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27th Season Of Long Island Film Festival To Be Held At Bay Street



Artist Bill King. (*LIFF*)

Sag Harbor - The 27th season of the Long Island Film Festival kicks off October 26 at Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor with films from the LIFF World Lens series, including productions from Canada, and Ireland as well as a Wading River production of "Mr. Danby's Son," directed by **Robert Sean**.

The feature for that evening will be "The Riddle."



Nathaniel Kramer.

About "The Riddle"

"The Riddle" is a true original. An American independent film directed by **Evan Brenner**, an American, in Russia and in Russian. While working on another film in Russia in 1993, Brenner wrote a short story about a 10 year-old Russian boy. **Yuri Torokhov**, Executive Producer of "The Riddle," became intrigued by the story as well as the prospect of an American director filming in Russia. Brenner returned to the United States and completed the screenplay with his brother, **Danny Brenner**, while Torokhov set to work raising money. Torokhov's faith, along with several video copies of Brenner's award-winning short films, were the pivotal elements in raising the necessary funds from private investors and banks.

In the United States, Brenner finished gathering a core crew of adventurous Americans, notably cinematographer **Richard Dallett**, casting director **Zoya Spivakovsky**, and co-producer **Chris Vail**. They returned to Russia, optimistic and ready for a long and challenging shoot. Needless to say, they had no idea what lay in store for them.

Although it was immediately apparent that resources were severely limited, Dallett, Spivakovsky, and Brenner set the tone for the rest of the shoot with what became the mantra for the production - No Compromise. Spivakovsky auditioned more than 400 children from schools and orphanages in and around the city of Perm, bringing in more than 150 children for the lead role alone. **Pasha Ivanov** was the clear favorite, displaying an unrivaled passion, intelligence, and humor. After careful consideration, Brenner and Spivakovsky chose to complete the cast of children with several actual orphans from a local government-run orphanage.

Russia has a great tradition for outstanding theater, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the remote areas, such as Perm, where actors are not distracted by dreams of national stardom. Until the fall of Communism, theaters were supported by the State, which left actors free to concentrate entirely on their craft. Spivakovsky and Brenner cast the adult roles from this pool of highly professional and dedicated local actors. Brenner and Spivakovsky described this process of casting the adults as a joy. "It was my privilege,"

Spivakovsky describes, "to work with such truly outstanding artists and choose among their varied interpretations of these roles."

Upon seeing the low quality of the production equipment, **Richard Dallett** immediately focused his production team on literally rebuilding or constructing from scratch what he saw would be necessary equipment to execute the storyboards which he and Brenner had drawn. For American born director Brenner, shooting an original narrative film entirely in a language that was totally unknown to him just a few months earlier posed great challenges. First, the script had to be translated. Brenner hired **Victoria Vasilyeva**, a linguistics professor from Perm University. Brenner and Vasilyeva agreed that strict attention had to be paid to the many subtleties of expression and vocabulary that are specific to this region of Russia.

By the time shooting began, Brenner had an adequate command of the language. However, his limited knowledge of Russian proved to be more of a help than a hindrance. As he describes it, "I remember acting in and directing theater exercises where the actors are instructed to speak in gibberish and what powerful drama and comedy this can create. Its amazing how limiting language can be to an actor's performance and how commonly it is used as a crutch. First and foremost as a director, I am interested in emotion and character, and I feel that these can only be truly and completely conveyed by the actor through all of his other tools - face, movement etc. In everyday life, just as in film or theater, I can tell so much more about a person - mood, character etc. by the nuances in voice, posture, etc. rather than the words he speaks. For me, not knowing the subtleties Russian forced me to concentrate primarily on the emotional content of each scene.

Although the script was ambitious, spanning three seasons and with many scenes calling for dozens of extras, no one could have predicted how difficult production would be. The crew faced nearly every possible technical obstacle. At one point the shoot had to be held up for two weeks while repairs were carried out in Moscow on the single available 35mm camera. Although many of the problems stemmed from the unavailability of equipment, food, and supplies, there were other, more unusual challenges.

For example, a scene toward the end of the movie required filming a statue of Lenin being removed from a town square. **Sergei Dultsev**, the production designer, had constructed a replica of a typical 20 foot high statue of Lenin. As the crew was setting up for the shoot, a group of protestors began to form. This group quickly turned into an unruly mob. They screamed at the crew, believing the film would somehow humiliate Russia and Communism. (Perm is known as a holdout for many die-hard Communists). Oddly, another group gathered to support the shoot and welcome the movie crew. When a shoving match began between two drunken bystanders, a riot nearly erupted and the production had to wrap for the night. The following day, the crew prepared for the same shot and, predictably, the mob formed again. Anticipating this problem, Executive Producer Torokhov had called the mayor who, after a few minutes of waving, handshakes, explanations, and apologies, convinced the group to disperse.

Many members of the cast and crew on "The Riddle" have commented on the intensity and dedication of the young actors. Ivanov, for example, who plays the protagonist Sasha, was unfailingly concerned with the accuracy of the emotions he was to portray. For example in one of the climactic scenes he was required to cry. Brenner worked with Pasha on creating such a moment internally. But Pasha insisted, "If someone hits me, I know I'll cry." Just

before a take, and unbeknownst to Brenner or anyone in the cast and crew, Pasha found a teenager who had been watching the shoot. Brenner says, "I heard a loud 'thump' and turned around to see Pasha walking breathlessly back to the set. He took his place, tears welling up in his eyes, and said in Russian, "Let's go." "We rolled three takes in a row," says Brenner, "and I had a lump in my throat the whole way through, not only watching the performance, but knowing the sacrifice involved."

