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THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES
OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN

based on the book by

VLADIMIR VOINOVICH

directed by

JIRI MENZEL

from a screenplay by

ZDENEK SVERAK

Produced by ERIC ABRAHAM

Co-Producer KATYA KRAUSOVA

PORTOBELLO PICTURES in association with
MK2; CANAL +; LA SEPT CINEMA; CNC (FRANCE),
FANDANGO (ITALY), KF/CABLE PLUS (CZECH
REPUBLIC), TRITE (RUSSIA), CHANNEL FOUR and THE
EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTION FUND (UNITED KINGDOM)

THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF
PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN

Twenty four years ago an extraordinary book was smuggled out of Russia via the YMCA in Paris. It was VLADIMIR VOINOVICH's magnificent comic novel about a simple, awkward private sent to guard a downed plane in a far off village in World War 11 who makes fools of the Soviet military machine, the secret police and party bureaucracy.

Published first in Russian and then in English the novel, which ridicules the sacred cows of the old Soviet Union, Party, Army and Security Force, was an immediate and overwhelming success in the West. Voinovich was hailed as a "latter-day Gogol" and his book acclaimed "a masterpiece" and "perhaps the greatest modern Russian comic novel". In Moscow the success brought disaster for the writer. He was persecuted for ten years and then stripped of his citizenship and expelled from the Soviet Union. He became a non-person, his work was banned and his name forbidden to be mentioned.

In 1989 the unthinkable happened, the old Soviet Union collapsed and CHONKIN was published in the magazine "Yunost". The critic of the Moscow News called it, "one of the funniest of our satirical books" and, at last, the Russian people were able to read openly the book which for years they had read secretly in dark corners in samizdat versions (well-thumbed, illicit photocopies passed from hand to hand).

ERIC ABRAHAM and KATYA KRAUSOVA, founders of PORTOBELLO PICTURES, acquired the film rights to CHONKIN in 1986 and it has taken seven years to bring together all the right elements, the financial backing, the director and the cast. It was the universality of the novel's humour that appealed to Abraham and he waited six years for Prague's Velvet Revolution to shake free one of the most accomplished directors of subtle humour tinged with black, Academy Award-winning JIRI MENZEL.

Scripted by ZDENEK SVERAK, CHONKIN is the first film in the Russian language with Russian actors to be produced outside Russia. GENNADIJ NAZAROV, a student straight from drama school, plays the young conscript Chonkin and the cast of over forty features the cream of Russia's film and theatrical talent as well as MARIAN LABUDA, one of Slovakia's best-loved actors.

Filmed on location in Milovice, once the headquarters of the Soviet occupying force in Czechoslovakia, the \$2.5m production was financed totally in Europe with investment from five countries. The participants are Portobello Pictures, Channel Four and the European Co-Production Fund from the UK; Fandango in Italy; MK2 in France with Canal +, La Sept Cinema and CNC; Trite in Russia and Cable Plus and KF in the Czech Republic.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

As Voinovich had his problems with the publishing of his book, so Eric Abraham and Katya Krausova had their particular problems in bringing the THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN to the screen.

Initially set up as a film to be made in Russia with the director Eldar Ryazanov in 1989, Abraham was forced to cancel the production eight weeks before filming began. Russia is still emerging from 70 years of oppressive communist rule and four years ago the old hands of the military and KGB had a loud and forceful voice. The book had been published in the magazine Yunost and was warmly welcomed by some but with overwhelming indignation by a group of generals. They called it a "blasphemous publication" and Voinovich a "traitor" and "slanderer". In the face of this powerful opposition Abraham felt there was not sufficient political freedom for him to be assured that he would get a film with the same kind of integrity as the book. He foresaw an emasculated version made so as not to offend the KGB and military.

