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“Ideas can be found in your nightmares”:

An Interview with Vladislav Severtsev,

Chief Producer of Russian Horror¹

Marat Shabaev

Horror films are trending again. They’re receiving Oscar nominations, becoming hits at the box office, and amassing rave reviews from critics. But that’s all in the West, so what's happening here in Russia? We decided to look into the issue and turned to domestic horror producer Vladislav Severtsev. His studio 10/09 released the highest-grossing Russian horror film *The Bride* (2017). It drew the attention of Netflix and can now be seen on the streaming service. Among the producer’s immediate plans for the future are putting together the supernatural series *America*, searching for screenwriters for a horror almanac about women, and even a vertical web project.

Marat Shabaev: At the end of May, 10/09 studio announced a screenwriting competition for a horror almanac film on women. Why this anthology format as opposed to a feature-length film?

Vladislav Severtsev: The shorter format is a perfect fit for horror. It’s easier to handle. A feature-length film is a very complex thing in terms of script and implementation. These days, theatrical distribution is showing weak signs of life, so the almanac is a safer investment. Moreover, it's uncharted territory. No one has ever done this in Russia.

MS: Why did you choose this particular angle? Your previous films also told women's stories (*The Bride*, *Quiet Comes the Dawn* [2019]).

Vladislav Severtsev: Director Kristina Manzhula pushed me to do this. Kristina is the first female horror director I’ve come across in Russia. I produced her short “I love Eve.” In 2020, she received a prize from the Guild of Film Scholars and Film Critics at Kinotavr. I enjoyed the collaboration, so I wanted to look into the female perspective on the genre.

¹ The original text in Russian was published 24 June, 2021, in *Lumos* (<https://lumos.art/>).

MS: Is it in principle important to you that the directors and screenwriters of this upcoming femme-almanac be women?

Vladislav Severtsev: If the stories for the femme-almanac were filmed or written by women, that would be ideal. At worst, it could be just the protagonist.

MS: In an interview with the site HorrorZone, you lamented that screenwriters are rather weak in Russia. What do you see as the ideal proposal for the horror genre?

Vladislav Severtsev: I would like to see a new approach, and not just the classic scary story about ghosts, the living dead, or a cursed house. A story capable of hooking a sophisticated viewer that also remains interesting to a wider audience. An extremely vague request, but for me the main thing is an original idea. Even rough language isn't especially important, because that can be "cured" through connecting with professional screenwriters.

The genre is undergoing quite a strong transformation. It's beginning to move towards what is called elevated horror or post-horror. (Read more about changes to the genre in our other articles—editor's note.) Unfortunately, the Russian viewer isn't ready for that yet. You can look at *Hereditary* (2018) or *Midsommar* (2019) as examples. These made pennies at the Russian box office in comparison to their showing worldwide.

MS: Where can we look for inspiration? These days, many Russian screenwriters, directors, and writers are oriented towards Western models.

Vladislav Severtsev: The issue of borrowing is multifaceted. It's like in music. Rock and roll isn't a Russian invention, either. When it arrived in the USSR in the 50s and 60s, there was a phase of copying. These are growing pains—you've got to learn to imitate if the feeling doesn't come from within. On the other hand, it's sad to see how many Russian screenwriters are still stuck in the era of early Stephen King or Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). Absolutely brilliant works, but times have changed already.

On the issue of referring to Russian genre samples. One of the projects we currently have in the works is *The Bride's* prequel series, historical horror. I just re-read Aleksei Tolstoy, a brilliant example of Russian Gothic.

MS: So then where do we go to find ideas?

Vladislav Severtsev: You can find ideas in your innermost nightmares. Sometimes I have dreams that make me think, “Damn, this would be a great horror movie if it could be filmed.”

Of course, we also have to try to keep up with the times as much as possible and look at what is happening abroad. If I had a 100% reliable recipe, I'd already be somewhere in the Bahamas sitting in a jacuzzi with some Playboy playmates. Everyone is just trying to find this formula through trial and error.

MS: International horror films of the last decade have concentrated on the inner worlds of their characters and their fears. Would it be possible to film something like that in Russia?

Vladislav Severtsev: Yes. And I'm sure a similar trend could work for us. The main thing in this genre is to sniff out the trigger that will produce a purely physiological reaction. We are fairly simple biological machines, we have certain buttons. It's just very difficult to reach them. It's easier to do when you understand where the lever is. Take films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or *Paranormal Activity* (2007), shoestring projects that ingeniously flipped the trigger and made a killing at the box office. You need to scare yourself, then everything will definitely work.

MS: And what personally scares you?

Vladislav Severtsev: I was really struck by the film *The Dark and the Wicked* (2020). At first glance, it doesn't seem to be doing anything fundamentally new. But closer to the finale, there are some scenes that gave me goosebumps. This happens pretty rarely. It's difficult for whatever is happening onscreen to scare me.

Hereditary also got me. I went to the pre-premiere showing, fell asleep for the first twenty minutes and thought, “I think I'll head out.” But when that girl's head got torn off by the pole, I woke up instantly.

There's nothing else to recall, because mainstream horror movies don't scare me. Commercial horror has become a big glossy machine. It's good because it

attracts a mass audience to the genre. But on the other hand, this kind of approach simplifies it too much.

MS: So that means the new Pennywise from *It* doesn't scare you?

Vladislav Severtsev: Not the new one, not the old one. I've never had a problem with clowns. If we can talk about other film adaptations of King, then I think *Children of the Corn* (1984) is really scary.

