

Michael Idov with his wife, Lily, at a Moscow film premiere. Photo by Victor Vytolskiy via Alamy.

Interview with Michael Idov

BY DARIA V. EZEROVA

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On November 2019, the Harriman Institute hosted filmmaker Michael Idov for the screening and discussion of his directorial debut, *The Humorist*. The event brought together more than 100 people, with another 200 watching the live broadcast online. It was one of the Harriman Institute's best-attended events of the year.

Idov has been a prolific screenwriter, author, journalist, and editor in both Russian and English, and I've always been impressed by his genuine bicultural fluency. I interviewed him on July 7, 2020. What follows is an edited and condensed transcript of our conversation.

Daria V. Ezerova: Michael, you wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* called "My Accidental Career as a Russian Screenwriter." Could you discuss the trajectory of this accidental career?

Michael Idov: I'm still pinching myself about the fact that this story was actually published. It seems like such an odd story in and of itself, and private in the sense that it's not really illuminating of anything other than some fun facts about Russian pop culture. It became the germ of an idea for *Dressed Up for a Riot*, the book that I published two years later. But the short version is that I've always wanted to write for film and TV and have always been a little too timid to start doing it. I actually went to film school; I finished the University of Michigan with a self-designed dramatic writing degree.

After that I slid sideways into journalism through film criticism, and I stayed there for almost twenty years. It took me going to Russia and finding myself in the worst job I've ever had—editor-in-chief of a glamorous magazine [*GQ*] in Moscow—to reconnect with my repressed desire and perhaps repressed ability to write for film. The first two or three screenplays were all written without any further fate in mind. No one approached me to write them. And I think after the age of thirty or so you have a vanishingly small window to do things that no one's asking you to do. I was lucky that I had enough of a drive and felt enough desperation in my day job to start doing it. After that it was more or less a standard success story, just with a big Russian asterisk next to it.

Ezerova: After writing a number of screenplays, you directed your first film, *The Humorist*, in 2019. What was it like transitioning from screenwriting to directing?

Idov: It was very gradual. Working in TV helped. I can't really claim

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that having showrun two series in Russia, *Londongrad* and *The Optimists*, made me a director, but it made me cognizant of everything that goes into the directing process. On *The Optimists* I had the unique chance to study literally behind the shoulder of one of the finest Russian directors of our time—Aleksei Popogrebsky—who directed the first season of the show. Roughly at the same time, my wife Lily and I wrote *Leto* (Summer) which ended up with Kirill Serebrennikov. I would say that my understanding of directing, at least when it comes to Russian film, is basically composed of everything I saw and stole from Kirill and Aleksei.

Ezerova: Films about comedians have existed in Hollywood for a long time. Scorsese’s *The King of Comedy* and Eddie Murphy’s *Dolemite Is My Name* come to mind. But there haven’t been many Russian films about the topic. Why did you choose to tell the story of a Soviet comedian?

Idov: There’s been at least one romantic comedy where the main character is a stand-up comedian. It’s by Pavel Ruminov, and the main character is played by Danila Kozlovsky. But *The Humorist* does seem to be, as pointed out in one of the reviews, the first Russian movie ever with a Jewish main character not set in wartime. This honestly blew my mind. The first time I read it I thought, “that can’t possibly be!” and then I started thinking about it, and it’s true! The entire corpus of Russian cinema does not have any non-Holocaust, non-WWII stories with a Jewish protagonist.

In a weird way, “Jewish” and “comedian” are almost parts of the same whole for me in this movie. I think “comedian” is almost a code for “Jew.” The otherness of the comedian and the otherness of the Jew in the official discourse and the official view of Russianness are very similar. What always fascinated me was that Soviet humor was very heavily Jewish. At the same time, the Borscht Belt school of American humor is that modern stand-up comedy is not just similar in terms of the Jewishness of its creators (it’s people from basically the same

Below: Michael Idov in discussion with NYU graduate student Tatiana Efremova at the Harriman Institute in February 2020.

