-expression. I guess I'm just lucky.”

But lucky or not, his success will certainly encourage others, and he's not stopping here. Despite the discouraging situation in his native republic, he says that is where his next film will be located, “in the place I love, with the people around me. I just have to think up the story. It will be a modern history.”

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