

film reviews



Nochnoi Dozor in *Night Watch*

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

Night Watch

review by M. Faust

"Tarkovsky meets the Wachowski brothers" is how producer Konstantin Ernst describes *Night Watch*, the fantasy epic that is the highest-grossing Russian film of all time (by a factor of eight, no less).

Based on the first of a trilogy of novels by popular Russian writer Sergei Lukyanenko, *Night Watch* opens in 1342 AD. Here, we are informed by a narrator speaking English

with a thick Russian accent, the world is a battleground between two armies, the forces of Light and the forces of Darkness. Realizing that they are too evenly matched to do anything but annihilate each other, they agree to a truce. Each may maintain their operations within limits, to be policed by watchdog groups representing each army. The "Night Watch" will monitor the forces of Darkness (who are vampires, witches, all

that kinda stuff), while the "Day Watch" will keep an eye on the forces of Light. The truce is expected to last a thousand years until the arrival of the Great Other, who will take the side of evil and plunge the world into the Darkness.

Confused? I don't blame you. Ignoring that the events of the film, which of course have to do with the arrival of the Other in our time, occur at barely the two-thirds mark of that millennium (or is it a Gregorian calendar thing?), I had trouble remembering that the Night Watch are the good guys and the Day Watch the bad guys. A movie like this makes you yearn at least a bit for the days of the silent westerns, when the bad guys were bearded and dressed in black while the hero was a clean-shaven Adonis in white.

There are two ways to watch *Night Watch*. Fantasy buffs will be inclined to see it over and over again, working out the details, sorting through clues for deeper meaning and marking their calendars for the arrival of the two sequels. (The first, *Day Watch*, is already completed and showing in Russia; the finale, *Dusk Watch*, will be filmed in English as an American co-production.)

The rest of us can simply forego optimal comprehension and appreciate it for its more visceral attributes. These include some slam-bang special effects, like the somersaulting truck you may have seen in the TV commercials or a warrior who, called into battle but lacking a sword, presses his spinal cord into action.

But the best reason to see *Night Watch* is because this is a special-effects extravaganza made by Russians for a Russian audience with the hope of instilling a thirst for a home-

grown alternative to the ubiquitous Hollywood product that dominates world screens. Director Timur Bekmambetov designed the film to make use of contemporary Moscow, in a way that would be recognizable to his primary viewers.

In particular, he adapted the mythology to the dilapidated condition of post-Soviet Russia, giving what Russians consider their run-down cars, buildings and furniture a kind of ultra-retro chic. While providing splashes of activity and color to brighten up the drab city, he also makes its drabest elements seem, at least in the context of the movie, like remnants of a dangerous ancient culture, preceding even the Soviets. (It doesn't hurt that Bekmambetov has a visual affinity for objects, having made more than 600 commercials and music videos.)

The plot of *Night Watch* follows the efforts of Anton (Konstantin Khabensky), an ordinary Muscovite recruited into the Night Watch, to save a young boy from the clutches of Darkness. Skip the rest of this paragraph if you're a stickler for surprises, but it's obvious from the get-go that the boy is not only Anton's presumed-dead son but the heralded Other who will determine the future of the world. It helps to bear in mind as you watch that this is the first part of a trilogy, in which details are going to be more important than story. I would liken it more to *Blade Runner* than either *The Matrix* or Tarkovsky, and it remains to be seen whether it can find an audience between those who might be interested in the story but abhor subtitles and the arthouse crowd that likes its imports more sedate. **AV**

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