The opening screen of Igor Grabovsky’s Katusha (2008) declares that ‘the events and characters portrayed in this film do not represent the entire historical truth’. While disclaimers such as this are hardly rare in films that are even vaguely grounded in historical fact, in the case of Katusha it implies that there may be a far more interesting story to be told than that which is about to unfold on the screen. While the very little critical attention the film received was not exactly praise, the scraps of information that have surfaced about the film’s production suggest that this is one of the most interesting Australian Lost in La Mancha (Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe, 2002) as yet untold. For even the most generous viewer, it is frankly difficult to avoid the fact that the nuts-and-bolts film-making mechanics are far from their most coherent in Katusha. It is clunky in a way that even the subjectivities of mainstream taste cannot deny, and this formal and narrative haphazardness steer it directly towards the paracinematic much more than its intended highbrow goal. Katusha may deserve a place in the Australian cult film canon, but for reasons that may not thrill its creators.

If suffering for your art reflects your dedication to a project, Grabovsky, who suffered no less than three heart attacks during the film’s production, certainly proved his commitment. But by the end of shooting, the atmosphere was far from victorious, as he writes in the press kit. It was Autumn 2003, when the first draft of the script was completed. Three years later, at forty-three minutes past midnight, we were standing in the bush ninety kilometres from Sydney after filming the last scene. No joyful sensation, … [no] anticipated festive mood, not even a sense of relief. I hope these feelings will come later.

If that hope was based on critical accolades, reviews such as those by David Stratton must have provided a profound blow, with the Auscinema elder dismissing it as ‘a bit underwhelming … more like a DVD release than a cinema feature’.¹ While it would be an erroneous fantasy to suggest that Katusha deserves a place anywhere even near a list of great Australian films, there is a certain irony that its remarkable production history marks it as one of the more interesting ‘Aussie battler’ stories the local industry has offered. Katusha the film may not be that memorable, but ‘The Making of Katusha’, if correctly executed, could give Not Quite Hollywood (Mark Hartley, 2008) a run for its money in terms of amazing tales of Australian cinematic underdogs.

The film is set in the Ural region of Russia in 1943, as a team of German soldiers are deployed to sabotage a secret Russian military base that produces the rocket launcher Katusha. When Russian intelligence discovers this mission they send Captain Greenhoff (Peter Haleluka) and two women soldiers to intercept the Germans, but Greenhoff’s identity is itself ambiguous. The title of the film suggests that this is the film’s intended central gist, but the confusing and overstuffed script make it difficult to extract the narrative punch of this plot from myriad, seemingly random subplots. Despite having seen the film numerous times and painstakingly analysed the official plot synopsis, a clear narrative focus still remains elusive. What results is a starkly reduced spectatorial care factor: when key characters die it is difficult to remember who they are, let alone to feasibly justify an expense of emotional energy on mourning their demise. This renders the film’s power-ballad-driven conclusion both awkward and a little corny, leaving even the most dedicated viewer somewhat bewildered.

While the film’s promotional material hardly admits to this narrative chaos, it does go to some length to explain the production hardships that influenced the shift from what the filmmakers originally intended to the strikingly different end product. According
to them, the original script differed substantially from the final version not only because the original was to be shot predominantly overseas, but also because the story itself was more complex, sophisticated and intricate. The press kit describes a shift from this commercial epic towards what it calls an ‘arthouse movie with a highly commercial storyline’. This immediately raises questions of definition: what do the filmmakers believe ‘arthouse’ to be? Although the artifice is exposed, this seems to be the result of the type of manic budgetary issues that so often mark paracinematic texts, rather than any concrete art film aspirations as such. Surely making a film on a shoestring does not automatically result in an ‘arthouse’ film.

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Regardless, with no government funding at any level, the Katusha story is remarkable in that it is a truly independent product. Not only did Grabovsky write, direct and produce the film, and compose the soundtrack, but he also formed the distribution company IG Distribution Pty Ltd that succeeded in winning the film a limited cinema release. For this alone, kudos is deserved – if only for establishing just how independent an Australian independent feature film can be.

Taking four years in total to make, including nineteen months of principal photography, the Katusha project suffered what the promotional material describes as a ‘significant scaling down’. Although the filmmakers had planned to shoot about a quarter of the film in Australia and the rest
there is little doubt that considerable effort is the use of accents in the film. Again, Perhaps the most striking example of this thing different entirely.

In the twentieth century, this all pales next to the pervasive weak-ness of other significant elements. If there is a poignant or meaningful irony here, its purpose is buried so deeply beneath layers of confusing plot and a cacophony of weak accents that its impact is almost totally obliterated.

