

acts of imagination

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Directed by Carolyn Combs
Screenplay by Michael Springate

Starring:

Stephanie Hayes as Katya
Billy Marchenski as Jaroslaw
Maki Nagisa as Seuchong
Julian Samuel as Aashir
Volodymyr Serdyuk as Petro

AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

By Jars Balan

Acts of Imagination is an adult drama that tells the story of Katya and Jaroslaw, a brother and sister who have immigrated to Canada from independent Ukraine. In portraying their struggles to adapt and survive in a large city without any family or an obvious network of fellow Ukrainians to draw on for sympathy and support, it touches on many different themes. The immigrant experience, questions of identity, relations between the sexes, and the role that the past plays in shaping one's present and future are among the issues explored by the movie. Another important theme implicitly raised by the movie is the nature of contemporary Canadian multiculturalism – its regional character and how it manifests itself in interpersonal relations. Below are some discussion topics for use in secondary school, college and university classrooms. Of course, the film will be of particular interest to anyone involved in Canadian and Ukrainian studies, as well as Ukrainian bilingual school and Ukrainian Native School (Ridna Shkola) programs.



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Strangers in a Strange Land:

IMMIGRANT HOPES, DREAMS, STRUGGLES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Canada and the United States are immigrant societies, and immigrant stories play a prominent role in the literatures and cinemas of both countries. Is *Acts of Imagination* a typical immigrant story? If so, what makes it typical? Or does the movie challenge common assumptions and portrayals of the immigrant experience? What other movies can you think of which deal in a central way with the theme of immigration, whether they are set in historical or contemporary times.

In terms of Ukrainian immigration to Canada, the best documented stories are those of the pioneers who homesteaded the prairies at the turn of the nineteenth century. A second wave of immigration from Ukraine took place in the interwar period, followed by a third wave after the Second World War. Katya and Jaroslaw belong to what is considered to be the fourth wave of Ukrainian immigrants, who began coming to Canada after the break-up of the Soviet Union. How have these waves of immigration differed from each other in terms of their motivation, make-up, and settlement pattern? How has the immigrant experience and the nature of immigration changed from the first to the fourth wave?

Can Katya and Jaroslaw be considered refugees? If so, what are they running away from? What role has politics played in their decision to move to Canada? Why might they choose to make Canada their new home, instead of the United States or another country? What do oranges symbolize in the movie?

In the film, the lives of Katya and Jaroslaw intersect with those of Seuchong and Aashir, who are also immigrants to Canada. What do their various experiences have in common? In what ways is the story of Katya and Jaroslaw a universal immigrant tale? In what ways is it specific to immigrants from Ukraine?

Several relationships are depicted in the film: Katya and Jaroslaw, Jaroslaw and Seuchong, Katya and Aashir, and Katya and Seuchong. Each of these relationships is somehow flawed and all are subjected to various strains. In what ways are they all in the same metaphorical boat together? In what ways are they all failures or damaged figures?

Immigrant Baggage: THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

Katya and Jaroslaw are victims of the Soviet persecution of Ukrainians, their parents having been dissidents. Reference is also made in the movie to the Holodomor, or genocidal famine of 1932-1933. How have these events scarred Katya and Jaroslaw in different ways? What coping strategies do they employ in dealing with their traumatic childhoods and the challenges that they face as newcomers?

There is an element of ambiguity surrounding the fates of Katya's and Jaroslaw's parents. Is it possible that Katya has imagined some of her past, perhaps romanticizing their activities in opposition to the Soviet regime? Can you cite other ambiguous aspects to the movie, or questions left unanswered?

Icons are very important in East Slavic worship and spirituality. Katya and Jaroslaw do not appear to be particularly religious, but the icon is a cherished family heirloom that Katya is especially reluctant to part with. What does Katya's eventual gifting / sale of the icon to Aashir represent – is it an act of desperation, or an act of liberation? Why does Jaroslaw react violently to Katya giving the icon to Aashir? Is money the only motivation for his anger, or are other issues behind his stabbing of Aashir?

Jaroslaw and Katya have very different attitudes toward their personal and national histories. Does gender play a role in how they deal with their shared past, the way they cope with adversity, or their attitudes toward the future?

It is suggested in the movie that Katya's and Jaroslaw's parents were victims of a betrayal. In what way have Jaroslaw and Katya also been betrayed?