Opposite page: Kirill Serebrennikov (2012). Photo via Alamy.



shtetls, those whose parents just left earlier). We're talking about specifically Eastern European Ashkenazi humor and sensibility, filtered through the official commercial formats of its time, both in the U.S. and in the Soviet Union. It has become a little fraught to compare the Jewish experience to the Black experience, and yet Jews went through a very similar stage of acceptance in the Soviet Union. When, from the point of the dominant white culture, you are allowed to be an entertainer, an athlete, a musician, a comedian, and yet what seems like acceptance—because you get paid, and you are famous, and all the currencies of success are applied to you—is a clearly subservient position to the mainstream culture. This is what I wanted to explore within the figure of Arkadiev. And I didn't have to go far to find it. One of the reasons so many Jewish creatives went into comedy in the Soviet Union was that they were frustrated writers who wouldn't be taken seriously as novelists. Arkadiev actually hates comedy—he thinks of himself as a serious novelist. He's just found a way to monetize his natural caustic wit. He didn't get into the Writers' Union, and that's what Jews did in the Soviet Union: they became comedians, translators, or children's book authors. Those were the three fields that were considered okay for Jews. So it works symbolically, but it also works on the face of it historically because that's what things were like.

Ezerova: The soundtrack for *The Humorist* was written by the Russian rapper Face. How did this collaboration come about?

Idov: This was kind of a high-risk, high-reward thing. Working with Face was a bit of a gamble because he was famous for intentionally dumb lyrics. But I wanted to show him the movie and see his reaction because he was a recent victim of an upswing in state censorship—his concerts would get canceled under a variety of pretexts. I wanted to connect the film with something that was happening in contemporary Russia, and this seemed to be a good way to do it.

Face said that he liked the movie and he'd do the song, but when he first sent the song, we didn't know if it was going to be any good. I remember talking to our producers before we got the first demo and saying, "Guys, are you emotionally prepared to just bury this song if it's not up to our standards?" Everyone said, "Okay. Worst-case scenario, we'll just have a really weird ringtone on our phones for a while." And then the song came in the mail. I opened it, and by the time I got to the line "Gold on my wrist—*ya humorist*" [I'm

a humorist] I absolutely lost it and started yelling, "That's a hit!" The song has become the most popular track Face has ever done—the video that I directed got over 50 million views on YouTube. It's kind of unbelievable. We thought it was Face doing us a favor. But this bizarre collaboration—that by any logic should not have happened—has actually become his biggest hit.

Ezerova: You wrote the screenplay for *Leto*, a film about the career of Russian rock legend Victor Tsoi, which interpolates the style of the music video into a number of scenes. What role did your interest in music play in the creative process?

Idov: Before I answer, I should make it very clear that all these stylistic decisions, including the sort of music video inserts—that's purely Kirill. The film Lily and I wrote was a so-called backstage musical. But Kirill brilliantly expanded that vision into these amazing psychedelic visuals that he created for the film. Lily and I had nothing to do with that. I'm proud of the result, proud of Kirill for making it much better than what we wrote. But that said, the reason the script even ended up on our doorstep is because I've always been a very vocal fan of '80s Russian rock. So, it's not like I had to become anyone else in order to do this. I had most of the material in my head.

I remember the premiere of *Leto* in Cannes and the end of the movie, when the birth-and-life dates for Victor and Mike



came on screen. There was a gasp—90 percent of the audience had no idea these were real people. They thought they were just watching a movie. The fact that this could work, that the music and the energy would work on people who had no context for it whatsoever, who didn't grow up on this, just shows how brilliant Kino is and how brilliant Kirill is. It was an enormous privilege to know that I somehow had a hand in bringing Russian rock to an international audience. That's probably the proudest I can be of anything I've done.

Ezerova: What was it like working with Serebrennikov, especially after he was put under house arrest?

Idov: The film went into postproduction by necessity, shortly after he was placed under house arrest, and he ended up editing it at home. He didn't have access to the internet but he had the raw materials for the film on a computer unconnected to the web, and so he spent three months putting it together. There were only two shoots after Kirill was arrested. One of them was right after his arrest. The other one took place about a month later using Kirill's written notes and film rehearsal footage—Kirill, being a theater director, very usefully films the rehearsal process. This was when we shot a crucial scene of a house concert at the end of the film.

Working with Kirill was obviously really amazing and, like I said earlier, I've basically tried to copy a lot of what he does. To connect it with *The Humorist*, the reason I picked Alexei Agranovich for the main role was in part that I saw him star in the Serebrennikov-directed play *A Common Story* and was blown away by his performance. So there's a lot of sort of Kirill-by-proxy in *The Humorist*.

Ezerova: What was your reaction to Serebrennikov's three-year suspended sentence?

