

Blu-Ray Review: 'Anton Chekhov's The Duel' Does Justice to Source Material

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on May 27, 2011 - 3:36pm

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CHICAGO – I suspect there is a segment of the moviegoing population that will take one look at the title, “Anton Chekhov’s The Duel,” and flee in the other direction, most likely into “The Hangover Part II.” Chekhov is the sort of literary genius whose work is quoted by writers aiming to prove their own level of intellectualism. Yet his work is too good to be merely confined in art houses.

Israeli director Dover Koshashvili has created what is easily the most accessible cinematic adaptation of Chekhov to date. It’s perched delicately on the razor’s edge between wrenching drama and deadpan comedy, allowing several sequences to simultaneously succeed as both. There isn’t a stilted or inauthentic moment in the picture, evoking memories of the best Merchant Ivory productions, particularly 1985’s “A Room with a View.”



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Like Koshashvili’s acclaimed 2001 drama, “Late Marriage,” Chekhov’s 1891 short story, “The Duel,” centers on a man whose illicit lover affair is frowned upon by local customs. But unlike Zaza, the lovesick son of Jewish immigrants in “Marriage,” who avoids an arranged union while conducting an ill-advised affair with a divorcée, the lead character in “Duel” could hardly be considered a romantic. Far from it, in fact. As the picture opens, Laevsky (Andrew Scott) finds himself in a self-made trap. The ailing husband of his mistress, Nadia (Fiona Glascott), has finally died. Unfortunately, Laevsky has come to the realization that he is no longer in love with the gorgeous yet rather vacant woman.

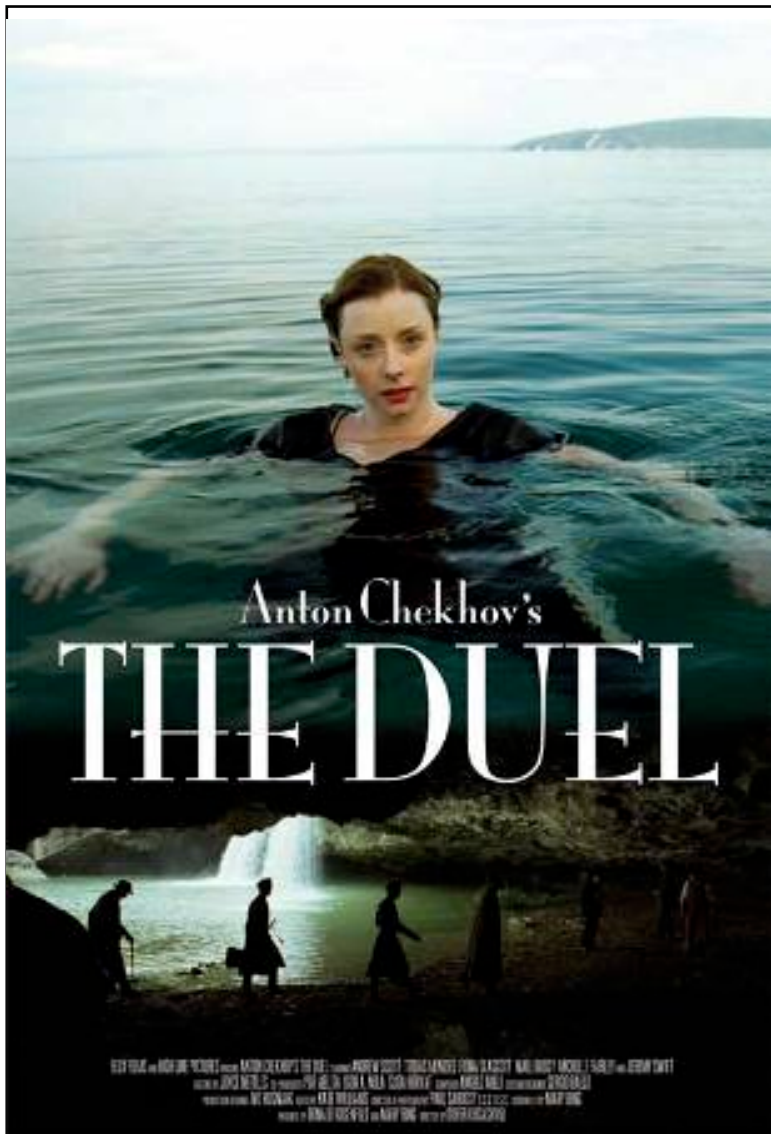
There appears to be little beneath their hormonal attraction, which rises to the surface only behind closed doors. Two sexually charged scenes occur between the couple—one is genuinely erotic, the other is an attempted rape. Laevsky’s unrealized dreams of a better life, coupled with his own listless inaction, have caused him to become wholly incapable of determining what he wants out of life. Thus, his worldview has become one of impermanence and decay, clashing with the moral certitude of self-righteous zoologist and increasingly perturbed neighbor, Von Koren (Tobias Menzies).



Fiona Glascott stars in Dover Koshashvili's production of Anton Chekhov's The Duel.

Photo credit: Music Box Films Home Entertainment

The claustrophobic air of judgment hanging low over Laevsky in the crumbling seaside resort certainly assists in making him a touch more sympathetic. In the hands of another actor, Laevsky may have become flat-out insufferable, but Scott makes his agonized frustration ring a note of truth so palpable that it becomes eerily relatable. It’s a marvel of a performance from the Irish character actor, still best known to American audiences for his work in “Saving Private Ryan” and the unmissable HBO miniseries “John Adams.” His expressions of unease while regarding his porcelain-skinned, distressingly hollow lover are hugely funny and terribly tragic in about equal measure.



Anton Chekhov’s The Duel was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on May 24, 2011.

Photo credit: Music Box Films Home Entertainment

Another high point of the film occurs when the newly widowed Nadia is visited by her terminally concerned mother, played by Michelle Fairley (baring a striking resemblance to Joan Allen). Fairley makes the most of her big scene, unloading all of the thoughts about her daughter that she had kept bottled inside. Her comments sting, but Fairley nails the dark humor layered within the diatribe. Yet when the camera cuts back to Nadia’s wounded expression, Glascott resembles a broken china doll, and the image is heartbreaking.

Mary Bing’s expertly paced script condenses Chekhov’s words while retaining his spirit. Perhaps the picture’s one sizable flaw is its undercooked depiction of Von Koren, who was originally written as a fervent follower of Darwin. His belief in “survival of the fittest” is what ultimately motivates him to request a duel with the loafing Laevsky, who he considers a lower life form. This motivation is left somewhat muddled in the film version, which ends up dulling the bite of the climactic sequence. Menzies does a fine job in the role, but he never quite conveys the obsessive drive that would lead him to make such a rash decision.

Of course, Chekhov’s world is one governed by irony, where supposed civility masks the most primitive of urges. It’s a tricky task to navigate through the waters of Chekhov, mining the dramatic in the absurd and vice versa. Koshashvili has not only done it well, but made it look effortless. This picture is as purely entertaining as any commercial commodity currently playing in mainstream multiplexes. One does not need an exhaustive knowledge of Chekhov to reap this film’s considerable rewards.

“Anton Chekhov’s The Duel” is presented in ravishing 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), and contains no subtitles or special features.

‘Anton Chekhov’s The Duel’ is released by Music Box Films Home Entertainment and stars Andrew Scott, Fiona Glascott, Tobias Menzies, Niall Buggy, Nicholas Rowe, Michelle Fairley and Jeremy Swift. It was written by Mary Bing and directed by Dover Koshashvili. It was released on May 24, 2011. It is not rated.



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