

METRAFILMS
PRESENTS



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION

HOUSE ARREST

A FILM BY ALEKSEY GERMAN JR.

2021 – RUSSIA – DRAMA – 2K – 5.1
RUSSIAN – 106'

SYNOPSIS

David, a university professor, takes to social media to criticize his city's administration. But instead of the mayor's dodgy dealings being investigated, David is himself accused of embezzlement and placed under house arrest. Despite the overbearing surveillance, double-crossing acquaintances, and growing media interest, David remains defiant and will not apologise. With the court case drawing ever nearer, does David have any hope of winning this battle against Goliath?

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

What were the technical and economic circumstances in which you shot this movie?

Well, this was no big film, not expensive when compared to the standards for Russian film production. We filmed in a dilapidated but not abandoned children's camp where [production designer] Elena Okopnaya built the apartment: we put down flooring, painted the walls, hung up wallpaper, and we shot next to that house. So production was quite local. We shot near Leningrad, that is Petersburg, but the intention was for this to be another city, some Russian town far away from Moscow.

What challenges did you encounter, and what did you learn from the filming process for your future work?

The biggest challenge was that periodically actors would get sick with Covid, even before we had started shooting; so, we had to change and adapt the shooting schedule as we went along, and we could not shoot in the order we had wanted to. That probably was the biggest difficulty. But I also learnt that we could work in relatively closed, small settings. We are quite capable of creating local stories and not just preserving the dramatic tension but making cinema diverse. When you look at the film closely, you can see that each wall of the apartment is a different set. So, we learnt that we could create complexity in small settings.

When did you shoot and for how long?

We started on October 10th, 2020 and finished on the 12-13 November. We had some breaks, also when we stopped to test everybody for Covid before we were sure we were fine to continue shooting. So overall 23-24 days of shooting.

What is your view on the role of the profession of director, and are you also a co-producer of your films?

I am never a co-producer of my films, even if I participate in planning and schedules, I have no ambition to be a producer of my films. I look at my profession without any aspiration, but pragmatically: it is a demanding job, physically and morally, where obstacles crop up all the time, and you have to face up to the challenges, that's part of the job. I am quite easy about my work: I never review my films, I never regret what I do. I think we need to go into different directions, and it makes sense when you do. After all, we are not making the same film over and over again – some directors do, and that also deserves respect. In different aesthetics you try to find a new film language or different possibilities for the narrative.

What is your preferred moment during the shooting? Do you prefer the pre-production, the shooting or post-production?

None. Those are different moments that cannot be compared. Each moment has its own problems, and I find joy and pain in every phase of making a film.

Do you have any particular things in common with directors from your country, from your generation, and what may be the common moments?

Of course, I have contacts with some directors, and not with others. But aesthetically I am somewhat different, I think, and I try to follow the style of the 1960s and 70s. My energy and interests are directed at that time, so I would not say there is a common trait with the directors in my country and of my generation, but we talk, share ideas, and help each other.

Has your view on cinema changed in the light of new technologies?

I am not sure, because there are some basic things that remain stable in cinema. These technical innovations are methods or devices, but deep down, things remain unchanged, such as the actors' practice or the image. It's like with theatre: whatever changes, the relationship with the spectator remains the same, while the language changes. Sometimes I use some technology, sometimes not, and of course the film stock is missing. I don't think technology is such a strong factor.

How did Covid impact *House Arrest*?

The pandemic has had a terrible and major impact for us, since our work on the war film *Air* stopped, the film about the first female fighter pilots in WWII. We made this new film in between shooting that big project. Russia has been affected by a price rise, then the production costs jumped up, and finally actors in minor parts who were afraid of travelling, so all in all a very harsh impact. In a sense it's thanks to Covid that this new film appeared, even if that is the only positive feature I can see in the pandemic.

Do you think the pandemic might affect your work in the future?

Probably yes, since the pandemic changed the world view, the way of life, the communication methods between people, and aesthetically some new methods have emerged, including conversations. Of course, this is a global catastrophe.

Where did the inspiration come from to write *House Arrest*?

The script had been written long before Covid: I always wanted to shoot a court drama or something close, and then I thought why not make a court drama, and then a court drama without a court: what happens to man outside the courtroom. Then I thought it would be interesting if it were a closed space and the person cannot leave but is under house arrest and has to make peace with himself. Isolation is a probing, terrifying and painful condition that gives rise to a re-evaluation. That is how this script got made, and I returned to it now.

Can you describe your work method, your work with actors, how you work on the location?

