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Published in the USA
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
Has been issued since 2005
ISSN 1994-4160
E-ISSN 2729-8132
2022. 18(1): 136-141

DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.1.136
<https://me.cherkasgu.press>



Cherkessk – Moscow – Hollywood – and Moscow Again...

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Abstract

Indar Dzhendubaev was born on September 8, 1983 in Cherkessk. While still in high school, he was fascinated by movies and drawing comics, but after an unsuccessful attempt to enter the Moscow State University of Design and Technology, he became a student in the psychology department of the Moscow Humanities University. After successfully graduating from the university, he first enrolled in a psychology graduate school, but then went to work in film. At first he worked as an administrator, coordinator and producer of post-production, then as a storyboard artist, and in 2012, at the invitation of director and producer Timur Bekmambetov, he went to Hollywood, where he worked as a storyboard artist and second unit director on *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. In 2015, Indar Dzhendubaev made his directorial debut with a feature-length feature film, *He's a Dragon*. As a creative producer, art director and creative consultant for visual development of complex staging scenes, he has worked on many major Russian feature projects, including *Silver Skates*, *Invasion*, *The Last Bogatyr* (Part 2 and 3), *Fire, Couple from the Future*, etc. In this interview, Indar Dzhendubaev talks to film critic Alexander Fedorov about his childhood hobbies and the creative path he has taken over the past twenty years...

Keywords: Dzhendubaev, film, movie, Hollywood, He's a Dragon, film education, film director, fantasy.

1. Introduction

Indar Dzhendubaev was born on September 8, 1983 in Cherkessk. While still in high school, he was fascinated by movies and drawing comics, but after an unsuccessful attempt to enter the Moscow State University of Design and Technology, he became a student in the psychology department of the Moscow Humanities University. After successfully graduating from the university, he first enrolled in a psychology graduate school, but then went to work in film. At first he worked as an administrator, coordinator and producer of post-production, then as a storyboard artist, and in 2012, at the invitation of director and producer Timur Bekmambetov, he went to Hollywood, where he worked as a storyboard artist and second unit director on *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. In 2015, Indar Dzhendubaev made his directorial debut with a feature-length feature film, *He's a Dragon*. As a creative producer, art director and creative consultant for visual development of complex staging scenes, he has worked on many major Russian feature projects, including *Silver Skates*, *Invasion*, *The Last Bogatyr* (Part 2 and 3), *Fire, Couple from the Future*, etc.

In this interview, Indar Dzhendubaev talks to film critic Alexander Fedorov about his childhood hobbies and the creative path he has taken over the past twenty years...

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– *You were born in 1983, back in the Soviet Union, and you probably remember the Soviet films you watched as a child. What tapes did you like back then, at the turn of the 1990s?*

– In the very beginning of the 1990s, I first had a VCR and a videocassette with a recording of Leonid Gaidai's comedy *The Twelve Chairs*. I really liked this film, as well as another Gaidai film *Ivan Vasilievich Changes His Profession*. I think I was then a classic Soviet child - I watched with pleasure *Gentlemen of Fortune*, *Amphibian Man*, *Pirates of the 20th Century*, that is, comedy, fantasy and adventure films. I, in general, was a prisoner of the adventure genre. As I realize now, I liked that Soviet films with these kinds of plots were less pathetic than American ones. But American and European films were, of course, just as important to my formation as an artist and cinematographer.

– *When you were still at school you were passionate about drawing comics, but after graduating in 2000 you entered the Psychology Department of Moscow Humanitarian University and even wrote your PhD thesis in social psychology. Why did you choose psychology instead of, for example, studying painting at some art school?*

– Frankly speaking, even when I was already studying psychology I wondered more than once why I hadn't pushed myself to study art. When I came to Moscow to apply, at first I chose the University of Design and Technology, but then I realized that I did not have a basic education in classical art. I drew really well, in my own way, but I could not do academic drawings of plaster heads. So, the members of the admission committee of the Moscow University of Design and Technology did not accept my work. And then I remembered (and my relatives supported me) that when I was at school I loved psychology, and with the help of my grandfather, a philosopher, I understood already in the sixth form the difference between Nietzsche and Hegel. So I was told: "Well, that's good! You'll be a psychologist - also necessary and useful to society". And I entered the Psychology Department very easily; I studied there with great pleasure; I was good at everything... But all the same, I never let go of my attraction to the world of art, and during my student years I earned money drawing illustrations for children's books for various publishing houses.

