

## FICUNAM 2015: Part 4

## Tackling life head on: The films of Uzbek-Soviet director Ali Khamraev

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*This is the fourth part of a series of articles on the recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City. The first part was posted March 18, the second part March 20, and the third part March 25.*

One of the genuine contributions of the recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City was its presentation of the works of Uzbek-Soviet film director Ali Khamraev. For that, the organizers are to be congratulated. For some of us, this was a remarkable discovery. It's a shame it had to take so long!

Khamraev was born in 1937—at the height of Stalin's terror—in Tashkent, in what was then the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, in Central Asia. He attended the famed VGIK film school in Moscow, graduating in 1961. He began working for Uzbekfilm, the film studio founded in Tashkent in 1925, that same year. In 1964, he made a comic film *Yor-yor*, which became quite popular. The first of the films shown this year in Mexico City, *White, White Storks*, was released in 1966.

A recurring theme in Khamraev's Soviet-era films was the struggle against social and cultural backwardness in the impoverished Central Asian region. The problem of the oppressed "woman of the East," i.e., the veiled Muslim woman, preoccupied him in particular.

In addition to *White, White Storks*, the FICUNAM festival screened *Without Fear* (1972), *The Seventh Bullet* (1972), *Man Follows Birds* (1975), *The Bodyguard* (1979), *Triptych* (1979), *I Remember You* (1985) and *Bo, Ba, Bu* (1998). (A number of these films are accessible on YouTube with English subtitles.)

The greatest strength of Khamraev as a filmmaker is his willingness to tackle life directly and with great sincerity, at a consistently high and serious artistic level. This is not someone who shies away from things or hides his essential timidity and inability to face up to the most difficult problems with chilly objectivity. In the best traditions of Russian fiction and film, Khamraev plunges courageously into reality, even if he sometimes makes mistakes.

This is the artistic and intellectual tradition that the great 19th century Russian critic Belinsky wrote of, which evinced "a noble sympathy with everything that is lofty and sublime, [and] deals with the most vital problems of life, destroys the old inveterate prejudices and raises its voice in indignation against the deplorable aspects of contemporary morals and manners."

"The most vital problems of life." How many contemporary filmmakers can claim, or would even want to claim, to be dealing with those?

Of course, that a young man in Tashkent would take on life through filmmaking was only made possible by the October Revolution and the existence of the Soviet Union. A small percentage of the Uzbek was literate before 1917; that percentage then rose to 100 percent. The Uzbek SSR was founded in 1924, one year before Uzbekfilm.

The policies of the anti-Marxist Stalinist bureaucracy brought about the

degeneration and, eventually, the destruction of the USSR. In Uzbekistan, for those in power, the seamless transition from Stalinist clique to imperialist agency took a particularly clear-cut and even personal form.

Islam Karimov, the current president of the impoverished Republic of Uzbekistan and its thuggish dictator, was formerly the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. Karimov did not let his "Communist" past stand in the way of becoming one of the Bush administration's closest allies in Central Asia and carrying out a massacre of hundreds of men, women and children in the city of Andijan in May 2005, in the name of the "war on terror."

As the WWSWS noted at the time: "This is a regime that imprisons over 6,000 political dissidents, systematically uses torture and has been known to boil its opponents alive. It is among the most corrupt dictatorships on the face of the planet."

In any event, Ali Khamraev emerges from the turbulent history of the Soviet Union as a man of principle and artistry.

In his *White, White Storks*, an unhappily married Muslim woman, Malika, in a small village, falls in love with a "foreigner," Kayum, a man from another of the Soviet republics. The population is torn by the drama. The most reactionary faction sets about to beat or kill the "other man." The husband attacks Kayum, "You're not a Muslim, you're a thief!" There are also humane elements, who argue, "let them alone, they're in love."

Khamraev concentrates on bringing the simple, strong feelings between the two to life. They mail each other letters, although they only live a few feet away from one another. They arrange to meet outside of town, on a road through a field in a beautiful valley. She asks him if he would go away with her. He doesn't think so. It's better that you go away then, she says. A group of horsemen nearly trample them. "Malika, you slut!," one of the riders shouts. Angrily and a little sadly, the couple look after the horsemen, who have raised a cloud of dust. The force of tradition and backwardness is very strong, too strong for one man and one woman.

The 35-second sequence that opens *Without Fear*, set in 1927, is profound and moving. It has more value and truth than the entire careers of most filmmakers. A Soviet soldier running, carrying a red flag, leads a group of Muslim women in burkas, also running, through the dust and wind. He stumbles, looks back at the women, carries on. They move on relentlessly through the frame ...

In Khamraev's historical film, a young Uzbek Red Army officer and his wife attempt to bring modernity to a small village near Tashkent. The ability of the women to go around uncovered is one of their major goals. In another of the film's extraordinary scenes, a militant Communist teacher who has come to town teaches her first class. Many of the local women and girls are seated in the classroom. Wonderfully, the teacher has posted giant pictures of Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), Rosa

Luxemburg and ... the Mona Lisa on her blackboard! This hints at what the October Revolution brought to the most backward regions.

Khamraev gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s with a series of “Red Westerns,” action films set in Central Asia during the civil wars of the 1920s. *The Seventh Bullet* was the most popular of the series.

