

Leviathan (Leviafan) (15) Russia 2014

21 March 2016

DIRECTOR: **Andrey Zvyagintsev**

Running time: 140 minutes (Russian with English subtitles)

LEADING PLAYERS: **Aleksey Serebryakov** (Nikolay), **Elena Lyadova** (Lilya), **Vladimir Vdovichenkov** (Dmitriy), **Roman Madyanov** (Mer), **Igor Sergeev** (Svyashchennik).

SCRIPT: **Oleg Negin** and **Andrey Zvyagintsev**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Mikhail Krichman**. EDITING: **Anna Mass**. MUSIC: **Philip Glass**.

Leviathan is the third feature by lauded Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev, after *The Return* and *The Banishment*, and was even more garlanded at Cannes, winning the Palme d'Or at the 2014 edition of the festival. If you enjoy Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films, for example *Once upon a Time in Anatolia* that we showed a couple of seasons ago, then you will almost certainly enjoy this. I say this so as not to raise the hopes of the uninitiated, and because it is very long, though not as much so as *Anatolia*!

Like those of his Turkish counterpart, Zvyagintsev's films pick apart the relationships that make up the fragile fabric of human experience: father-son, husband-wife, sibling, lover. He also favours long, static takes and narratives that unfold with scant regard for conventional story structures. With *Leviathan* he has, finally, taken on an overtly political agenda in his story of a man who sets himself against the machinations of a corrupt state, in fighting a compulsory purchase order on his family home.

The moral fabric of our hero's situation is less than promising from the outset: he drinks to excess; the lawyer friend he has called upon to argue his case against the mayor's office is having a tentative affair with his wife, on whom Nikolay dotes to an alarming degree given her fragile attachment; and his property shows severe signs of neglect, as if a pathetic fallacy for his predicament. The eponymous hulk of a sea creature's skeleton that dominates the shoreline could be a metaphor for this man's withered existence, or a wider one for the country at large. Only his devoted son seems to offer hope of an enduring outcome, or rebirth, but the example he is set is far from a good one, when his father comes to the ruined church where the boy

hangs out with his cronies, to drink sullenly in the shadows of their campfire.

Indeed, one might easily give up on our protagonist well before the shattering dénouement, were it not for the parlous state of the society from which he stands apart, and the religious undertones that point to him as a martyr-like figure. 'A man more sinned against than sinning', the character he most resembles is Job, the Old Testament figure who was buffeted by misfortune on all sides, reduced to penury, and berated God for his neglect of a righteous man.

In one key scene of the film, Nikolay takes to task a priest for his faith, when he can offer no material comfort for the former's predicament, other than to say, lamely, that that is what faith is. Ironically, it is to build a new church that the mayor wants Nikolay's land so much – it is a prime spot – but then this is a topsy-turvy world, one in which the state can deprive a man of his birth right, and in which its citizens drive for miles to get drunk on vodka in front of their children and shoot guns at bottles. The 'outcast' priest consulted by Nikolay on questions of faith belies a new status quo in which, far from being at odds with the Communist Party, the Orthodox Church is the witting beneficiary of the Mayor's nefarious patronage.

There is, indeed, something rotten in the state of Denmark; all the more remarkable, then, that the Russian authorities presented the film as a contender for the Foreign Language Oscar?

David Clare