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‘Ayka’ Is Still In the Running for an Oscar

This Russian-language film is not from Russia

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Actress Samal Yeslyamova and director Sergei Dvortsevoi **Samal Yeslyamova / Courtesy Cannes Film Festival**

HOLLYWOOD—Russian movie makers sent six films to compete for Hollywood’s two coveted awards. None of them made the cut. Now a Russian-Kazakhstani drama titled “Ayka” is capturing the entertainment community’s attention.

Moscow-educated director Sergei Dvortsevoi’s film has been shortlisted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

In the West, the film was promoted as a “Russian-Kazakhstani co-production.” The 100-minute, Russian-language story takes place in Moscow: a runaway new mother struggles in the Moscow winter to raise her child without a job or place to live.

But the picture was entered in the competition as Kazakhstan’s official pick since the

Academy Awards accepts only one entry from each country and Russia's official pick this year was "Sobibor." "Sobibor" was eliminated both in the Golden Globes and Oscar races. Of the 87 films vying for the Oscar in the best foreign language film category, "Ayka" has emerged as one of the nine semi-finalists.

This is Dvortsevoi's second directorial effort. He made his feature debut in 2008 with a film titled "Tulpan," which was Kazakhstan's 2009 Academy Awards submission in the foreign language category.

A Shymkent native, Dvortsevoi worked as an aviation engineer before studying filmmaking in Moscow in the early 1990s.

"Ayka" competed for the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival, where its star Samal Yeslyamova won the best actress award. The film won the grand prize at the 28th Cottbus Film Festival in Germany.

In Hollywood films are heavily promoted for the Oscars. Studios and distributors engage so-called "awards consultants" to push their products. Promotion helps draw attention to films and filmmakers in all awards races.

For example, this year in the foreign film category Netflix is spending an enormous amount of money advertising its release, the Mexican film "Roma," one of the nine shortlisted films. With this film, the streaming pioneer is determined to legitimize its theatrical exhibition arm.

However, "Ayka's" promotion and public exposure has been minimal, and it seems to be succeeding on word of mouth and its European award reputation.

In the Oscar race "Ayka" is competing with "Birds of Passage" from Colombia; "The Guilty" -- Denmark; "Never Look Away" -- Germany; "Shoplifters" -- Japan; "Capernaum" -- Lebanon; "Roma" -- Mexico; "Cold War" -- Poland; and "Burning" -- South Korea.

Mexico's entry "Roma" won the best foreign language Golden Globe on Sunday.

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