The film is set during the Basmachi revolt of the 1920s, a reactionary nationalist uprising against the Soviet government in Central Asia, which no doubt fed off nationalist sentiment, but also accepted money from the imperialist powers. *The Seventh Bullet* follows the Red Army officer, Maksumov, who allows himself to be captured by Basmachi leader Khairulla in order to have the opportunity to address the members of his battalion who have deserted to the enemy. This is one film where Khamraev, or his script, is carried away by Soviet derring-do to an occasionally unconvincing degree. But still the film is exciting and engaging.

On the other hand, *The Bodyguard*, set during the same general time period, is a somewhat more complex and darker work, reminiscent in some ways of Anthony Mann’s tense, ambiguous 1950s’ Westerns with James Stewart. A Red Army unit gives a local hunter the difficult task of transporting an important prisoner, along with the latter’s daughter and loyal lackey. The small expedition faces incredible physical dangers in the harsh landscape, but also attacks from a Basmachi warrior and his witch-like wife.

Fellow filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky [see accompanying comment] told Khamraev to stop “wasting his time” with Westerns. Whether or not the latter took the advice immediately or not, *Triptych* is a definite step forward and addresses itself to problems of everyday life in the postwar Soviet Union.

Set in 1946, *Triptych* follows the lives of several women in a small town in Uzbekistan. At the center of the film is Khalima (played by the remarkable Dilorom Kambarova, who appears in a number of Khamraev’s films). She has a husband, but his job takes him elsewhere, or so he claims. When she tracks him down, we can see he’s immature, restless. Of all things, rather than discuss the fact that he’s disappeared from her life, he shows Khalima a card trick he’s learned, which he botches. Realizing he’s not interested in her or their child, she turns her face to the side, slightly toward the camera. Khamraev holds the shot, a painting of a suffering woman, without self-pity, determined, superior to the individual she is saddled with. Against everyone’s advice, she decides to build her own home.

The local teacher is in love with her, and reads her a composition, “Woman of the East.” “How often we were unfair to you ... Take the veil off your heart ... I’m your friend, not your master and you are not a slave. ... Take the veil off your soul.” Working the whole time, Khalima listens intently to the piece, perhaps with a certain mistrust, but says at the end, “Those are fine words.” Only a great filmmaker produces scenes of such simplicity and grandeur.

Later, the teacher tells an over-zealous female official, who is bothering herself with Khalima’s house-building: “Of course you will say that the factory is a public matter, and the house means egoism and private property. But isn’t the private happiness of each person separately the real target of our life?” Another extraordinary film.

But Khamraev’s master work to date is probably *I Remember You*, the circumstances of whose production he explains in the comment posted today on the WSW.

The semi-autobiographical work deals with an older woman in Samarkand, sick with cancer, who asks her grown-up son, Kim, a veterinarian, to find the grave of her husband, his father, who died during World War II. The son is reluctant, in part because his mother is so ill, but she prevails upon him to go. On the train, he reads once again his father’s last letter, written from the war front. His father wrote to his wife that he could no longer look at the “burnt forest” and the “dead people ... at all

that I love so much and is so disfigured now.”

The film cuts back and forth between scenes of Kim’s trip to Moscow, to the small village in Smolensk where his father was buried and his return train ride and scenes of his ill mother back in Samarkand, where her sister comes to visit.

Khamraev allows himself more freedom in this film, more expression, he loses some of his restraint. There are moments of chaos. A Russian wedding: tables and food shaking from the dancing ... children, animals, old people ... a fireplace ... an accordion player ... the newly married couple dancing and kissing in the dark... Kim talks to an old man who remembers burying his father, “the dark-complexioned” one.

After finding the grave and paying tribute to his father, Kim takes the train home. It’s New Year’s and there’s a lively party in the restaurant car. Various nationalities and ages take part. Kim meets two sisters, one of whom attracts him. A woman sings sentimental songs. A sheep somehow wanders into the festivities. The encounter with the lovely woman on the train for some reason prompts Kim to recall his childhood. “I’ve suddenly remembered my father’s face and smile.”

In *I Remember You*, Khamraev makes use of a far more fragmented, impressionistic approach than previously, but it is not a self-conscious or strained approach. This is how life and memory operate. He is not breaking scenes into pieces, and shifting from location to location, and time period to time period, for effect, but to establish the truth about a life and about an era.

What *I Remember You* strongly suggests—and as the owl of wisdom often flies at the last moment, this comes just as the Soviet Union was on the eve of collapse—is that there was something of value in the USSR that had nothing to do with the official [Stalinist] version. The sacrifices, the hopes, the dreams, the accumulated human accomplishments were real and genuine, but these were things apart from the claims and propaganda, the official activities of the regime. These phenomena existed on separate planes, so to speak.

Khamraev’s most recent feature film, *Bo, Ba, Bu*, is the only one of his works that shows signs of discouragement or demoralization. Made after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is an unpleasant parable in which a beautiful European woman somehow falls into the hands of two primitive, inarticulate Central Asians in the middle of a desert. They restore her to health, admire, abuse her and eventually come to blows over her. If this is Khamraev obliquely commenting on the confusion and disarray coming to the region in the wake of 1991, it is neither very clear nor very helpful. Worse, by implication at least, it blames the population for the disaster, not the betrayals of Stalinism and the machinations of imperialism.

In an interview in Mexico City, Khamraev referred to the USSR ceasing to exist” as “my personal tragedy,” although when it existed, he said, “you could criticize the Communists.” He went on, “you had censored films” and “movies that were not shown” because they were not what the government wanted.

Khamraev remains vibrant and alive at nearly 78, and apparently determined to make more films. For our part, that seems like a fine idea.

*To be continued*



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