

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

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## Chess Fever (1925)

*Shakhmatnaya Goryachka*

Sunday 21 March 2021

Music By: John Sweeney

In answer to what might be your first two questions—

The good news: as with the Netflix sensation *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), you don't need to understand chess to love *Chess Fever* (1925).

The better news: *Chess Fever* is hilarious.

The Russian silent cinema isn't particularly known for its comedies: epic sweep and dazzling montage, yes, pratfalls, not so much. And yet. Sergei Eisenstein was a cartoonist, and you can see how a talent for caricature comes through in his work, with every character a grotesque, carefully cast for their facial features and body types, and augmented with costume and makeup. And less-celebrated filmmakers Boris Barnet and Fedor Ozep, who both cameo in *Chess Fever*, were very successful working in a lighter vein, using the techniques of montage in a playful fashion, which those techniques proved very well suited to. If you think about it, even the theory behind all that dialectical cutting had a humorous quality, with Comrade Kuleshov noting that you could make a closeup of an actor look grandfatherly or just hungry depending on whether you cut to a baby or a bowl of soup. And you could cut from a man waving in front of the Kremlin to another man waving with the Eiffel Tower behind him, and the audience would be forced to accept they were waving at each other. These were funny guys, at least some of the time.

Vsevolod Pudovkin & Nikolai Shpikovsky, the team behind *Chess Fever*, went on to direct serious, weighty classics of their native cinema: *Mother* (1926) and *Storm over Asia* (1928) in the former's case, *Bread* (1930) in the latter's. But for their first short film and their only collaboration, they elected to keep things light and even zany. Chess fever was sweeping the Soviets for real and Pudovkin paused the production of his feature documentary *Mechanics of the Brain* (1926), which takes a Pavlovian, behaviourist view of human consciousness and contains absolutely no laughs, to make this frenetic, witty and deeply lovable film about chess obsession.

I have a question of my own: had these Russians seen and been influenced by Buster Keaton? I think I can answer it. There are beautiful Russian constructivist posters for Keaton's films, with his unsmiling photographs collaged into blocky and diagonal and dynamic graphics, so we know his films are screening. The young protagonist's earnestness and his serious solutions to absurd difficulties, and the sheer inventiveness of these solutions, are very Keaton-like. True, leading man Vladimir Fogel, fresh from Kuleshov's equally surreal and satirical *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), doesn't quite have

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Keaton's death-defying physical dexterity, but he does pretty well sliding backwards down an icy street, drawn by the magnetic allure of a chess shop, or plunging headfirst into a snow bank. But his earnestness is very Keatonesque, and when he draws his jacket collar close to him in response to a chilly reception from his fiancée, a specific Keaton moment (from *Seven Chances*, I think), that nearly clinches it for me.

The film's central premise, of a wedding delayed by an addictive board game, comes swinging back at us in Laurel & Hardy's *Me and My Pal* in 1933, and was also lifted by Vladimir Nabokov for his 1930 novel *The Luzhin Defence*. The device of using plot contrivances to postpone a successful union of leading man and leading woman had a vulgar nickname among Hollywood romcom writers (the first two words were "the delayed" and I'll let you guess the rest), and I suppose we could say that instead of tying the heroine to the railroad tracks, Pudovkin & Shpikovsky have bound their hero to a chessboard. Note also the clever costume choices, with scarf, socks and hankie patterned in black & white checks to evoke the game's pernicious influence, a motif also to be found in Scott Frank's miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*. Chess really does get everywhere: one of the film's running gags is that whenever leading lady Anna Zemtsova (who happened to be Mrs. Pudovkin and acted in several of his other movies) throws a chess board or puzzle book out of the apartment window, it's seized upon by some passing Muscovite and the Great Chess Pandemic spreads further.

Also: kittens! Lots of kittens! I want to be able to reassure you that no mini-felines were harmed during this production and crewmembers with catchers' mitts lurked off camera each time Fogel discards an unwanted puss, but I have no positive information on this score. And Pudovkin, based on *Mechanics of the Brain*, could be a ruthless S.O.B. But let's hope for the best.

Also also: chess grandmasters, real ones, and lots of them. Of course, few of us will recognise Cuban world champ José Raúl Capablanca today, even as a name, nor Frank Marshall, Richard Reti, Carlos Torre Repetto or Frederick Yates, who were all in town for the 1925 Moscow tournament (eventually won by the camera-shy Comrade Bogoljubov), but it's cool that they're shown, just as it's fantastic that Nabokov himself is rumoured to turn up as an extra. I couldn't spot the future author of *Lolita* anywhere in the film's bustling throngs of chessmaniacs, but you can't see a 13-yr-old Phil Collins in *A Hard Day's Night* either, but it's fun to hear he was there.

By **David Cairns**

David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at [Shadowplay dcairns.wordpress.com](http://Shadowplay.dcairns.wordpress.com)

Dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin and Nikolai Shpikovsky | USSR | 1925 | NC U | b&w | 26m | Russian intertitles with English surtitles.

With: Boris Barnet, José Raúl Capablanca, Vladimir Fogel, Anna Zemtsova

Screening material courtesy of Lobster Films

