

TV Film About Prison Camps, Honor Shelved

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Veteran filmmaker Buturlin says Russian television respects directors far less today than during Soviet times.

ST. PETERSBURG — Russian director Viktor Buturlin is one of the country's most talented and successful filmmakers, the man behind the award-winning 2004 television series "Chest Imeyu," or "I Have the Honor," about life in the Russian army, but he does not know when his next series will be shown.

"Zhit Snachala," or "To Start Anew," the story of a talented 17-year-old provincial singer who ends up in a prison camp due to a miscarriage of justice, has been gathering dust somewhere on the shelves of Channel One since the director completed it in early 2010.

"When I call the studio, I get the same answer every time: 'We will call you when the time comes,'" Buturlin said. "At the same time, I am getting news from my friends that the film is showing — and very successfully — in other countries, most recently in Kiev. I have no idea

what is going on.”

Vera Mikhailova, the main character in “To Start Anew,” learns about life largely through the political prisoners with whom she serves her term. Some of the sentiments and even phrases spoken by some of the characters echo ideas voiced at meetings staged by the contemporary Russian opposition. The heroine, however, remains apolitical throughout the movie, and the main things that she learns in the camps of Vorkuta is that people who want to help others must be careful and cautious, that the kindest people around you can be helpless against any injustice that may suddenly befall you, and that even the most detestable person can suddenly reveal his or her human side.

“I often ask myself what the words ‘a man of honor’ mean,” Buturlin said. “In ‘I Have the Honor,’ one of the main characters returns to the hell of war just because ‘there are 10 people waiting for me there.’ Here is a valid answer to that question.”

“On a more general note, there are lines that a decent man should not cross, and these lines are defined not only by the law but by [the man’s] inner self,” the filmmaker continues. “A person of honor does not strike deals with his conscience.”

The director said life is at times more complicated than any legal or moral standard, and he is attracted to stories that illustrate this reality.

During the filming of “I Have the Honor,” some of which took place in a real military camp near Novorossiisk, where the soldiers were being trained in between their missions to Chechnya, Buturlin was once shocked by the sight of an officer beating a soldier. That evening, over a shot of vodka, the officer explained himself in a way that shook the director even more than the beating had.

“The guy doesn’t know how to crawl flat on his stomach; the way he does it — his back and butt high in the air — he makes a perfect target and has zero chance of surviving his very first battle,” the officer told Buturlin.

“I ran out of words a long time ago. So I am beating military science into him so that when he is crawling under fire, he will remember my fists and my angry face and keep his bloody butt to the ground!” ☒☒

In “I Have the Honor,” the director mixed real soldiers with actors to the effect that nobody could tell the difference. Buturlin☒and his crew arrived at the camp with brand new uniforms and shiny new guns, only to be presented with the sight of “soldiers with their wounds sewn up by something resembling barbed wire and wearing shoes that were falling to pieces as they walked.” The actors swapped garments with the soldiers, and the spirit of fraternity settled in, ultimately ensuring the future success of the series.

The expression “I Have the Honor” is the formal phrase Russian soldiers use when taking leave of their superiors.

The situation with “To Start Anew” is typical of the way television channels treat filmmakers, he said.

“After filmmakers submit their work ... they have no way of influencing or even following its

fate,” he explained. “It is quite common that several parts of the series or some key episodes might be cut out, and no explanation whatsoever will be offered. Even in the Soviet years, editors were obliged to at least discuss the changes they considered necessary and give reasons for shelving your work.”

Buturlin is not alone in finding his work being shelved. His colleague, the internationally renowned filmmaker Alexander Sokurov — a fellow Petersburger — said last week that he, too, was being treated in the same way.

“The channel that shelved my film keeps telling me that the schedules are packed with high-rated American films, apparently blockbusters,” Sokurov told reporters.

“I have developed a strong feeling that filmmaking in modern Russia serves first and foremost the big advertisers, meaning that if your stuff is not commercial enough, you either don’t get to film anything, or you’ll have trouble getting it shown,” Buturlin said.

What worries Buturlin even more than the mystery behind his latest series is the fate of his alma mater, Lenfilm, one of Russia’s oldest and most venerable film studios, which looks set to merge with the private company Sistema Financial Corporation, the county’s largest diversified consumer services company, headed by the tycoon Vladimir Yevtushenkov.

Buturlin shares the concerns of his fellow filmmakers Sokurov and Alexei German, who have sent a petition regarding the Lenfilm situation to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. They fear that there will be no place for art-house films in the new studio.

“Of course, among ourselves, we have all known for a long time that the issue at stake is the prime land that Lenfilm occupies, a stone’s throw from the Peter and Paul Fortress,” Buturlin said. “Many of us think that Lenfilm is doomed for that reason alone. Too many powerful people want to get access to the land, and nobody apart from the filmmakers themselves can oppose it.”

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