

FICUNAM 2015

I Remember You: A comment on the history of his film by director Ali Khamraev

28 March 2015

Filmmaker Ali Khamraev was present in Mexico City for the FICUNAM film festival and personally introduced a number of his films. At the screening of one of his major works, *I Remember You*, Khamraev gave a fairly lengthy explanation (in Russian, translated into Spanish) of the difficulties surrounding the film's making in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The audience was fascinated by both his remarks and, above all, by the beautiful, poetic film itself.

We communicated with Khamraev later during the festival, in a combination of languages and gestures. He explained his plan to make a new film about an art museum in the early days of the Soviet Union, many of whose artist-participants were later killed by Stalin. At that time, he also explained that he had paid a visit to the Trotsky museum in Coyoacan in Mexico City.

We wrote Khamraev following the film festival and asked him if he could provide for our readers a version of the introductory comments he had made to *I Remember You*. Despite a busy schedule, the filmmaker was generous enough to oblige us. We post his account written for the WWSWS, translated into English, as he sent it to us. It gives some indication of his own artistic talent as a writer and storyteller, and, moreover, provides some fascinating insight into the conditions artists, including those who considered themselves Communists and loyal to the Soviet Union, faced under the Stalinist regimes.

The petty and almost imbecilic objections to *I Remember You* offered by the Uzbek Stalinist officials bring to mind Trotsky's phrase in *The Revolution Betrayed*: "The bureaucracy superstitiously fears whatever does not serve it directly, as well as whatever it does not understand."

Note: Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) was a gifted filmmaker (*Ivan's Childhood*, *Solaris*, *The Mirror*, *Stalker*), whose opposition to the soulless, malicious Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, however, took the form of a pantheistic mysticism, which proved entirely inadequate as a basis for artistic effort once he left the USSR for good in the early 1980s.

* * * * *

Ali Khamraev writes:

In February 1973, I and my friend, the screenwriter Odelsha Agishev, got on a train in Moscow and in few hours got off at the train station in the city of Vyazma. Long ago my mother had reproached my brother and I for drinking, hanging out with girls, living life to our heart's content, and thus far not even wanting to know where the war had taken the life of our father—the Uzbek screenwriter and actor of the 1930s, Ergash Khamraev.

With only a worn-out notice about the death of the young lieutenant E. Khamraev, we stopped at the post office and got directions to the village of Chashchevka, where my father was buried. We grabbed a taxi and went along the snow-covered road in the Smolensk forest.

Only a few homes of the big village remained. The young had left to find a better life in the city. A handful of old people were living out their years there. An old lady told us that the old man, Afanasy, who had buried

some of our soldiers before the arrival of the Germans, was still alive.

Looking over the death notice, the bearded old man told me:

"The whole army was encircled here in 1942. The battalion commander asked me to bury twelve people. They lay there naked on the snow. One, I remember, was a swarthy sort ... Probably, your father."

"But why naked?," I asked.

"The dead aren't cold. The living need clothing ... the women skirts, and for the men boots and overcoats come in handy."

The old man took us to a river bank. There, in a crater made from a shell, my father found his peace. I borrowed a hatchet from the driver and broke off a bit of frozen ground for mom, drank a glass of vodka and gave my word that I would not eat meat for a month. This being the time of the Muslim fast, I hesitated to not eat, as I grew up in a country of atheists. Grandfather Afanasy explained that Nikita Khrushchev himself ordered that all the victims be buried in a mass grave, and now the bones of the twelve soldiers lie in a big village by the name of Old Village. My friend and I went there and drank vodka there too, and then I had my picture taken next to the primitive, but lovely monument.

In March, exactly one week before the end of my pledge to not eat meat, [filmmaker] Andrei Tarkovsky and I flew to a Soviet film festival in East Berlin, at which [Tarkovsky's] *Andrei Rublev* and my *The Seventh Bullet* were to premiere. On the plane, I did not eat chicken, which was the symbol of Aeroflot [the Soviet airline]. Andrei had to explain the reason for my behavior to everyone. The entire week Tarkovsky bugged the Germans:

"Ali does not eat meat. ... Where are the vegetables, where's the fruit?"

After the week went by, we stopped at the first cafe and grabbed a liter of beer and a mountain of sausages. I had a bottle of vodka in my bag. We sipped our beers and then I divvied up the vodka between us under the table. Andrei and I remembered my father.

"First time in my life I've drunk such a devil's brew [mix of beer and vodka]!" proclaimed Andrei. "The vessels in our brain won't burst?"

We were feeling good, chatting away non-stop, then Andrei said:

"My father was badly injured during the war. ... Let's drink to his health!"

And we drank to the great poet Arseny Tarkovsky, who after the war front, walked with crutches. When we finished the cocktail of beer and vodka, Andrei looked intently at me and, nervously biting his nails, said quietly and sullenly:

"Why are you wasting your life on all these Westerners? ... Why don't you make a film about how you searched for your father's grave? Why? ..."

