

Chess Fever



Richard Reti (left) with the White pieces against F. D. Yates at Moscow 1925.



Carlos Torre (left) against Frank J. Marshall in an opening scene. Marshall won.



The protagonist of *Chess Fever* plays chess with himself even while he is dressing.



A chess shop, whose attraction proves irresistible to our hero.



The proprietor of the chess shop is more than a willing partner.

CHESS FEVER!

The Framingham Chess Club will present on Tuesday, June 5 at 8PM two celebrated chess movies, the 1925 Russian silent film, "Chess Fever", and the 1977 Canadian production, "The Great Chess Movie". Admission \$4. Don't miss this rare opportunity.

The following review of "Chess Fever" was excerpted from Frank Brady's series for Chess Life, "Chess in the Cinema":

The most important chess film of the silent era was a two-reel comedy called *Chess Fever*. It was made in Moscow in 1925, produced and directed by Vsevolod I. Pudovkin. *Chess Fever* is significant because it was the first film to deal exclusively with chess, because it "starred" the reigning world champion, José R. Capablanca, and because it was the first directorial effort of one of the greatest film directors ever to work in the Soviet Union: Pudovkin went on to create such classics as *Mother* (1926), *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), and *The Deserter* (1933). Pudovkin's films and theoretical contributions, like those of Sergei Eisenstein, have influenced filmmakers for generations.

The great Moscow International Tournament, with Lasker, Capablanca, Marshall, Bogolyubov, Reti, and others, was held in Moscow in 1925. At the time, Pudovkin was already engaged directing a highly serious and controversial film entitled *Mechanics of the Brain*, but because Ivan Pavlov, the psychologist who was to become famous for his experiments with dogs, insisted that the film not be made, production was halted. While the difficulties were being worked out, Pudovkin was asked to direct a film about chess.

Because of the tournament, the already avid chess players of Moscow had become virtually obsessed by the game. Instead of treating the chess theme with the seriousness he brought to *Mechanics of the Brain*, Pudovkin, perhaps for political reasons, treated the chess mania sweeping the city with humor and created a topical comedy to chronicle the event. Newsreel footage was combined with scripted camera work using professional actors. Capablanca, then world champion, was filmed going to and from the tournament, wearing a derby, talking and smiling ebulliently, and this footage, heavily edited, was eventually used in the film, giving the impression that he was playing a fairly active part. Actually, Capablanca did no real acting, although he enjoyed cooperating with Pudovkin and his crew. Despite his relatively brief appearance in the film, his role is significant, and because of his immense popularity with the Soviet public he was given star billing in the film's titles.

Chess Fever opens at the tournament itself. Almost every participant is filmed before and during play, with such players as Tartakower, Yates, Marshall, Torre, and Stahlberg preserved on celluloid. The spectators, thronging the grand ballroom of the Hotel Metropol, are filmed watching the games intently, copying down the moves, concerned only with the contests being played before them. We are told: "An epidemic of chess fever has struck the city."

The main character, played by actor Vladimir Fogel, typifies the Muscovite addicted to and obsessed by chess. A chess set is permanently set up in his room, and he constantly competes against himself, first playing the White side, then the Black, over and over again, game after game, in an almost manic way. His apartment looks a little like a chess club. Hundreds of chess

books line his shelves. His hat, sweater, tie, muffler, and socks are designed in a black-and-white chess board motif. So possessed is he with the game that he plays on his set even while he is eating and getting dressed.

A note from his fiancée arrives, asking him to visit her at noon. Though he wants to go, he cannot and will not stop playing chess, and he continues studying the position as the minutes tick away. Finally, with great reluctance, he leaves his apartment, but not before checking an opening position on the small pocket set he always leaves right next to his door. In a cutaway scene showing his fiancée, played by actress Anna Zemtsova (in real life Pudovkin's wife), it is made clear that she believes that the "greatest menace to a happy domestic life is chess."

As Fogel hurries to his appointment, he passes a shop that sells nothing but sets, books, clocks, and other chess paraphernalia. At first he ignores the shop, but then, as though hypnotized, he is magnetically drawn to it. The shop is to him a sort of chess nirvana. As soon as he enters he engages in a game with the owner, a chess demon incarnate. The game keeps our hero from his appointment even longer. Eventually he does pull himself away and arrives at his fiancée's house, but hours late. She begins to cry at his inconsiderateness. He begs for forgiveness and places his handkerchief on the floor to kneel on. But the handkerchief bears the ever-present chess design, and as he prepares to kneel he takes some chess pieces and a chess book from his jacket, sets up a position on the handkerchief, and begins to play over a game. This insult is too much for the poor girl to bear. She kicks over the position, throws the book out the window, stamps her feet in total frustration. "I've always loved you," she cries melodramatically. "And you, you love only chess. All is over between us. I am going to poison myself."

