

Through a Glasnost Darkly

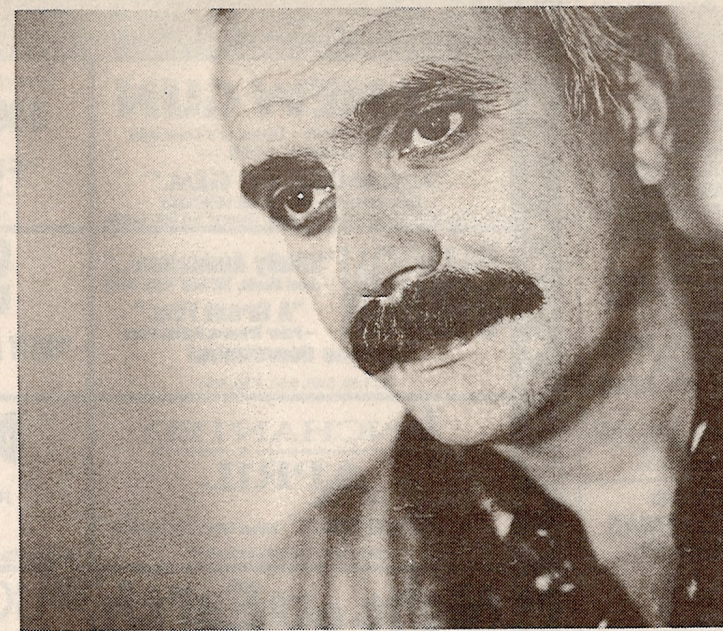
By Edward Ball

Nikita Mikhalkov is describing what he calls the "panty-hose method" of filmmaking. The fifty-something Russian director of *Close to Eden* sees this new mode of production now settling in across the former Soviet Union.

"Today, anybody who has made money selling, say, panty hose, can decide he is interested in movies and set himself up as an independent producer," says Mikhalkov, raising his eyebrows and sinking into an upholstered chair in his three-room suite at a midtown hotel. "It's the future of Russian filmmaking."

With a walrus mustache, booming voice, and taste for black humor, Mikhalkov presents himself as, and may actually be, the ethnographic Russian subject. The stout, six-foot-four former actor fills his conversation with parables, big laughs, and wry pessimism straight out of Gogol.

"How would I define the Russian character?" Significant pause. "I'll draw you a tableau. You're in the countryside. It's night. Frost on the ground. A wooden cottage among trees. The sound of balalaika music in the air: 'diddle-iddle-iddle-iddle.' The music stops. The cottage door swings open. A barrel-chested man, shirtless, barefoot, a balalaika in his hand, steps out. He bellows at the top of his lungs: 'Fuuuuck



Nikita Mikhalkov: love for paradox and negation

Yoooooouuu!' He slams the door and disappears. The balalaika resumes. *That's* the Russian character!"

Although deeply cathected to Russia, Mikhalkov has not been held back by panty-hose economics. *Close to Eden*, which opens in New York this week, was named Best Film at the Venice Film Festival in 1991, and is a French production. *Dark Eyes* (1987), an Italian-Soviet coproduction, pulled an Academy Award nomination for Marcello Mastroianni's performance as a charming bam-

boozler in late-Czarist Russia.

Set against his own success, Mikhalkov's complaint against the capitalist wave seems to gurgle up from a deep (Russian?) love for paradox and negation, an attraction for the world of *nyet*. It's no coincidence that his most interesting film, the sublimely dark *Oblomov* (1979), is an adaptation of Goncharov's 19th century novel about a feckless Russian aristocrat, wholly without desire, who rejects the world and mostly stays in bed between brief, failed sorties into society.

Close to Eden appears at first to break with Mikhalkov's fulsome Russophilia. Shot in inner Mongolia, it tells of a shepherd named Gombo and his family's simple life in the remotest nowhereness of the steppes. All is idyllic and preindustrial, with sheep at the roam in wide-angled landscapes, until Russia intervenes in the person of Sergei, a blustery Slavic truck driver who wrecks his rig along a barren highway near Gombo's family hut. Sergei has a thirst for vodka, and tattooed on his back is the sheet music of a melancholic waltz, which he frequently sings. He is, literally, inscribed with ethnicity. The Russian takes charge of the narrative and the Mongolian idyll becomes the backdrop for a Chaplinesque romp of Slavic identity through the bewildering precincts of its Asian other.

Having promoted *Close to Eden* for a year, Mikhalkov is almost bored talking about it. The subject that really interests him is Russian history and politics. It is apparent that Mikhalkov is an orthodox Christian with an abiding respect for monarchy.

"Russia is a Christian country," he says, implausibly, of a nation that almost obliterated the church. "Furthermore, all the best democracies have managed to preserve their monarchies, like Denmark, the United Kingdom, Holland, Sweden." What about France, which guillotined Louis XVI? "Ahhh! For every rule... there is an exception!"

Mikhalkov's views of the old regime lead him to burlesque pro-

nouncements, passionately argued. "Democracy is not going to work in Russia," he says flintily. "I have no faith in it. The problem of democracy reminds me of when Gorbachev visited Sweden during the *glasnost* period. He saw the ample housing and social services, stores full of goods, comfort and cleanliness. Back in Moscow, Gorbachev said, 'We should have more Swedish-style socialism in the Soviet Union.' To which I reply: there aren't enough Swedes in Russia!"

The hotel room is filling up with piles of nationalism, and inevitably the Revolution is tossed on the heap. "In 1918, the Bolsheviks put to death the czar and his family, without a trial. There was no transfer of power. Because of this, every subsequent Moscow government has been illegal." The windup gives way to the pitch. "Therefore, I believe the Yeltsin government should find a descendant of the Romanov family and negotiate a formal state transfer of power. That would give us a legitimate new start."

Whether this suggestion has been put to debate in the Kremlin is unclear, although a czarist pretender and other Romanovs can in fact be found in France. But it may have to wait until the end of Mikhalkov's globe-trotting promotion trip. The director steps into the next room to take a call from his distributor, and the new panty-hose ethic rears its shimmering head. His voice is overheard saying: "To reimburse my plane fare and expenses, I would prefer cash." ■

CHRIS BUCK