"There was also a difference of opinion on the nature of humour," Abraham says. "I regard CHONKIN as the classic novel about the communist experience in Russia and as such you have one shot at producing it as a film. You must start off with the potential for creating a marvellous film which has the chance of matching the brilliance of the book or you leave it alone. Because of the warning signals I was getting I felt I just had to step back."

Abraham was introduced to the book by his wife Katya who read it in Russian while studying at university in 1974. "The universality of the humour appealed to me," says Abraham, "the triumph of the individual, the little man, trying to lead a normal life in total abnormality and showing up the absurdity of that system at that time. The story could be transported or transposed to any individual in any bureaucracy or system anywhere. The appeal of the humour is born out by the fact that the book has been translated into some 20 languages, including Japanese."

As director for the project, Abraham's immediate thought was the Academy Award-winning Jiri Menzel. "I had seen most of his films and knew him as one of the few directors with a subtle touch with humour, which is very necessary for this piece. The story cannot be played as a crude slapstick caricature, it would lose too much of its charm."

Abraham had to wait six years for Menzel. In 1985 the Velvet Revolution had yet to happen and the political situation in the then Czechoslovakia was such that Menzel still had to follow a very careful path. He was not a dissident but he was outside the official line and to make his films he had to take care not to offend. "Jiri did not want to jeopardise that position," says Abraham. "The book was banned in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia was then an extremely faithful and loyal son to the USSR. So, Menzel, understandably, was wary of possible ramifications."

When the revolution did come Menzel was in London teaching at the National Film School and the day the news filtered through he was eating dinner with the Abraham family. "Jiri went straight back to Prague," says Abraham, "and for a year or two was very taken up with the changed circumstances in his country."

It also took time for Abraham to persuade Menzel that he was the right man to direct the film and the catalyst in focusing the director's mind was his frequent screenwriter Zdenek Sverak. In July 1992 Abraham met the writer while sitting on the jury at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival. "I remembered he had worked with Menzel on 'My Sweet Little Village', an Oscar nominee in 1987, and thought CHONKIN would appeal," says Abraham. "I asked him to read it and said I thought he and Menzel should do the film." Two months later Sverak called to say he loved the story and his involvement clinched Menzel.

The book is considered a contemporary classic of Russian literature and Menzel had to be convinced that it would not be better directed by a Russian. "It is a classic," Menzel says, "and it is hard for a foreigner. Like it is hard for someone who is not French to do Maupassant or if someone not Czech wants to make 'The Good Soldier Schweyk'."

"But I liked the book because of its humour. The characters are very plausible, they are full of life, they are real people, not contrived. The story is essentially universal and very human. It had what I look for in a script, the relationship between characters and a sense of humour.

"In the end I decided on a compromise, to make the film with a Czech crew, Czech screenplay and Russian actors who would give me a guarantee of keeping the spirit of the original work."

Abraham still had thoughts of Russia as the location but Menzel said he would prefer to make it in the Czech Republic. "There is no doubt that labour is cheaper in Russia," says Abraham. "But there was always the question of whether those who were opposed to the book would make trouble."

Then came the decision to make the film in the Russian language. "Although I don't read Russian and cannot understand Russian I felt sure the work would lose an important dimension by being played in English," says Abraham. "I felt it needed the Russian soul and spirit. When reading the book in English I could feel that Slav dimension but I felt if we moved it to England or America something vital would be lacking. I know that flies in the face of asserting that CHONKIN is a universal classic and by definition should be accessible and enjoyable and as rich in virtually any language. But, when adapting for the screen I feel one has to be very careful. When you touch a classic you have to be extremely cautious, unless you have a fighting chance of matching the integrity of the book you should leave it alone."

When Menzel signed there was the possibility of the film being made in Czech but everyone agreed the Russian spirit was different from the Czech persona. "We needed that authentic Russian cast and we needed the language", Abraham says.

