

Tulpan

Germany / Kazakhstan / Russia

/ Poland / Italy / Switzerland

Cert 12A 2008 102 min

Credits

Director	Sergey Dvortsevoy
Screenplay	Sergey Dvortsevoy Gennady Ostrovski
Cinematography	Jola Dylewska
Editors	Isabel Meier Petar Markovic Sergey Dvortsevoy
Production Design	Roger Martin
Music	Peter Braker

Cast

Askhat Kuchinchirekov	Asa
Samal Yeslyamov	Samal, Asa's sister
Ondasyn Besikbasov	Ondas, Samal's husband
Tulepbergen Baisakalov	Boni
Bereke Turganbayev	Beke
Nurzhigit Zhapabayev	Nuka
Mahabbat Turganbayev	Maha
Amangeldi Nurzhanbayev	Tulpan's father
Tazhyban Khalykulova	Tulpan's mother

Synopsis

The Betpak-Dala ('Hunger Steppe'), Kazakhstan.

Freshly discharged from service in the Pacific Fleet, Asa is living with his sister Samal, her shepherd husband Ondas and their three young children; he dreams of becoming a shepherd himself and having his own yurt, but needs to marry first. Ondas introduces him to the parents of Tulpan, the only eligible girl within reach, but the unseen girl rejects him on the grounds that his ears are too big. Ondas (who despises Asa and doubts that he will ever make a shepherd) worries when several lambs are stillborn and calls in a vet, who says that the sheep are malnourished. They return to bargain with Tulpan's parents, and Asa tries (but fails) to have a conversation with Tulpan herself. After another row about Ondas' bossiness, Asa determines to leave the plain. But as he stomps off he finds a sheep in labour and helps it to give birth to a live lamb. Fired with enthusiasm, he races back to Tulpan's family - only to find that the girl has left. Asa says his goodbyes to his sister, nephews and niece and leaves with Boni, the local driver/odd-job man, to look for a new future. But Asa changes his mind and returns to catch up with his in-laws as they set off in search of more fertile land.

Sight & Sound, Dec 2009.



Review

Tulpan is an amazing film. It shows such an unfamiliar world, it might as well be Mars. This is a place where the horizon is a straight line against the sky in every direction. There are no landmarks, no signs, no roads. No vegetation grows much more than a foot or two. It is dry, dusty, cold and windy, and nothing seems to be green. This is the world *Tulpan* takes place in, and I can think of only one other story that would feel at home there: "Waiting for Godot."

Yet the people love it. They are yurt dwellers in Kazakhstan, the largest landlocked nation on Earth. They live on what is named in the credits as the Hungersteppe and raise sheep. We meet a young sailor named Asa, discharged from the Russian navy, who has come here to live with his sister Samal, her husband, Ondas, and their children. As the story opens, Asa, Ondas and his buddy Boni are negotiating with a poker-faced man and his hostile wife for the hand of their daughter, Tulpan ("Tulip"). Asa enralls them with tales of the seahorse and octopus. They offer 10 sheep and a chandelier. It is to no avail; Tulpan, peeking through the doorway curtains, thinks that Asa's ears are too big. There is not one single other potential bride in the district, and how is a man to live here without a wife?

These people are quite familiar with what we call civilization. Their children have been deserting to the cities for years. They do not have electricity, and water must be trucked in. I assume they eat a lot of mutton, and there is a man with an ungainly Jeep-like vehicle who comes around selling cucumbers, and, I hope, other vegetables. They have a battery-powered radio, which one of the boys listens to eagerly, racing into the yard to announce: "Breaking news! Earthquake in Japan! Seven on the Richter scale!" They are alarmed that many baby lambs are stillborn. They call out the vet, whose teeth do a thing with his cigarette that it is difficult to describe. He travels with a sick baby camel in his motorcycle sidecar. His diagnosis is simple and almost obvious. Asa eventually argues with his task-master brother-in-law and walks away from the farm. This consists of disappearing into the void; how do people avoid getting lost here? When Ondas scans the horizon with his binoculars, everything looks the same.

There is humour, some of it involving the cucumber salesman, and tenderness, as when Samal sings a bedtime lullaby to her tired husband and their children. There's stark reality in the difficult birth of a lamb that manages to survive. A shot, long held, of Samal's face, tells us everything we can ever hope to know about her situation. The film's closing shot is epic in its meaning and astonishing in its difficulty.

Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun Times, June 2009