

The Star with No Name

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Did you know Romania has a railway line between Bucharest and Sinaia, a mountain resort popular with high society thanks to its gambling and hotel scene? An express train hurriedly runs from its point of departure to its destination. Passengers on the train are either excited to get a lucky gambling streak at a casino or return to business as usual. Interestingly, none of the people on board would know a small provincial town on the railway. But we also must ask ourselves, how would they know? It's not like the train ever bothers to stop there. However, for the townspeople, the sight of the never-halting passing express is an occasion to get together at the train station and socialize. Marvel at the jewelry of the madam from the second car and the elegant hat of the lady from the seventh car. Even the lingering scent of French perfume is to be celebrated. Please do mind; every passing train has never slowed for even an iota down. Fatefully, the seemingly tranquil life of the town is severely disturbed when a passenger is forced off the train at the station because they tried to pay for the ticket with casino chips, which expectedly were not accepted by the conductor.

The passenger's name is Mona, a member of the high society; bored with her life spent in casinos and fancy hotels, she runs away from Sinaia. She encounters Miroiu, the naïve astronomy teacher at the town's gymnasium, with whom she spends the lovely night. Mona discovers the wonders of a new life of love and the

simple pleasures of a provincial lifestyle. We witness the possibility of a life of fulfillment, a happy life, and even prospects of a loving marriage. However, no star deviates from its path. Social obligations of their ordained destiny put an end to the utopian dream, which was so short-lived. It is a story of love, the kind of love which knowing no bounds nor laws, violently sparks in a single instant yet would remain untested and unlived. This paper will compare the original play from 1944 by Mihail Sebastian, *The Star with no Name*, and the Soviet film adaptation directed by Mikhail Kozakov, *Nameless Star*. The primary purpose of our work will be to concentrate on changes brought by the adaptation, how they differ, and what shifts we can observe both stylistically and narratively. I haven't found any research on comparative analysis of those two versions; therefore, our work from here and on will be unique.

Firstly, the film adaptation changes multiple scenes from its source and adds new ones and new characters instead. Even with those changes enacted, I would like to preface that the movie stays incredibly faithful to the original play and the emotional impact. Mikhail Kozakov directed *Nameless Star* almost forty-five years after the initial publication of *The Star with no Name* by Mihail Sebastian. The setting in both versions is a provincial town in Romania, sometime in the 1930s. It's a small and quiet town with around eight thousand residents. The town is so restricted that everyone knows each other, their daily schedule, every intrigue and little drama happening in their lives, and all the neighbors in a multiple-block radius. Life is simple. The differences start here.

The play opens with its first scene of the first act sometime in the evening at the small provincial train station. The small office of the stationmaster, which is also the ticket office, is used as the setting in the scene. We observe a couple of interactions between the stationmaster and peasants trying to get train tickets. All of it is accompanied by absurd uptightness and bureaucracy of the train station. The hilarious story shows a peasant coming to buy a ticket, only to get refused by the stationmaster, who later walks a couple of feet to open the other window; and refuses the peasant yet again, because now the ticket office is closed, only to be open half an hour before the arrival of the train. This bit, in the beginning, works as a tone-setter, which amplifies the ridiculous rules of the small train station, mainly because there is nothing else to do nor nothing else to exert power on. A healthy amount of corruption and embezzlement is demonstrated by the stationmaster forcefully selling another peasant a dubiously expensive train ticket because his wife needed five hundred lei to go to the market. Stationmaster Ipistat is the embodiment of these vices. He uses the train station ticket office cash flow directly into his pocket. Mihail Sebastian wishes to engage us with a satirical play on provincial narrow-mindedness and the cowardly way that many municipal institutions are run. As readers, we are immediately immersed in the reality of what it must have felt like to be alive in the small Romania of that era. This is a powerful opening, which is indicative of the play's rich, some would even call, distinctly Chekhovian atmosphere.¹

¹ Oana Sanziana Marian, *Mihail Sebastian's "The Accident"* published by "Words without Borders," June 2011

