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Bekmambetov on Vampires, Loss of Soviet Union

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Benjamin Walker, right, plays the 16th president of the United States in his first starring role. The film follows Lincoln's life from his early childhood.

NEW YORK — Movie director Timur Bekmambetov has been responsible for some of the Russian film industry's major post-perestroika hits, including "Night Watch" (2004) and "Day Watch" (2006).

Those films gave Bekmambetov his big break in Hollywood with "Wanted" (2008) and this summer's "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter," both of which carry Bekmambetov's trademark visual fireworks.

Bekmambetov met up with The Moscow Times in New York to talk about his latest directorial effort, the historical-horror mash-up "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter," one of the most anticipated movies of the summer. Co-produced by Tim Burton and based on the novel of the same name by Seth Grahame-Smith, it tells the secret history of America's 16th president

(played by Benjamin Walker) and his crusade to destroy the undead and their slave-owning helpers.

Q: How do you relate to Lincoln?

A: Lincoln didn't allow the bad guys to do to the United States [what happened to the Soviet Union]. He kept the country solid, and I went through perestroika, which for me [meant that] I lost the country I loved. I live in Russia but I grew up in Kazakhstan, which [back then] was one country. Now, they're different independent states. For me, it's a drama and trauma, because I still feel that this country ought to be united.

Q: Did you feel particular pressure making a movie about an American historical figure?

A: No pressure. It was challenging. To begin this kind of project you have to be a bit irresponsible, because if you're too serious you will never make it. Can you imagine, for me, a Russian director, to make a movie about Abraham Lincoln, it was quite risky, but I was brave and I did it. I had to make it because it's absolutely unique. Nobody had made anything similar before, nobody had made a vampire movie about a real historical figure and nobody makes such movies in 3D; nobody had enjoyed 19th-century America in 3D. There were enough elements to make this movie unique, and for me, vampire movies are genre movies; they must be grounded. They must be based on reality. That's the only way it works, like even "Twilight" and "Night Watch." It's a unique genre of movies because they are based on the real world. Vampires are next to you. It's your classmate, it's your neighbor in "Night Watch" and it's your president. Everybody has a five-dollar bill with his portrait in their pocket.

When I began, I had no idea how to finish it. I felt that I had something very valuable in my hands and I felt a huge responsibility, because it's not a Marvel superhero, it's a real man and it's the real history of the country. If you do something wrong, you could even destroy the country, because the country rests — every country, every nationality — on two or three names. If you destroy this legend, then the whole country could fall apart, just like what happened in the Soviet Union: We made a lot of jokes about Lenin and Stalin and the country just disappeared.

Q: Why did you make it a 3D movie?

A: I think it's really important that you have a chance to be there in 19th-century America and to really feel the world, to be next to Lincoln, not to look at him through a spyglass like 2D but just really to be with him. I was surprised by how much more emotional and dramatic scenes are in 3D. I mean, because jumping and action scenes have their own logic, because his weapon was an ax, and when you're fighting a vampire with an ax, the distance is crucial: If you miss by one inch you will probably die. The 3D format enables you to feel the distance. It's not like a machine gun; here you are fighting and you really need to feel the distance and it gives you an emotional connection with a character. That's what I discovered, but most important for me is that 3D is like a theater. You know, theater is more emotional than cinema because it's happening right next to you. The characters are three-dimensional, they are real, and that's what I found in 3D movies, 3D language: You really feel that Lincoln is next to you, and you feel him, and I think that's more important.

Q: Is it true that Tom Hardy and Michael Fassbender were considered for "Abraham Lincoln"

at one point?

A: I really like Tom and I really like Michael Fassbender. But at the end of the day, it was clear that only Ben Walker could be Lincoln because, well, we have a Lincoln. Ben Walker was perfect. Nobody knew who he was here, and he's a totally believable professional actor, a genius, and most importantly, he's a Lincoln as a person, his personality — I think that's who Lincoln was. He is very honest, very elegant, with an unbelievable sense of humor. A dark and melancholic sense of humor.

Q: How has your Russian-Kazakh background helped you to become an American director?

A: I believe that it would have been impossible for me to make this movie without my background, without people behind me. I had a great, unbelievable American crew, but part of the crew was my friends from Russia, just like on "Wanted." That's very important for me, because they are unique people. For example, my wife is a costume designer. She designed the costumes for the movie.

There is a fresco history of vampires done by Alexander Petrov, a great Russian animator who won an Academy Award for "The Old Man and the Sea" (1999). He made it. He is a friend of mine, and I called him and said, "Alexander, can you help me on my movie? I want to animate a fresco," and he said, "Yeah, we'll do it," and he made this masterpiece.

There is a pre-visualization studio in Moscow, a secret lab I have. Nobody has anything like it. It's a group of people who can pre-visualize the action scenes before I make them; I can create the action scenes in animation form first and put virtual cameras, cut, make sound effects and everything. I do it before I shoot. It's really, really helpful. I have an unbelievable guy from Kazakhstan, Igor, who created all the fighting techniques. He's a fight choreographer. He is an unbelievable kung fu master and he helped me a lot. I have a CG studio in Moscow too. They did all the vampire transformations. The vampires have very interesting eyes; you feel there is an effect. They invented this technique. They created all the blood in the movie. I mean, they made maybe a third of the movie. CG was made in Russia, and for me it's not just courtesy to my past; it's essential. I need people who will follow me not because it's their business, but because they are on my team.

Q: What was the first movie you ever saw?

A: It was a Russian musical that I saw when I was two years old; I really remember that moment and the movie theater, I even remember the short — in Russia there was a short before the movie. There was a five- or 10-minute short, and I remember it was an animation about a barber's shop and an elephant.

Q: What does being a Hollywood director mean to you?

A: First of all, Hollywood means I can work with the best people, like with Caleb Deschanel, who shot "Abraham Lincoln." With John Myhre, our production designer, who made "Wanted." He's a two-time Academy Award winner. And to work with the composer Danny Elfman on "Wanted," and with Henry Jackman on "Lincoln." I mean, it's the opportunity to work with the best people. But most important is Hollywood's distribution system. It's an opportunity to make movies for the whole world, and not just for one country.

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