Idov: It's disgusting to be put in the position where you have to sigh with relief when a demonstrably innocent person doesn't get full-on jail time. This idea that we're supposed to be grateful or relieved that it ended up being a suspended sentence is precisely the so-called "salami tactics" for stripping people of freedom that we've seen play out in many ways in many cultures. The tagline of the Vysotsky biopic, *Спасибо, что живой* (*Thank You for Being Alive*), is a key phrase of the modern Russian psyche. Like, "oh, it could have been worse," but this is not a force majeure; it's not like his house was picked up by a hurricane and he

survived. It's a demonstrable, provable injustice. And I hope that at some point it, and many others like it, will be reversed or addressed or redressed. That's the answer.

Ezerova: You are a figure of bicultural fluency, but your formation as a writer and a critic primarily took place in the U.S. Was it challenging transitioning to working in Russia when you first moved there in 2012?

Idov: Quite a bit, actually. And there are still some self-imposed limitations that I keep to. In English, I'm a good mimic. I can write for just about any education level or regional provenance. I've had a variety of experiences in the U.S.—I was a refugee, my family was on food stamps, we lived in Cleveland, etc. Whereas in Russia, I can only write about and for well-educated urban dwellers. I have the experience of my childhood in Russia's orbit, in Soviet Latvia, and my Moscow and St. Petersburg experience and points of reference—unruly privilege and hanging out with various elites. This is why, if I had to tackle a rural story or a provincial period story, I think it would be, for the lack of a better word, offensive to all parties involved. So if we're talking about directing, in the American context, I can be almost anyone. In the Russian context, I have to be the Russian Whit Stillman or something. Although Lily and I did write a feature that hasn't been produced yet that takes place in Rostov. But one of the characters is a rapper and another character is a court judge. So despite being in Rostov, we're still in our respective comfort zones. Lily is a former lawyer and knows that world very well, and I'm weirdly conversant in Russian rap.

Ezerova: How would you compare the Russian film industry to the U.S. film industry?

Idov: There is no juxtaposition between the Russian and the American school. There is a European school and an American school. They are very different. And it applies to both journalism and the film industry. The Russian school in both of these cases is part and parcel of the European school. There are incredibly minute differences between the Russian and, let's say, the French or the Italian or the German or the Polish film industries. When we were working with really established British TV writers on *Deutschland 89*, the people who worked with Armando Iannucci on *Veep* and beyond, they told

us that when they come to LA, they feel left out by the American film industry. They feel very much like Europeans when they come here to pitch. And again, these are people with Emmys for an HBO show. That's when I realized how big that divide actually is—not even having English as a first language is enough to bridge it. So yes, Russian film is just another European industry.

Ezerova: How has the pandemic affected your ability to work? What sorts of projects are you working on now?

Idov: We're definitely writing. It remains to be seen when all of this will be shot. We're lucky to have *Deutschland 89* in the can. The second season of *The Optimists* is coming out this fall, but we didn't write it. They're using a few of the plotlines that we had developed when we were doing Season 1, and I also wrote a song for Season 2. Other than that, we're writing and we're waiting for things to open up. It's mostly English-language stuff. It's an American TV series, a Russian-German coproduction miniseries that takes place mostly in Berlin. And finally, I do have a Russian film that was supposed to be my follow-up to *The Humorist*. It was supposed to shoot in April, but it got frozen on March 15. There's now talk about restarting it in September. The Russian film industry has bounced back from COVID much faster than the American one. For better or for worse, everyone's back to filming. So, there's a chance we'll be filming in September. The film is called *Jet Lag*. It's about people who fly constantly. After all these period pieces, this was a self-conscious attempt for Lily and me to write a story that is set in the now, among people who look like us, and is inspired by ourselves and our friends. And then of course the moment we wrote something that's supposed to be ultracurrent, the world goes and makes it a period piece.

Ezerova: Back in the spring, you tweeted: "The nearest future looks like a world of people in masks. I genuinely wonder if the movies will ignore this, the same way everyone in the movies still prints out documents." How do you think the pandemic will change cinema?

Idov: It might become a very specific marker 20–30 years from now. I envy future period movie writers because they will have such easy shorthands for everything. If you're setting something in 2018, people will have pink hats and RESIST stickers. 2019 is everyone in every scene, in every street scene, riding those goddamn electric

Right: Banner with portrait of director Kirill Serebrennikov at a rally in central Moscow (February 24, 2019). Photo by Nikolay Vinokurov via Alamy.



And then of course the moment we wrote something that's supposed to be ultracurrent, the world goes and makes it a period piece.

Below: Rapper Face performs at a rally in Prospekt Sakharova Street in support of opposition candidates disqualified from the forthcoming Moscow City Duma election. Photo by Sergei Savostyanov via Alamy.

