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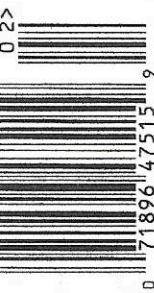
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The Eccentric Revolutionaries

Banned for decades in the Soviet Union, a subversive comedy finally comes to DVD.

Jesse Walker

AT SOME POINT in our lives, we've all waited in a line for so long that time seemed to stand still. In *My Grandmother*, a strange and wonderful silent comedy made in Soviet Georgia in 1929, this happens literally: As a "notorious idler and bureaucrat" cools his heels, everything around him slows to a crawl and finally freezes altogether.

But all is not lost. From atop a mountain, a member of "the Youth Communist League, our junior cavalry" hurls an enormous pen down the slope and, miraculously, into the office, where it pierces the bureaucrat's chest, removes him from his job, and restarts the clock. For the rest of the movie, our now-unemployed protagonist will search for an older apparatchik willing to be his patron and to find him a new post. Along the way, there will be no shortage of surreal sequences, including a statue that comes to life and a cartoon that crawls out of the newspaper; there's also slapstick aplenty—the central character is modeled on the American comedian Harold Lloyd—and sets inspired by expressionist and constructivist art.

But what's especially striking is that Youth Communist cavalry. At a time when Stalin was imposing harsh new constraints on Soviet cinema, the boy's intervention was clearly parody, not propaganda. If you doubt that, consider a scene later in the movie, when our antihero, applying for another job, is unable to speak

to the bureaucrat behind the desk because the latter keeps disappearing and being replaced by someone new. "Directors are changed," the narration informs us. "The job remains." The film ends with the slogan, "Death to red tape, to sloppiness, to bureaucrats!"

It's no surprise that the authorities immediately banned the film, which wasn't widely seen until the '70s and has only now been released on DVD in America. What's amazing is that it was made at all.

My Grandmother was heavily influenced by eccentricism, a Russian movement indebted to both pop culture and the avant-garde. Its most obvious precursor was Dada—the eccentrics were known to disrupt plays with whistles and rattles—and it drew on native absurdist authors as well. But its chief inspirations were American. *The Eccentric Manifesto*, published in 1922, includes a list of the eccentrics' "parents"; among them are jazz, boxing, "the cry of the auctioneer," "the jacket of a cheap pulp thriller," and "American song and dance routines," the latter identified as their favorite form of ballet. The eccentrics loved vaudeville, advertisements, and machines; "the 200 volumes of German expressionism," they wrote, "do not offer the expressivity of one sole circus poster."

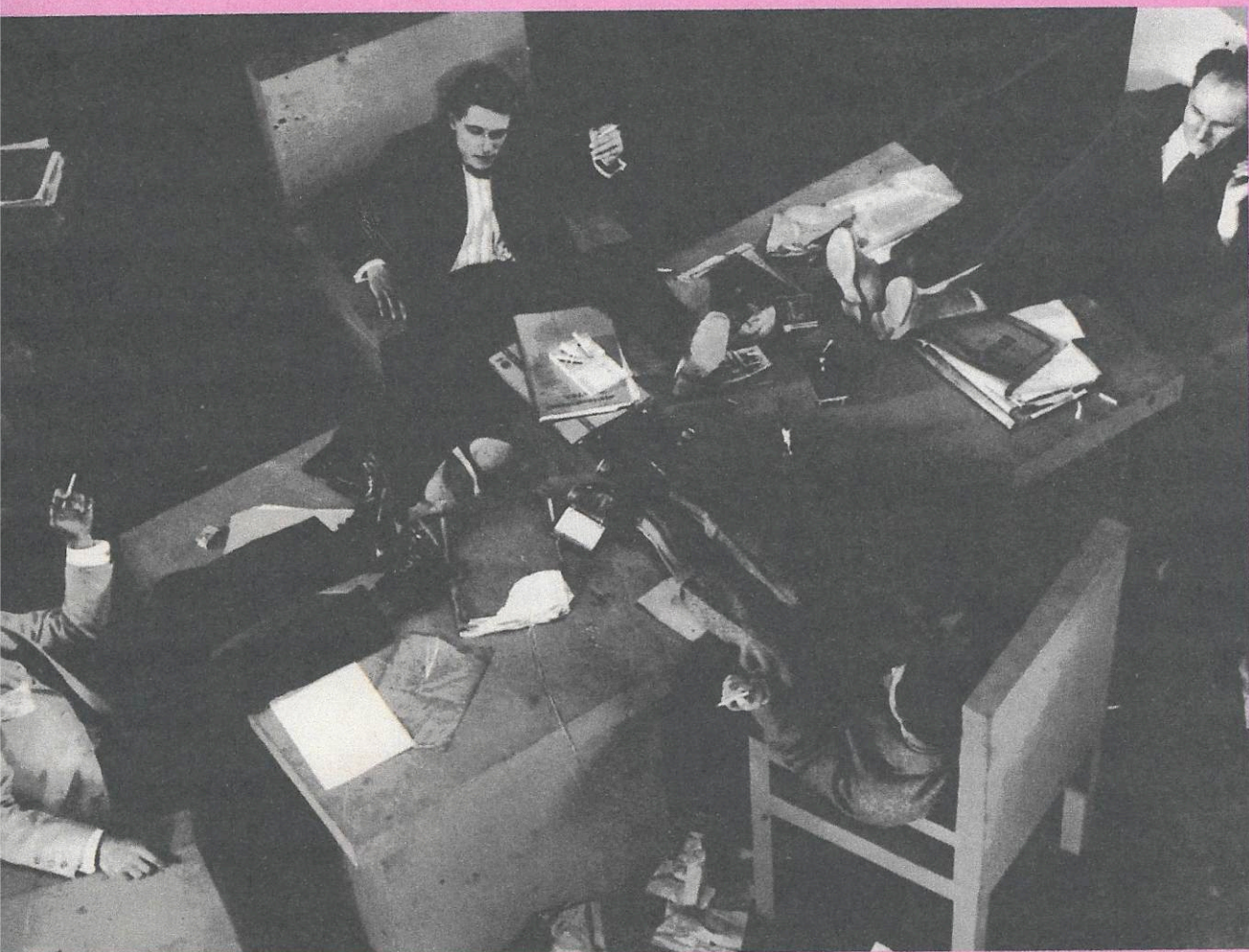
The Factory of the Eccentric Actor, or FEKS, began as a theater company but soon moved into film production. Its best-known picture may be its last one, *The New Babylon* (1929), a tale of the Paris Commune that suffered from heavy government interference but enjoyed a score by the young Dimitri Shostakovich. Some writers have attempted to cast its creators as committed commu-

