

# Wings (1966)



During WW 2 a pair of Soviet soldiers, captured by Nazis, face death in different ways. (c) Criterion Collection

As promised in the last issue in my review of *The Ascent*, here is a brief look at another of Russian filmmaker Larisa Shepitko's films. *Wings* was her first film after graduating from the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography, reputed to be the oldest film school in the world. Such subsequent Soviet greats as Andrei Tarkovsky and Elem Klimov (whom Larisa married). Winning the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival, it turned out to be her last because in 1979 she died in a crash with four of her crew members while scouting film locations for the an adaptation of the novel *Farewell to Matyora*—her husband Elem Klimove finished the film in 1983, naming it simply (and aptly) *Farewell*.

*Wings* is a character study of a once famous and highly decorated female fighter pilot during what the Soviets called the Great Patriotic War, Nadezhda Petrovna (Maya Bulgakova). Now 41, she has been rewarded by her appointment to be the schoolmistress of a vocational school for teens and hold a seat on the town council. Her old military discipline of service before self does not suit the changing times. She cannot connect with her teenage students, who cannot

understand her code of self-sacrifice for a greater good. She is estranged from her adopted daughter Tanya (Zhanna Bolotova). She dislikes Tanya's choice of men, so that the girl has not introduced her to the man she intends to marry. When Nadezhda insists on coming to a gathering with him and Tanya and their friends, it is a tense scene, revealing one more instance of the generation gap between Nadezhda and the next generation.

Frequently there are interspersed brief shots of the cloud-filled sky, the camera soaring high above the earth. These show her earth-bound mind longingly reminding her of her past glory as a pilot. Her old airfield is close by, so she occasionally visits it, where many of the pilots and crews still recognize and welcome her. But her daily life she finds drab and boring. There is one bright spot when she visits a restaurant and connects with the owner. The two sit at table together talking and then break out in song and dance.

Nadezhda has a relationship with museum director Pavel Gavrilovich (Pantelejmon Krymov), but it is going nowhere, there being no passion between them. She visits the museum to reconnect with her past and stops to gaze on a photograph of a fellow pilot Mitya (Leonid Dyachkov). The two had become lovers, with her being traumatized when he was killed by gunfire as they flew together. She had tried to awaken him as his plane sped earthward, but he was already dead, unable to prevent the fiery crash. A docent is leading a group of children through the exhibit when they stop before pictures that include Nadezhda, and a little girl asks the guide: "Is the pilot Nadezhda Petrukhina still alive?"

Overhearing the conversation, this question has a profound impact on Nadezhda. She heads for the airfield and tours the hanger where parachutes are hanging. An instructor and students, along with the crew, recognize and cheer her. She climbs into the cockpit of a plane and is pushed around the strip by her admirers. Then, as they start to push the plane

back into the hanger, Nadezhda does something that, though maybe providing an ambiguous ending to the film, suggests there is still a spark of hope, that maybe the future need not be as bleak for her.

*Wings* is a reminder that despite the authoritarian power of the Soviet government, there were artists in that nation able to produce works of art and not just propaganda. Both director Larisa Shepitko and actress Mayya Bulgakova were a world-class director and actress subtly communicating the contrast between a person's once exciting past and the deadening dullness of the present. The attitude of the former fighter pilot toward the present is as negative toward the present as that of the author of Ecclesiastes. He had a measure of faith to prevent him from sinking into nihilism, she had—well watch and see for yourself. I can scarcely wait to to see another of the films of this tragically short-lived director!

*This review will be in the July 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 a subscription or individual issue in The Store.*