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Q&A: Bachurin and 'Stalingrad' Galvanize Russian Film

By Lena Smirnova

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Ilya Bachurin, in front of the Glavkino logo, hopes to rally his industry.

It takes Ilya Bachurin mere seconds to choose his favorite movie. But when asked to choose his favorite Russian movie, to say that it takes him a long time would be an understatement.

The general director of Russia's youngest and most technologically savvy film studio, Glavkino, approaches the matter with the seriousness of a NASA engineer about to send a rocket to space. His face twists into a quizzical frown, he goes quiet, pulls away from his tea, looks thoughtfully at the ceiling, blocks out all outside sounds and appears to be in utter agony.

Ilya Bachurin

Education

1998 — State Academy of Life and Services, now Russian State University of Tourism and Services Studies, degree in economics

Work experience

2008-present — Chief executive, Glavkino
2006-2008 — Editor-in-chief, Music of Channel One
2003-2006 — Vice president, editor-in-chief, MTV Russia
2000-2003 — Director of musical content, Channel One
1995-2000 — Chief executive, radio "Station 106.8," later known as "Station 2000"
1993 — Organized the first Michael Jackson concert in Russia

Favorite book: Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1866)

Reading now: Shantaram, by Gregory David Roberts (2003)

Favorite film: Spirited Away (2001), written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki; The Pokrovsky Gate (1982), directed by Mikhail Kozakov

Favorite restaurant : Vanil, 1 Ostozhenka

Weekend getaway destination: Venice

"This is some question!" he finally blurts, unable to answer the last query of a fluid two-hour-long conversation about his business strategy, investment risks and thoughts on how to pull the Russian film industry out of its chronic stagnation.

Ultimately, he agrees to think about it and send his answer via phone message.

Bachurin, 43, is a man whose life revolves around Russian film, though that was not always so. He got his start in business in 1990 after coming back from the army to a country entirely different from the one he left two years before. In this new world, entrepreneurship could now be a mark of success.

He worked in the business and earned enough money in two years to bring Michael Jackson to Moscow for the first time. The 1993 concert was a commercial flop, but Bachurin has no regrets about it and still thinks of it as a noble, culturally progressive investment.

The concert was also Bachurin's first venture into popular culture. He went on to help create

Russia's first dance radio station, worked in the music section of Channel One, and crafted the iconic MTV Russia. Audience ratings climbed steadily under Bachurin's guidance and youthful enthusiasm, as the channel transformed into a mouthpiece for the young generation.

Though Bachurin's projects were successful, he said he gets bored after he stops learning.

Ignoring observers, who called the project a financial risk, film director Fyodor Bondarchuk, Channel One chief executive Konstantin Ernst and Ilya Bachurin gathered $84 million and opened the film studio Glavkino in 2012, 7 kilometers from Moscow along the Novorizhskoe highway.

Sitting on 10 hectares of land, the studio has 33,000 square meters of filming pavilions, production and office buildings. Glavkino was also the site where the special effects for Bondarchuk's blockbuster "Stalingrad," released Thursday, were made.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How did you choose to get into the film industry?

A: I left the Soviet Union to serve in the army and returned to a new country, in which there were neither laws nor rules. At that moment, the principles of wild moneymaking were dominant. It was a scary era, there is no other way to call it. There were a lot of career choices, but virtually all of the opportunities available to a young man ranged from "bad" to "very bad." I was lucky in that I did not go down a bad road. I remained on the good side.

Q: Could a businessman working in a sphere other than entertainment easily adapt his skills and switch to your field of work?

A: It is probably possible not to be specialized in the type of business where moneymaking is the single criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of work. You can be a manager with a wide-ranging profile. But in industries where there is an artistic component, not only your professional experience plays a role. You need to have a specialization. As a strong television producer — though it is not up to me to judge my expertise — I have a certain level of experience and feel confident about my work. But coming into the film industry, though there is some crossover, I am a student. When you come here, you have to understand that without an extensive background specifically in this industry, you cannot expect fantastic results.

Q: The projects you were involved in before Glavkino were very successful. Why did you decide to leave?