Pasha's relationship with the girl who plays a hometown friend created a particularly interesting dynamic. During the production, the two children developed an intense closeness, which paralleled their relationship in the script. During the first month of shooting the two children were inseparable. But later they became antagonistic and eventually refused to work together. After some counseling by Brenner, they made up, and their romance was reawakened.

In the Fall, the production moved to a nearby women's gulag, where all the prison scenes for the film were shot. In this work camp prisoners are required to labor in a boot factory under appalling conditions. All the women depicted in these scenes are real prisoners. Early in the story, Sasha's father places him briefly in solitary confinement in a twisted attempt to teach him a lesson about theft. The woman in the adjacent cell discovers he is just a boy and sings to him a heart-wrenching song about a failed escape from prison. Brenner knew only the tune of the song he needed for the scene. He did not remember the lyrics since he had heard the song the year before from a prisoner in this same gulag while filming "A Story Like This." Since the song was needed for the next day of shooting, a quick-thinking production manager grabbed Brenner after dinner and they made it back to the prison in time for 10 p.m. roll call. On the misty prison grounds, all 2,500 female prisoners are gathered and counted each night, under piercing 100 foot high lights with machine gun-toting guards standing by. After roll call, over the ancient PA system, the warden made a special announcement. "As you know, there is a movie being made on our grounds. The American director, Brenner, is trying to find out about some song or other. He's going to hum it to you, and anyone who knows the song, step forward." Brenner took the microphone, and in a moment of absurd wonder, serenaded the prisoners of Kungor prison. When the song ended, only one inmate stepped forward. She sang the song to the production manager who dutifully recorded the lyrics. The next day, Brenner used this old prison song verbatim.

Similar attention was paid to detail and realism in the orphanage scenes. These scenes were all shot in a real orphanage using orphans as extras and principles. Over the next six weeks, the crew became a regular fixture in the orphanage, and some intense relationships developed between the children and adults. When it came time to leave, many tears were shed by both youngsters and adults.

After shooting was completed, the negative was transported to New York City for post-production. Brenner's score for the film was completed in collaboration with **Rob Todd** and **Yuri Lemeshev**. "We wanted to combine Russian folk music with certain intentionally childish melodies," Brenner states. The final score integrates folk music with more traditional film scoring, weaving common melodies and feelings between the two forms.

The finished product of "The Riddle" is, as **Piers Handling** writes, "a triumph of realism. It is also profoundly lyrical, filled with heart-wrenching moments seen from the perspective of the children whose singular personalities illuminate this film." Ultimately it is an

uplifting story about a mischievous and lovable young boy's struggle to find home.

October 27

This evening will feature Animation Specials with short films, not just from Long Island, but from Ireland, Latvia, UK, and Germany. There will also be additional short films from the LIFF World Lens series from Spain, Germany and Italy. The feature for that evening will be "Spook," produced in Canada.

"Spook," is an independent film by award winning Santa Monica filmmaker **Barry Levy**, that tells the chilling story of Canada's covert involvement in the Vietnam war, and the 40,000 Canadians who secretly served there.

"Spook" is a controversial film. It tells the true story of 'Kick,' a Canadian who served in Vietnam as a sniper and spy (spook) under the direction of the CIA. His story is so sensitive, Kick remains anonymous for his own safety. As a result of its explosive political content, "Spook" is banned in Canada. Director Levy says that "Every American draft dodger who crossed the border into Canada, was replaced by a Canadian volunteer." Levy also adds, "U.S. audiences are very intrigued that in America's most recent war with Iraq, Canada was asked to participate and said they wouldn't. In Vietnam, we said we wouldn't, and we did."

October 28

This evening will present "The Artist and His Model," a documentary about 86 year old Hampton sculptor, **Bill King** who falls in love with a restaurant owner and makes her his muse. In 2007 King was the recipient of the International Sculpture Center's Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award.

Our feature for this evening will be "By The People: The Election of Barack Obama."

With assistance from actor **Edward Norton**, filmmakers **Amy Rice** and **Alicia Sams** get their opportunity to film the day to day activities of Barack Obama leading up to election night, with never before seen footage of Obama behind the scenes. An interesting film to see at the midterm of Obama's presidency.

October 30

This evening will feature several college student films such as "Salt Water," directed by **Jessica Rionero** of the Visual Schools of Arts, "The Pink Fight," directed by **Stephanie Lombardo** of Hofstra University, "Bingo," directed by **Aubrey Smyth** of Pratt Institute, "The Grave," directed by **Alexander Monelli** of Long Island University, C.W. Post, and "The Indian and the Samurai," directed by **Shilpi Roy** of University of Southern California, School of Cinematic Arts.

Of note in "The Indian and the Samurai" is actor **Jonathan Ahdout** who made his professional acting debut in "House of Sand and Fog" opposite **Sir Ben Kingsley**, **Jennifer Connelly** and **Shohreh Aghdashloo**. Ahdout has also acted in the Fox Television series "24," and in the independent feature film "American Gun" opposite **Forrest Whitaker** and **Marcia Gay Harden**.

The highlight and closing film for this evening will be "A Long Haul," directed by Tony award winner and Hampton resident, **Nathaniel Kramer**. This documentary depicts the

ongoing struggles of the commercial fishing business in the Hamptons as they deal with a bad economy, high fuel prices, loss of customers, depleted fish populations and the limitations of DEA regulations. Guest speaker will be director Nathaniel Kramer.

For more information contact Thomas Santorelli, Long Island Film Festival, 631-665-4058, or go to www.lifilm.org.

From Long Island Film Festival