I have a strange method; often when we start, I work closely with my wife, who is a costume and production designer. She immerses herself in the atmosphere and creates this world. I am not sure how to describe what she does, because she gives meaning to everything through her set and creates a concept-image. The shooting process is quite interesting. Often, we take

a scene from the script and end up changing it quite significantly as we search for truth, and through rehearsals we get rid of what is superfluous, and we improvise. For example, we had one scene we shot several times; there were others, when I tried to immerse the actors into their own happiness or pain, their own comfort zones, to create a world where they would maximally merge their own personality with the experience of the character. I reckon in such a closed drama you can reach truth through such an intense and painful experience. We often changed scenes and improvised, when we understood there was a need to develop or emphasize one thing or another to strengthen the texture of the film.

My next question is linked to your choice of actors: had you worked with them before?

There are some actors I had worked with, such as Svetlana Khodchenkova, Anastasia Melnikova, Merab Nindze. Others I had never worked with before, such as Alexander Pal, Alexandra Bortich, Anna Mikhalkova, Roza Khairullina. I try to talk with them, see what works and we rehearse a lot. Even if we still re-shoot a lot of scenes, we rehearse a lot. When we rehearse, we may find that the language is too literal, or some unemotional scene comes out, or we see there is no conflict, so we look at it together and I try to make sure it is a shared work process, where we seek the truth. This can be a burden for actors, but it seems to me to be the only way to make sure the situation is not artificial. Whilst sticking to the seed of the scene, we find a super-task that makes it the actors' own. This task sometimes pulls the real core from an actor, who might imagine himself differently.

What inspired you to become a filmmaker?

I always wanted to be a theatre critic or a scriptwriter and ended up as a filmmaker by chance. The job of the theatre critic then seemed to be quite boring, and it was not my thing; and the scriptwriter is not mine either. So, my mother suggested I should try for director, and I wanted to try for a year or half and then leave. I was always more interested in words and paper, I am a book worm, and the role of critic did not work out for me, nor did scriptwriter. Long story, but I ended up in filmmaking by chance.

What do you think of the state of the film industry in your country?

It's alright in my view: new directors are emerging, quite a lot and some rather good films are made. It is weaker than Soviet cinema, but that is a tendency all across Europe where there appears to be a pause in film language, in meaning, in aesthetics. Our cinema is in the same interim situation as many others. We also have some difficulties, but I do not see anything terrible. It's alive, it's moving.

If you could meet a favourite director, who would that be and what would you ask?

I would probably like to meet with Fellini, with Tarkovsky, with Bergman. But I am in no great hurry to do so. And I would have a great number of questions, it would be a long conversation.

How did you build the character of David and his literary world, and what did you read before building his character?

I read no books to prepare, but I had a clear image of him from the start. I knew what he was like and how he would change. Another thing is the creation of this image on the screen, that was a long and shared road with the actor Merab Nindze. I understand their logic, their thinking, their life, because I have an image of the Russian intelligentsia. For me there was no difficulty when we created the character with the scriptwriter, Maria Ogneva, who brought a lot to the work. His specialisation on the work of Osip Mandelshtam was also clear since the intelligentsia has always existed within the paradigm of time and always had a strong link to history.

David is a tremendous university professor, but he also has a strong link to his mother and is almost under her yoke. The prosecutor puts him under pressure, almost against his own will. Could you talk about the contradictions in some characters?

For me this is quite simple: they all have a different vision of Russia and her path. The mother, with a long life, understands best the composure of the Russian mind; not the Russia on Facebook, but Russia at its core. She is sceptical about his ideas of a republic, power, and the building of a new life. She reckons that if for centuries we formed systems that are similar and that build upon each other, the country will continue to exist that way. She does not believe in changes. They are not possible in the way in which her son wants it. In that way, her position is no less important and central for the film. She represents a concept that is important for a great number of people in Russia. David is clearly oriented towards western progressive thought and reckons that a new and different vector of development is necessary. Therefore, it is a conflict about whether change for the country is possible or not. And this is not only a generational conflict. The prosecutor's position is that of an executive, a position which is not popular but follows the government line. If the government says that David is guilty it will ask for a confession, but if the state says that the mayor is to blame, it will also avoid a conviction of the mayor. Whatever this man likes or not, he is within the state system. The view of the mother and David is from the side, while the prosecutor is a part of the government with its best and worst aspects.

So, there is a form of cognitive dissonance in these people who think one thing and do something else?

I don't think so, there is a justification for each of them: how the country should develop, with two possible endings. It is a governing point of view that society is in power.

Why did you have David surrounded almost only by women?

That's what happened and how we wrote it, maybe also because we are shooting a film about women pilots in the war, but David is also a man dependent on women who are stronger than him.

Your last film *Dovlatov* was a biopic, with some fantasy and departures from reality. In this film the most important character is a person who did not exist. What is easier: to write about a man who is a fictional product or work from an existing character?

For me that makes no difference. For me, the criterion is what I feel, do I feel with the hero, never mind whether he is invented or not. With a real character I often add things and fill out his character. For me, the process of invention in a character is always the same. I always think up something.