A: You should regularly change the field you are working in. That is my rule. There are different deadlines for this. I have read books that say you should switch jobs after two years. In my own experience, after five years I get bored. I cannot give my full attention to something after losing interest. I spent five years in radio and a little longer in television. It was really interesting and cool, but after I made sense of all the production steps, I started to lose interest. I could continue, but it does not bring a lot of joy to spend your days doing something that does not move you. Film is what makes me happy and inspires me now. It is

very important for me not to stagnate, occupying some television manager post and covering myself with bronze like a statue, but rather to work on a project that is very alive and serious.

Q: The Michael Jackson concert you helped to organize in the 1990s was not a commercial success. Do you regret that investment decision?

A: Commercially, it was a disaster. We were in debt to everybody. We could buy a whole industry with the money we spent. It was a huge amount of cash by the standards of the time, but I do not regret it. There were a lot of ways to part with money back then, and most of them involved risking your life. We would have probably lost the money that we earned in commerce in some other way, but here we gave it to a good cause and stayed alive. In the 1990s, people were usually killed for having a lot of money. We were lucky in that respect. We did a good thing. Yes, we lost our money, but we were able to embark on new adventures with a clean slate.

Q: Do you rely mostly on logic or emotion when you have to decide whether something is worth the risk or not?

A: Logic only. There cannot be any emotions. Unless you talk about creative projects, in which case there are some subjective moments. With age, I have become a pretty pragmatic person. Business is always about profit. No other measures of business exist. If you see business as the aim of your work, rather than creativity, you do not have the right to take risks. I try think over every step and practically never do anything spontaneously. There is almost always some logic behind what I do.

Q: Would you consider establishing a large film studio in Russia a risky move?

A: Risks are inherent to doing any kind of business in Russia. The Glavkino studio and production company are undoubtedly risky, but no more so than the production business in general. We are not jumping out of a plane without a parachute. It is difficult to work in these industries. It is not like oil drilling. There is little money and you have to be very careful with what money you have. The financials of business projects in film production and film studios are very hard, but such are the rules of the industry and we agree to work by them.

Q: What challenges have you faced in working in the Russian film industry?

A: The Russian film industry is very small. That is the biggest problem. A lot of people work in this business and a lot of ambitions clash. Russian films are shot for very little money. In general, Russian film is a yarn ball of problems and opportunities. There are very professional people and companies working, and also very incompetent people and companies.

In Glavkino, we had no problems with getting the necessary government documentation. As for finance, we found an ally in VTB. We explained that the studio and film production business are not quick earners, but considering that no new studios have been built in Russia since 1937, Glavkino could be an interesting investment.

Speaking about the film industry in general, I have only one wish. The volume of existing state

support for the film industry does not allow us to compete with Western producers. If we want to increase the share of Russian films, we have to spend more money on them. It has not been possible to set up a system of getting revenues from movie screenings and rentals. What we have is the investment of state funds. As things stand, this is not making the industry competitive.

The government spreads out its support in a thin layer, giving hundreds of producers very small amounts of money to make movies. These small movies cannot adequately compete with large Hollywood projects. When the viewer comes to the cinema, he chooses to watch Hollywood blockbusters. More investment is needed in order to change this situation.
In addition to that, we need to enhance education so that there are qualified workers for the industry, check that theater owners are not stealing money, help movies with their marketing campaigns, and fight piracy.

Q: How has the establishment of Glavkino changed the local film industry?

A: By building the first film studio in Russia since 1937 we sent a powerful message about the potential to succeed in the local film industry and its future development. We created a vector for the development of Russian film while everyone was speaking of a crisis. That is not to say that there was no crisis — we are still not out of it, and there is still no demand for Russian movies — but by creating a technological foundation we showed that we believe in the Russian market.

Q: Why don't viewers go to see Russian movies now?

A: A lot is missing. Movies often do not match up to the necessary standards. And here we return to the problems in the Russian film industry, among them limited technological abilities and a lack of professionals. We are losing on numerous fronts and so, naturally, the final product turns out weaker. We need to restore what we lost in the transition from Soviet to Russian film.

Q: What kinds of movies does the Russian industry need to get out of its slump?

A: We need to focus on ambitious, large-scale projects. The Russian film industry does not get stronger from releasing small films. However, this is incredibly difficult for film producers. If you are getting state support of $1 million, it is very difficult to come up with an investment package of $7 million to $10 million. The government should do something to help large movies appear, so that we have films of such scale as "Day Watch," "Admiral," or "Vysotsky. Thanks for Being Alive."

