

Yugoslavian blues

by Hillel Tryster

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That's How Steel Was Tempered, which in Hebrew benefits from a snappier title that roughly translates as Burning Steel, is a meandering piece of Yugoslavian whimsy that seems about as disciplined as its main character.

The latter, a steel-worker called Leo, works when he has to, eats and drinks when he can, thinks nothing of bringing girls home when his wife is out, or leading an attack on his foreman's home to regain that same wife. No one in the film appears to have any more scruples than Leo; whatever one can get away with is what one deserves to have. As one of the lines of dialogue has it: "Nowadays only crooks can get ahead."

Corruption is not only widespread, but entirely taken for granted. When a group of workers approaches the manager's car to get a first-aid kit for an injured comrade, it is instantly assumed that the revolution has come and the bosses activate a clumsily-prepared escape plan.

Hardly any of the incidents described here can be said to constitute plot, and most of the film functions as an exposition of the immorality of society's upper echelons. This contrasts unfavorably with the amorality of the laborers, who are interested only in satisfying their immediate desires and lusts.

And if sympathy must go to any of the largely caricatured cast, it may as well be the happy-go-lucky workers. It is they who captivate in the film's first shots, using the red hot foundry equipment to grill chickens and fry eggs. Nor can a picture that periodically provides spirited imitation Louis Armstrong scat renditions be all bad.

Director Zelimir Zilnik (who coscripted) made That's How Steel Was Tempered in 1988, and it might correctly be assumed that on the surface the film has little relevance to a contemporary Israeli audience. Much of the obvious comedy is heavy-handed, but beneath it all is a current of serious political criticism.

Deprivation of freedom can under no circumstances be considered

a good thing, but when it passes beyond a certain stage and there seems to be nothing left to lose, logic is turned on its head. When the whole country is a prison, where can they send you when you misbehave?

That's How Steel Was Tempered gives this concept a clever twist. Early on, the disgruntled management, fed up with its unruly employees, demonstrates a clear preference for labor brought in under guard from the local penitentiary. When Leo finally breaks and actually gives the bosses a taste of what they've been dreading, the threat of prison hasn't the slightest effect on him. He notes: "I'd be sentenced back here anyway."