

Director
Andrei Tarkovsky

Cast
Erland Josephson
Susan Fleetwood
Allan Edwall
Guðrún Gísladóttir
Sven Wollter
Valérie Mairesse
Filippa Franzén

Screenplay
Andrei Tarkovsky

Cinematography
Sven Nykvist

Art Director
Anna Asp

Editors
Andrei Tarkovsky, Michal Leszczyłowski

Sound and mixing
Owe Svensson, Bosse Persson

Music
J.S. Bach, Swedish and Japanese folk music

Executive Producer
Anna-Lena Wibom

Produced by Mosfilm Studio

Run time: 149 Minutes

Certificate: 12A

Swedish, French and English

with English subtitles

Sweden/France 1986

Colour

Aspect Ratio: 1.66:1

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THE SACRIFICE

Screening as part of Sculpting Time: Andrei Tarkovsky Nationwide Touring Programme



In May 1986, a month after the Chernobyl disaster, *The Sacrifice* won the Grand Prix at Cannes. Andrei Tarkovsky, at the age of 54, could not accept the award. He was in Paris, battling lung cancer.

The prize was collected by his son, Andrei Jr. The Soviets had waited until the recalcitrant genius was beyond cure before granting his children permission to stray beyond the Iron Curtain. Back in Russia, the award went unreported by the state media.

Tarkovsky died, in exile, later that year. And so *The Sacrifice*, this Dostoyevskian epic of apocalyptic grandeur, can be seen as his final farewell.

Ingmar Bergman once said: "Tarkovsky for me is the greatest director, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of film, as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream."

The Sacrifice seems to be the Andrei's way of returning Bergman's compliment. It was shot in the summer of 1985, on the Swedish island of Gotland (the Swedish military denied Tarkovsky access to Bergman's island of Fårö). Employing, to large effect, the Swedish language, Tarkovsky also used two of Bergman's veterans - the cinematographer Sven Nykvist, and the actor Erland Josephson. In the vein of Bergman, the film asks questions of Biblical proportions to frame a midlife crises. The Vatican includes *The Sacrifice* as one of 45 'great religious films', yet it is essentially a story about a rather dysfunctional birthday party.

Josephson plays Alexander, a writer and academic of unflinching sincerity whom tells us, in an opening monologue, of humanity's great moral failings in the authoritarian age of nuclear arms. "Humanity is on a dangerous road," he says. "We are living like savages."

Quite a way to kick off one's birthday. We meet him in his remote, spartan home on the banks of the sea, joined by his wife Adelaide (Susan Fleetwood), her teenage daughter Martha (Filippa Franzén), and their young son (Tommy Kjellqvist), referred to only as Little Man, and whom cannot speak. Two housemaids hover in the background, and he is visited by two friends whose provenance remains uncertain.

The roll of thunder is heard in the skies overhead, and then the thunderous shudder of military aircraft passing by. We hear mysterious cries, faraway in the night. Then a voice on the radio intones with words that shake the party; a nuclear holocaust is imminent, the world is about to end. Only a deal with God, an anti-Faustian-pact, holds the chance of salvation.

In *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*, a documentary about Tarkovsky from another cult cineaste, the late French director Chris Marker, we are given access to quiet, revertant footage of the great man brought low with sickness, greeting his family after years apart. Marker's film contextualises this with, seven months hence, backstage filming of *The Sacrifice*. Such sunlit, shimmering footage of Tarkovsky - already ill, exactly and, in his own way, joyously planning the film's climatic end - is a lovely foil to this weighty, portentous film.

For it is possible to read *The Sacrifice* as a metaphor for Tarkovsky's own state of being. Six years earlier, he seemed to foretell the Chernobyl disaster with *Stalker*, which takes place in an abandoned, desolate expanse called The Zone. Tarkovsky, his wife Larisa Tarkovskaya and Anatoli Solonitsyn, the lead actor in *Stalker*, all died from a comparable type of lung cancer (Vladimir Sharun, the film's sound designer, claimed the director and cast were exposed to lethal carcinogens by the production's proximity to a chemical plant). When he shot *The Sacrifice*, he must have known the end was in sight.

In the opening act of *The Sacrifice*, Alexander helps his son plant a tree by the sea. Without speaking, the small boy listens to his father's instructions - if the tree is watered, every day, it will become something larger than ourselves. It will outlast us, and in that act, a small part of the world will change.

And so, in the final moments of *The Sacrifice*, we see Little Man, now a bit bigger, carefully watering the sapling, still fragile but steadily growing, winding its roots into the earth.

What a way to sign off. That maybe, in the act of dedicating oneself to small tasks, in the embrace of sacrifice, we might find our chance to build a legacy.

By Tom Seymour, editor of British Journal of Photography and journalist