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'Leviathan' Is Close Favorite as Oscars Draw Near

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Zvyagintsev will fly out for the Oscar ceremony, which takes place Sunday.

HOLLYWOOD — Prognosticators are at work as the guessing game heats up in the Oscar race, especially when it comes to the best foreign-language film category with Russia's "Leviathan" and Poland's "Ida" occupying center stage.

"Leviathan" has turned its director, Andrei Zvyagintsev, into a beloved artist on the world cinema scene while being scorned in his homeland.

The much-discussed controversial Russian film has managed to garner accolades in most competitions it has entered. The big test comes Sunday when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announces the Oscar winners in a televised ceremony from the Dolby Theater in Hollywood.

Both Zvyagintsev and the movie's producer Alexander Rodnyansky will be in the audience, as will representatives of the four other competing foreign films, which, in addition to "Ida," include Estonia's "Tangerines," Mauritania's "Timbuktu" and Argentina's "Wild Tales."

In an interview with The Moscow Times, Rodnyansky said that both he and "Andrei will be attending the ceremonies with our spouses. My producing partner Sergei Melkumov will be joining us."

Rodnyansky said that although the film's stars will not be making the trip, he will be bringing two other guests "who helped finance the film."

In entertainment circles, "Leviathan" is looked at as the odds-on favorite to capture the top prize, closely followed by "Ida." "Wild Tales" is regarded as the dark horse in this race, considering comedies rarely win the Oscar.

The controversial Russian movie became the talk of the town in Hollywood, both for its story line and the negative treatment in its home country, although it was nevertheless selected as Russia's official entry in the Oscar competition.

Although the film's theme is an average man's fight against a corrupt government official determined to seize his ancestral home, it has been described as anti-Russian and anti-Putin screen fare. Producer Rodnyansky takes exception to that label. "Andrei has made a very universal film, but it's also a contemporary story from Russian."

Results of the Academy Awards are eagerly awaited by Sony Classics, which is distributing the film in the United States. Prior to its Golden Globe win, "Leviathan" started with a very limited showing at two theaters in Los Angeles and New York. Since then it was expanded to 15 movie theaters.

Usually an Oscar win translates to a sizable box office boost. Sony is heavily advertising the film in key markets and has spent a considerable amount of money in trade publications in Los Angeles targeting the entertainment community.

So far its limited public engagement here has grossed in excess of $600,000.

Meanwhile, after delays the film opened in Russia, where it is showing on more than 600 screens, double the amount Rodnyansky says he had expected.

"Our film opened to 50 million rubles (about $800,000). This is a breakthrough for a Russian auteur's film," the producer told The Moscow Times, adding, "No one ever opened to these [first week] numbers and especially with such a number of illegal downloads."

In the United States, "Leviathan" had a positive snowball effect. Media reaction has been unanimously favorable. The New York Times described it as "Russia's greatest cinematic accomplishment in years."

"It is already being compared to works of Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak," Rodnyansky said, adding that he is hoping that it will be seen "as a work of art rather than a political statement."

He said that the number of illegal downloads swelled on the day of the Golden Globes by "30,000 in the first 24 hours and has been growing ever since."

However, the producer said that contrary to rumors they did not intentionally encourage

the Russian public to illegally download it.

"I have never, nor has Andrei ever, encouraged the people to watch the film illegally. What Andrei said at a press conference was that if a theater is not accessible and there is no way 'Leviathan' will be broadcast on TV, then we wouldn't really mind if the film was downloaded," the producer said.

He added, "But that [was] never meant to be an encouragement."

Rodnyansky said that the film has already been illegally downloaded more than two million times in Russia.

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