

VARIETY

FILM

Posted: Tue. Jan. 16, 2007, 6:01pm PT

N.Y. Jewish

Sonia

(Documentary)

By Ronnie Scheib

A Lucy Kostelanetz production. Produced, directed by Kostelanetz.

Voice of Sonia - Maria Tucci

Like many recent Jewish-themed docus, Lucy Kostelanetz's first feature, "Sonia," burrows into personal family genealogy only to surface in the vortex of a vast historical movement, in this case not the Holocaust but the Russian Revolution. Kostelanetz's great-aunt Sonia Dymshitz-Tolstaya was an impassioned painter and revolutionary avant-gardist whose tumultuous private and professional life offers a unique window on the Russian art scene during the early revolutionary days. Excerpts from Sonia's vividly penned memoirs are vibrant and revelatory... Seminal artistic, ethnic and feminist hooks should assure timely docu tube and fest currency.

Through old photographs and archival clips, Kostelanetz successfully captures the promiscuous intermingling of the personal, artistic and political in Sonia's fully engaged bohemian lifestyle. Breaking away from her affluent Jewish St. Petersburg family, Sonia forged a radically different destiny than the one envisioned for her.

She was an integral part of the revolutionary art movement from as early as 1905, both through her various marriages/liaisons with leading activists, artists and writers and through her own considerable achievements as a painter and organizer. Sonia's memoirs express the euphoria and heady liberation of a collective creative effort that sought to change the world.

VARIETY

Posted: Tue. Jan. 16, 2007, 6:01pm PT

Sonia

(Documentary)

Onscreen, Kostelanetz parades a succession of Sonia's canvases and glass paintings, assorted historical artifacts and neatly animated photographic cutouts that discreetly meet, mate and separate.

Meanwhile, on the soundtrack, contrapuntal voices weave a rich audio tapestry: Sonia's artist comrades, heard via read-aloud letters and journals, chime in to amplify Sonia's ongoing narrative, slangily evoking the boisterous Stray Dog Cabaret -- hangout of revolutionary poets and painters -- or enthusing over more pastoral get-togethers at a country home by the sea.

At times the voices contrast ironically, like the "Dear Daddy" letters from Sonia's second husband, writer Alexei Tolstoy, which reflect his decidedly bourgeois idea of marriage even as they prefigure the opportunism that would see him thrive under Stalin.

Her long-term relationship with the constructivist Vladimir Tatlin, on the other hand, was apparently of a more mutually inspirational nature.

Helmer Kostelanetz, though deftly avoiding any overtly topical analogies, highlights the still-contemporary tensions of a woman juggling marriage, motherhood and art. Indeed, docu implicitly suggests that Sonia's artwork may still be underrated by virtue of her religion, her sex and her politics.

Sonia's story after the rise of Stalinism mirrors that of other committed idealists who remained in Russia, as she attempted, not uninterestingly, to adapt her modernist style to the depiction of women in farm collectives and factories, only to be kicked out of the Artists Union she helped establish..... (Excerpts from Review)

Tech credits are fine, Todd Sines' graphic design and Jared Dubrino and George Griffin's cutout animation plussing archival material without overwhelming it.

Camera (color/B&W archival), Mikhail Levitin, Yuri Garushin, Alan Dater, Daniel Epstein; editors, Kostelanetz, Jared Dubrino; sound, Dima Shustoff, Jonathan Bloom; graphic designer, Todd Sines; animation, Jared Dubrino, George Griffin. Reviewed on DVD, New York, Jan. 9, 2007. (In New York Jewish Film Festival.) Running time: 96 MIN. (English, Russian, French dialogue)

