The DAU Project: History of One of Russia’s Biggest and Most Controversial Film Production

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• The project began in 2005 as a conventional biopic of Lev Landau, Soviet physicist, and the Nobel Prize winner.
• In director’s seat – Ilya Khrzhanovsky, who debuted in cinema the previous year with a festival favorite 4.
• The production started in Saint-Petersburg, Russia in 2008, but soon moved to Kharkiv, Ukraine.
• In space of old swimming pool Dynamo, the production constructs the Institute a large immersive set in the style of Soviet science centers.

• The city center gets billboards from the 1930s, old cars flood the city, a 1:1 replica of a Soviet plane is built in the airport.

• The call is made for extras and for any period artifacts. Originally, the shooting was supposed to last for just 63 days.
• With time ambitions grow, and the Institute becomes more than a film set, but an immersive replica populated by hundreds of untrained extras.

• People inside wear Stalin-era clothes, use Soviet tools, money, food, and cigarette packaging, and boast old-fashioned hairstyles. They were also obeying the Soviet rules.

• Women were forbidden to wear modern tampons: Soviet-model cloth versions were made available (Meek, 2015).
IMMERSIVENESS

- There is no traditional script, and the people are supposed to act and live at the same time.
- The set is riddled with microphones to record conversations, and the people are bounded to allow filming any aspects of their lives.
- No hidden cameras, but a single camera unit operated by a renowned German cinematographer Jürgen Jürges.
IMMERSIVENESS

• “Before me is an entire city, built to scale, open to the elements, and—at 1 a.m. and with no camera in sight—fully populated. Two guards walk the perimeter, gravel crunching under their boots. Down the fake street, a female janitor in a vintage head scarf sweeps a porch” (Idov, 2011).

• The use of modern words is forbidden, the set is patrolled by inner guards, failure to comply with the rules may result in firing. As the result, the culture of snitching was flourishing.
• A freelance translator mentions that the production resembled slavery with people from various places working for a small financial reward, while living in barracks, with Ukrainians especially being treated as third-class people.

• A coordinator says that working on the project meant no sleep, no food, and no money, since the production was trying to save on everything, delaying salaries and encouraging free labor (both: Prilepskaya, 2010).
GETTING IN

• It usually began with a phone call and the request to come to the film set and discuss everything there. Most often the tickets were paid by the production.
• Once there, it was revealed that it was no regular film set with rules, schedules and regular work hours. Some would agree to try, while others leave.
• The director would talk with each hired person.
There were two classes of people: those, who were close to the director, and the rest. The first group was treated comfortably and generously rewarded, while the second were continuously harassed (Tonet & Salino, 2019).

It was easy to get on the bad side of the directors: ask uncomfortable question, demand some rights, refuse to drink with him.

They were looking for people “who have nothing to lose” (Zayats, 2017).
• Women were expected to get involved in sexual relationships, especially with visiting foreigners.

• Yulia, who was hired to be an assistant director, was questioned about her sexual life, if her friends are whores and if she can sleep with another woman. After she acted disgusted, she was fired (Idov, 2011).

• A lot of alcohol is used to encourage more frivolous behavior.
THE CITY SUFFERS

- Some people never got their Soviet set pieces back, quite often those were destroyed or lost.
- The closing of the streets and abusing people.
- Poor economic situation and joblessness were exploited by the project.
- People began to refuse to lend flats for the production workers.
TOTALITARIAN EXPERIMENT

• “A documentary about how totalitarian system can kill an angel” - Teodor Currentzis, played the role of Lev Landau.

• Some people who worked on the project appreciated the unique conditions and truly believed in the director’s goals and vision.

• A film’s manager said that the project taught two things: anything can be done with people, and there is nothing impossible.
• The German cameramen left the production in 2010, and the following year the Institute was officially over.
• It was partially demolished, while the director organised a rave-party on its ruins with DJ Spooky and Peaches performing.
• 700 hours of footage were filmed, and the editing was done in London.

• After years of editing, various footage and accompanying materials were presented at the immersive exhibition in Paris in early 2019.

• A more conventional premiere happened a year later at Berlin Film Festival with DAU: Natasha in the official competition.
• Does the festival see any ethical issues in screening a film that contains scenes of real violence against non-professional actors, as well as non-simulated sex between people under the influence of alcohol?

• Would such a film be possible to exhibit if it was created in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, or the U.S. and used on-screen talent from these countries?

• Does an admission of this film into the main competition mean that the festival supports and encourages mistreatment of talent in the name of art?
Eventually, a streaming website was launched with various instalments available on demand. Currently there are 7 titles available each costing 3 dollars.

However, not everything is currently present there, and for several months there were problems with accessing the website.

Ilya Khrzanovsky has moved on to other projects.


