

## 12, directed by Nikita Mikhalkov (2007)

Golden Lion award, Venice Film Festival, 2007;  
nominated for Academy Award, Best Foreign Language  
Film, 2008

Reviewed by Susan Welsh



*Editors note: Recently SLD member Susan Welsh wrote to us and suggested a column reviewing, recommending and discussing Slavic films and further agreed to moderate it and start the ball rolling with a review of Mikhalkov's 12. We thought this an excellent idea and suggested that she introduce herself with a short profile. Following this column*

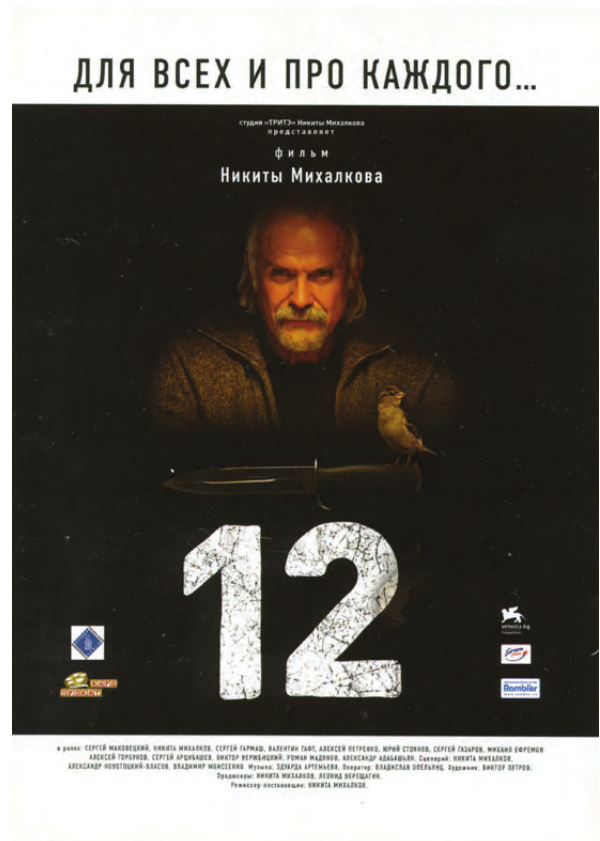
*is an article by Nora Favorov about russiandvd.com, the Russian equivalent of Netflix. Nora's list of her ten favorite DVDs will appear in the next issue of SlavFile.*

Readers of Slavfilms are invited to comment on published reviews, to submit new ones and/or suggest films to review. Contact [welsh\\_business@verizon.net](mailto:welsh_business@verizon.net).

As SlavFile's newest columnist, I have been invited to write a brief profile introducing myself to readers. I have been fascinated by Russia's culture and language since I was a teenager growing up in beautiful, pre-war Beirut, Lebanon (I was born there to American teachers who taught at the American University of Beirut). I would lie on the beach, reading Dostoevsky and broiling my Anglo-Saxon skin (we didn't know better then). With the passion of youth, I decided to major in Russian when I got to college, the better to understand the human mind—and why my family was so crazy. And so I did, studying Russian at Swarthmore College, adding a psychology major later. I took a summer “immersion” Russian program at the University of Indiana in 1968, the summer of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, of the assassination of Robert Kennedy, of the escalation of the Vietnam War. I was politicized for life.

I ended up using my Russian as a professional translator and journalist, reading the Soviet press every day. My technique was to scan an article until I came to the word *однако*, and then see if the author had anything to say. Usually, they didn't. I studied Soviet history, psychology (E. Ilyenkov), and history of science (V.I. Vernadsky.) By 1981, I had had as much as I could stomach of *Pravda* and *Krasnaya Zvezda*, switched to the study of German, and eventually became an editor. Among my other pursuits during that period was delving into Leonardo da Vinci's scientific investigations and the work of Johannes Kepler, hoping that by the time my young son was old enough to ask me “why?” questions, I would be able to answer them.

My son, now a student at the University of Virginia, was born a week after the Berlin Wall was breached, and I confess that the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 somewhat passed me by, as I was struggling with a two-year-old, a job, and sleep deprivation, among other entertainments. I always kept up with translating, either on the job or on the side, and in 2007 decided to hang up my shingle as a freelance translator. I continue seeking to comprehend what has happened in Russia all this time; this column is an effort in that direction. My website is <http://www.ssw-translation.com>.