MS: You've got several interesting projects in the works right now. We've heard about the *America* series.

Vladislav Severtsev: Yes, it's an adaptation of an Anatolii Umansky story of the same name from the series "The Most Terrible Book." The beauty of it is that it's partly based on true events. It's about the early period of colonization of Alaska by Russians, about their relationship with the Americans, the British, and the local Indians. It was a potent mix. The British supplied the Indians with weapons so they could launch raids against the Russians. This whole story is real. But later on it acquires a mystical coloring. I highly recommend reading.

I translated the story into English and started showing it to potential Western partners. Everyone was delighted. If you need references, then conceptually and visually it's close to the first season of *The Terror*. *America* is my passion project, very big and costly. Right now we're just developing the script. I hope that by the end of 2022 we'll have something concrete, like filming a pilot episode.

MS: And what about the upcoming horror film *Good Luck, Nightingale!*?

Vladislav Severtsev: The plot is pretty simple. It's a chamber film, so the action takes place in one location. There are only four characters: the mother, a former nurse; her daughter, who is getting off methadone; and two Christian missionaries who accidentally wind up in the house. And the fifth character is a monster. If everything works out, it won't be a digital model, but animatronic. And it'll be made by the same people who worked on John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). I can't say more!

Damien LeVeck, director of the horror film *The Cleansing Hour* (2019), which was pretty good, will be shooting the film. For the moment, the fate of the project depends on whether or not we'll be able to get rebates (government

payments that cover part of the production budget—editor's note) in Russia. If so, then filming will begin in Moscow in October. In the worst case scenario that filming must be done in America, then I'll be one of the co-investors and co-producers. (After the interview, preliminary approval of the rebates was received—editor's note).

MS: You did the web series *Don't Be Afraid* (2020). Have you ever thought about making a horror movie for TikTok?

Vladislav Severtsev: We're currently developing a similar project, a short vertical story in cooperation with Mail.ru. I'm not sure how all this will turn out, we'll see.

MS: Do you get the feeling that Russian horror is breaking out of its genre slum?

Vladislav Severtsev: The problem is that there's still a slum at all. Big directors and screenwriters don't want to work in horror. Some are just not interested, while others think it's a low-brow genre.

The box office figures for Russian horror films don't work in our favor, either. After the success of *Queen of Spades* (2015) and *The Bride* (2017), things went downhill. There's a wonderful Russian proverb: don't blame the mirror if your face is crooked. I understand perfectly well that the person who has paid money for a ticket goes to the movie theater the way they'd go to a store. They should get the quantity and quality of adrenaline that any American film might offer.

At the moment, we're unable to provide that. But if you don't make bad movies, you can't make any better ones either. I have to laugh at myself a little because I'm in a situation like the one where “the mice cried, pricked themselves, but kept devouring the cactus anyway.” But if I don't eat this cactus, it won't be possible to elevate the industry of the genre. Sooner or later, it'll happen. I think it needs another five or so years to reach a good level.

MS: But supernatural Russian series streaming on online platforms—like *The Swamp* (2021-), *The Vampires of Midland* (2021), and *Kitchenblock*—have found their audience. And they're pretty well-made. Why is this not the case with feature-length films?

Vladislav Severtsev: These are slightly different things. It's one thing to sit on the couch at home with a beer to watch content at your convenience. It's quite another to go to the movie theater. Today that's a real event. Completely different levels of expectation.

MS: Lots of American directors and screenwriters are not at all shy about working with horror. Do you think we can expect Nikita Mikhalkov or Andrei Zvyagintsev to suddenly start working in this genre?

Vladislav Severtsev: I was just reading in the news that Nikita Mikhalkov's TriTe studio is planning to shoot a horror film about a confrontation between a Russian submarine and a kraken. I was absolutely delighted. Zvyagintsev could handle horror, but I couldn't say how interested in that he is.

In America, well-known directors can take on horror and it seems normal because there's a functioning industry there. We won't be seeing interesting intersections of famous directors with the genre here anytime soon. Of course, there will be attempts to repeat the success of Egor Abaramenko's *Sputnik* (2020). But pure horror isn't worth holding your breath for.

MS: Can you recommend some recent horror films that will help viewers understand the beauty of the genre?

James Wan, with *The Conjuring* franchise, has done a big thing, turning horror into a high-quality mainstream product. There aren't any revelations, but the craftsmanship is absolute. There's also *Hereditary*, which I already mentioned. *Mandy* (2017) is a totally shameless project, and therefore excellent. *The Lighthouse* (2019), even though it's not the genre in its purest form.

MS: Do you think contemporary festival horror will soon give way to something new?

Vladislav Severtsev: It's more than likely to happen. At some point, the circuit will be saturated. But human fears aren't going to disappear and so long as those exist, so will the genre in one or another form. We've already talked about physiology. If you hit a person on the head with a hammer for a long time, then by the end of the week it won't hurt them quite as much as it did on the first day. We need to look for new methods and stimuli.

MS: Maybe the new form is already here, but it's just gone unnoticed? Take video games, for example, even if they're not movies. I'm practically never scared by films, but when I started playing *Resident Evil 7*, I felt true horror and panic.

Vladislav Severtsev: Unfortunately, I'm so busy that I can't spend time on this. Even though I once bought a Playstation 4 and really tried to play. I'm sure that horror is in great demand in the video game industry and can take on other forms even more interesting than in film. Simply because it's an interactive experience. In film, you're led along certain paths, but here there's much more of the unknown.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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