

## **The Tale of Tsar Saltan**

Prepared by: Ricky Wilson, 2004-03-25

Chapter 13 (6 minutes)

### **Background Info**

The film starts out with the aforementioned Tsar wandering around some random peasant huts. When he hears one girl say that if she were married to the Tsar she would produce for him an heir, he busts in and, much to her two sisters' chagrin, tells her they are getting married. The two sisters are begrudgingly put to work as seamstress and cook at the palace, and they fall in with a conspiratorial aide who also has a grudge against the new Tsaritsa. Well, soon after getting married the Tsar and his wife conceive a child (while literally playing patty-cake ... quite possibly the most bizarre euphemism for sex I have ever laid eyes upon), but the Tsar is called off to fight some evil Muppets (actually "Troglo-dytes") in a relatively far-away corner of the kingdom. Seizing upon this opportunity, the band of miscreants in the castle intercepts messages to and from the Tsar, effectively causing him to believe his wife has given birth to a monster and the advisors to believe the Tsar wants his wife and newborn son to be drowned for this. Of course this is patently untrue. That notwithstanding, the Tsaritsa and her son are sealed in a barrel and set adrift. Well, the young prince soon reaches maturity in the barrel (for some unexplained reason he grows extremely quickly) and they are washed ashore on a barren island. The prince fashions a crude bow and arrow and uses it to save a swan from a marauding raven. This proves to be a wise decision as the swan is really an enchanted swan maiden who creates for the prince and his mother a wondrous kingdom to rule. Merchants come from Tsar Saltan's kingdom, and they are treated well and sent back home. This is where the clip shown in class comes in ...

### **Film Studies Info**

Film Formats: There are two common formats of film (and by this I mean actual film, not digital or video or anything like that) in use today: 16 mm and 35 mm. 16 mm is usually used only by independent filmmakers or occasionally by music video directors or the like. 16 mm is, of course, less than half the size of 35 mm and as such the image is grainier and does not look as good projected onto a full-size movie screen. 35 mm is the standard Hollywood caliber of film stock as it balances out affordability (that is, affordable if you have a budget in the hundreds of thousands) with clarity. Other film sizes have come and gone out of use, for example 8mm and Super-8mm (used for home movies before the advent of video). Ptushko, however, shot *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* in 70mm. This means the film frame is twice as long as a standard 35mm frame, so the shot is twice as clear. For reference, an IMAX movie (like the ones at the Science Center) is 70mm wide (although an IMAX film is about 70mm square, and a regular 70mm film is not nearly so high). What does this mean? Ptushko spent immense amounts of money just getting this film shot. 70mm film is not just twice as expensive for the stock, everything is more expensive. 70mm cameras are not only bigger, they are rarer (since not that many

people shoot in 70mm), and on and on and on. So, while some parts of this clip might look a little tacky from our standpoint, this was a pretty big epic for its time.

**Matte Painting:** An archaic method of creating relatively cheap backdrops for filmed scenes. It involved getting extremely talented painters to recreate fantastic or obscure locations, for example the moon or an exotic jungle, as gigantic paintings to be used in the backgrounds of shots. This technique has now been almost completely eclipsed by advances in computer graphics and other digital techniques. Many of the classic “epics” have excellent matte paintings. *Tsar Saltan*, unfortunately, is not one of them. Ptushko generally has excellent art direction and prop/set builders for his films, but some of the matte paintings in this film are extremely sub-standard (notice the magical kingdom in the background of the first scene in the clip we will view in class).