However, the film opens a little bit differently than its source material. We start with a lovely scene of Marin Miroiu taking a stroll across the town's streets with the narrator describing the setting and period of all the events that occurred; while also giving us, the viewers, an excellent tour of all the town's landmarks, such as the vital train station, Pascu's convenience store, Chiroiu's tax office, jail, and of course the gymnasium where Miroiu teaches. He walks into the school building, and now we are in a scene of him teaching about the Solar System and the Sun. It is, of course, not the largest nor the brightest star, yet it gives us life. Though this introduction differs from the play, it leaves off the same aura of the setting we are about to get closely acquainted with. Miroiu is presented as a caring teacher, maybe even naïve and romantic, due to some of his remarks regarding the astronomy topics he teaches in class. The play focused on the absurdity and corrupt nature of the small town; the film decided to turn its attention to its provinciality. When a student in the classroom, Zamfirescu, was quizzed over the material, she dutifully said that Jupiter is Moon's satellite, only to show how genuinely unsophisticated this small town is. At least it has a beloved train station, where the diesel-electric train passes by and never stops.

After the minor crime of coercing a peasant to buy a needless and expensive ticket, we are to meet the crucial characters of the play. Marin comes to the train station to inquire about Mr. Pascu, who is delivering a book from Bucharest. Of course, we find that the clock on the platform, instead of working correctly, is

constantly adjusted with the arrivals of trains. When number 747 arrives from Campina, it's eight o'clock. When the 63 and 97 cross paths, it's five past 12. Wall clocks: you can never trust these things. Marin came too early, as his delivery was scheduled for the evening. Upon hearing so, he promptly leaves, promising to come back later. Promptly, we are graciously introduced to Miss Cucu, or the "local upholder of justice and all the things that are proper." When Marin comes back, she scolds Zamfirescu for showing up at the station, threatening to expel her, which seems to be the only school. Our initial acquaintance with Zamfirescu differs from the film's school scene to show how strict Miss Cucu is about the perverted train station and its corrupting force on the students. Sending the crying student off their way, the train whistles get louder; Mr. Pascu arrives with the commuter train.

The adaptation took their liberty with this scene by giving it more life and colors than the play. The first significant deviation is how crowded the train station is compared to the play. New characters are introduced to the story that were not present in the play, like the stationmaster's wife. In the play's scene, the only people at the station are the stationmaster; his assistant, Ichim; Marin Miroiu; Miss Cucu; and poor Zamfirescu. The movie shows at least a couple dozen townsfolk enjoying a lovely day on the station, drinking together, and schmoozing. Ladies are in their best Sunday dresses, all men wearing full suits. For a good reason, the current setting is entirely different from the source to show how important this place is to the people. This little train station, where no trains of any importance make a stop, is this

provincial town's lifeblood; it is the source of luxury and some connection to an urban lifestyle. The moment an announcement is made about an “arriving” electro-diesel train, every person on the platform immediately jumps up to witness another reality that is about to pass them by without a single thought of slowing down. Where the play showed the absurdity of the town through its corrupt nature, the film accomplishes this, and even more through the scene of townspeople treating the train station as the most luxurious establishment, where one could mingle and enjoy the scent of a lady’s perfume from the fifth cart. During this whole scene, we get a similar picture of Marin coming to the train station to inquire about Mr. Pascu’s arrival, only to come back at a later time; and of Miss Cucu reprimanding Zamfirescu, whom we already know, for coming to the train station, even if they were strictly forbidden to do so. We are shown Marin’s house while waiting for the commuter train to arrive and confronting Miss Cucu about her narrow-mindedness and ignorance of any outside world and opportunities. In the film, his house looks very modest yet suitable for the times and environment that he is in.

