The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Film Profiles Soviet Writers Ilf and Petrov

By Eradzh Nidoev

September 10, 2013



The use of animation based on abstract paintings makes “Ilf&Petrov” stand out from other documentary films.

Soviet literature would not be so ironic and joyful if, once upon a time, the novice writers Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov had not met and decided to start composing novels. Now, a new documentary will the bring the work of the unlikely duo to a new generation of Russians.

Ilf&Petrov, a new animated documentary about the two prominent Soviet writers, authors of Little Golden America, started in Moscow. The movie narrates the most important parts of their lives, including their acquaintance, work on the satirical novel The Twelve Chairs and even their famous trip through the U.S..

"Literature is probably the source of inspiration for every other kind of art, even music and painting," said Roman Liberov, director of the film, in an interview with The Moscow Times. "My universe focuses on literature first of all. All these authors brought something

into my life and the lives of many other people ... They are a great part of my world."

Roman Liberov is already known for his documentary series about Russian authors: The last one was about Soviet author Sergei Dovlatov. Liberov hopes the movie will be interesting for everyone who is fond of Ilf&Petrov novels.

The movie not only uses video and archival footages but also incorporates animation, computer graphics, photos, music and voice-overs, which make it stand out from other documentaries. It features animation based on paintings by avant-garde artist Alexander Labas. Alexandra Ilf, the daughter of the writer, shared her photos for the movie.

"The art of the movie is an art of synthesis. That's why I use everything I can use. You unite all the things you can in a movie — animation, graphics, voices, music. It's a mixed-media movie. That's my idea of how documentary should be shot," Liberov said.

Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov were born in Odessa but got acquainted in Moscow. They started writing their satirical novels under the patronage of Petrov's brother, Valentin Katayev. Their first book, The Twelve Chairs, about the adventures of charismatic artist Ostap Bender, became very popular in Russia and was later made into a popular film. Many lines from the book can still be heard.

The production of Ilf&Petrov took a year and a half from writing the script to post-production. Sometimes Liberov had to wait for answers from big stars whom he wanted to get for the movie.

"It was extremely hard, almost impossible to get these actors," Liberov said. "Sergei Makovetsky, who provides the voice of Ilya Ilf, at first declined due to scheduling conflicts. ... Later he gave us three days and then he said it was absolutely impossible to go on, we did not finish ... we waited for a month and started editing without finishing the main work of Makovetsky."

The documentary was shot in Moscow, Odessa, Yaroslavl and Paris. To show the authors' adventures they described in "Little Golden America," Liberov made the same trip as Ilf and Petrov in 1935. They crossed the U.S. from east to west, and Liberov felt that in the 80 years since, the country had changed little.

"America was absolutely the same. For example, when you're crossing the border into Texas, it's a common stereotype that people start to say "you bet." We didn't believe this. We came to cafe just after crossing the border of Texas, we were talking to a waitress, and we asked for coffee, and she said: "You bet!" No way, we thought."

To produce the movie, Liberov used his own money. He managed to gather 100,000 rubles from crowd funding, but this was just a small part of what he needed. Liberov lives movie to movie, and used money from "Written by Sergey Dovlatov" to produce "Ilf&Petrov."

Liberov says it is very hard to make a documentary popular in Russia. He has spent his life trying to get his movies into theaters to the viewers, to the theaters, and he understands that Ilf&Petrov will not be a blockbuster. However, he has hopes that the movie will at least be profitable.

"Dovlatov was extremely successful for me. About 20,000 people came to the theaters, and then it was shown on Zakryty Pokaz on Channel One and that helped. But the chances of Ilf&Petrov [becoming a hit] are very, very low.

Liberov has plans to make another documentary about a great Russian author, possibly Osip Mandelshtam or Andrey Platonov. But he is sure it will be even harder to produce as these writers are not widely recognized.

Ilf&Petrov premiered at Pioner and Winzavod and will also be shown at 35MM, 47/24, Pokrovka, metro Kurskaya on Sept. 11

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/10/film-profiles-soviet-writers-ilf-and-petrov-a27546