Russian-born Grabovsky’s extensive background in theatre becomes clear when looking at the production of Katusha. Many actors commented on the gruelling four-and-a-half-month audition process, and when it became apparent that the whole film would need to be shot in Australia, Grabovsky could focus more on the performance aspects of the film. Rehearsals appear to have been no less vigilant, with the lead cast splitting their preparations between working on their roles and undertaking a Russian military-style boot camp. While the actors involved all praised the director’s in-depth, nit-picky attention to even the smallest detail of their performance, the fact remains that while on stage this may have had a direct pay-off in terms of verisimilitude, very little of this transfers convincingly to screen. The boot camp regime may have prepped the actors psychologically for understanding their roles, but in the training scene early in the film, for example, this all pales next to the anachronistic, Carry On-esque upskirt shot as sassy nurses learn how to use their guns. Grabovsky worked hard, there is no doubt. But working smart is something different entirely.

Perhaps the most striking example of this is the use of accents in the film. Again, there is little doubt that considerable effort had been expended upon learning and tweaking each actor’s Russian accent. But while this may have been completely convincing on stage, on screen the familiar Australian tones blended with these put-on Euro accents just sound kind of weird to an Australian spectator. It begs the question: did the actors really need to use accents at all? Considering the overt ‘Australian-ness’ of the countryside, disbelief could have been suspended more logically (and perhaps more meaningfully) with confident Australian accents than it was with the varying success of these clearly faux-accents. While some accents are unproblematic (Greg Eccleston deserves some recognition here), Sarah Chalmers’ Katya verges more closely on clear faux-accents. While some accents are unproblematic (Greg Eccleston deserves some recognition here), Sarah Chalmers’ Katya verges more closely on what can only be described as a xenopho-bic bogan pastiche. Most troublesome is Peter Haelulu’s accent – while the plot acknowledges in a late twist that his character is Australian (hence justifying the distinct Australian aspect of his accent), this explanation arrives so late in the film that his legitimacy has been significantly decimated by what sounds closer to Elliot Goblet as a Bond villain than a convincing Russian-based expat.

Aspects such as these do not completely detract from some of the smaller, more interesting and well-played subplots. The ongoing sexual abuse of Irina Orlova (Sarah Robinson) by Eccleston’s Major Vadim Panchenko escalates into a harrowing rape scene, and stretches the scenario’s melodramatic Manichaeism to its fullest extent as she is violated under the watchful eye of a framed portrait of Stalin. While the politics of this mise en scène are far from subtle, the unflinching evilness of Eccleston’s character balances well with the quiet desperation of Robinson’s victim (both of these performances in particular give the film much needed gravitas). But the sudden, speedy haste with which Vadim is punished at the film’s conclusion does not adequately balance his villainy – less time on other, weaker plot points may have substantially strengthened this interesting but comparatively under-explored plotline. There are also some formal strengths that deserve praise – the folksy, accordion moments of the soundtrack create a rich Russian ambience where the accents fail. Even more striking is the confident digital camera work of the director of photography, Mark Newnham: his use of colour, framing and composition are consistent from the film’s opening to its otherwise chaotic, montage-happy conclusion.

That there are elements of Katusha that seem to hold water less than others imply that the director may have simply taken on too much himself: from an outside perspective, it could be read that Grabovsky’s health issues suggest that he may have benefited from sharing the workload a little more. While some aspects of the soundtrack were effective, the bombastic power ballad that appears in the film’s concluding moments does nothing to detract from what was originally intended as a commercial war-era epic.

While Grabovsky’s passion and dedication to the project cannot be denied, Katusha raises far more questions than it answers. Is a 100 per cent self-funded feature such as this over-ambitious by nature? Can Grabovsky’s dominance of so many aspects of the filmmaking process make this project anything less than a failed vanity project? Is it unethical to dismiss such a film in the face of its flaws when it provides such fascinating insight into the entire process of filmmaking (and distribution) in Australia? All of these questions mark Katusha as a definite source of paracinematic inter- est. Hesitantly, it is therefore difficult to avoid the following conclusion: there may just exist a sophisticated, fiercely intel- ligent cult audience for Katusha, but these viewers – lovers of trash, lovers of bad film, lovers of paracinematic excess and lovers of the joyfully exposed diegésis – are dramatically different from the filmmakers’ intended mainstream demographic. On final analysis, this may be the only audi- ence capable of appreciating Katusha for what it actually is, rather than for what it so desperately wanted to be.

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Endnotes