Opposite page: Scene from Michael Idov's film *Leto*. Photo via Lifestyle Pictures/Alamy.

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scooters. Just have these scooters in every shot. If you're setting something in 2020, everyone's going to be wearing masks.

Personally, to me, wearing the mask has basically developed into a nervous tic at this point. I'm very curious to see how long it will take to get rid of it. Or maybe we're the generation that will just kind of keep on doing it. Look at the East Asian cultures who had to put on masks in 2004 after SARS and never took them off since. And it seems to have been a pretty good idea.

Ezerova: Where were you when you first realized that the pandemic was serious business?

Idov: In Moscow preparing to shoot *Jet Lag*. We were two weeks away from filming when things started shutting down. At some point we just froze the production. I flew back on March 15, and LA went into lockdown on March 16.

Ezerova: What has been most surprising to you about the experience of navigating it, both on a personal level and as a film industry professional?

Idov: As a film industry professional I've been toggling between cautious optimism and a truly apocalyptic mood. The benefit of being truly apocalyptic is that you don't really care about the film industry at that point. It just seems like, "Oh, yeah. This is kind of a silly thing we did in the before times, you know." So that's at least one less thing to worry about. "Oh well, we had a good run" is generally a very good outlook to have on the world.

Ezerova: Since we're talking about COVID-19, let's discuss other things that happened in the past few months. In the U.S., the pandemic was marked by the Black Lives Matter protests. Much of the reaction to these protests in Russia has been characterized by conservative or even overtly racist sentiments. Can you discuss the Russian reactions to these protests?

Idov: Oh my God. It's so bad. So many of the self-described liberals in Russia just really, in modern Twitter parlance, showed their asses on this one. Over the last week alone, I've seen Russians breathlessly extol the virtues of that St. Louis gun couple, saying something like, "This is the America that I actually like and respect. This is the America that I've been brought up to

venerate: somebody buying a house and restoring it with their own hands and then stepping out onto the porch to protect it from the marauding hordes.” I’ve seen this widespread coverage of the “hordes bullying poor J. K. Rowling.” It’s literally every time. You can take feminism, you can take any topic, and the Russian quote-unquote intellectuals will find a way to reason themselves onto the absolute wrongest side of it. And I don’t know why. Maybe it’s Stockholm syndrome. Maybe the lack of stability in the Russian life makes them fast to embrace law and order in any sort of context. I can keep throwing these maybes but the point is, the society has to be deprogrammed, and I don’t know who’s going to do it. My only hope lies with people who are fifteen now. Looking at the Russian TikTok is a breath of fresh air. When we’re talking about people in their 30s or 40s, there are maybe five or six journalists in Russia today that are worth reading among the sea of absolute garbage. We really need to either stop asking ourselves why and just actively fight it, or at least have some sort of academic consensus as to why this happening.

Unfortunately, this also happens to coincide with real and largely unexamined Russophobia on the American side. I constantly see outlets like the *New York Times* allowing just horrible essentializing. “Russians are like this, Russians are like that,” “the bad Russians” who are “organically ruthless.” It’s painful both to see Russians engage in the conduct that invites this sort of thing and to see these horrible things in the American press. And that’s because the American mainstream left has been using Russia as a way to shirk all responsibility about getting Trump elected. Which is terrifying because Putin didn’t put Trump in power. Racism did.

Ezerova: In Russia, the pandemic has been the background for two contentious topics: the constitutional amendments and the Studio Seven (Serebrennikov) trial. There were no in-person protests, but there was still quite a lot of vocal public discontent. In your book *Dressed Up for a Riot* you describe your experience of being amid Bolotnaya protesters in

2012. What is your view of the state of activism in Russia now? How has it changed since 2012?

Idov: It’s dead. Dead and gone. Bolotnaya was a beginning of or an attempt at a horizontal leaderless protest modeled on Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street, and now all of that is gone. Where there was protest now is only Navalny. When people say “opposition” in Russia, all they mean is the Libertarians. That’s the bleak picture that I see. To the extent that I don’t even know if anything else needs to be done until maybe some new generation comes along or a new catastrophe makes the changes somehow. I don’t know. To make things a little less bleak on the Russian front, I will just repeat that I’m pretty hopeful about the young kids because, at least in terms of social liberties, it doesn’t look like they’re buying the official state line on almost anything. ■

Daria V. Ezerova is a postdoctoral research scholar at the Harriman Institute focusing on contemporary Russian culture and society. She received her Ph.D. in Slavic languages and literatures from Yale University.