nists, but post-*perestroika* scholarship has cast doubt on that interpretation. "Everything in the FEKS Manifesto is consistent with the 1920s youth culture," wrote the late Shostakovich scholar Ian MacDonald, who argued that the eccentrics were individualists, not collectivists. "What they stood for was what young people enjoyed (and vastly preferred to Soviet Communist propaganda): Chaplin movies, detective stories, clowns and cardsharps, pop songs, foxtrots, funfairs, fast cars, sex, free expression, and vodka....Like most young people, and most artistic groups of that era, FEKS resented the Bolshevik usurpation of power. As far as they were concerned, the revolution belonged to the people and should be (a) democratic and (b) an ongoing carnival."

There is, at any rate, no question how *My Grandmother* views the Soviet regime. It shows a system that is corrupt, filled with self-serving placeholders, and uninterested in individual merit. Directed and co-written by Kote Mikaberidze, it was made outside the FEKS orbit in Leningrad but bore an unmistakably eccentricist orientation.

It's possible that the film was screened once or twice in Georgia before the government suppressed it, but it didn't go into general release until 1976. Tom Luddy—then with the Pacific Film Archive, now the head of the Telluride Film Festival—happened to be in the USSR when the picture was unbanned, and he arranged to have it shown in America. "It came out of the blue," he remembers. "To me, it was even less dated and more alive than the films I had seen from the FEKS."

Two decades later, in 2000, the



Pacific Film Archive invited the clarinetist and composer Beth Custer to create some music for the movie and to perform it during a screening. She wrote an overture on her own, and then her trio did “some structured improvisations,” she recalls, “that were the embryonic formings of what I later wrote.” Still fascinated by the film, she composed a more elaborate score for an eight-piece ensemble, a vivid jazz arrangement with a strong undercurrent of blues and touches of Russian and Georgian music. Her band has now played several live gigs with the film, and with a grant from the Aaron Copeland Recording Fund has recorded the score for the DVD. (The disc was released by BC Records,

a small label owned by Custer.)

Like all the best soundtracks, this one improves the images it escorts. That’s clearest in a sequence where the protagonist’s wife dances a seven-minute Charleston. Her endless dance isn’t the only thing happening on-screen, but it would almost certainly become tedious with a lesser score or in silence. Custer’s ensemble keeps the scene interesting, even exciting.

It’s tempting to look for reflections of Mikaberidze’s movie in films that came later, especially Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s great Cuban satire *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966) and Terry Gilliam’s dark dystopia *Brazil* (1985), both of which echo *My Grandmother’s*

mix of slapstick, surrealism, and anti-bureaucratic invective. But *Death of a Bureaucrat* was made before *My Grandmother* was revived; and while it’s conceivable that Gilliam saw the Georgian picture before he shot his movie, it seems unlikely. Mikaberidze was a great filmmaker, but he wasn’t an influential one. He’s more like an isolated engineer who builds an airplane in 1852 and promptly crashes it into a mountain, leaving the rubble undiscovered until long after the Wright brothers reinvented his creation. ■

Managing Editor Jesse Walker (jwalker@reason.com) is author of Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America (NYU Press).