All of the main characters have experienced disappointments in their lives. Describe the disappointments that each of them have suffered, and discuss how they have dealt with their various defeats. How have Katya and Jaroslaw been disillusioned by Ukraine, and by their new lives in Canada? Are there any signs of hope for either of them, or are they both ultimately doomed characters? How might their situations be turned into immigrant success stories?

He Said, She Said:

GENDER ISSUES RAISED BY THE RELATIONSHIPS

Katya and Jaroslaw in many respects have a typical sibling relationship. Because she is older, Katya is naturally very protective of her younger brother, and fusses over him in a motherly way. Some reviewers have suggested that there is an incestuous undercurrent in their interactions. Is there any basis for such an interpretation? Can the relationship between Katya and Jaroslaw be described as being typically East European or Ukrainian in terms of the gender roles that the two assume with each other?

Ukrainian society is often described as being matriarchal, notwithstanding the fact that men occupy most of the dominant positions in institutional life and frequently seem (at least to North Americans) to be pampered and overly-indulged by their mothers, sisters, girlfriends and wives. Is Katya overly tolerant of her brother's immature behaviour and weaknesses in character, or is she merely being empathetic? Can the relationship between Katya and Jaroslaw be characterized as being stereotypically Ukrainian or East European? Or is it just typical of brother-sister relationships in general?

There are numerous match-making companies that do a brisk business promoting Ukrainian women as brides for Western men. This suggests that the traditional gender relations in Ukrainian society are somehow attractive to males from North America, where the feminist movement has influenced the dynamics between men and women. Neither Seuchong or Aashir come from mainstream Canadian backgrounds either. Is any of this relevant to the sexual and emotional relationships that the main characters enter into?

Although Katya turns to Aashir out of need, she clearly initiates the relationship and always appears to be in control of her feelings even when she appears to be acting impulsively. Who is taking advantage of whom in the affair that they embark upon, and what does it give to both of them? Is Katya being reckless and self-destructive in taking a married man as her lover?

Questions of Identity:

FINDING ONE'S PLACE IN A POST-MODERN WORLD WHERE NATION-STATES SEEM TO BE DISAPPEARING OR LOSING THEIR RELEVANCE

Katya's and Jaroslaw's parents were Ukrainian nationalists who struggled and died in the hopes of achieving an independent Ukrainian state. Yet neither Katya or Jaroslaw seem particularly imbued with Ukrainian nationalist fervour, and have obviously chosen to leave the country that their parents dreamed of for a new life in Canada. What does this say about their generation? What implications does this have for independent Ukraine's attempts to forge a modern Ukrainian identity? Does national identity matter anymore? If not, what has replaced it?

Is the fact that Katya and Jaroslaw have settled on Canada's West Coast significant in any way? Would their fates be different if they had settled in Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton or Montreal? How does the Vancouver setting of the film contribute to its mood? What does the Fraser River symbolize for Katya, Aashir, and Seuchong?

There are no English- and French-Canadian characters in the film, and no specific references are made either to Canada or to stereotypically Canadian things like hockey, the RCMP, moose or maple syrup. Do you think this was deliberate on the filmmakers' part? Although the drama unfolds in the modern-day Vancouver, could it happen in any major city, anywhere? What does this say about contemporary life?

Racial and ethnic differences do not appear to be a factor in the relationships formed between Katya and Aashir, and Jaroslaw and Seuchong. Nevertheless, could Jaroslaw's attack on Aashir be partially motivated by latent racist feelings, or does self-loathing and perhaps jealousy play a bigger role in provoking his anger?

In coming to Canada, some immigrants choose to shed their old identities and to use the opportunity to create new ones for themselves. Others consciously or unconsciously cling to their former cultures and identities in the process of trying to adapt to their changed environments. Discuss how these alternatives are reflected in the choices made by Katya, Jaroslaw, Seuchong and Aashir.

The Soundtrack

The soundtrack of *Acts of Imagination* has a generally spare and lean quality to it – how does this contribute to the story told by the film, and to the creation of its overall mood?

The movie utilizes both Ukrainian folk songs and some background music featuring the *bandura*, a traditional lute-like instrument with a distinctive and delicate sound. What role does Ukrainian music play in specific scenes and in the movie in general? What feelings are evoked by the haunting melody of the folk songs?

