

Jean Renoir recalled: “One day...I saw *Le Brasier ardent*, directed and acted by Mosjoukine and produced by the courageous Alexandre Kamenka. The audience howled and whistled, shocked by a film so different from their usual fare. I was ecstatic...I decided to abandon my trade, ceramics, to try to make films.” Whether an exaggeration, Renoir’s recollection might contain a grain of truth, for he turned to filmmaking shortly thereafter, in 1925. When in 1936 Renoir decided to make *Le Bas-fonds* (*The Lower Depths*), his path crossed with the studio that produced *Le Brasier ardent* (*The Burning Crucible*), Films Albatros, and its head, Kamenka.

The significance of this medium-size studio – known as Ermolieff Cinéma until 1922 and Films Albatros henceforth – is hard to overestimate. The Russian-run outfit offered high quality, generically diverse films – and made a profit, to boot – throughout the 1920s as Hollywood continued its steady offensive on the European film market. As the large companies like Pathé and Gaumont began to focus almost exclusively on distribution, Albatros forged ahead with production. Crippled by the devastation of World War I, the French film industry welcomed the financial and creative capital of the exiles of the Bolshevik revolution. Initially, the émigrés feared they might run into difficulties adapting to French tastes, which, film historian and Albatros expert Lenny Borger notes, “did not take readily to the sort of morbid, often mystical melodramas the audiences of Czarist Russia had doted on.” Already in the late 1920, however, the release of *Angoissante aventure* (*Agonizing Adventure*) and the following year *Contes des 1001 nuits* (*The Tales of One Thousand and One Night*) dispelled their fears. The Russian exiles took advantage of their long voyage from Yalta to Paris, using the stop in Marseille as an opportunity to shoot a number of scenes that made it into *Agonizing Adventure*. In *The Tales of One Thousand and One Night*, they shrewdly combined the splendors of real Tunisia, where director Viatcheslav Tourjansky had taken the crew, with their own brand of “exoticism,” a theme they would exploit more than once. Met with both public and critical success, the films seemed to inject hope into the stagnant French industry.

Albatros owed its success in the 1920s to the superb talent it had attracted. Set designers and artists Ivan Lochakoff and Lazare Meerson, costume designer Boris Belinsky, cameramen Nikolai Toporkoff and Fedot Burgasoff, actors Nathalie Lissenko and Nikolai Koline are just a handful of names in the Albatros constellation who contributed to its glory and who frequently remain untouted. Leaving behind his status of the “king of the screen” in tsarist Russia, Ivan Mosjoukine – actor, writer, director, but above all, star – conquered the French. “The subtle alchemist of passion and pain,” as one admiring commentator described him, was adored by the public and critics alike. Despite his triumph in Europe, in late 1926 Mosjoukine boarded the steamliner *Berengaria* and headed for the United States, a lucrative contract with Universal Pictures in hand. When he entered his cabin, a telegram from Carl Laemmle wishing him a pleasant voyage

waited on the desk. Less than a year later, the Russian actor was crossing the Atlantic back – his star did not take in Hollywood.

One other figure deserves a moment of limelight – Alexandre Kamenka, an astute businessman with a love for cinema, guided Albatros through many a storm. When, by the mid-1920s, the majority of the original Russian base was lured away by bigger enterprises, Kamenka welcomed a new generation of French directors and later in the decade became involved in co-productions. It is also thanks to him that the Albatros archives and film prints ended up at the nascent Cinémathèque française before the Second World War.

By Vika Paranyuk