Although Menzel has a knowledge of Russian he was by no means confident enough to speak directly to his actors in their own language but directed them with the help of an interpreter. "It was not difficult," he says. "I think the Russian actors are wonderful. They could read my eyes and we understood each other without the help of interpreters. I learned Russian at school, because I had to, but although I was shy to use my Russian I did understand. In the past I did not always like the sound of the language but from the actors in the film it sounds very pleasant."

Menzel faced the equal challenge of correctly conveying the nuance of a story which is very particular to Russia. "It is a great burden making a film of famous book and I am on very thin ice," he says. "I derive my experience from Russian films and through literature but at the same time my ears were open all the time on the set. I was interested to hear what the Russian people had to say about that time. I listened to the costume designer and the actors to help me find my direction in the story.

"I find that people from different nations have some common demonimator and the story will find resonance in different countries. It would have been easier for me to make the film in Czech but I do not think the subject would have benefitted from being in Czech."

There was always the problem that the Russian actors would not approve of CHONKIN being filmed by a foreign director. Most of them had read the book in its samizdat version when it was dangerous to do so. They had loved the book for its view of life that flew in the face of the official line and they did not want to take part in a film which would sneer at or denigrate their life. "I am a Russian not a Soviet man," says Vladimir Iljin who plays Golubev, chairman of the local co-operative. "When I agreed to do the film I was afraid of one thing. Menzel and everyone can smile about our life but they cannot look on it with sarcasm. I saw the films of Jiri Menzel and they were very intelligent, I knew he would not laugh at our country."

From the time Portobello acquired the screen rights to THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF PRIVATE CHONKIN in 1985 it has taken some seven years to bring Voinovich's legendary book to the screen. "I always believed the film would be made," says Katya Krausova, "and with Jiri Menzel. But it was a really long, patient wait."

"In the end the chance of combining the talents of Menzel, Voinovich and Sverak was an irresistible opportunity," says Abraham. "The three are a match made in heaven and it was a golden opportunity to create something really special and I believe this is what we have achieved. This business is too hard to be churning out just another film. I am very committed to CHONKIN."

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## THE DIRECTOR

JIRI MENZEL is no stranger to the restrictions of creative freedom. A leading figure in the brief liberalising Prague Spring of 1968, he was completing work on his latest film "Larks On A String" as the tanks rolled into the Czech capital. Said to have much in common with Menzel's father, a journalist imprisoned by the Germans in World War 11 and later persecuted for refusing to join the Communist Party, the film is about a group of men made to work in a scrap metal yard as 're-education' in the early 50's. "Larks On A String" was immediately banned by the Soviet backed government and Menzel became a non-person forced to tread a very careful line. Because he was beyond the official pale when he turned to the theatre for work Menzel's name could not be included in the programme or on posters.

Born in Prague in 1938, Menzel graduated from FAMU, the Czech National Film School, alma mater to some of the world's best directors and where Milan Kundera taught comparative literature, in 1962. His graduation film was "Our Mr Foerster Died", based on a well-known Czech composer. His professional career began in Barrandov Studios as an assistant director and actor in the films of Vera Chytilova and after military service he made his debut as a director with "Mr Balthazar's Death", an episode in the compendium piece "Pearls in the Depth".

In 1965 he directed "Crime In The Girl's School" and a year later "Closely Observed Trains". Immensely successful and critically acclaimed, this film, famous for its earthy black humour, won the Academy Award as Best Foreign Film in 1967 and the Grand Prix at the Mannheim International Film Festival and established Menzel as a symbol of the renaissance of Czech cinema in the 60's. It went on to gross some \$3m at the US box office.

With the banning of "Larks On A String" in 1969 Menzel's film directing career was put on hold and he turned to acting and directing for the stage. Since 1964 Menzel has appeared as an actor in most of his own films but he also has played in the films of other Czech and Hungarian directors.



