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Homegrown Films Beat Hollywood Imports in the Battle for Viewers

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Moviegoers weighing their options at a Moscow cinema, a choice that in recent months has favored Russian film.

After a string of domestic blockbusters and the strongest first quarter in recent years, it seems fair to say that the Russian film industry is on the rise — but the story is far from over, a local producer says.

"Russian cinema is experiencing a very important moment right now," said Alexander Culicov, chief producer of box office leader "Viy 3D" from motion picture company Marins Group.

"This upswing will be definitive," Culicov said. "Either we reach a new level and become a country to be reckoned with in the international film business, or else ..."

From January to March, Russian-produced films "Viy 3D" and "Yolki 3" held first and second

place respectively in the domestic box office, with box office revenues of 1.2 billion and 895 million rubles, according to independent research company Movie Research. Domestic films' total revenues reached 4.8 billion rubles ($134 million) and claimed 34 percent of the total box office, a nearly 70 percent increase from the same period in 2013.

The beginning of the year is traditionally a strong period for Russian film thanks to the New Years' holiday, the peak season for Russian movie theaters. Indeed, three of the four Russian films in the quarter's top 10 — "Yolki 3," "Ivan Tsarevich and the Grey Wolf 2" and "Love in the Big City 3" — were all released for the holiday.

But there was a dark horse as well: "Viy 3D," the fantasy film adaptation of a classic Gogol short story, which combined the imagery of a mythological past with 3D effects to box office acclaim.

"Viy 3D" was released on Jan. 30, during what is typically the dead season for Russian film. Two other recent hits — 2013's hockey biopic "Legend No. 17" and historical epic "Stalingrad" — were also released at unusual times to no ill effect, said Alexander Luzhin, executive director of Movie Research.

"Russian producers have at last understood that good Russian films can compete with foreign films not only during the New Years' holidays," Luzhin said. A total of 21 Russian films were released in the first quarter this year, compared to 15 in 2013.

The rising level of professionalism among Russian producers, as well as the growth in their numbers, is one of the two main forces behind Russian film's recent success, said Iva Stromilova, a producer at film company Bazelevs, who worked on the New Years' comedy "Yolki 3."

The other is the government's financial support both for the production and, more importantly, the distribution of commercial films, Stromilova added.

"An excellent film may never reach the screen if it is not supported by an advertising campaign, which is often comparable to the production budget," she said.

Fond Kino, the agency responsible for developing cinema for the mass audience, launched a program to support commercial films in 2010 and has to varying degrees participated in most of the box office successes of recent years.

"Given the two to three year film production cycle, we are now seeing the results of that program," Luzhin said.

The fund made a few critical changes to its strategy in 2013. Studios now have to publicly defend their requests and pay back a certain amount of the money they receive to the government.

Of the Fond Kino's 2013 budget of 6.7 billion rubles ($186 million), studios will pay back about 30 percent, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky said at a meeting of the council on the development of national cinema in late March.

This state support, alongside Russian producers' increased activity and the industry's

recovery from the 2008 to 2009 economic crisis, has led to the current revival, Luzhin said.

While "Yolki 3" could have got by without state funding, the Fond Kino's subsidies was essential during the filming of the first Yolki, said Dessislava Medkova, head of marketing at Bazelevs.

Of "Viy 3D"'s $26-million budget, about 2 percent came from the Fond Kino, Culicov said.

The government is currently developing a range of further proposals intended to support Russian cinema, including taxes on showing foreign films and a customs duty on the import of foreign movies with "low commercial potential."

But from the perspective of filmmakers and producers, what the Russian film industry needs is clear.

"Together we must resolve one very important and incredibly difficult issue — to increase the quality of our films," Culicov said.

There are still crucial gaps in the infrastructure needed to create films with the visual quality modern viewers expect. When the team on "Viy 3D" finished filming and went into post-production, they discovered that there simply were not enough specialists in Russia with the experience needed to create visual effects for the 3D format.

"We pulled everything together from fragments, practically creating it from nothing. All of Moscow's computer graphics studies worked with us at various times, and also a great number of teams from other cities and countries," Culicov said.

Once a film has been assembled, there is another, more basic problem: Russian viewers usually are not very interested in domestic films.

"It is likely related to the fact that it is harder to guess whether a Russian film will be interesting and high-quality. Viewers know that Hollywood films will have first-rate special effects, even if the story is not the most outstanding," Bazelevs' Medkova said.

And yet, as the recent parade of domestic hits has demonstrated, Russians' attitude toward their country's cinema is clearly improving. "If a film is good, then after watching it the viewer has no biases left," Medkova said.

Film series such as the Yolkis are particularly important in this regard. Of the four films in the first quarter's top 10, all but "Viy 3D" were sequels to earlier films, showing that Russian film companies are not only finding their audience, but holding onto it.

"Without a doubt, a great part of our success is our fan base. In this way, along with the Yolki films we are nurturing our viewers' trust for this format, for Russian film entertainment," Stromilova said.

In the next two quarters, Hollywood blockbusters such as "The Amazing Spider-Man 2" and "X-Men: The Days of Future Past" are expected to sweep in and diminish Russian films' share in the market.

But hope, once again, will come with the New Year, as yet another Yolki — "Yolki 1914" — and the next installments in two other popular film franchises, "What Men Talk About 3" and "Snow Queen 2," hit the silver screen, Movie Research's Luzhin said.

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