– *You played in student theater and in Students' Comedy Club, staged student productions. You also worked as a choreographer. How did that come about? You didn't have any special choreographic training?*

– At school in Cherkessk I, of course, dreamt about Moscow, especially as my elder brother had already entered one of the universities in the capital. And he, by the way, danced just amazingly. And, in general, we all dance very well from an early age. Where I come from, the ability to dance well is a normal thing (when it comes to national dances). Well, I liked not only the national dances. I copied some moves from music videos, got good at it and even opened a small informal school of my own when I was a pupil. And then when I was already at university I choreographed plays for stage shows with elements of choreography, and it turned out that I did that quite well. And then on one project I needed an actress to teach a couple of movements for the stage. There was no choreographer, and I, the stage manager, was there. I taught it. And got the official line in the credits. And now I can proudly wear the title of choreographer in the movie (laughs).

– *So, you successfully graduate from university, and opportunities open up for you to become a university teacher or a research psychologist, but, even after writing your dissertation, you choose to work in film. How did this happen?*

– It happened that a professional film crew came to the university where I was studying to shoot one of the episodes. And I was just stunned: it was a real movie, not some kind of student theater. I helped the film crew to gather students for the crowd...

In 2005, after I graduated, I opened my own private psychological training center. Everything seemed to be going well, but after a while I got a call from a film studio, and they asked me to work as an administrator on one of TV shows. I immediately agreed, although then I said to

myself: "You're without five minutes Ph.D. in psychology, and you do some nonsense – in the cold sweeping up trash on the set!"

But I do not even know why, I continued to work hard in the movie, even though the administrator from me was not a who knows what - I liked the creative process on the set. And then one day during the preparation of a project sick storyboard artist, and I volunteered to take his place. Generally speaking, as a storyboard artist I later developed a certain reputation, because I worked in that capacity for seven years (in advertising, TV, cinema), and I liked it much more than the administrative work. I began to do a job that I was passionate about.

But most importantly, the work of a storyboarder is a great film school. You're in the very beginning stages of translating a literary script into a film project. My film studies were collaborations with many directors with whom I worked at the very beginning of their conception. I still remember how just one line in a script about "a soldier getting out of a burning tank" turned into a whole series of drawings with general, medium and close-ups... The first attempts at constructing complex scenes, and honing the techniques of cinematographic language began then.

– *How did you get into Timur Bekmambetov's studio?*

- At first I was invited to his *Bazelevs studio* as a storyboardist for commercials. And then in the same capacity, I got on one of the series of *Christmas Trees*, where I met with Timur Bekmambetov.

– *They say that it was after the filming of “Christmas Trees” and a couple of other projects director and producer Timur Bekmambetov took you with him to Hollywood, where you were his assistant on the film “Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter” (2012). What does this Hollywood experience give you?*

– Yes, that's right, Timur invited me to Hollywood with him. By that time I was not only engaged in storyboarding, but also participated in the development of previsualization scenes, for future projects, that is, I was involved in the process more deeply than before. Of course, it was easier for the Americans to hire a Hollywood storyboarder, but Timur insisted on my candidacy. So from the Russian development team I ended up on the American set of *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* in New Orleans. There I continued to draw storyboards on the set, helped with the creative planning of scenes, and, eventually, Timur Bekmambetov trusted me and Igor Tsai (the future creative producer of the project *Hi's a Dragon*) to become directors of the second unit for the shooting of the stunt episodes of the film. After that I worked in Los Angeles for another three years in Timur's team to develop projects, and then Moscow and *Hi's a Dragon*.

