The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In the Spotlight: Prison TV

By Anna Malpas

September 23, 2010



This week, Channel One began showing its own remake of the U.S. show "Prison Break," transferring the whole story to Russia. While it's not unusual for sitcoms — like "Married ... With Children" — to get remade with local characters, this is a hugely ambitious project to remake a show with lots of dramatic action that lasted four seasons in the United States.

In the U.S. original, a man voluntarily gets himself jailed so that he can carry out an escape plan for his brother, who is on death row for murdering the brother of the vice president. In a bizarre plot device, he tattoos a map of the jail on his chest before he goes down.

The Russian version is pretty much the same, except that Alexei's brother Kirill has been convicted of killing the finance minister. While the death penalty is under embargo in Russia, for dramatic purposes the State Duma has decided to lift it here.

Alexei, a construction engineer, gets jailed after trying to rob a bank very badly. As he goes into jail, the guard notices his crucifix and snarls at him: "Are you a Christian? In here, there's only one God — me."

His cellmates scoff grechka, or buckwheat, for breakfast — unaware of any shortages — and ask him curiously, "Have they finished building Moskva-City yet?" in what may be yet another televised dig at Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

Two of the cellmates are scary men with bulging muscles, one of whom has the nickname Gibbon, while the nice one, Nalim, takes Alexei under his wing and points out who to avoid.

Most feared is the thief who is in virtual charge of the prison, Kopylov. He and his gang of hoodlums hang out at one end of the prison yard, moving their facial muscles as little as possible. In his cell, Kopylov enjoys little luxuries such as a flat-screen television and a carpet on the wall.

The prison security staff mysteriously melt away every time Kopylov's henchmen want to beat someone up in the gym. "We agreed, if there's a corpse, there will be a problem," the guard says.

Some details of the show seem right — like the prison warden who asks Alexei to design his dacha in mock-Tsarist style — but the prison looks far too clean and airy. Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote that the exterior scenes were shot in Nizhny Novgorod, while the cell interiors were built in Mosfilm studios.

Technically speaking, the show is also unrealistic because prisoners with long sentences in Russia do not serve their time in city prisons, but are sent to remote colonies that are more like prison camps.

The prisoners aren't hacking with tuberculosis and all seem to be thriving specimens. What's more, Alexei is able to get daily treatment from a pretty prison doctor.

Channel One uses its real news studio and news anchors for "bulletins" watched by the characters, which makes for surreal viewing.

The shooting of the finance minister is described on the news as "a terrorist act possibly organized by the opposition." Another news broadcast leads with the death of a human rights activist, his head in a pool of blood.

Earlier, the same activist is warned by slick men in suits not to campaign for the freeing of Kirill, whom he believes to be innocent.

"Let's not make a sensation of this," they warn him, calling the subject "very sensitive." They suggest some other neutral topics he could campaign about: "We have a low birthrate and our winter sports aren't doing too well."

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/23/in-the-spotlight-prison-tv-a1693