

Film 'I Am Michael' Will Test Limits of Tolerance

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James Franco stars as a gay activist who renounces his homosexuality.

HOLLYWOOD — The addition of a gay-themed drama to an American co-sponsored film festival's slate in Russia is creating a buzz in the motion picture community here.

The film "I Am Michael" has been included in the lineup of independent movies to be screened at the American Film Festival (AmFest) both in Moscow and St. Petersburg running September 16 to 27.

The 96-minute film may create controversy at the annual event co-sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and CoolConnections, a Moscow-based arts group dedicated to showcasing cinema events, especially spotlighting independent productions.

Entertainment watchdog internet sites here are interpreting the inclusion of this motion picture to the list as "defying Russia's ban on gay-oriented screen fares."

In Russia a "gay propaganda law" bans the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations"

to minors.

AmFest was begun in 2006 by a group of Russian and American movie buffs with the purpose of showing small-budget and classic films which would not be otherwise widely distributed in Russia.

CoolConnections, the Embassy's partner, is primarily responsible for the selection of movies.

"Our program department follows such festivals as Sundance, Tribeca, New York and others to select the highlights for showings in Russia," said CoolConnections' Natalia Goncharova about the selection process. "Our purpose is to find the most interesting pictures to screen for Russian audiences."

She continued, "We aim to create a broader conception of the American film industry than the standard choice found in the usual Russian cinema halls. Each year we select the newest and the latest American film releases, which have never been screened in Russia before."

At the same time "we don't ignore such big names as Mark Ruffalo, James Franco, Jesse Eisenberg and Jonah Hill," she added.

"I Am Michael," which was premiered at the Sundance film expo, has a well-known ensemble of actors headed by James Franco, Zachary Quinto and Emma Roberts, and it was written and directed by Justin Kelly.

The film is based on the true story of a gay activist, Michael Glatze — played by Franco — who renounces his homosexuality as he tries to become straight. He eventually becomes engaged to a woman and is ordained as a Christian pastor.

Enforcement of the law against propaganda of homosexuality among minors has been sporadic in Russia. "Pride," a British comedy, is the first gay-themed film to be released in Russia since 2013 and currently is enjoying a run. Its movie posters are clearly marked 18+ in compliance with the law.

"I Am Michael" represents the second starring role for Franco in a gay-oriented motion picture. In 2008 he appeared with Sean Penn in "Milk." The biopic chronicled the life of first openly gay right activist and politician Harvey Milk to be elected to public office in California. He was assassinated while serving his term.

"I made the decision to do both (films) at different times," Franco told The Moscow Times. The script was developed from an article in The New York Times Magazine about Glatze, who is now married and living in Wyoming.

The film's principals had no involvement in the selection process for the Russian showings. "This year AmFest celebrates its 10th anniversary. So, we are aiming to make it an extra special event," said Goncharova, who is the project manager of AmFest at CoolConnections.

Among a dozen films, the festival's lineup includes a comedy called "Funny Bunny" and two other dramas, "Infinitely Polar Bear" and "The Diary of a Teenage Girl."

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