– *After “Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter”, did you ever think of staying in Hollywood to further your career?*

– Yes, I had such thoughts, and there were offers from American colleagues. But at the time, my main priority was loyalty to Timur's team, I knew of his plans and I wanted to work with him further. And it was obvious that the people with whom Timur worked were always "people for the future" for him. For me Timur was like part of my family. He wasn't just my boss, but my teacher and mentor, and I will be grateful to him for the rest of my life for his trust and all the lessons and opportunities he gave me. I, in general, consider him one of the most outstanding visionary directors of his generation...

Then, when I came back to Russia and started working in Moscow again, I never had the feeling that I had missed out on anything. And I still have that feeling. Although it is clear that if I had stayed to work in Los Angeles, my life would have turned out differently. But would it have been better? I don't know.

– *In 2015, your first feature-length directorial work was released in Russia: the fantasy “He's a Dragon”, which was seen by 0.5 million viewers in Russia and 3.2 million in China. How did you get the idea to screen the novel by Sergei and Marina Dyachenko? What difficulties did you encounter during this film?*

– It went like this. When we were working in Los Angeles, one of the projects we were thinking about, gathering visuals, was "about a dragon." And then we came to Moscow, and we had a meeting with Sergei and Marina Diachenko about something else entirely. And they saw some of our drawings and asked: "Why do you have a dragon? We answered that we would like to shoot something about it. And then Sergey and Marina said that they have already written a book about the dragon. So Timur Bekmambetov started developing a film project for this book. But then he was invited to Hollywood to shoot a major film *Ben-Hur*, and I at this time was already fully immersed in the development of the script and casting of the fantasy *He's a Dragon*. Then Timur decided (for which I am very grateful) to entrust me with directing this film, relying on the strong team which he had already gathered for the shooting (including an excellent and very experienced cameraman Sergey Trofimov, a wonderful set designer Grigory Pushkin and the studio of computer graphics A. Gorokhov), and the maximum number of episodes he had thought over visual code. True, realizing that, despite all my experience, I am still a novice in independent directing of "full meter", the project was adjusted in the direction of less cost of its production. But a more chamber story became, perhaps, even a greater challenge for me. After all, when you shoot a "higher-priced" fantasy, you can always hide behind the swoop of special effects and fast-changing action scenes...

I was lucky that we had Sergei Nevshupov in our team, who had also created dragons for *Avatar*, so with his help all the complicated scenes connected with the movements and flights of our main character were visually very convincing, especially as it was in 3D.

We offered the Chinese producers of *He's a Dragon* as a co-production in China while we were still preparing the project, but they refused: "How! You're suggesting a story where one of the greatest symbols of our national culture would be paired with an ordinary person? You can't do that, it's a violation of all canons!"

We started shooting on our own. Initially, it was a more "adult" project, with a fantasy "dark world". But, in the process of production, *He's a Dragon* somehow transformed smoothly and imperceptibly and became more light intonationally. There was no calculation in it, it just happened that way, both the objective circumstances and my understanding of the project.

As for the film's theatrical release, due to objective circumstances the distributors had to put the premiere of *He's a Dragon* on New Year's Day in December (and not on Valentine's Day in February, as originally planned), we did not have time to develop the planned advertising campaign in full, and most importantly - the picture hit the screens along with the final series of *The Hunger Games* and *Star Wars*, that is, the Hollywood blockbusters our *He's a Dragon* was not spared at the box office...

But if we look at the number of viewers of this film on the Internet, the citation index and the composition of the fan base (there are more girls and young women, by the way) of our film, we see that the figures are much higher there. For example, on an Internet portal, *He's a Dragon* gathered 17 million views in two years. But China surprised us the most. Accidentally ended up on one of their online platforms (even without voice translation, just with subtitles) for the first four days it attracted 6 million viewers, while *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* watched for a year on the same site no more than 300 thousand people.

