

LIQUID SKY

Soviet born director Slava Tsukerman exposes the fascinating and thriving sub-cultures of New York in his latest film.

By RANDY CANTERA

Not all outer space beings want to conquer our world. Some are just looking to score a bit of smack.

The invisible aliens in question, seeking the coveted drug heroin, descend upon New York City in their flying saucer and attach themselves to a female unit named Mar-



garet. This fashion model, with her New Wave clothing and lifestyle, is a good choice for the aliens because heroin is a popular stimulant among her circle of peers.

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But, we soon learn these alien junkies hunger for another type of high—a chemical produced by the brain during orgasm. Once again, Margaret proves to be a dependable supplier as she, through her radiant, slightly emaciated and androgynous appearance, attracts a steady number of sexually-

motivated suitors of both genders.

A funny thing, however, happens to these lady and gentleman callers when they are feeling the earth move. Without warning, they evaporate. And quite colorfully at that, with an accompanying orange-blue-green shaded explosion. Margaret revels in the discovery of her ability, and with a spirit of vengeance, starts to liquidate all her lovers and assailants.

This most touching tale is the premise of *Liquid Sky*, a film that combines the fantasy of science fiction with the smutty decadence of today's underground youth movements. Since its release early last year, *Liquid Sky* has made an impact on reviewers and audiences not seen since the days of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. Blaring trumpets disguised as superlatives, including "dazzling," "brilliantly original" and "innovative and imaginative," have emerged from such diverse newspapers and magazines as the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.

Such lavish praise is usually directed towards state-of-the-pap Hollywood merchandise or the rare quality film, and not towards a low-budget (\$500,000) film flaunting drug-drenched, fashion-conscious androgynes who indulge in illicit sex.

"I wasn't surprised by the reaction," *Liquid Sky* director Slava Tsukerman says with a laugh in a telephone interview from his home in New York City.

"First of all, I think every filmmaker makes film to be successful. Also, in a sense, it was my own naivete that made me think it would be successful. I didn't know that certain subjects made something an underground film. And I still don't understand it. For instance, many films are made about criminals. Nobody would call them criminal films, right?"

Born in Moscow in 1939, Tsukerman always had a fascination with cinema. He recalls making his first movie at the age of 8.

Despite the unavailability of sophisticated equipment, he continued producing amateur movies which he says were the only ones made outside of the state-controlled film industry. His efforts were eventually recognized and rewarded in 1961 when he won first prize in the Festival of Amateur Films.

That same year, he won a prize in Montreal. But Tsukerman says he has no idea what the award was since "they (the government) never showed it to me. I read about it in the newspaper."

This recognition eventually enabled him to join the Soviet Film Institute. He says his previous education as a civil engineer would disqualify him as a candidate because a person is not allowed to

have two professions in the Soviet Union.

"They permitted it because they figured we could make instructional films, so they could exploit my knowledge."

Tsukerman says student filmmakers at the Institute had to respect ideological borders. "You could more or less do what you wanted to do . . . well, not exactly. They told you if you couldn't do something."

Tsukerman eventually emigrated from the Soviet Union. It was a matter of wanting more artistic freedom and after spending some time in Israel, arrived in the United States in 1976. No less than four attempted film projects were scrapped before the idea for *Liquid Sky* germinated.

"I had this strategy where if I couldn't raise enough money for a film, I would start a new one with a lower budget." The concept was inspired by a screenplay his wife, Mima Vkerova, was writing that dealt with the problems of a relationship between a man and a woman. "She invited me to help her write it. So every night we would be talking about the problems that affected relationships, and then this idea for *Liquid Sky* occurred to me."

Tsukerman says his attraction to social outcasts and artists in New York influenced the film's makeup. "I've always liked films that were about the outer fringes of civilization. My opinion is if you want to show the contradictions of a civilization, you should go to the biggest city and see the night life."

When Tsukerman wandered through New York's bohemia he met many people who later became part of *Liquid Sky's* cast.

Among Tsukerman's new acquaintances was Ann Carlisle who, with her androgynous appearance and gripping presence, has won accolades for her performance as Margaret. In one scene, she plays both a man (Jimmy) and a woman whose brief encounters lead to their carnal coupling. Carlisle's similarity to a character Tsukerman had in mind, along with her artistic inventiveness, led him not only to cast her as the lead, but also to invite her to help him and Vkerova write the script.

"At that time, she was a New Wave fashion model and a visual artist. She had recently made her own film, which she wrote, directed and played in, which I thought was very good. Then when I had this idea about a relationship between a New Wave model and aliens, there was no doubt in my mind who could play the woman. And she proves it right up there on the screen."

Although many people who go see *Liquid Sky* are enticed by the prospect of watching trendy narciss-

sists living out their Sid Vicious fantasies, there is a message under the affections, Tsukerman says. "I've tried to show as full a picture as possible of the main problems of our civilization." These include the troubled relationships between the sexes and between classes.

"These New Wave people either consciously or unconsciously have tried to make, from their lives, a performance that shows all the contradictions of modern civilization. Today's people are really lost about social and sexual roles."

But Tsukerman does not find this situation, especially the changing sex roles, discouraging. "I don't approach things in that way. What's progress is progress, what's happening is happening. We can't go back. So I don't know what's good or what's bad. I think my role is not to judge, but to show the problems as they are, and make people think about them."

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