

Morton Marcus: 'The Italian' should really be 'The Russian'

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As we strolled out of the critics' showing of "The Italian" a few weeks ago, a fellow reviewer remarked that the Russian chamber of commerce must not have been happy with the film. I immediately disagreed. True, the story is about a run-down Russian orphanage and its unhappy children — a sort of contemporary Oliver Twist with a Russian accent — and, yes, the backdrops and sets all real locations are shabby, decaying and grubby, "But," I said, "That's only on the surface"

I pointed out that there was another film sliding along next to the one we saw, a shadow film that runs parallel to the suspenseful story, one that any tourist board director or chamber of commerce president would immediately recognize — a shadow film whose meaning strikes to the very root of what we term the "Russian Soul" and goes a long way to identifying why the overall impression the viewer takes away from the film is so appealing and uplifting. However, the plot is so absorbing that the viewer doesn't consciously see the shadow film.

The plot of "The Italian" concerns Vanya, a six-year-old inmate of the orphanage who is about to be adopted by an Italian couple and taken to a promised good life in Italy, but who, through a series of circumstances, runs away from the orphanage to find his birth mother. It is a quest film, a road film, and a chase film, all rolled into one.

Little Vanya is resourceful, resolute and courageous as he wanders through the world of contemporary Russia, a dilapidated, poverty-stricken land peopled by drunks, teenage gangs, suspicious citizens and brokers in human tragedy, all of whom seem to be angry, bitter, cynical and morally destitute. But are they?

Besides the grimy environment, the shadow film is about these people as much as it is about Vanya, and for all the abuse or tongue-lashing they give him, almost every one of them eventually shows a side that is understanding and caring, and one way or another they encourage him in his quest. Take the sullen teenage prostitute who refuses to teach him to read but eventually does, or the bitter orphanage gang leader who beats him but later advises him and helps him secure his personal records. One after another, acquaintances and strangers alike help Vanya on his way, as if his quest to find his mother is their own.

Most of the characters Vanya encounters tell him their unhappy personal stories in words of frustration or outright anger, but all show him that under their bitterness and cynicism resides compassion and concern for their fellow humans, which Russia's current socio-economic hardships and corruption cannot destroy.

In the end, the film is a hymn to the indomitable Russian spirit and by extension, the human spirit? and becomes a symbolic journey through the Russian soul. That Vanya is searching for his mother — who we pointedly never see and who so many characters go out of their way to help him find — is in reality a search for Mother Russia by them all. In this connection, and not wanting to reveal too much about the plot, Vanya's final confrontation with Grisha, the orphan broker's thug-like driver who has been relentlessly pursuing him, is certainly one of the most uplifting moments in current cinema.

Morton Marcus is co-host of 'Cinema Scene,' on channels 27 and 72, every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. He leads film discussions at the Nickelodeon theater the first and third Saturday of the month. He'll lead a discussion on 'The Italian' Saturday at the Nickelodeon at 12:50 p.m.

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