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‘Bolshoi’: New Movie Explores Love and Competition at Russia’s Best-Known Ballet

Valery Todorovsky goes behind the scenes at Moscow's illustrious theater

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Not one, but two of the most anticipated Russian big screen premieres this year are about ballet: Valery Todorovsky’s “Bolshoi” and Alexei Uchitel’s much discussed “Matilda.” The former, directed by Valery Todorovsky, hits theaters nationwide on May 11 and it’s a film not to miss. Todorovsky is best known for his 2008 musical “Hipsters,” set in the 1950s, and “The Thaw,” which many believe is still the best Russian-language TV series to date.

“Bolshoi” was conceived several years ago and took a long time to produce. In Todorovsky’s own words, he’s never been a fan of ballet, but one day at a performance he realized that the dance form was “very attractive” for him as a cinematographer.

“It’s pure, absolute, complete beauty. At the same time I understood very well that behind this beauty there’s not just work and incredible human sacrifice, but that there

is a whole world. And I wanted to enter that world and tell a story about it,” says Todorovsky.

Todorovsky describes the film’s format as a novel: “I wanted to fit a lot in two hour. My characters go through three ages, it’s a story of their friendship, which falls apart and is put back together again. It’s a story of coming of age and becoming a professional.”

The movie centers on two characters, Yulya and Karina, who study at the ballet academy and then compete to become lead dancers in a performance at the Bolshoi Theater.

“Bolshoi,” Valery Todorovsky’s new movie on Russia’s most famous ballet, secured access to the illustrious theatre for filming. The movie opens nationwide on May 11.

“It’s a two hour long novel about the people who come into the world of ballet a for a chance to stand for 10 minutes on that stage. People are prepared to die for it,” says Todorovsky.

The original cut of “Bolshoi” was actually three and a half hours long. Todorovsky hopes that after the film’s theatrical release he will have a chance to make it into a TV series.

Even though several acclaimed actors are involved in the movie, including Alisa Freindlikh and Valentina Telichkina, who play instructors at the Ballet Academy, both main characters are played by newcomers, discovered in the world of ballet. Todorovsky says it was the most difficult casting process he’s taken part in.

“I very quickly realized that traditional drama actors won’t be able to play these roles. However thin, slim and flexible they were, they wouldn’t be able to have an argu- ment while raising their legs [up to their ears]. It’s just impossible.”

Todorovsky and his team went to pretty much every ballet theater in Russia and some of the former Soviet Union countries scouting for the right balance of ballet and acting skills.

Margarita Simonova, who plays Yulya, was found at a theater in Warsaw (Poland), while Anna Isayeva, who plays Karina, was at a dance school in Moscow. Andrei Sorokin, who was cast for the role of Mitya, the girls’ mutual love interest, is a principal dancer at the Yekaterinburg Theater of Opera and Ballet.

“The trick was to find young actors, who would look similar to play our main characters as children,” says Todorovsky, explain- ing that they were discovered not in the ballet, but at gymnastics schools.

Another aspect that makes “Bolshoi” all the more interesting to watch is that all the scenes that take place inside the world- famous theater were really filmed there, a privilege that not many filmmakers enjoyed in the past. On the other hand, the ballet academy is a replica built at a film studio because filming on location would interrupt the teaching.

Todorovsky says that the filming process was “a gradual, step by step immersion [into the world of ballet].” “And now that the movie is done, I can say that yes, I love ballet,” he adds.

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