

Russian Film Voted Audience Favorite at U.S. Festival

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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If you want to catch a rare glimpse of "the mysterious Russian soul," you need only to watch a collection of short Russian films being shown at a prominent film festival in Washington this month, said a Russian filmmaker whose work was voted an audience favorite over the weekend.

The Russian soul "is always a little sad, I don't know why," said Sofia Kendel, 26, author and director of "Pishto Goes Away," an eight-minute, animated film that tells the tale of a hungry goat, an angry man, and the man's decision to leave the small, drab village where he lives, until a tiny dog changes his mind.

There are no words in the film, but the audience that crowded into a Washington theater Saturday during the festival's opening weekend seemed to have no trouble connecting with the story, laughing at the antics of the hungry goat, and applauding enthusiastically at the end.

Of the 152 short films being shown, "Pishto" was one of 17 chosen as an audience favorite when votes were tallied after the weekend.

"Pishto" is one of 16 productions by emerging Russian filmmakers being screened at the 10th annual DC Shorts Film Festival, which every year showcases short films from countries all over the world, but had never before had a single entry from Russia.

Festival Director Jon Gann, looking over previous submissions last year, said he was shocked to discover such a glaring absence.

"I wanted to figure out why. We have films from Cypress and Kuala Lumpur, but then we don't have any from Russia, and Russia's such a big country," Gann said in an interview with RIA Novosti.

He set out to curate the largest collection of Russian short films ever to be seen in America, which previously had been six.

But there were challenges, including language barriers, a limited number of short films produced in Russia, and the somber Russian soul Kendel referred to.

"We were trying to find what I call happy films, and we realized the Russian sensibility of happiness, at least in filmmaking, is kind of the American sensibility of less miserable. They seem to be kind of less miserable but they weren't like joyous happy," said Gann.

It's "all about wanting ...and too many troubles," Kendel said, and then laughed. "But this was more of a story about my mom, because she lives in a very small village called Tashla, in Orenburg region. She always wants to go away but she always comes back."

And yes, she has a small dog who's her best friend. "I think that's why she stays," Kendel said, laughing.

At a question-and-answer session with the audience after Saturday's screening, Kendel fielded questions about the inspiration for her film, whether she did the animation herself (yes), and how long it took to finish the piece (two years).

"I thought it was a sweet and charming story," said one woman in the audience, and another added that the drawings "were really just wonderful."

Gann said he had hoped to bring more filmmakers from Russia to the festival, but ran into visa troubles and timing issues. As political tensions flared in recent months between the U.S. and Russia, he also ran into concerns from festival sponsors and filmmakers wondering if the Russian focus should be cancelled.

And, as an openly gay man upset at what he called the "anti-gay" laws in Russia, Gann wrestled with his own internal conflict, but ultimately decided it was more about providing an outlet for Russian filmmakers than promoting the Russian government.

He's pleased with how it turned out, he said, "and I'm even more excited with the reaction we're getting from our audience. They're loving the Russian films."

"I just talked to a woman at a different theater, she grew up in Russia and she's so happy to see these films here. She said, 'It's like a piece of home... and that's great.'"

There were more than 100 submissions from Russian filmmakers to the festival and 16 were chosen as entries. Next year, Gann said, "maybe we can have even more Russian films."

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