"Need a screenwriter," I muttered. "Who's going to write it?"

"Write it yourself!" ... Andrei said with eyes flashing. ... "Right here on the land of those people who killed your father, you've sworn that you're going to make a film about him! Then you cannot eat meat for a year."

Memories were rattling around in my head from the vodka. I didn't

even know how to answer my comrade. ...

From that moment on my scratch pads, director's notebooks, notepads, restaurant napkins, scraps of toilet paper began to be covered with notes, dialogue, phrases, scenes from my new project called *I Remember You*. Everywhere mastheads flashed: "Train: Tashkent-Moscow," "Aerobus IL-86," "Hotel 'Russia'," "New Delhi, Hotel 'Ashoka'." ... In 1977, the screenplay was written and sent to Moscow for approval by Goskino [State Film-AGF] of the USSR. The bureaucrats didn't accept the screenplay. It seemed too pessimistic to them.

"The heroine, the widow of the officer who gave his life for the Motherland, spends the entire film in bed dying of cancer? ... The Soviet people don't need such a film!" ... they yelled at me.

I invited the bureaucrats to a restaurant, brought grapes and fresh tomatoes from Tashkent to Moscow during the winter, carried suitcases-full on long-distance trains, and they told me, albeit quieter but firmly:

"Your hero is a Lovelace [a libertine], his brother an alcoholic. ... They discredit the memory of their dead father! ..."

It was necessary to redo many episodes, but even the new versions of the script were rejected. At the beginning of 1982, I was called urgently to Moscow, and a car was already waiting for me on the tarmac by the plane at Sheremetevo [Moscow's main airport]. In his office, the Soviet Minister of Film Filipp Ermash [a top Stalinist official] issued a brief comment:

"Brezhnev wants a film about our international aid in Afghanistan. We decided that you can handle it. Fly immediately to Kabul, get into the material, pick the environs, the actors. ... This is a state order."

"I have other plans," I said.

"Make a film about Afghanistan, then we'll talk about your plans ..."

"For five years your people haven't accepted my screenplays!"

"About what?"

"It's a military-patriotic theme. ... About a person who is searching for the grave of his father killed in the war."

"Khamraev, you know me ... I give you my word. ... After completing this order of Brezhnev's, you'll make your film. ... Agreed?"

I went to Kabul twice a week, and then in March became a jury member at a film festival in Italy. Andrei Tarkovsky and I met there for the last time. He sternly warned me:

"The Communists are deceiving you, and they won't allow an honest film about Afghanistan, and your screenplay about your father will sit on their table!"

They wouldn't accept the film *A Hot Summer in Kabul* [1983] for a long time. They demanded that episodes dealing with the death of Soviet doctors be cut. Then Brezhnev died and the film, finally, made it to the screen. There were lines for tickets at the movie theaters, in as much as many people had relatives or friends who served in Afghanistan, and then the film was quickly taken out of the theaters. But the minister [Ermash] kept his word. At the end of 1984, I began work on my confessional film *I Remember You*. My mother, who had a severe form of cancer, said that before her death my brother went to her and cried, and complained that I portrayed him as an alcoholic in the screenplay.

"Don't do this ... I'm asking you. ... In honor of the memory of your father ..."

I shot the film in one take, so to speak. The screenplay was written in the traditional manner—plot statement, development of the action, dénouement and finale. But under the direct influence of my art director, Rustam Khamdamov, I literally turned the story upside down. I decided to develop the stream of poetic association that I used in my film *Man Follows Birds* [1975] in *I Remember You*.

In the middle of the filming, Rustam Khamdamov left, but my entire creative team, like a Persian carpet, selflessly developed the fabric of the film, knot by knot. And then it was ready, the colleagues and leadership of Uzbekistan's cinematography praised it highly. Even the secretary of the

central committee of the Communist Party, the leading ideologue Rano Abdullaeva, approved the film with small changes. The Moscow bureaucrats also accepted the film.

The première was set for the House of Film in Tashkent, when all of a sudden they tell me that Rano Abdullaeva wants to watch the film again, this time more carefully. A small film hall, the secretary of the TsK [Central Committee] takes out a notebook and prepares to write down criticisms. When the lights are turned on, this woman had listed seventeen criticisms and corrections it was necessary to make. They were monstrous and I refused to believe my ears:

*In the railway dining car, take the Pepsi Cola off the table and switch it with Uzbek lemonade ...

*Take out the song "Ah yes, Galya and Sultan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan ..."

*When the train moves through Kazakhstan, in place of desert, camels and cemeteries, have shots of wheat fields, factories, modern cities ...

*Take out the fight at the Russian wedding ...

*Take out the shot in which the hero carries the old priest through deep snow ...

*Take out the shot in which the sheep appears in the railway dining car ...

I was shocked, but still said firmly:

"But surely, Moscow has accepted the film ..."