Among his acting credits are Jan Kadar's "The Accused"; Schorm's "The Return of the Prodigal Son"; "Hotel for Foreigners"; "Dita Sax"; "The Cremator"; "The Vampire From Ferrat"; "Thirty Virgins & Pythagoras"; Svoboda's "Blue Planet"; "Greetings From the Earth" and Kaliha's "Tender Barbarian".

Hungary he appeared in Gyarmathy's "Every Wednesday" and "Koportos"; Gyula Maar's "A Game In The Clouds" and "Heart Problems" directed by Boszormenyi. In 1977 Menzel won the Golden Plaque at the Virgin Islands Film Festival for his performance in Chytilova's "Apple Game" and most recently played the leading role in Costa Gavra's "Le Petit Apocalypse".

As a stage director Menzel has worked with the National Theatre and most of the major theatre companies in Czechoslovakia. He has directed productions in Paris, Basle, Zurich, West Berlin as well as in theatres in Hungary, Yugoslavia, Finland and Sweden. He also directed the drama "Mandrager" for Swedish Television. In 1990 he staged Vaclav Havel's play "Audience" and filmed a documentary of the production for MTM Productions, New York.

In 1974 Menzel returned to the cinema as a director with "Who Seeks a Handful of Gold". While other writers and directors moved to the West to work Menzel stayed on to make films which spoke with a muted voice but nonetheless opposed the occupying force with a subtlety that "triumphed over censorship". Now acknowledged as one of the world's most intelligent directors, his subsequent films are "Seclusion Near the Forest"; "Those Wonderful Men With Cranks"; "Cutting It Short"; "Snowdrop Festival"; "My Sweet Little Village"; "The End Of Old Times" and "The Beggar's Opera".

Menzel's films have played to a wide audience both in the former Czechoslovakia and abroad. They have represented their country at most of the major film festivals throughout the world and won a clutch of prestigious prizes. Among the most significant are the Oscar for "Closely Observed Trains"; the Grand Prix at Karlovy Vary in 1968 for "Capricious Summer"; the Silver Hugo from the Chicago Festival and the OCIC at San Francisco in 1976 for "Seclusion Near The Forest".



"Cutting It Short" was given an Honourable Mention by the International Jury at Venice in 1981 and "My Sweet Little Village" was nominated for an Oscar in 1987 and won the Special Jury Prize at Montreal and the Viewer's Prize at Valladolid. In 1989 "The End of Old Times" won Menzel the Director's Prize at the Montreal Film Festival.

In 1990, some twenty years after it was banned, "Larks on A String" was finally released and has been seen throughout Europe, in Japan and in over twenty countries across the world. Critically acclaimed wherever it is screened the film was awarded the Golden Bear at Berlin and the Akira Kurosawa Prize in San Francisco.

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### THE CAST

Abraham and Menzel have gathered the best of Russian film and theatrical talent in the cast of over forty, which also includes Slovakia's Marian Labuda, star of Menzel's "My Sweet Little Village".

"They are Russia's top actors," says Abraham. "In the UK the equivalent would be Vanessa Redgrave, Maggie Smith, Alec Guinness and Anthony Hopkins. Jiri has cast brilliantly, especially the two leads. From the beginning the challenge was to find Chonkin and I cannot imagine any actor other than Gennadij Nazarov playing him. He is Chonkin.

"Nyura and Chonkin are two young people who have an intrinsic innocence and Nazarov and Zoya Burjak have a naievete and naturalness that comes across on the screen. They are instinctive actors and that was so necessary to find.

"The Russian actors had a generosity of spirit and were enormously professional, I was very impressed. They are an incredibly talented group and I would work with them again tomorrow."

GENNADIY NAZAROV, a young student in his third year at drama college, makes his first film appearance as Chonkin, the innocent young conscript who confounds the Red Army and the KGB at the beginning of World War 2.

Born in Moscow in 1967, Nazarov's ambition as a child was to be a painter specialising in the restoration of works of art. He spent four years studying theatre design at GITIS, Moscow's Institute of Theatrical Design, before he began to think of acting as a career. "The idea gradually became an obsession," he says. "As a child I did not dress up or act out fantasies but I do like to talk and be with people.

