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'Milk' Producers Attend Side by Side LGBT Film Fest

By Sergey Chernov

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Director Gus Van Sant and screenwriter Dustin Lance Black at the festival. **Sergey Chernov**

American film director Gus Van Sant came to support the beleaguered Side by Side LGBT rights festival on Saturday despite threats and attacks that caused some other Western filmmakers to decline the festival's invitation or even to withdraw from the lineup after initially agreeing.

His appearance came after the public had been evacuated due to the fifth bomb threat the festival experienced during its run and had to wait for two hours outside until the Skorokhod film and concert venue was checked for explosive devices.

Having flown in earlier that same evening, Van Sant arrived with "Milk" screenwriter Dustin Lance Black and producer Bruce Cohen to screen his 2008 film about the pioneering American gay politician Harvey Milk, who was shot to death in 1978. The three started by unfurling a large rainbow banner reading "Support Russian Gays" on stage, to a standing ovation

from the festival audience.

An awkward moment came shortly after, when Van Sant introduced his "old Russian friend," who turned out to be the controversial artist Sergei Bugayev, also known under the alias Afrika.

Bugayev was Putin's official advocate during the 2012 presidential campaign, gave pro-Putin speeches and was reported to have been involved in opposition-smearing schemes. On Nov. 5, the Dzerzhinsky District Court ruled that Bugayev illegally possessed two dozen paintings by several local artists that he reportedly took possession of when organizing exhibitions abroad. The court ordered him to return the paintings to their rightful owners.

In his turn, Bugayev said he was the victim of what he described as a "liberal-fascist" campaign allegedly organized by former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev to punish him for his support of Putin. "After all, it is not just about me as an individual, they are barking at President Putin's official endorser!" he told Moskovsky Komsomolets on Nov. 27.

Speaking at the festival, Bugayev, who first met Van Sant in St. Petersburg in 1991, said that the two had been drinking vodka ahead of the event. Later, a journalist from Ekho Moskvy's St. Petersburg bureau confronted Van Sant with a question about whether he was aware of Bugayev's pro-Kremlin activities, to applause from the audience. No direct answer followed.

During a lengthy discussion with the three filmmakers, Van Sant said why he had chosen to make a film about Milk. "I think the first time I heard of Harvey Milk I was driving cross country in the U.S., and there was a report that an openly gay politician in San Francisco had been killed, a supervisor, and also the mayor of San Francisco," he said.

"And the connotation was that even though the mayor was not gay, there was something about the story [...] that suggested it was because he was gay and he was out and advocated being out. And that was a very small broadcast and I did not know about Harvey Milk at that time.

"It is pretty much the thing that brought me out of the closet — that announcement or that moment in history."

Although Van Sant did not speak much on LGBT rights or political issues at the event, dedicating much of his time to talking about the depictions of clouds in his films, the subject was addressed at length by Black and Cohen. Cohen described the event as the perfect example of "the combination of personal experience and political and artistic experience."

"We have Bruce [Turner, the U.S. Consul General in St. Petersburg] here and some other of his associates from the American Consulate, which we want to thank for joining us," Cohen said.

"They represent the U.S. government, and the U.S. government did not always support the LGBT people. The three of us and many, many, many others in America, as you know, have spent our entire lives fighting the U.S. government for our rights to be equal human beings. So to be here tonight and to have them supporting us and to realize that now the U.S. government is on our side is very, very moving to us and, I hope, gives all of you great hopes for the

future."

Referring to himself as being raised in conservative, gay-hostile Mormon community, screenwriter Black said Milk inspired him by his courage to be open about his gayness despite the danger.

"I wanted to make this film to remind Americans, and now to remind the world, that we must be brave in the face of discrimination, and we must come out, and we must remain visible, because visibility is our path to freedom, and it's true for Americans and it's true right here today," he said.

Black specifically addressed Russian anti-gay legislators and officials. "And to those people out there who want to hurt gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people just for their own gain, I want you to know that I am dedicated — and we are dedicated — to making sure that it does not happen in silence, that it will not be invisible, that the world is watching and you will be held accountable," he said.

Ahead of the closing event, a group of men wearing the armbands of the revived pro-Kremlin nationalist party Rodina (Motherland) came to the venue to give away "gifts" to the festival attendees. The holiday gift bags contained a gift-wrapped piece of soap on a rope and a note reading "From Russians with Love." After the festival's security guards told them to leave, one of them sprayed the crowd with tear gas, according to Side by Side co-organizer Gulya Sultanova.

Earlier, better-publicized venues such as the Jam Hall movie theater and the Loft Project Etazhi art center cancelled scheduled screenings after receiving bomb threats from the anti-gay faction. The events scheduled for those venues were then moved to the Green Lamp press club, a smaller venue used for news conferences and press screenings. On Friday, when Canadian director Xavier Dolan's "Tom at the Farm" was screened, Green Lamp was so crowded that some potential audience members could not be admitted.

Side by Side organizers said they would screen "Valentine Road" by American director Marta Cunningham and several short films they failed to show during the festival due to cancellations and the time lost because of the bomb threats during a special screening in February 2014.

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