"You, comrade Khamraev, work in Uzbekistan, not in Moscow! ..."

"And two weeks ago you saw the film and gave your corrections, and I made them ..."

"I have the right to watch the film as many times as I want! ..."

"And I, as the author, have the right not to agree with your criticisms ..."

"You don't agree with the opinion of the Central Committee of our party? ..."

"Let the entire Central Committee see my film ... I, as a Communist, don't agree with *your* opinion ..."

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The party woman [Abdullaeva] flushed, turned to the director of the film studio, and said:

"I won't watch any of Ali Khamraev's films anymore!"

The film studio director hurriedly helped the woman on with her coat, and I blurted out:

"Of course you won't see my films! ... You should be removed from the post of Secretary of the TsK for arbitrariness! ..."

The film was banned. On this very night I wrote a long and detailed letter to Mikhail Gorbachev. After a month, I was called to a meeting of the bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. This was not a meeting, but a real circus. First Secretary of the TsK, the Uzbek, I. B. Usmankhodzhaev, didn't attend. The Second Secretary of the TsK, the Russian, V. Anishchev, held the meeting. First we watched the film in total silence. Then the discussion began. I knew practically no one among those who were there.

A thin Russian (it turned out to be the head of the KGB of Uzbekistan):

"How much did the film cost? ..."

"300,000 rubles," answered the director of the film studio.

"Seize this sum from the director! ..."

"It will take me fifteen years of ceaseless work to repay this sum," I explained. Everyone started to rustle around, a small fat man stood up (it turned out to be the party leader of Tashkent):

"Comrades, he's got the Soviet emblem on the train car specially covered in mud! ..."

"We can provide a receipt for the cost of the spray-washing machine that cleaned the whole car before shooting. ... It's just that the emblem on the train car wall got worn out after a while," I said.

But the leader of the city didn't calm down:

“You think that we don’t understand your allegory? What does the black cloud that floats through the sky when your hero travels on the train to Moscow mean ...”

“This means a dark foreboding. ... The hero may not manage to return home, his mother is seriously ill ...”

“You’re not spinning us fairytales! ... Comrades, a dark cloud—this means that the negative influences from Uzbekistan are rapidly spreading to Moscow! ...”

Everyone rustled about, and the head of the KGB cried:

“We won’t let Khamraev overseas anymore! ... This is the influence of the West! ...”

I waited until everyone calmed down and said:

“I wrote Gorbachev, I thought that perestroika is happening in the country. ... And my letter was forwarded to you, to those about whom I complained ...”

The Second Secretary interrupted me:

“Don’t forget where you are, comrade Khamraev! ...”

“Not that long ago I shot a film in Afghanistan. There I knew exactly where the enemies were ... and it was easier for me than now with you ...”

Amidst a chorus of cries, I left the hall, went home, and wrote a letter to the commission of old Communists at the 27th congress of the CPSU [February-March 1986], which would soon open in Moscow. I knew, based on the regulations of the party, that this commission carefully considered any letter, any complaint of rank-and-file Communists ...

And I won. After some time, V. Anishchev invited me to his office and, not lifting his eyes from the paper, uttered through his teeth:

“There was a mistake. ... In Moscow your film has been acknowledged as ideologically harmless ...”

“Does I.B. Usmanhodzhaev know about this? ...” I asked, having in mind the First Secretary of the TsK of the party.

“I told him,” Anishchev explained sharply.

And once again it was confirmed that the leaders of the republics in the USSR were marionettes, and the people from Moscow were in command.

In May 1986, I spoke at the Kremlin from the tribune upon which Stalin stood at one time. During our congress of cinema artists, I recounted the conflict with the Secretary of the TsK of the Uzbekistan party. ... I was happy that by the decision of the congress many outlawed films, like my *I Remember You*, were released in the theaters. The only thing that displeased me during these days was the ban on showing films by Andrei Tarkovsky. Surely, had it not been for the cocktail of beer and vodka and the pledge to Andrei in East Berlin, I probably would not have shot my confessional footage. By this time, Andrei was already a defector, and in December 1986 he died.

Over the course of thirteen years, the film *I Remember You* was screened in Uzbekistan only in one Tashkent theater, on Victory Day, May 7, 1999. I went with friends. There were three of us. The cashier said that if they sold less than six tickets they would cancel the showing due to the cost of the electricity. I bought those six tickets. The theater was empty, but in the hall there were a lot of people: they were playing billiards, there was a beer bar, American films played in a video-salon, music thundered, the youth of independent Uzbekistan were hanging out.

In March 2015, in Mexico at the film festival FICUNAM, I saw my film for the first time in many years in a full theater. Thirty years later, I once again saw my father on the big screen, heard the voice of my mother. From the bated breath of the viewers, to the shine in their eyes, it was clear to me that while the author of this film has grown old over these years, the film *I Remember You* has not. ...Thank you to the festival! ...





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