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IN RUSSIA, EVERY ORPHAN LONGS FOR ADOPTION. VANYA HAS OTHER PLANS... TO FIND HIS MOTHER AT ALL COSTS.

“IRRESISTIBLE!”

-Stephen Farber, HOLLYWOOD LIFE MAGAZINE

“AN ACCOMPLISHED DEBUT FILM! IT LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE AN ITALIAN NEO-REALIST CLASSIC.”

-Maria Garcia, FILM JOURNAL

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THE ITALIAN

A FILM BY ANDREI KRAVCHUK

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The Italian is based on the true story of a small Russian boy abandoned in a rundown orphanage who is adopted by an Italian family and then goes in search of his birth mother. Director Andrei Kravchuk addresses with intelligence, humor and poignancy the urgent issue of illegal adoption in Russia, which has become a well-documented international crisis.

RUSSIA • 2007 • 97 mins • Color • In Russian with English subtitles

A Place Where Hope Dies, and a Boy Who Escapes

MANOHLA DARGIS

A dark fairy tale from Russia, "The Italian" — more on that title in a moment — pulls you into a richly atmospheric, persuasively inhabited world teeming with foundlings and pathos. Directed by Andrei Kravchuk, making his feature debut, from a screenplay by Andrei Romanov, the film pivots on a 6-year-old stray, Vanya (the wonderful Kolya Spiridonov), who lives in an institution easily meriting that well-worn adjective Dickensian. Overcrowded and brutally underfinanced, it is the kind of place in which hope dies slowly but surely, vanishing a little more with each new birthday. It is a holding pen for young bodies with very old souls.

The story opens once upon a time not long ago when two Italians, a giddy, gregarious husband and wife, arrive at the founding home in the company of a corrupt adoption broker, simply called Madam (Maria Kuznetsova). Bursting confidently out of her snug clothes, her eyes twinkling with malice and greed, Madam arranges for foreigners to adopt Russian children, including the ones here. The husband and wife have come for Vanya, a little Italian to call their own (hence the film's title). But first there are papers to sign, bureaucratic channels to cross, personalities to meet, a world to discover, perils to note, jokes and toasts to be made, and the careful creation of an engrossingly dramatic reason for us to keep watching.

That dramatic hook arrives in the person of a weeping woman, a Russian mother who has come to reclaim the son she once abandoned. But the child is long gone, having been adopted by a foreign family or, more terrifyingly, by an organ purveyor. After spilling her tears, she takes a cue from one of the great sacrificial victims of Russian literature and leaps under a train. The news gets back to the institution, where the children start buzzing fearfully, worried that their own mothers may try to come back to fetch them, only to end up dead. Among the most concerned is Vanya, whose anxiety inspires a ferocious, heroic quest, one that takes him far from the home and into a kingdom dangerously alive with ogres and witches.

These are not real ogres and witches, naturally, though they loom just as menacingly as any fairy-tale fiend. Among the scariest is Madam, who keeps a close watch on her future sales while aided and abetted by Sery (Sasha Syrotkin), an all-purpose lackey who drives her S.U.V. and occasionally checks under her hood. Madam more or less runs the home, stingily paying off the old rummy who serves as its headmaster (Yuri Itskov). He seems to drink most of that money away; more careless than cruel, he has neither the head nor the heart really to run the place. That leaves the children to fend for themselves, which they do with all the cunning and invention of Fagin's little troupe, led by a charismatic teenage boy, Kolyan (Denis Moiseenko).

As a microcosm of contemporary Russia, the institution couldn't be bleaker or feel more harshly true. Nestled in the warmth from its roaring furnace, Kolyan runs the home like a general or a mob boss, divvying up the work and collecting the earnings. One young teenager, Irka (Olga Shuvalova), turns tricks, climbing in and out of the cabs of passing trucks; the boys,



including Vanya, pump gas and wash car windows and headlights at a local gas station. Much of the money goes into a chest, but some of it goes for shoes and supplies. The paradox of these children's lives is that while some of their futures are dependent on the rapacious capitalism embodied by Madam, they survive as a collective, as a shadow of the Soviet past.

The film's director, Mr. Kravchuk, throws a beautiful, somewhat gauzy light over this world that gently softens its harder angles. There is something slightly magical about the lighting, almost as if this were a fantasy land from which Vanya might actually make an escape. This sense of unreality, of magical thinking and wishing, carries the story and Vanya through a remarkable journey.

He leaps over hurdles like a stag, this child. He runs and fights and schemes and, during a ferocious eruption of pity and terror near the end of the story, he just about breaks your heart into pieces. There's a touch of directorial sadism at work here, I think. But the last shot of a child's face lighted up with hope also seems to me like something out of a film by Roberto Rossellini, which is very high praise indeed.

THE ITALIAN

Directed by Andrei Kravchuk; written (in Russian, with English subtitles) by Andrei Romanov; director of photography, Alexander Burov; edited by Tamara Lipartiya; music by Alexander Kneiffel; production designer, Vladimir Svetozarov; produced by Vladimir Husid and Vladimir Bogoyavlensky. Running time: 99 minutes.

WITH: Kolya Spiridonov (Vanya), Denis Moiseenko (Kolyan), Sasha Syrotkin (Sery), Olga Shuvalova (Irka), Dima Zemlyanko (Anton), Maria Kuznetsova (Madam) and Yuri Itskov (Headmaster).

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21 West 38th Street, 14th floor, New York, NY 10018 • Tel: (212) 645-4600 • Fax: (212) 645-3232 • nontheatrical@newyorkerfilms.com