In the street below, two cossacks retrieve the discarded chess book and begin to set up a position on their own pocket chess set. Everywhere in Moscow the chess fever is rampant. A policeman, about to arrest a wrongdoer, is distracted when the man pulls out a pocket chess set, and they become involved in a game.

Meanwhile, the chess sickness of her fiancé and of the entire city continues to haunt the unhappy girl. When she asks her grandfather for advice and consolation, he gives her a huge book of famous games to play over for solace. A belated engagement gift arrives for her, and it turns out to be a cake in the form of a chess board, with a real position on it. Even the infants in the apartment next to hers eagerly play the game. She can tolerate the chess madness no longer. She goes to a pharmacy to buy poison, but even here all the clerks are playing chess. The pharmacist absentmindedly gives her a chess piece instead of a vial of deadly pills.

When she leaves the store she accidentally meets Capablanca in the street and, not knowing his identity, tells him how chess has made her hate the whole world. He throws the chess piece into the street and with great courtesy and charm says: "I understand how you feel. I myself cannot stand the thought of chess when I'm with a lovely lady." Flattered, she leaves with Capablanca in a taxi, unaware that she is being taken to the tournament.

Her fiancé, who has resolved to take his own life, decides to visit the tournament once more. The couple meet, and now, having been charmed by Capablanca and introduced to the glamor of international tournament chess, she says, "Darling, I never realized what a wonderful game this is." Reti looks up from his board and smiles. Yates, Torre, and Marshall also look up and smile.

The lovers kiss. "Let's play the Sicilian," she suggests, as they set up the pieces on a pocket set. Chessic marital bliss.



The hero can't resist chess even as he begs his fiancée's forgiveness.



Moscow is so obsessed with chess that it is impossible to buy a normal cake.



In Chess Fever, even infants play chess.



With his great charm, Capablanca proves that chess isn't so bad after all.



"Darling," she says, "... what a wonderful game this is! Let's play the Sicilian."