Ukrainian is spoken at several points in the film, yet Jaroslaw and Katya speak English when they are together, rather than Ukrainian. Why? And why would the director choose to use Ukrainian dialogue with subtitles, instead of having the characters speak English with a Ukrainian accent? What is the effect of using foreign languages in an English-language film?

There is also a scene where the landlord speaks Polish and Jaroslaw answers him in English. What is the intent of their rather unusual and awkward exchange?

Are there any other notable sounds that contribute to the mood, plot or symbolism of the film?

Other Topics for Discussion

Acts of Imagination is described by some viewers as having a European sensibility. Why? What qualities make it seem like a European rather than a Hollywood film? Would it be more accurate to identify it as being a classically Canadian movie? And does it have any features that suggest conscious or unconscious similarities to films in the Ukrainian cinematic tradition embodied by such directors as Oleksander Dovzhenko (1894-1956), Serhii Bondarchuk (1920-1994), Serhii Paradzhanov (1924-1990), and Yurii Ilienko (b. 1936)?

What details in the film relate to its specifically Ukrainian subject matter? How are these used in relating the story and grounding it in the experience of Katya and Jaroslaw?

Does Katya undergo any changes in the course of the movie – is she a different person from the one we meet at the beginning? What do you think will happen to her and Jaroslaw, five years, ten years down the road?

Are Katya's conversations with her deceased mother a sign of mental instability or are they simply a vehicle that she uses work out her unresolved feelings? Are they an escape for her, or a means of coping with painful memories? Immigrants can be particularly sensitive to developing a mental illness, either because of traumas that they experienced in their homeland or the challenges that they face in adjusting to a new society with a different language and culture. Who do you think is more at risk for potentially experiencing depression, addiction, and other serious mental health problems: Katya or Jaroslaw?

Finally, why is the movie called Acts of Imagination? What acts are being referred to, and who is imagining what? Although Katya engages in imaginary conversations, for which she is chastised by her brother, it could be argued that Jaroslaw is equally adept at avoiding reality by refusing to grow up and behaving as if somehow everything will work out without him having to earn his success. In what ways are both victims of their imaginations? And is the imagined world any less 'real' than the world of our waking, everyday consciousness?

Resources

General Contextual

Encyclopedia of Ukraine. Toronto-Buffalo-London: The University of Toronto Press for the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, the Shevchenko Society, and the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies, 1984-2001. Now available in part at HYPERLINK "<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/>" www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/

Balan, Jars. **Salt and Braided Bread: Ukrainians in Canada.** Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Frances Swyripa, "**Ukrainians,**" in Magosci, Paul Robert (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples.* Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1999, pp. 1281-1311.

Victor Satzewitch, Wsewolod Isajiw, and Eugene Duvalko, "**Social Networks and the Occupational Settlement Experiences of Recent Immigrants from Ukraine in Toronto,**" *Journal of Ukrainian Studies.* Volume 31, Nos. 1-2 (Summer-Winter 2006), pp. 1-25.

Also see in the same issue Oleh Wolowyna, "**Recent Immigration from Ukraine to the United States: Levels and Characteristics,**" pp. 27-63.

The Famine of 1932-1933

Conquest, Robert. **The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine.** Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press in Association with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1986. Also available in English and American editions.

Dolot, Miron. **Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust.** New York-London: W.W. Norton, 1985.

Dolot, Miron. **Who Killed them and Why?** In remembrance of those killed in the Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine. Cambridge (Ma): Harvard University Ukrainian Studies Fund, n.d.

Procyk, Oksana, Leonid Heretz and James Mace. **Famine in the Soviet Ukraine 1932-1933.** A Memorial Exhibition. Cambridge (Ma): Widener Library, Harvard University, Harvard University Press, 1986.

Also, the 1985 film **Harvest of Despair: The 1932-1933 Famine in Ukraine.** Directed by Slavko Nowytsky. Produced by Slavko Nowytsky and Yuriy Luhovy.

Icons

Cavarnos, Constantine. **Orthodox Iconography.** Belmont (Ma): Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1986.

Hordynsky, Sviatoslav. **The Ukrainian Icon of the XIIth to XVIIIth centuries.** Philadelphia: Providence Association, 1973.

Quenot, Michel. **The Icon: Window on the Kingdom.** Translated by a Carthusian Monk. Crestwood (NY): St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991.