Nikita Mikhalkov's 12 is reputed to be a remake—and even a plagiarism—of the American play 12 Angry Men, written by Reginald Rose and directed for Hollywood by Sidney Lumet in 1957. It is certainly not a plagiarism, and not a straightforward remake either. Although the story is obviously based on the earlier work, it is very different in many important aspects. Mikhalkov's 12 is more of a Canterbury Tales in which a number of disparate characters tell revealing stories about themselves, with a darker, uniquely Russian tone, set in the context of a courtroom drama where (as in Lumet's film), a young man's life hangs in the balance, but this time in a nation seeking to establish its identity after a century of trauma.

As in the best Russian literary tradition, there is a sustained tension between moments of high drama and comedy—that devastating irony that is so characteristic of Russian, Jewish, and other East European humor. The ironic humor that has sustained peoples through historical waves of oppression and enabled some, at least, of the survivors of the gulags to emerge with their humanity uncrushed.

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The 12 jurors hold in their hands the fate of young Umar (played by Aпти Magamayev), a Chechen whose parents were brutally murdered during the war. A Russian soldier, “Uncle Volodya,” a friend of Umar’s parents, finds the orphaned boy after their death and takes him to Moscow to raise as his own son. When Umar’s adoptive father is found stabbed, Umar is charged with the crime. Some elements of this story line parallel that of the Lumet film, in which a Puerto Rican youth in New York City is charged with murdering his father. But how much richer and deeper is Mikhalkov’s tale!

With Lumet, we know little about the jurors. We know their occupations; we know that they represent a certain cross section of the white, male population of the United States in the 1950s; and we learn something about their characters. But we do not know, for example, why the “dissident” juror (played by Henry Fonda) steps forward to say “not guilty,” challenging the consensus of men who have already made up their minds to agree with the prosecutor, unencumbered by any thought process of their own, and who (mostly) want to get the business over with.

But with Mikhalkov’s *Canterbury Tales*, almost every juror has a story to tell, a story that reflects in some way upon the experience of the Soviet and post-Soviet people. There is a multidimensional mingling of personal, social, and economic issues that is only hinted at in the Lumet film. Of course, at the beginning, most of the jurors are convinced the boy is guilty, like their American counterparts. But slowly they open their hearts and lives to each other, as they arm-wrestle one another toward the realization that there is indeed at least “a shadow of a doubt” about Umar’s guilt—and maybe more than a shadow; that the boy is a human being, worthy of compassion, not “Chechen scum” (as the

taxi driver, played masterfully by Sergei Gamash, puts it). There is then a solid core of psychological truth when, over the film’s two and a half hours (Lumet’s is one hour shorter), they change their votes, one by one, to “not guilty.”

Who will have the courage to discover and stand up for the truth, even if no one else does? What theme could be more gripping for a Russian audience that still feels the impact of Stalin’s police state, an audience in which each person’s family lost loved ones in the carnage that swept Russia and the USSR from World War I to the Civil War to Stalin’s purges to World War II to Afghanistan to Chechnya?

The film is also a story about love and redemption, with a very subtly presented Christian theme, which is only made overt at the end. One of the most endearing characters, the first to join the dissident juror (played by Sergei Makovetsky) in voting not guilty, is a Jew (played by Valentin Gaft). Another juror, whose self-revelation has a particularly dramatic impact on the other jurors—as well as the audience—is himself, like Umar, from the Caucasus (this juror is played by Sergei Gazarov).

The acting is excellent, and the direction is brilliant overall. The charge made by reviewer Zoya Svetova ([Review, “12’ как апология Путина”](#) on the website «Ежедневный журнал» [Daily Journal])—that the film is not about the jurors, not about Chechnya, nothing but a puff-piece for Vladimir Putin—seems to me so silly as not to be worthy of comment. I found the beginning hard to follow (who is related to whom, and how?)—but I’m often that way with movies. It made the second viewing that much more enjoyable.

Send comments on this review or the film 12 to [welsh\\_business@verizon.net](mailto:welsh_business@verizon.net).

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### TO OUR FAR-FLUNG READERS

Every once in a while we hear from a heretofore anonymous reader outside the U.S. and/or Slavic speaking countries—Israel, for example, or Scotland. We are always delighted to do so. After all, even though we are the official organ of ATA’s Slavic Languages Division, we post SlavFile on the ATA’s open website so that anyone who is interested can read it. We welcome and publish appropriate contributions from all readers and even non-readers.

Now we would like to find out more about our far-flung readers, both members and non-members of SLD. Send us a paragraph about yourselves and/or your reactions to SlavFile. With your permission, we will publish it and, as an extra incentive, will add you to a list of people receiving emails when the next issue is available on line. We are looking forward to hearing from and about you.

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