

Queendom, directed by Agniia Galdanova, produced by Agniia Galdanova and Igor Myakotin (2023, France/USA). 1 h. 38 min. Russian with English subtitles.

Early on in Agniia Galdanova's new documentary film, *Queendom*, one of the supporting characters says, "Drag from the beginning has been political ... It draws attention to important problems." In a sense, *Queendom* presents a case study of drag performance as politics in Putin's Russia on the eve of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Largely observational in style, *Queendom* follows the life of the protagonist, Jenna Marvin, a twenty-two-year-old Russian from Magadan attending beauty school in Moscow. Marvin, who goes by Gena (short for Gennady) at the beginning of the film, expresses herself in spectacular ways and struggles to comprehend the hostile reaction her looks provoke in public spaces, especially in the provinces. In Magadan, a neighbor harasses her verbally and physically on the street ("You're a man! Act like one"); security guards at a shopping center eject her from the premises ("There are children and the elderly here. You can't be here dressed like that"). In Moscow, she courts attention to create content for her social media accounts and as a means of registering political dissent, notably in support of Alexei Navalny and against the war in Ukraine. Marvin's drag excursions into city streets, parks, stores, and public transit reveal an essential point *Queendom* makes as a documentary: much as the political realities determine this young person's journey of self-discovery, these realities—casual homophobia and police brutality chief among them—are secondary to the pursuit of creative freedom that this film captures so impressively.

Queendom is certainly about the dangers of doing drag and being queer in Putin's Russia. Marvin's insistence on the validity of her point of view as a citizen and an artist strains her relationship with the grandparents who raised her, gets her expelled from school, lands her in police detention, and ultimately forces her into exile. Yet the questions of visibility and violence that *Queendom* raises get subsumed into the larger inquiry about creating art and about the paradoxically tenuous relationship between art and life. In the visually stunning opening sequence, Marvin strikes a series of poses on a frozen beach for the smartphone camera handled by her friend. Marvin resembles a shard of ice sticking out of the winter seascape, wearing all-white makeup, lingerie, and a tulle ruffled collar, cream-colored corset, and a pair of elbow-length black gloves and shiny platform boots on treacherously high heels. She has no hair; her head is shaved and covered in white makeup inspired by Pierrot. She looks elemental, one with the glistening surface of the sea and the icy mountains on the horizon. It is her friend who looks out of place: she belongs to the world of humans who wear sensible shoes and practical clothes. Marvin's presence in this world of conventions, rules, and norms undercuts their authority and throws into relief the arbitrariness of what is deemed common sense.

Marvin's drag performance practice has very little in common with drag as female impersonation and the fast-paced, deliberately crude banter exemplified in Russia by Zaza Napoli. Marvin calls her drag persona an "essence" (*сущность*), which is perhaps

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an embodiment of her continuing aesthetic experiment. Her haunting costumes verge on the surreal and resemble conceptual artworks. Clad in them, she is unstoppable, personifying a liminal being. Marvin finds success as a model and a performer online and offline, but she is determined to walk not only in fashion shows but also in the streets, to protest the disappearance of freedoms. Visually striking without fail, the scenes of Marvin's encounters with the police are shot so skillfully as to seem almost staged. In one shot, Marvin in drag faces a policeman who asks her to leave the area around a park for her own safety. (Marvin had wanted to walk beside veteran paratroopers on the Day of Airborne Forces, which they infamously celebrate with very little restraint in cities across Russia.) As the policeman and the drag performer with an elaborate headpiece stare at each other, we see a giant billboard in the background advertising a mobile phone company with the slogan "Dreams of Freedom." The accidental *mise-en-scène* visualizes the fraught mis/communication between the state and its citizens as consumerism substitutes for civil rights.

The narrative texture of *Queendom* incorporates the familiar tropes of Russian repression into a moving personal story. An hour and a half of the film's running time covers two years of Marvin's life between Magadan and Moscow. The core of the film is devoted to Marvin's complicated but loving relationship with her grandparents. Her grandmother is steadfast in her support. The grandfather is clearly caring, but he channels and enforces societal demands for conventional success and conformity. To them, Jenna is Gena. During the shooting of the film, Marvin used male pronouns, though there is one moment in the film when her friends in Magadan use female pronouns in addressing her (this detail gets lost in English subtitles). Marvin's queerness is expressed mostly through drag performances, except in the film's final scenes. Following a stressfully suspenseful sequence of Marvin's frantic search for ways to escape from Russia after Russia invades Ukraine, Jenna makes her way to Paris. She is wearing a skirt and no makeup, seemingly at peace. In the closing sequence, Marvin walks on a street in nothing but underwear, covered in red paint head to toe. Away from Russia, she remains a Russian, a representative of a country waging a bloody war on its neighbor. Parisian streets are empty, however, and the occasional passersby are indifferent. Marvin is left one-on-one with the camera, and this marks the beginning of her life as an exile.

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