It was after such a success that Chinese distributors started calling us with requests to organize a movie premiere with a film crew as part of a limited release of the film on the territory of the Celestial Empire. And, in spite of the fact that by the time of the theatrical premiere of *He's a Dragon* in China has already watched on the Internet more than 150 million viewers, it still aroused the interest of the public in cinemas. The actor Matvey Lykov, who played the title role, became a superstar in China, and he was met by crowds of female fans everywhere.

I am a very self-critical person, but I understood from the example of the film *He's a Dragon* that you make a film not for yourself but for the audience. And if you personally don't like something in your film, you have to show it to the audience anyway, and it's very possible that the audience will appreciate a lot of things quite differently...

– *Film critics' opinions on the film were sometimes contradictory (see, for example: Dolin, 2015; Ivanov, 2015; Rogova, 2015; Litovchenko, 2015). Does it matter to you at all what film critics write about your films?*

– When I read many reviews of my film with fear, I made sure that not a single one, even the most trashy review of *He's a Dragon*, had the level of critical intensity that I was charging to myself.

I thought, "You guys aren't getting it right: there's a lot to really scold!" As it seemed to me at the time. But this situation served as a big lesson for me: if none of the film critics managed to hurt me with their review, so how did I feel about my work? Was it even more critical and picky? I realized then that I had to be kinder to myself in this respect. Let the critics criticize, but you create!

And one more thing: it's understandable that film critics advise the audience whether or not to watch this or that film. But as a filmmaker, I would like film critics to give me some constructive advice. And I have had such film critics, too. I thank them.

– In 2016, you co-directed the New Year's Eve comedy "Christmas Tree 5". But your new directorial works haven't been made for five years. In 2017, it was announced that the shooting of "He's a Dragon 2" would start soon, but then it didn't happen. Why is that? What were you working on after "He's a Dragon" and "Christmas Trees"?

– First of all, after *He's a Dragon*, the Chinese producers quite quickly suggested doing *He's a Dragon 2*, and we started to develop this project, which took us almost a year and a half. In spite of the fact that we made a tremendous leap forward in the field of visual development, I encountered serious difficulties as a playwright. There are all sorts of "capsule" type stories, and then there are, conventionally speaking, "block", franchise stories like *Toy Story* and *Star Wars* that can go on for decades... *He's a Dragon* seemed to be more of a "capsule" story. The characters found each other and fulfilled a basic purpose. But we still found a very original script that put everything in its place. And then our Chinese partners started having difficulties with other projects and had to give up cooperation. The situation was similar with the next partners. So we decided that the time was not ripe for the second part. Who knows, maybe it is not so easy with the Dragons in China. But the material remained. Both visual and dramaturgical. The time will come and quite possibly our dragon will take off again!

Then I got married. A child was born, then a second. I decided to devote more time to my family, my children, not to break away from them for long and distant film expeditions. But I did not lose time. In Moscow I took an active part in artistic, visual, creative development projects in various teams and projects with great pleasure. I worked on the film crews of *Invasion*, *Silver Skates*, the second and third series of *The Last Bogatyr*, *Fire*, *A Couple from the Future* and many others. I've been there as an art director, elaborate scene developer, creative consultant, and creative producer.

But now I'm ready to dive back into directing a feature film on my own. The main thing is to have a decent story and a decent team.

– Now you are involved in an ambitious online film education project. What attracted you to it? What are you going to teach there?

– While I was still shooting the film *He's a Dragon*, I was invited to a film school in Moscow to teach a storyboard course. And there I discovered that I was terribly interested in telling students about film. There were more and more courses, and the topics became more and more profound. There emerged a method and a personal approach. And I have a lot to tell, because I have worked with various teams – Russian and American – on dozens of film projects in many different capacities.

Then I began to be invited as a film teacher and other universities, for example, in the Film School Industry.

And then the film director and producer Konstantin Kutuev invited me to this "International Online Content School". There are courses for masters of the film industry (www.moshka.pro). I completely like it. It inspires me a lot. There is something in there that I, as an educator, have been missing a lot. I'm very excited about this opportunity for myself and for future students, and I think it's still just the beginning of a great journey...

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