Russian Revolution, Italian style


By Jay Carr
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When Ayn Rand left her native St. Petersburg in 1924, it was with a deep-seated antipathy to the Russian Revolution. These sentiments are the motor of her sweepingly romantic first novel, “We the Living,” from which this film was made in fascist Italy in 1942 without her permission. Although it’s as close as fascism ever came to “Gone with the Wind” or “War and Peace,” the Mussolini government had second thoughts about it. They liked its anticommunist thrust, but correctly saw its attack on totalitarianism as an attack on themselves. An anticapitalist message – foreign to Rand – written into the film wasn’t enough to keep it from being shelved shortly after its premiere. It didn’t emerge until 44 years later at the Telluride Film Festival.

At something like three hours, it’s an absorbing, florid, often entertaining rediscovery. The lush studio artifice permeating the film — lots of phony snow, cosmetic dirt in the prison scenes, vulgar display in the profiteers’ apartments — almost belies its outcry against the harsh lives inflicted upon these Italian-speaking Russians by their new ruling class. It’s easy to discern Rand’s idealized portrait of herself in the heroine, Kira, played by 21-year-old Alda Valli, who is every bit as possessed of incandescent spunk as Vivien Leigh’s Scarlett O’Hara. She’s an engineering student who falls in love with a son of the aristocracy (Rossano Brazzi) and is loved by a fiercely idealistic party official (Fosco Giachetti).

The party official is the only one who behaves well throughout. Brazzi’s scion of the aristocracy looks poetic and holds his cigarette at just the right angle, but lacks moral staying power, disappointing the woman who loves him by throwing him with black marketers. Valli, who makes sacrifices and deceives her suffering family, shiringly exclaims such lines as “We’ll fight it together. Leo — the country, the century. All of it!” Before the film is over, though, she glumly admits, “I guess I won’t be building any aluminum bridges.”

She sleeps with the lovestruck party official in order to send her tubercular aristocrat to the Crimea to recover. When he returns, cured, the predictable romantic collision occurs. Confronted with her duplicity, he divides the system. Only the party loyalist’s honor remains intact, but his idealism is shattered when he realizes how the Revolution’s ideals have been corrupted by black-marketeering colleagues and end-justifies-the-means killings. Although it deals with what were modern tempestuous events, the film, like the book, has an almost beguilingly dusty 19th-century feel. It’s closer to “Il Trovatore” and “Andrea Chenier” in spirit than to the music of Prokofiev and the art of the Russian constructivists.

“We the Living” dates from a time when movies weren’t ashamed to be operatic, lusty and full-blooded. It sails into its themes of nobility, self-sacrifice and moral corruption with bellowing conviction and a fullness of gesture that carries it past its kitschy meretriciousness. In the end, it’s carried not by political ideologies, but by the larger-than-life love of its heroine. If “We the Living” had been made in Hollywood, Bette Davis would have been a natural for the role of historia-tossed Kira. As it is, it plays like a cross between “Doctor Zhivago” and “A Tale of Two Cities,” Italian-style. There’s nothing half-hearted about its melodrama.

(This is an expanded version of a review published in these pages when this film was presented at the Boston Film Festival.)