Q: What is now the percentage of television, as opposed to film, orders at Glavkino?

A: Unfortunately, television dominates for the moment. Film producers get little funds, and try to minimize spending by filming in existing locations instead of film studios. It is cheaper for them not to have to put up decorations. As a result, television accounts for about 90 percent of our orders.

In five years, this split will ideally be 50-50. That said, it is hard to line up filming schedules. If the filming period for one movie ends and the other starts in a month or later, only

television is flexible enough to quickly fill this gap. We will never be able to exist without television orders because the studio should not stand idle.

Q: Why should foreign producers consider filming in Russia instead of Western countries?

A: We are ready for international partnerships. In addition to the funds that Western film producers will bring, it will help us get experience from people who are more successful in moviemaking than we are. We will try to battle it out with our Eastern European competitors, the Czech and Hungarian film studios, offering competitive prices. However, it will not be easy. There are strong support systems for national producers in virtually all the Eastern European countries as well as in America. In Russia, we still have to build such a system. For example, a tax return system still does not exist, so if a Western producer comes to film here, we will have to work without profit to provide a competitive price. We are ready to do this.

Q: Where are the Western movies with Russian settings and villains filmed?

A: Often in Hungary and the Czech Republic. Often they are not filmed in Moscow because, in addition to not being ready to invite foreign producers here for economic reasons, Russian organizational skills are also not always up to their standards. It is often easier to build Red Square in some Eastern European studio and put up a fake Kremlin as well. Is that right or wrong? I do not know. London, Paris and New York, for example, offer their streets for filming as part of the strategy of promoting these cities as international tourism centers. If you always show a city in movies as beautiful, comfortable and interesting, a person living on the other side of the world will eventually want to see that city in person. If you do not show off the city or show it in an unflattering light, dangerous and gloomy, then many people will probably not come. They will consider Russia the world's citadel of evil and think that polar bears roam the streets here and play balalaikas. We will gradually change that situation if we work with Western film producers. We just need to start.

Q: You know English well and at one point in your life even considered becoming a translator. Did you ever have a desire to leave to work in the West where the film industry already allows working on large-scale projects?

A: My values include what you could call love for your motherland, and these values are more important than commercial success. I would never leave Russia to work in a large, international industry. I like living in this country and want to live here even though I understand perfectly that it is harder here now than in the other countries. I look at some of the shortcomings in Russia's business world as an opportunity to correct them. There is a marketing advantage in this as well as an opportunity for growth. If someone is not doing something here, start doing it first and you will get some unique advantages. It took people in the West decades to create a film industry. It would be less ambitious to use the results of their labor than to try to lay the bricks for the foundation of a Russian film industry.

Q: How do you see the Russian film industry in 5 years?

A: I hope that viewers will respect Russian film. I very much hope that we will be able to restore the authority of Russian films, and, as a result, the box office revenues will increase. Right now, Russian movie makers too often betray the trust of their audiences. This must not

happen. A person virtually signs a contract when he buys a ticket at the cinema. He has not seen the movie yet and does not know what he is being sold. The contract is based on trust, and that trust must be restored. The viewer should have fewer reasons to fear that he is making a wrong choice when he buys a ticket to a Russian movie.

Q: What does the word "film" mean for you as opposed to an average Russian?

A: About 85 percent of what the average Russian chooses to watch are Western films, so when you speak to an average viewer, he will talk to you about American films. I will talk about Russian ones.

For me, movies are a magic world in which you can create what you cannot create in reality. Movies are a big fairytale in which I believe and which I really love. Television, which I worked in before, is not at all as creative as film. In television, money and financial calculations always take center stage. You know your audience, and you do everything to satisfy them. You have minimal abilities to develop the tastes and interests of your audience. If you suddenly attempt to be an art connoisseur and try to change the audience's understanding of what is good entertainment, you will simply lose them. Television is a much more pragmatic medium than film. Film gives you more opportunity to prioritize creativity.

Q: What motivates you in your work?

A: The opportunity to see the results of my work materialized not only in the form of films but also as a physical studio.

Q: Who inspires you?

A: I do not have one idol that would be an ideal to strive for. Different people have influenced me and my attitude to life at various times. I cannot say that I have been so smitten with one person, like Steve Jobs, for example, that I would wish to be like him. Never. He lived his wonderful life, and I hope to live mine. No less wonderful, but different.

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