"I felt I might be too old at 24 to change direction but I was already working in the theatre and everyone accepted that as the life I wanted to lead, so it was not too much of a shock when I became an actor "

Blond-haired with a round open face and innocent pale blue eyes, Nazarov seems perfect casting. When they read Voinovich's book in 1989 Nazarov's friends agreed, they told him he looked like Chonkin.



Nazarov was so taken by the character Chonkin that he wanted to play the young soldier as his audition piece for drama school but this could not be, the work was a book not a play. When it came to the film his teachers warned that Chonkin would be a difficult character for him to portray. "They said he belonged to a different time with different ideals," Nazarov says, "But, I feel so in tune with him, I have no problems."

Although he has appeared briefly on the Moscow stage Nazarov regards CHONKIN as his professional debut. It is a first experience many actors spend a lifetime reaching for, a major role in a classic story for one of the world's best directors. "I am very happy for the chance," Nazarov says. "When I read the book I never imagined I would one day be Chonkin in a film. Mr Menzel is a very understanding director, we had a good interpreter but I knew what he wanted by his eyes and his gestures."

ZOYA BURYAK, born in Krasnoiarsk in Siberia in 1966, plays the young peasant girl Nyura, Postmistress of Redend. Her mother was an engineer and her father worked in a cheese factory and when Zoya was five the family moved to Odessa. Zoya loved the English language as a child and wanted to work as an interpreter but in the tenth grade decided to try her hand at acting.

"To see if I could succeed as an actress", she says. She studied drama at a special school attached to Odessa Film Studio and then successfully auditioned to join the Leningrad Institute of Theatre. Although unhappy at the beginning of the course, a new teacher in her third year awakened a love for acting which helped reassure Zoya that she had made the right decision.

In 1990 Zoya made her film debut in "The Cold Summer of 1953", a film popular in Russia and abroad. This built up her confidence and also led to more work. She is now a member of Fontanka, Leningrad's Youth Theatre and has been too busy to take a holiday. Her other films include "Little Giant of Big Sex" directed by Nikolai Dostal and she also appeared in a Moscow based episode of the popular British television series "Love Hurts".

Zoya did not read Chonkin until after she auditioned for the director Ryazanov. "I loved Voinovich's book very much," she says. "At the first audition I was not accepted and now it is difficult to believe that I am cast as Nurya. I love this girl because she is so open and so natural."



"Working with Mr Menzel is very calm and relaxing. I had seen "My Sweet Little Village" which I really enjoyed. CHONKIN is a good experience for me, I have been able to forget all my problems and think about my life without the pressures of a big noisy town."

VLADIMIR ILYIN is Golubev, chairman of the co-operative. Born in 1947 in Ekaterinberg, Ilyin's life is steeped in the theatrical, his father, Adolfo, was an actor, his brother Alexander is an actor (he appears in CHONKIN as Shikalov) and his wife Zoya, is an actress. When Ilyin read CHONKIN in the early 70's it was banned and to be discovered with Voinovich's book would have meant immediate arrest.

"I enjoyed the book tremendously," he says. "because it gave a very different view of life in Russia to the official one we were all supposed to accept."

Ilyin studied drama at Sverdlov's Theatre Institute and for seventeen years was a member of Moscow's Mayakovskij Theatre, touring Czechoslovakia, Poland and Bulgaria with the company. He made his first film appearance in 1984 in Menshikov's "My Favourite Clown" but his career was based mainly in the theatre until some four years ago. "I worked without a holiday, that was the way," Ilyin says. "But times are changing and films are a holiday for me."

Among his other films are the screen version of another Voinovich book "The Fur Hat"; Todorovskij's "Once More, Once More"; "Moneychangers" and "Defender of Sid" directed by Filatov and "Lost in Siberia", which starred Anthony Andrews directed by Alexander Mitta.