The fight with injustice is universal, but in your film, we see also an issue of generations. Do you think man will always fight against injustice?

I don't think so, I think there are people for whom this is important, for example I am currently involved in a court case against the Petersburg Filmmakers' Union because of a Facebook post. When I say that an important historical building, in my view, is managed badly, I assume it will be destroyed. So, they accused me of writing this on Facebook and demanded for it to be removed, which I refused to do. I reckon this is the truth and needs to be said. That's me. For some people it is important to fight for their truth, even in court; others remain in the comfort zone of work and family. So this hero is infantile but a saint, in the clumsy way of belief.

The project of *House Arrest*: was the turn to this material caused by the restrictions of the pandemic and isolation, or because it is cheap?

It was the decision of Artem Vassiliev, our producer, who reckoned we should move on and make what is possible. The actors in this film are not all involved in *Air* and the cinematographer was also separately invited for the film.

And a final question: What are your projects for the future?

We are shooting *Air*, the film about the fighter pilots; we re-started shooting a month and a half ago. It is a very difficult project technically and whilst we have great ambitions in Russia, it is quite hard to turn it in Russia. The footage we have already filmed can be preserved in the future film.

Interview conducted by Joel Chapron.

ABOUT ALEKSEY GERMAN JR., DIRECTOR

Aleksey German Jr., born in 1976, grew up in St. Petersburg. He studied at the VGIK Russian State University of Cinematography in Moscow from 1996 to 2001.

His debut feature *The Last Train* was selected at the Venice Film Festival, as well as his next film *Garpastum*. With *Paper Soldier*, his third feature, he won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2008. *Under Electric Clouds* was awarded the Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution at Berlin International Film Festival in 2015.

In 2018, *Dovlatov*, German's fifth feature, was awarded the Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution to filmmaking for production and costume design.

House Arrest, German's sixth feature, was selected in Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival in 2021.

FILMOGRAPHY

2021	HOUSE ARREST (DELO) Drama, 106'
2018	DOVLATOV Drama, 126'
2015	UNDER ELECTRIC CLOUDS (POD ELEKTRICHESKIMI OBLAKAMI) Drama, 138'
2013	VENICE 70: FUTURE RELOADED Documentary, 120'
2013	5000 DAYS AHEAD Short, 1'
2011	IZ TOKIO Short, 11'
2009	KOROTKOE ZAMYKANIE Drama, 92'
2008	PAPER SOLDIER (BUMAZHNYI SOLDAT) Drama, 118'
2005	GARPASTUM Drama, 116'
2004	THE LAST TRAIN (POSLEDNIY POEZD) Drama, 82'

ABOUT ARTEM VASILYEV, PRODUCER

Artem Vasilyev is the founder and CEO of METRAFILMS film company (founded in 1993). Today METRAFILMS is a group of companies including Metrafilms Studio, engaged in the creation of animation projects, and the METRAFILMS production company.

He is one of the most prominent independent producers in Russia today. Artem is a member of the European Film Academy, Russian Film Academy and The European Producers Club.

Films produced by Artem Vasilyev and METRAFILMS, such as Alexey German Jr.'s *Dovlatov* and *Paper Soldier*, Alexey Fedorchenko's *Anna's War*, Michael Idov's *The Humourist* have received numerous awards at the most prestigious international film festivals. One of its latest productions, *House Arrest (Delo)* was selected in Un Certain Regard at the 74th Cannes International Film Festival.

METRAFILMS also actively works with debut features and some of the most promising directors. One of its latest productions is *The Dorm* by Roman Vasyanov.

CAST

David	Merab Ninidze
Svetlana	Roza Khairullina
Anna	Anna Mikhalkova
Katya	Anastasia Melnikova
Nadya	Svetlana Khodchenkova
Detective Petrov	Alexander Pal
Nastya	Anastasia Talyzina
Arkady Borisovich	Yuri Utkin
Ira	Alexandra Bortich
Kin Lin	Li Tsyazuan

CREW

Director	Aleksey German Jr.
Writer	Aleksey German Jr., Maria Ogneva
Production Designer	Elena Okopnaya
Costume Designer	Elena Okopnaya
Director of Photography	Ivan Burlakov
First Assistant Director	Snezhanna Gerasimova-Ogarkova
1st AD (planning)	Margarita Kuzmicheva
Casting Director	Yana Kushakovskaya, Julia Kobylinskaya
Producer	Artem Vasilyev
Producers	Iouri Stepanov, Georgy Shabanov, Ilja Zofin
Co-Producers	Ekaterina Lapshina, Viktoria Shamlikashvili, Anouk van Ghemen, Dmitry Saltykovsky

Production Companies	Metrafilms, Outrageous Film Company, All Media (a START Company), LM Media
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The film was created with the support of The Foundation for development modern cinematography KINOPRIME

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