

Bolshe Vita

Hungary | 1996 | 97 minutes

Credits

Director	Ibolya Fekete
Screenplay	Ibolya Fekete
Photography	András Szalai
Music	Yuri Fomichyov Ferenc Muk

Cast

Jura	Yuri Fomichevas
Vagyim	Igor Csernyevics
Szergej	Aleksey Serebryakov
Erzsi	Ágnes Máhr
Maggie	Helen Baxendale
Susan	Caroline Loncq

In Brief

When the Soviet Communist empire crumbled in 1989 and '90, and thousands of Russians poured into Eastern Europe, who could blame them for imagining that utopia was suddenly at hand? All they had to do was go west, and the winds of freedom would whisk them to a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

Ibolya Fekete's richly humane and poignant film "Bolshe Vita" remembers the brief moment when Budapest was a benign, freewheeling way station for thousands of young Russian emigrants seeking a better life. This Hungarian film, which New Directors/New Films is showing tonight at 9 and tomorrow evening at 6 at the Museum of Modern Art, follows three young dreamers across the Russian border into Hungary, where they find life is certainly different but no less complicated than before. One of the hardest lessons they learn is that in the West money is everything.

Yura and Vadim, a Russian guitarist and saxophonist, desert their musicians' collective the moment their group sets foot on Hungarian soil. Sergei, whose story is intercut with theirs, is a dour young engineer who arrives in Budapest with two suitcases of knives he hopes to sell.

The Hungarian capital in which they make their way is a teeming international bohemia that has attracted capitalists and footloose adventurers from all over Europe and the United States. The two musicians are respectively taken up by Maggie (Helen Baxendale), an English translator, and her hard-bitten American friend Susan (Caroline Loncq). Sergei becomes halfheartedly involved with a smuggling ring.

"Bolshe Vita" does a wonderful job of fleshing out its characters and showing how each man's personality and temperament react with the Darwinian sink-or-swim reality to determine his future. Having been brought up in a totalitarian state, all three Russians have a childlike naivete about hustling in a environment where everything's up for grabs. Only Yura, the jolliest of the three, has the spirit and flexibility of a true survivor.

The giddy spirit of Budapest in 1990 quickly palls as gangsters take control of the lucrative open-air market and drive out the shady small-time entrepreneurs who treated the place as a kind of hippie bazaar. A McDonald's sprouts, and in a matter of months, Budapest's golden moment has soured.

The movie ends on a sad and pessimistic note with an extended montage of grisly news clips of the wars in Chechnya and the Balkans. The coda implies that the euphoria in Budapest was just an isolated little bubble of hope in a sea of butchery.

Stephen Holden - New York Times

A Potted History of Hungarian Cinema

Though its silent film production produced few films of note, Hungary developed a widespread and intense film culture (see the work of film theorist and screenwriter Bela Balasz, author of *Somewhere in Europe*). The sound era brought new professionalization; Hungarian films, often based on operettas and other popular fare, began to draw homeland audiences and those of neighboring countries, too. Yet Hungary's most famous cinematic export during this period was talent: Michael Curtiz, Alexander Korda, Andre de Toth, Paul Lukacs, Miklos Rosza, Bela Lugosi, and Steve Sekely are just a few of the Magyars to make their mark abroad. "Just because you're Hungarian," warned a sign above the MGM commissary, "doesn't mean you're a genius!"

After WWII and the communist takeover, Hungary's film industry was nationalized. Ideological restrictions aside, the industry benefited from an influx of capital into the cinema (better equipment, more cinemas built, etc.) and the limiting of those foreign films that had till then dominated Hungarian screens. As in all other aspects of Hungarian life and culture, 1956 was a watershed, and indeed the events of that year would continue to reverberate in Hungarian films over the next few decades. After the Uprising, Janos Kádár's new government gradually eased control of the film industry, and feature filmmaking began to flow from one of four studios: Budapest, Dialog, Hunnia, and Objektiv, each of which were largely run by filmmakers themselves. Freed from the outright constraints of the box-office, permitted a degree of freedom certainly unique within the Soviet bloc, and aided by a pool of talented actors, screenwriters, and especially cinematographers, Hungarian cinema soon became one of the most remarkable in the world.

Practically every year brought with it the revelation of bold new talents--Jancsó, Szabó, Gaál, Meszaros, Kezdi-Kovács, Bódy, Gothár, Tarr--while Magyar movies were international hits, routinely carrying off major international film prizes. Since 1989, Hungary has experienced some of the same problems as the rest of the former Soviet bloc--increased competition from foreign, principally U.S., films, loss of state support, complex international co-production arrangements--yet the artistic level of Hungarian cinema remains high, with the emergence of talented filmmakers such as Attila Janisch, Janos Szasz and Ibolya Fekete offering very hopeful signs for the future.



Film Society of Lincoln Center