

Russian Independent Film Fights the Odds

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Alexandra Rebenok playing in "Till Night Do Us Part," a film based on exchanges overheard at a posh restaurant.

Independent filmmakers still face problems across Russia, despite the recent wave of technical revolutions which have helped to close the gap between big-budget cinematic productions and their low-budget counterparts. As crowdfunding platforms, such as Kickstarter, continue to gain popularity abroad, and methods of digital distribution transform the dispersal of films, the future of independent cinema in the country is unpredictable.

Early successes through these innovative means include Boris Khlebnikov's 2012 glimpse into the dinner-talk of upper crust Muscovites. "Till Night Do Us Part" (Poka Noch Ne Razluchit) was shot in digital for a minimal budget of \$100,000, aided by a form of crowdfunding. Rather than paying its cast of luminaries in advance, the producers promised them shares in the film's box office profits.

Last October, "Offside," a program dedicated to independent cinema of the Russian regions, appeared in "2morrow/Zavtra," Moscow's yearly festival of independent film. According to film critic and co-curator of "Offside" Maria Kuvshinova, "Several [of Russia's] republics have their very own cinema, which we in the major cities hear almost nothing about."

However, independent filmmaking remains rare, and conditions are generally hostile. "There is no system, there are separate, one-time efforts by lone enthusiasts," Kuvshinova said.

External sources of financing are scarce; many of the filmmakers featured in "Offside" had to shoulder the costs of production personally.

There are two government institutions that actively support Russian cinema, the Culture Ministry and the Russian Cinema Fund. But as a rule the money goes to major studios and, occasionally, to art house projects expected to represent the country at festivals abroad.

As for crowdfunding platforms, most consider them a dubious proposition in Russia.

"I don't believe for a second that it could work here," said J'bel Chapron, representative of uniFrance in Russia and official selector of Russian films for Cannes, citing the lack of institutional transparency as a key obstacle.

Distribution poses an even greater challenge. Online piracy is particularly severe in Russia, rendering DVD and legal online portals largely obsolete and making box office profits even more crucial for distributors. While viewers are generally unwilling to spend on what could be seen for free, they will pay for an experience that requires physically being in the theater — in other words, for sensational special effects and 3D.

"The victims of piracy are art house films," Chapron said.

This trend is intensified by the fact that 60 percent of Russian filmgoers are between the ages of 14 and 25. Adolescent taste dominates the box-office, guiding producers, distributors, and movie theaters alike.

Moreover, the distribution of independent films is limited to major cities. George Shabanov and Evgeny Pivovarov, managing partners of the distribution and licensing company All Media Company, had difficulty distributing the comedy sci-fi film "Iron Sky" in the provinces simply because it was a European production.

"There is a bias," Shabanov said. "They think that if a film isn't American, then it must be art house."

Shabanov and Pivovarov added that art house and independent films have lower chances of market success. But they also insisted that high-quality films can do well, even without famous actors and typical "sales points," though such films require more innovative and expensive promotion.

As for the future, the partners are optimistic. Asked whether the filmgoing audience's tastes are likely to change, Pivovarov responded: "If the industry develops and grows, the film audience will also develop and grow richer."

The Russian film industry is only 15 years old, after all, and according to Shabanov, "It is just beginning to really develop. Now professionals are appearing."

Professionals are not only "appearing" — they are also being made. Shabanov himself moonlights as a teacher of production at the new Moscow Film School, which opened its doors less than one year ago. Unlike the predominately theoretical programs available previously, this film school strives to arm its students with as much up-to-date knowledge of the industry as possible.

"We don't work well with distribution," said director Yekaterina Cherkes-Zade about the industry at large, "so my students think about distribution first."

"My students want to change the industry," she continued. "Many of them would like to talk about other themes, to make films for themselves."

Cherkes-zade expects to begin seeing the full effects of the Moscow Film School in three to four years time, when, having worked a few years in the industry, the first class of students will initiate their own, possibly independent, projects.

For the moment, the odds are against aspiring independent filmmakers. But the Russian film industry is evolving, and a new generation is coming of age. No one knows exactly what comes next, but hopefully, we'll be enjoying it soon on the big screen.

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