

FILM REVIEWS

Tini zabutykh predkiv (Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors).

Directed by Sergei Paradzhanov. Color. Distributor: Janus Films, Kiev Studios, 1964.

Reviewed by Egle Victoria Zygas

To the southwest of the Ukraine, perched on the Carpathian Mountains, is a region called Carpatho-Ukraine. Early inhabitants of the area were nomadic Magyars who arrived there in 895-96, and were eventually replaced by the Hutsuls, a people of Ukrainian stock. What began gradually as minor migrations culminated in extensive official colonization by the Ukraine in the 11th and 12th centuries. At the present time most of the lands of Carpatho-Ukraine are incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic under the name of Transcarpathian Oblast. The remaining lands are annexed to Romania and Czechoslovakia.

Traditionally, the people of the area have secured their livelihood from forestry and sheepherding. The Hutsuls are interesting from the folkloric viewpoint in two ways: since they are removed from mainstream Ukrainian life, they have preserved much that is archaic; and since the way of life in the mountains is necessarily different from that on the steppes, the group has had to adapt to new conditions. Thus, the Hutsuls are both true to Ukrainian folk traditions and easily distinguished from other Ukrainian sub-groups.

Mykhailo Kotsiubyns'kyi, a Ukrainian author, travelled to the Carpathians in the first decade of this century and spent some time among the Hutsuls. Tini zabutykh predkiv (Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors) is Kotsiubyns'kyi's record of impressions garnered from that visit. Written in 1911 and printed in 1912, the story resurfaced in 1964 when Sergei Paradzhanov used it as the basis for a film of the same name. Paradzhanov, an Armenian, came so close to a true expression of Hutsul life that he was accused by Soviet authorities of excessive Ukrainian nationalism: Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors focuses on the national culture of these people, to be sure, but Paradzhanov's work was not nationalist in the chauvinistic sense. Kotsiubyns'kyi wrote a work of literature which was filled with folkloric elements; Paradzhanov took this literature, translated it into film, and created a piece of intellectual cinema successful enough to have won him sixteen international prizes.

The story focuses on a young boy and girl, the children of two feuding families. As the two grow older they predictably fall in love and perform a secret marriage ceremony. The girl becomes pregnant and the boy leaves the village to hire himself out to the sheepherders. He plans to earn enough money to have a public wedding and to support his wife and child. While he is away the girl tries to rescue a lamb caught on a treacherous mountainside; she loses her foothold and falls off the mountain into the river below. The boy finds her body and gives it up to the village women who lament over it and prepare it for burial. In torment the boy leaves the village and wanders for years as a laborer. He returns--a man possessed and tormented by memories of the tragedy--and marries a woman whom he does not love. She is aware of her husband's indifference and, assuming it is due to her barrenness, resorts to witchcraft in hopes of a remedy. The village sorcerer sees her performing her incantations and falls in love with her. Eventually she becomes the sorcerer's mistress. The husband is unaffected by their love affair and the two grow increasingly bold in their public displays of affection. The husband is finally forced to take action; a confrontation results and the sorcerer kills the hero in a hatchet fight.

The story of star-crossed lovers and their tragic lives is usual enough. We know it from literature, film, and soap operas. The motivating factor which turns the attention of folklorists toward the film lies in the use of ethnographic detail.

In an area where there is wood aplenty and sheepskin in abundance, these materials will be used extensively by the people, and the tools necessary for the preparation of the materials will be in plain sight. For example, the hatchet is so vital to the Hutsuls as to be ubiquitous. The mace-shaped hatchets found in the region are more than a wood-working tool: every Hutsul male wears one in his belt. In the film the hatchets are used to clear away thickets, chop trees, cut wood, and serve as weapons.

The great availability of wood in the Carpathians means extensive wood construction. During the film we are shown the ornate interior and exterior of a Hutsul church. The hero's house, atypical for general Ukrainian folk architecture but well adapted to the conditions of mountain life, is also a wooden structure--a square yard is completely surrounded by connecting hewn log buildings and enclosed by a fence. Carved ornamentalions adorn the house's interior and some parts of its exterior. Hewn logs and carved wood are also used in the inn where the hero is killed. The folk architecture is representative of the Hutsuls and is related to that of other eastern European peoples.

Sheepskin is part of many of the costumes. Although the steppes are cold in winter and sheepskin is used there as well, Hutsul clothing is distinctive in cut and the embroidery is identifiable by pattern and color; none of these details are overlooked in the movie.

The laments over the dead girl are not the slicked-over, popularized musical background of numerous similar films. They are not pseudo-folk or ethnomusicological-esque. The melodies are true to lament tradition and do not seem to have been toned down for moviegoers.

The morbid preoccupation of the hero with his dead sweetheart is representative of a common Slavic belief in otherworldly ethereal beings who torment the living. These beings are the *rusalki*, the souls of unfortunate young women who take their own lives--usually by drowning--due to unhappy love affairs, miserable marriages, or unwanted pregnancies. The humans they disturb are often their former lovers.

Several folk religious beliefs are apparent in the witchcraft segment of the film. The ignored wife steals out of the house in the betwixt-and-between time of light-before-dawn and performs her magical acts while standing entirely naked on the "Mother moist earth" of a riverbank. This demonstrates a duality of belief: although in daily life the woman may be quite devout, in a crisis it matters little to her whether help comes from Orthodox saints or pagan deities, as long as help arrives. As activities concerning the natural order are performed in broad daylight, so should acts influencing the supernatural order be performed at a chronological antipode. Running water is internationally considered a curative element. The meaning of "Mother moist earth" in the context of fertility-producing incantations is obvious. The woman's ritual nudity in combination with the other factors merely reiterates the message she is sending to the powers controlling her situation.

Dialogue in the film is kept to a minimum--a boon for those overburdened with subtitles. Standard Ukrainian is spoken in much of the film, but as the viewer becomes more involved in Hutsul life, more and more Hutsul dialect creeps into the dialogue.

The importance of this film does not lie solely in its individual merits as they are enumerated above: those interested in material culture can refer to the proper books, drawings, and museum collections; ethnomusicologists can listen to recordings of Hutsul

laments; those with a linguistic bent can do the same with tapes of dialect. However, it takes a film to pull together these disparate elements, to combine them into a comprehensible whole, and thus to flesh out the dry bones of tomes, tunes, and tones.

Comparatively little is available to the folklorist concerning eastern Europe (especially to non-speakers and non-readers of the various languages). For this reason I would have been tempted to recommend just about anything relating to or coming from the area. Luckily, I need not make such a compromise. Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors is worthy of good words from the most critical critics. Whether one's interest is in material culture, ethnomusicology, linguistics, Slavic folklore, ethnography, or Russian cinema, something valuable can be gained by viewing this movie.

I was told that recommending an internationally praised, produced-by-filmmakers film would lead me to trouble. Nonetheless, I highly endorse Sergei Paradzhanov's Tini zabutykh predkiv/Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors. Let the trouble come; the film is well worth it.