



Bolshoi Babylon

Directors: Mark Franchetti, Nick Read
Country: UK
Date: 2015

A review by Charlotte O'Sullivan for *The Evening Standard*:

As dramatic as *Black Swan*, as funny as *Horrible Bosses* and as spryly intimate as *The Red Shoes*, this doc about Russia's most famous dance company is hot stuff indeed. Ballet aficionados may deem it sordid to dwell on the 2013 acid attack that left Sergei Filin, the Bolshoi's artistic director, blind in one eye. Yet the film never feels lurid.

"Let's not turn this into stories about sex," says world-weary, fiercely articulate ballerina Anastasia Meskova. British director Nick Read heeds her advice and glosses over the part played by glamorous 21-year-old Angelina Vorontsova in the scandal. He's not interested in the power of lust, but the lust for power.



Three men dominate the story and all of them, amazingly, are willing to be interviewed on camera. First up is huge-haired Nikolay Tsiskaridze (imagine Sacha Baron Cohen's character Bruno on an especially loud day), a stupendous dancer and teacher who allegedly schemed against Filin.

Then there's hatchet-faced maverick Vladimir Urin, the man sent in to clean up the Bolshoi's image. He too has issues with Filin. The latter, in case you're wondering, has issues with everyone. All of these men are fascinating dramatic types, but Filin is particularly intriguing: arrogant, poisonous, brilliant and almost touchingly naïve. Back at work following nine months of surgery he seems confident that he can reassert his hold on the company. Wrong!

The camera hones in on his ugly wounds (his enemies claimed he exaggerated the scale of his injury; the images suggest otherwise). Meanwhile, slowly but surely, it's Urin who gains the upper hand. The unsuspecting Filin gets assaulted again, this time by an acid tongue.

You may ask yourself why Urin allowed Read to remain a fly on the wall while all this was going on. And you may wish a longer interview with Tsiskaridze had made it into the final cut (the dancer withdrew his permission for its use when he got a new job in St Petersburg).

There are gaps in this narrative, but it's pretty obvious that none of the central figures are saints and that the corruption the interviewees repeatedly refer to (whether on the part of the Kremlin or various oligarchs) has probably shaped the film itself.

Given the circumstances, Read has done a wonderful job. Instead of promoting or smearing a celebrated brand he's created a portrait of a workplace that feels both pertinent to Putin's Russia and universal. Take note, employees of the world: dysfunctional institutions can seriously damage your health.

From: <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/film/bolshoi-babylon-film-review-a-ballet-company-of-wolves-a3151636.html>