The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Gay American Actor Makes Waves in Russia's Closeted Entertainment Scene

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February 11, 2015



Odin Biron plays U.S. doctor Phil Richards in Russian sitcom “Interny.”

The coming-out of American actor Odin Lund Biron, who plays a starring role in one of Russia's most popular sitcoms, has rattled the Russian show business community, where homosexuality remains taboo.

The 30-year-old Minnesotan — better known to Russian television viewers as Phil Richards, the keen American medical intern on hit sitcom "Interny" — revealed earlier this week in an interview with New York Magazine that he is gay.

Biron stars alongside Ivan Okhlobystin, arguably one of Russia's most outspoken entertainment personalities, who is well-known for his homophobic diatribes.

Okhlobystin, who plays Biron's merciless supervisor on the show, tweeted that he "banged his head against the wall and cursed fate" when he heard that his co-star was a "sodomite."

"There are some things that are not worth knowing," Okhlobystin Tweeted in reference to Biron's sexual orientation Wednesday morning, pleading: "God protect us from this wickedness!"

The show's fan base flooded Russian social media with the news of Biron's coming out. Many commenters expressed shock, or speculated on how the uncompromising Dr. Bykov would have reacted. Other social media users suggested that Biron's announcement could jeopardize the future of the show.

God's Will, a Russian Orthodox religious movement, tweeted that it was prepared to "cure" Biron of his homosexuality.

Though social networks were replete with messages of disbelief and disgust, some fans of "Interny" expressed support for Biron, congratulating him on the bold move.

Coming out of the closet is a high-risk endeavor in the world of Russian show business. Television host Anton Krasovsky was promptly fired from his job at Kontr TV in 2013 after announcing he was gay on air.

"The Russian public brought me into their homes through the character of Phil Richards, and I believe they accepted me," Biron said in a statement issued Wednesday. "Now I appeal to the good conscience of the Russian people, and I can only hope that friendship in Russia is stronger than hate and fear."

The cast of "Interny" is scheduled to begin shooting the show's sixth season in the coming weeks. Biron's decision to open up about his sexuality does not appear to have impacted those plans.

Okhlobystin tweeted that "Bykov will never find out that Phil [Biron] is a pervert," seeming to imply that as far as their fictional characters are concerned, Biron's announcement will not have any effect.

Biron, whose heterosexual character on "Interny" has two gay fathers, has been a witness to homophobic sneers on and off the set.

Okhlobystin — a 48-year-old father of six who served in the Orthodox Church until his priesthood was suspended in 2010 — has publicly advocated for homosexuals to be stripped of their rights to vote, referring to members of the LGBT community as a "living danger to his children."

"I'd burn them [homosexuals] all alive in the oven," Okhlobystin said during a public appearance in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk in 2013.

He famously wrote an open letter to President Vladimir Putin last year, asking him to restore Soviet-era legislation that criminalized homosexuality.

Biron told New York Magazine that Okhlobystin's comments had nearly led him to sever ties with the show.

In 2013, Russia adopted legislation banning the "propaganda of nontraditional sexual

relations among minors." Critics of the law say it has further stigmatized Russia's LGBT community by restricting its members' freedoms and rights, and has led to a surge in hate crime.

"I do not see myself as an activist and I didn't set out to involve myself in politics," Biron said. "But at a time when sexual minorities in Russia face greater adversity, both socially and legally, than at any time in recent memory, I feel compelled to use my unique platform to speak out. If my coming out publicly can give hope to anyone, or encourage them to do the same, then the sacrifice of my privacy is worth it."

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