From Mr. Pascu’s awaited arrival, the play and its adaptation follow a remarkably similar narrative, both in the setting and dialogues. Both versions have Marin finally receiving his expensive book, which will start a new scandal and become the talk of the town because of its cost and purpose. The only little comedic liberty taken by the film was to swap Miroiu’s book and the stationmaster's wife’s order. The sense of this little confusion was to further illustrate the cowardliness of the town’s

bureaucrats not only in the face of their responsibilities but also their wives and spouses. Mihail Sebastian succeeds at showing what a sad and tragic loop of misery and corruption many small-town functionaries are stuck in. After Marin is fully engrossed in researching his new book in the stationmaster's office, an unthinkable happens; the revered electro-diesel train has stopped. It never stops. A stranger is escorted out from the train by the conductor for attempting to pay for their ticket using Sinaia's casino chips. In her distress, the stranger, who we later learn to be Mona, is trying to kill herself by getting run over by a train; fortunately for her, the next train is only passing by at 11:35, which is ample time from now. Compared to the film, Mihail Sebastian's play comically demonstrates the stationmaster's spinelessness in his attempt to advise Mona against killing herself at their train station; and offering to buy her a ticket to the next stop instead where she could end her life in her way.

I watched the film in original Russian but read the play in English translation, as I cannot read Romanian, and no one in the world seems to possess a Russian copy of the play. While reading Mihail Sebastian's play and even with the friction caused by translation, I was fascinated by how faithful *Nameless Star* stays to its source material. This paper's focus is not on retelling the story's plot but on comparing the Soviet adaptation to its Romanian source. Because the film stays very close to its original text, let us explore small exciting details instead of going through everything that happens later in the story.

Firstly, the story's setting is set in the pre-World War II era. However, it is Wednesday in the film, and the entire town is at the cinema. From the scene of the playing cinema, we know they are screening the legendary German musical comedy film *The Woman of My Dreams* directed by Georg Jacoby. However, this musical was released in 1944, well into the war, which contradicts the time setting of the movie. These details might be an accidental error that breaks the event's continuity. They might have even been done on purpose. It is an exciting detail, nonetheless.

Secondly, Mona sings in the yard the following morning and picks flowers from the garden. Marin, in the play, rushes to the window, pleading with Mona to stop stinging, not because he doesn't like it, but because he is afraid that Chiroiu across the road and Atanasiu from the house with shrubbery will hear her. However, in the film's script, Marin Miroiu is much more liberal and less scared of the provincial scandals that will start with his name. The adaptation presents our main hero as a more open-minded and brave person to combat the town's prejudices and gossips. This is not to say that Mihail Sebastian presented Marin as a more cowardly person but merely more surprised at how his life has changed in a single night.

Thirdly, the adaptation adds a few new scenes that are not present in the play. When Miroiu leaves the house to get his paycheck from school and buy Mona a new dress, we see the same shot from the beginning of the movie when Marin walks through the town. However, instead of walking, he is giddily hopping across the

street to show his renewed state of mind. Another scene with Grig and the stationmaster driving through the town's roads shows how prestigious cars are.

Mihail Sebastian depicts the upper classes as leading empty life full of boredom. Mona and Grig come from a different society; it would be safer to say that they come from another world or planet. In Grig's world, the notion of love or happiness does not exist in their vocabulary. They are too busy for that; they are creatures of luxury from a world where money is easily gained and as easily spent. Marin and Mona's love story is a tragedy of how even with deep love transcending worldly and physical restrictions, they are incompatible with each other, as social order and tranquility need to be restored through the sacrifice of true love. Perhaps, an authentic life cannot exist in the same realm as one's social obligations and belonging.

Finally, thanks to the phenomenal acting of the film's main cast: Anastasiya Vertinskaya as Mona; Igor Kostolevsky as Marin; and Mikhail Kozakov as Grig, who is also the director, the play's writing received a masterfully executed and faithful to Mihail Sebastian's ideas adaptation, which transcends time and stays relevant even in our times. Even to this day, many still dispute whether Mona should have stayed and lived a provincial yet happy life with Miroiu. I observe that people who make such claims have missed the central idea Mihail Sebastian conveyed in his masterpiece.

No star deviates from its path.