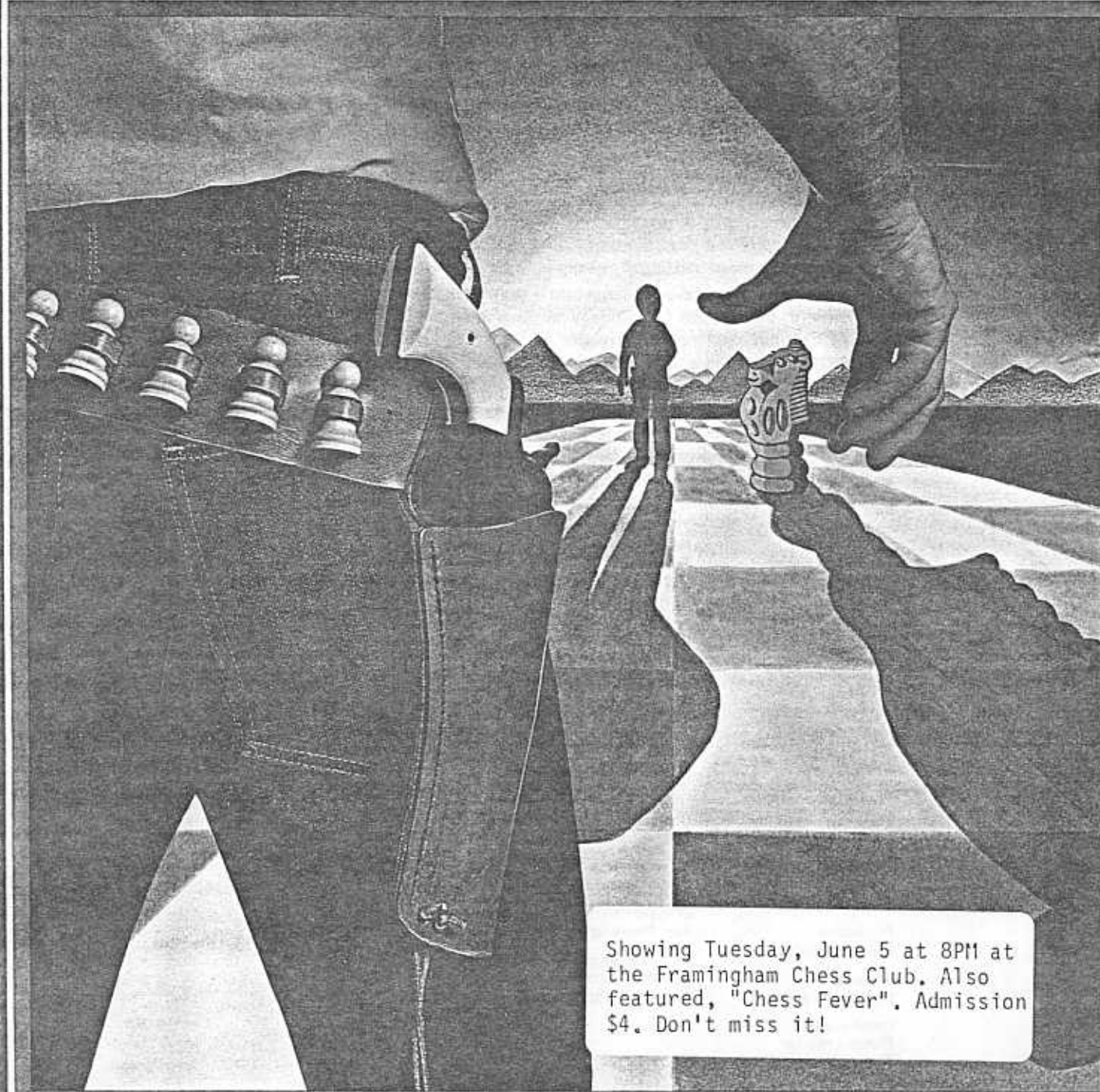
THE GREAT CHESS MOVIE

where the game is more than a game

featuring

Anatoly Karpov, Viktor Korchnoi, Robert Fischer

A film by Gilles Carle and Camille Coudari produced by Hélène Verrier



Showing Tuesday, June 5 at 8PM at the Framingham Chess Club. Also featured, "Chess Fever". Admission \$4. Don't miss it!

A production of the National Film Board of Canada



National
Film Board
of Canada

Office
national du film
du Canada

THE GREAT CHESS MOVIE

The game transcends the chessboard. The film transcends the game. A dense, exciting documentary, *The Great Chess Movie* reveals the fine meshings of politics and chess.

Man has had an enduring fascination with the game. It is said that chess reflects the fundamental laws of the universe. The movement of the pieces has been likened to human behavior. The film, by peeling back the layers, shocks the imagination into forging parallels where before they didn't exist. Associations emerge that hardly seem possible.

Three men dominate the film: Anatoly Karpov, Russian, world champion, with a Tartar cast of features and a mask that rarely dissolves; Viktor Korchnoi, the runner-up, a Russian defector who preferred freedom to the subsidized lifestyle of a national hero; and the American Bobby Fischer, sometimes called the best player of all time, who lost the world championship by default on a matter of principle.

They are seen competing at the world's great tournaments. They are seen in interview, pried loose from the protective shadow of the chessboard. Camille Coudari, international master and co-director of the film, and Fernando Arrabal, Spanish playwright, journalist and filmmaker act as on-camera commentators, analyzing the personalities and strategies of the three men.

Gilles Carle, with over 30 films to his credit, has cast his first feature documentary in the mold of a Western. To him the drama of the classic shoot-out echoes the tension of an international chess match. *The Great Chess Movie* rises brilliantly to the challenge of its subject.

Starring
Anatoly Karpov
Viktor Korchnoi
Robert Fischer
Ljubomir Ljubojevic
Jan Timman
Vlastimil Hort
Igor Ivanov
Michael Valvo
Tigran Petrosian
Vassily Smyslov
Boris Spassky
Mikhail Tahl
Jose-Raoul Capablanca
Max Euwe
Isaac Kashdan
Miguel Najdorf

Direction
Gilles Carle
Camille Coudari

Production
Hélène Verrier

Research
Camille Coudari

Photography
Pierre Letarte
Thomas Vamos

Assisted by
Séraphin Bouchard
René Daigle
Serge Lafortune
Martin Leclerc
Jacques Tougas

Lighting
Maurice De Ernsted

Graphics
Louise Overy
Val Teodori

Editing
Yves Leduc

Sound Editing
Michel Bordeleau

Re-recording
Jean-Pierre Joutel

Commentary read by
Earl Pennington

Administration
Joanne Carrière
Monique Létourneau

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