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Jack Ryan Thriller Recreates Russia in the U.K.

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Sir Kenneth Branagh takes on dual duties behind the camera as director and also on screen as oligarch villain Viktor Cherevin. He has spoken about the difficulties of filming in Moscow.

"Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit," an espionage thriller by Paramount Pictures is currently sitting on top of the Russian box office with an opening weekend gross of $2.2 million, showing on more than 1,000 screens. The film aims to do for Tom Clancy's CIA hero Jack Ryan what "Casino Royale" did for 007 and delve into the character's origins.

Sir Kenneth Branagh takes on dual duties behind the camera as director and on screen as the oligarch villain Viktor Cherevin, who attempts to destroy the U.S. economy. It is not Branagh's first Russian role — he played Chekhov's Ivanov on the London stage in 2008. Though large sections of the film's action takes place in Moscow, it was only partially shot there. Branagh opted to shoot much of the $60 million movie in England — at Pinewood Studios in Buckinghamshire and on location in Liverpool and London.

"Moscow is an amazing city, but it is a challenge to work in because it is so big and so spread out ... [Liverpool] was able to provide us with some old imperial Moscow" Branagh said, according to the British Film Commission website.

Liverpool's commercial district doubled for the Russian capital in the film. The film's production designer Andrew Laws was responsible for recreating modern-day Moscow at Pinewood and other British locations. "Using a building in London and post-production visual effects, we were able create something with a grandeur and glory very much like what is currently being built in Moscow's new financial district."

A mixture of a strong filmmaking infrastructure — notably state-of-the-art studios and post-production facilities — makes Britain in general, and London in particular, a major destination for film production. Especially strong are the post-production facilities and world-class visual effects company such as Framestore — Oscar-nominated for their work on "Gravity" — and Soho-based Cinesite, who were responsible for many of the visual effects on Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit.

In the past, a number of filmmakers have recreated Russia in England. As long ago as 1981, for his Jack Reed biopic "Reds," Warren Beatty used the interiors of Lancaster House in London as the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, as Leningrad, as it then was, was out of bounds to Western filmmakers.

When shooting on location in Russia was beyond the budget of the makers of 2012's "Anna Karenina," director Joe Wright abridged Tolstoy and stylized imperial Russia inside a 19th-century theater where the drama unfolds, yet he never lost sight of the fact that film is a visual medium. Production designers Sarah Greenwood and Katie Spencer were inspired by Selo, the summer palace of Catherine the Great. Their sets were gorgeous to look at and they even included a train station inside the theater. These were built over 12 weeks during 2011 at Shepperton Studios in Surrey. On the same sound stages where 1870s St. Petersburg was built, they had just finished hosting Sandra Bullock suspended by wires in front of a green screen for Gravity. Greenwood and Spencer were both Academy Award-nominated for their work.

Shepperton was the same studio where another British version of "Anna Karenina" starring Vivien Leigh was shot back in 1948. It is also where in 1999 Martha Fiennes filmed her adaptation of Puskin's "Onegin," with locations in Hampshire and Surrey, featuring her brother Ralph.

None of these match the most ambitious recreating of Russia in England. In 1995, "Goldeneye" was to relaunch the James Bond franchise. The producers found their traditional venue of Pinewood Studios working to full capacity, so opted to build a new studio on the site of a former Rolls Royce plant at Levesden in Watford, 29 kilometers from London. At the finished studio, art director Peter Lamont created St. Petersburg on the massive back lot for the tank chase, though only a small amount of that sequence was shot on location. Lamont's ambitious sets also included a Soviet chemical weapons facility, a Siberian satellite monitoring station, a Turkish bath and an eerie junkyard full of abandoned Soviet-era statues. Away from the studio, St. Petersburg Airport was Epsom racecourse and Alec Trevelyan's Russian armour-plated train ran on the Nene Valley Railway in Peterborough —

which had previously doubled for East Germany in 1983's "Octopussy." Levesden subsequently became the studio where Warner Brothers produced all eight of the "Harry Potter" series and is today both a working film studio and home to the £100 million Harry Potter Studio Tour.

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