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Vera Krichevskaya's 'Connected' Premieres at Artdocfest in Riga

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Augie Fabela II and Dmitry Zimin. **Still from "Connected"**

Since 2007 Artdocfest has been celebrating the art of documentary filmmaking, first in Moscow and then, when the Russian authorities began to disrupt the festivals, in Riga. Every year dozens of films from or about Russia and Ukraine, Central Asia, the Baltic states and Eastern and Central Europe are shown to tens of thousands of viewers in a week-long film lover's fest that begins every morning and often runs all night.

This year the winner of the Special Award was given to "Connected" directed by Vera Krichevskaya. It tells the story of the improbable partnership and deep friendship between a young American, Augie Fabela II, and a much older Russian, Dmitry Zimin, whom Augie calls "Dim." Their relationship begins before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and ends a few months before Russia invades Ukraine in 2022.

Like all good stories, it's not only about their friendship. It's the story of Russia's steps

towards joining part of the civilized world and then its rapid descent into barbarity. And it is the story of a man with what today seems like a rare quality: the ability to tell right from wrong and do the right thing.

In America, Augie is one of three children of emigrants from Mexico and Columbia. In Russia, Dim is the child of a working mother and, as he finds out late in life, a father who was arrested and executed in the 1930s. Augie's only connection to the U.S.S.R. was a college trip, but in 1991 he and his father traveled to Moscow after being convinced that they'd be able to sell their mobile network equipment and services to small cities in Russia.

In Moscow they quickly learned two things: The only reason scientists and businessmen were willing to meet with them was the buffet breakfast at their hotel (where dozens of napkin-wrapped sandwiches disappeared into hard-cased briefcases), and no one wanted to buy their products — they wanted to manufacture them in Russia. The Fabelas changed their business model and soon invited a group from the Moscow Radio Technical Institute to the U.S. to continue talks. When the invitation list was being finalized, Augie asked specifically to include "that man" who kept pounding the conference table during their meeting in Moscow. Augie thought that man — Dmitry Zimin — knew what he was talking about and really cared.

He was right. The company the Fabelas and Zimin founded in 1992, VimpelCom, went from being a tiny startup mobile communications network with 200 subscribers to 50,000 customers in just four years. In 1996 it was the first Russian company to have an IPO on the U.S. Stock Exchange.

VimpelCom somehow managed to get through the years of gangster capitalism in the late 1990s, but they couldn't survive the years of state gangsterism under Vladimir Putin. In 2001 Zimin and Augie sold their Russian holdings.

And then the next chapter of their improbable lives began. In the U.S. Augie, who was now independently wealthy, joined the police force. In Russia Dim took most of his wealth and put it into his newly created Dynasty Foundation. For years the Foundation supported the sciences and education in Russia. When Dynasty began to support liberal education projects, in 2015 it was declared a "foreign agent." Dynasty was closed, but another organization, the Zimin Foundation, continued — and continues — philanthropic work.

All of this would be another story of business thwarted by the Russian state. But Krichevskaya is a master storyteller with an eye for finding compelling people and personal stories and then weaving them into the larger story of the era they live in. Here she is supported by the extraordinary music by Anna Dubrich that shapes and carries the audience's emotions aloft throughout the film.

Krichevskaya lets Augie narrate much of the story of their connection and Dim's life. There are black-and-white photographs of Zimin as a child, a teenage radio constructor, a young man hiking with his girlfriend and then wife Maya, and old family photographs of his illustrious pre-Revolutionary ancestors. The photographs of Augie growing up are in American technicolor. All this is interspersed with archival material, as over the years Reagan welcomes Gorbachev at the White House, Clinton and Yeltsin crack jokes in photo ops. Young Soviet radio engineers, long-haired, cigarettes in hand, head off to the U.S. in their brown sweaters and jackets. There is gaudy Moscow in the 1990s and Russian dancers on the floor of

the NY Stock Exchange; mugshots of Russian gangsters with black boxes over their eyes; and Vladimir Putin morphing from a skinny guy in a bad suit to the master of the Kremlin.

Zimin narrates parts of his life and the country's changes, too, in clips from Russian television interviews over the decades. We see him young and optimistic, then gradually becoming gray and more pessimistic until he speaks of the Putin era, when "the time of hope became the time of survival."

The audience knows from the beginning of the film — or before they enter the theater — how the story ends. Zimin has cancer, and although it is not terminal, his memory is failing, his hands shake, and he is no longer the master of his own life. He has asked his family and Augie to join him on a "last voyage" sailing on a yacht around Cyprus. The man who has lived his life consciously has now decided to end it consciously in Switzerland where assisted suicide is allowed.

At the end of the film, Dim's deck chair is empty. And when lights come up in Riga, the audience of many exiles from Russia rise to their feet, some wiping away tears for what was lost and what might have been.

For information about upcoming screenings in the U.S. and U.K., see the film's site here*.*

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