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**WAR MAKES STRANGE BEDFELLOWS**

**"THE SIMPLICITY OF THE NARRATIVE AND THE VIBRANT, SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF ANNI-CHRISTINA JUUSO KEEPS 'CUCKOO' ON TRACK. A PORTRAIT OF GOOD HUMORED INDEPENDENCE AND SEXUAL HONESTY!"**

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**"A STARK ANTI-WAR COMEDY!"**

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When no one speaks the same language, misunderstandings can quickly lead to comic situations with tragic results. This subtle, sometimes hilarious, and ultimately powerful anti-war film is set in Finland during the Second World War, and is the story of a romantic triangle that develops between a local Lapp woman and two soldiers from opposite sides of the war.

RUSSIA • 2002 • 104 mins • Color • In Russian, Finnish and Sami with English subtitles

MICHAEL WILMINGTON



Anti-war films may not be exactly in vogue these days, but "The Cuckoo" harks back to an earlier time, the Cold War era, when movie attacks on war were more common. Set in Lapland during the waning years of World War II, it's an unabashed pacifist movie that really works, emotionally and dramatically.

Made by a director-writer, Alexander Rogozhkin ("Checkpoint"), who is clearly an old-fashioned humanist, "The Cuckoo" features an excellent trio of actors playing protagonists, thrown together by war, who can't speak each other's language. There are two soldiers (one Finnish and one Russian) cut off from their regiments, and a Lapp reindeer farmer from the Sami tribe. All three characters have been abandoned in some sense. The Finnish sniper, Veiko (Ville Haapasalo), was left behind by his fellow riflemen, who dressed him in a German uniform and chained him to a rock, making him a live target for the Russians. The Russian captain Ivan (Viktor Bychkov), wrongly accused of treason by his own army, escaped a court-martial after his military guards were killed in an ambush. The Lapp reindeer farmer, Anni (Anni-Kristina Juuso), lost her husband to the draft and is living alone in the mountains when suddenly these two soldiers show up.

When the three come together, after Veiko escapes from his chains and Ivan is freed by the ambush, they can communicate only with gestures and pantomime. None completely understands the others' circumstances. Ivan, still a patriot despite his arrest, is convinced Veiko is an actual Nazi soldier. He is also violently jealous when Anni and Veiko become lovers. Veiko is unaware of Ivan's arrest or background. And to Anni, the two men are just outsiders helping to break the painful bonds of her isolation.

Later, Anni becomes Ivan's lover as well, while nursing Veiko back to health after a near-tragic confrontation between him and Ivan. But Rogozhkin doesn't draw Anni as promiscuous. She's an earthy farm girl who judges people by their character rather than by their countries or armies. In time, the men become friends too, though war continues to rage in the world outside their temporary retreat. "The Cuckoo" is an internationalist, pacifist fable that suggests, in the simplest, most powerful way - with primal images of earth, wind, water, sky and human flesh - that the world is home to us all and that instead of killing each other, we should try to love and understand even our "enemies." That may sound sentimental, but the movie doesn't play as soft or naive. Instead, it's a lusty comedy-romance-drama, beautifully acted by the three principals: Haapasalo and Bychkov, both veterans of previous Rogozhkin films, and Juuso, making her film debut here.

All three give performances as natural, solid and open as the breathtaking Lapp landscapes. Haapasalo's Veiko sharply suggests the sense of a young intellectual sick of war and death, someone who tried to opt out of killing even before his fellow soldiers chained him to the rock. Bychkov conveys something slightly more complex: a killer with a poet's sad, brooding heart, filled with suspicion and envy but capable of devotion once the facade is cracked open. Juuso, a Sami Lapp with little dramatic experience, is a natural; her performance helps open up the others, just as her character opens them up in the film.

Rogozhkin has a fine eye for both human behavior and natural vistas. Under his eye, the landscape becomes his fourth principal character. As in a classic 1950s American Western by Anthony



Mann or John Ford, we see these characters and their onscreen fates as something tied to the land, their relationships enacted against, and vivified by, the timeless expanse of mountain and sky stretching behind them.

The title has several meanings, according to Rogozhkin. "Cuckoo" is Finnish slang for sniper. But it's also a name Anni gives herself - a bird who is a nestling in other birds' homes. That's what the soldiers are, too - warriors ranging across a land they don't know, which temporarily becomes their nest. Inside, there's a temporary warmth; outside, there's chaos and slaughter.

"The Cuckoo" also recalls the famous thesis in "Grand Illusion": that borders are not geographical but social. Eventually, the three characters come to understand each other despite the barriers of language, custom and the war, because, cliched as it may sound, they share a common humanity. So do we.

One of the best Russian imports in several years, Rogozhkin's "Cuckoo" suggests that love in a time of war is possible, if fleeting. Watching this film, with its stark theme of war as evil and madness, one would like, however hard it is today, to fully share that sentiment. The film's strength lies in the fact that, as you see the tale of its central trio and sense the terror around them, you almost do.

### THE CUCKOO

Directed and written by Alexander Rogozhkin; photographed by Andrei Zhegalov; edited by Julia Roumyantseva; production designed by Vladimir Svetozarov; music by Dmitry Pavlov; produced by Sergei Selyanov. In Russian, Finnish and Lapp, with English subtitles. Running time: 1:44. MPAA rating: PG-13.

WITH: Anni-Kristina Juuso (Anni), Ville Haapasalo (Veiko), Viktor Bychkov (Ivan).

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