

Firebird (2021)



Roman (right) takes Sergey to a rehearsal of the ballet *The Firebird*. (c) Roadside Attractions

This British-Estonian LGBTQ+ love story is adapted by director and co-writer Peeter Rebane from *The Story of Roman*, a memoir by Russian actor Sergey Fetisov. It has been suggested that it is a *Broke Back Mountain* meets *Top Gun*—a fair description in that one of the lovers is a dashing, young pilot stationed at Haapsalu Air Force Base in Soviet-occupied Estonia. It is the late 70s when the Cold War was at its height and any male caught in a gay relationship could be sentenced to five years hard labor in a gulag.

The film opens with [Sergey Serebrennikov](#), a private and his friends fellow Russian soldier Volodja (Jake Thomas Henderson) and Luisa (Diana Pozharskaya) enjoying night swimming in the sea after curfew hours. Luisa is a beautiful Estonian soldier serving as the secretary for the Colonel (Nicholas Woodeson) who commands the base. Their swim is interrupted by soldiers brandishing flashlights and guns, an incident foreshadowing more clandestine trysts to come.

Sergey had enjoyed a flirtation with Luisa, but this changes quickly when Roman (Oleg Zagorodnii), a lieutenant as handsome as Apollo arrives at the base. Sergey, who aspires to become an actor, likes photography, and his taking of a picture of Luisa with Roman standing just to one side of her signals this

change. We see through the camera's viewer that he changes the focus from Luisa's head to that of Roman's, leaving hers blurry. He will have opportunity to get close to the object of his desire because he is assigned to the role of Roman's valet, driving him about and assisting him in his tasks. Their mutual love for photography hastens the awareness of their stronger mutual sexual attraction, with the darkroom at times providing them a few moments of privacy.

The film gains its title from Stravinsky's great musical. When Sergey mentions that he has never been to a ballet, Roman takes him to a rehearsal of the great work.

The film will end with an older but wiser Sergey attending a *Firebird* performance in Moscow where he has been attending drama school. In between the bookends there will be passionate scenes of the two making out, and then separating for a stretch when Roman, under pressure from the intense scrutiny of a KGB officer dying to catch him in an illegal act, marries Luisa. The two have a son, and after a few years, the two men reconnect, and the film becomes a love triangle.

Although not a subtle film—during a sexual tryst while swimming two Soviet jets stream overhead—the story is a lush love story, challenging viewers to expand their view of romance. Although "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! / For your love is better than wine" was written for a heterosexual couple, Sergey and Roman feel their love just as passionately. Tales of forbidden love are even older than that of Romeo and Juliet, and too often their endings are just as tragic. This one is not quite as tragic, but it is just as sad—and end titles remind us that the old Soviet law against homosexuality might no longer be in place, but the love between two people of the same sex is still not accepted.

This review will be in the May issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing

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