

MUSIC

The House of Tudor

Soviet film satire, organ plaster-casting, and animal 'toon carnage.

SF WEEKLY NOVEMBER 13-19, 2002 sfweekly.com

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The House of Tudor

Banned in the Soviet Union for almost half a century, Kote Mikaberidze's 1929 silent movie *My Grandmother* is a visually striking, often hilarious example of avant-garde Russian filmmaking, inspired by the 1922 *Eccentric Manifesto*. The picture, named after a slang term for unwarranted dividends garnered from public office, follows the misadventures of a Georgian bureaucrat who loses his job and discovers what it's like to be on the other end of the boodle. Drawing on the *gesamkunstwerk* ("biomechanics") of the constructivist theater movement — gesture over speech, architecture over art, organization over personalization — Mikaberidze uses stark, angular, oversize sets that deftly characterize the still-young Soviet State system that he chose to lampoon. Inside this austere, expressionistic setting, he tosses a cast of wonderfully strange and despondent characters who are, at once, self-important and seriously impotent: an administrator who whiles away the hours by chasing cockroaches with his spit, a paper-pusher who spends the day hurling love letters folded into the shape of airplanes at an indifferent secretary, and a grimy clerk whose job it is to carry memos to the suits sitting around a giant table. And that's just the beginning. The cast, most notably the wild-eyed Bella Chernova (playing our unhappy bureaucrat's wife), is comprised of adept physical comedians who stand up superbly next to Mikaberidze's more adventurous techniques, such as stop motion, puppetry, exaggerated camera angles, and animation, all of which were considered radical, if not anarchic, at the time. Add to this a good smattering of death — suicide by handgun, near-suicide by hanging, and murder by giant pencil (wielded by the ever-vigilant Communist Youth League) — and a catchy little maxim ("Death to Red Tape, Messiness, and Bureaucrats!") and you've got yourself a box-office hit. Or a movie that will never see the light of day until the Pacific Film Archive resurrects it with loving care and a lot of help from the Beth Custer Ensemble. Custer's original score — a pastiche of classical, folk, blues, jazz, and international sounds performed by seven very gifted musicians — captures the kinetic, off-kilter pace of *My Grandmother* while plumbing its darker depths and amplifying its humor. The score will be performed live with select narration, tears, and laughter provided by Nils Frykdahl (Idiot Flesh, Sleepytime Gorilla Museum, and Faun Fables) at each showing of *My Grandmother* on Friday and Saturday, Nov. 15-16, at 8 p.m. at the Castro Theatre (429 Castro near Market). Tickets are \$12; call 621-6120 or visit www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/pfa.