ALEXEI ZARKHOV as Gladyshev, village know-all and amateur Soviet scientist trying to cross a potato with a tomato, finds himself cast in a very untypical role. "I could never imagine myself as this character," he says, "but that is the beauty of my profession, sometimes you have the chance to journey into the unknown and test yourself in new situations."

"Chonkin is a curious, interesting and responsible work. After the roles I usually play Gladyshev is quite a challenge for me, but an actor should be ready to take risks."



Born in Moscow in 1948 Zarkhov is not sure why he wanted to become an actor but as a small boy there was a strong amateur theatre at his school. He spent time during holidays with the House of Pioneers in Moscow's Studio of the Artistic Word and after leaving secondary school joined MCHAT, Moscow's Institute of Theatre.

"It was at the end of the 60's and at that time the school was considered to be THE academy of the arts," he says. "I remember those days as the most colourful pages of my life because we were taught by some of Russia's most famous actors. They were not only great actors but also great teachers."

The Russian theatre was in a state of upheaval when Zarkov left MCHAT and he opted to join the Sovremenck run by actress Maria Yermolova and director Vladimir Andreyov, staying with them for some 20 years.

Five years ago he again decided to broaden his experience and when the Maxim Gorky Theatre changed its name to the Chekov and split into two groups, Zarkhov joined director Oleg Yefremov.

Zarkhov made his first screen appearance thirteen years ago and has since appeared in some 40 films. He has worked with the best, plus the young and upcoming in a wide range of roles from historical to contemporary.

Among his credits are "My Friend Ivan Lapshin"; "Torpedo"; "Criminalistic Ability" and Ivan the Terrible in Boris Blank's "Secrets of the 16th Century Kremlin".

On stage Zarkhov's best-known roles are in Ostrovski's "Vasilisa Malenteeva" and "Duck Hunting" by Vampilov. He recently completed the film "Will of Stalin" directed by Tumanishvilli in which he plays Stalin's son.

SERGEI GARMASH one of Russia's leading young actors, is Milyaga, local head of the KGB. "I regard Milyaga with horror," he says. "These were terrible people who aroused fear and disgust in those around them."

"I read a photocopy of Voinovich's book in 1983 and again before the film started. I especially liked its humour and irony. I think it is the best of Voinovich's books and certainly never thought I would be in a film of it."



Born in the Ukraine where his father was a bus driver and his mother worked as a bus dispatcher, Garmash joined the Theatre Institute of the Ukraine when he was fifteen. He is not sure why he became an actor except that his mother thought it the best thing he could do.

"At 15 being an actor was very untypical," he says, "and I didn't think about it too much until a few years later when I realised I could not live without acting."

After drama school Garmash joined the Ukraine Theatre then spent time doing compulsory service in the Army before moving to Moscow in 1984 and joining MCHAT. He divides his time now between theatre and film and has toured Poland, Germany, Finland, Italy, Cuba and the USA with theatre groups. CHONKIN is his second film to be made in Europe.

A friend, the director Galina Volchov now making films in the West, had told Garmash of director Jiri Menzel and the actor had made a point of trying to see some of Menzel's films. "I particularly enjoyed 'My Sweet Little Village', he says, "and I know he will do well by CHONKIN."

ZINOVIIY GERDT is Moishe Solomonovich Stalin, the old shoemaker, who is mistaken for the father of the great Josef Stalin.

"Voinovich is a friend," says Gerdt. "I first read his very funny book twenty years ago, illegally, deep in the night. Stalin the old Jewish shoemaker is a very childish man but I wanted the chance to be in the film."

Now aged 76 Gerdt was born in a small town on the Russian/Latvian border. He started out as a metal worker, helping to build Moscow's subway, and began acting with an amateur theatre in his spare time. When he was 24 he joined a group run by the playwright Arbuzoff and together they wrote a play that had a successful run in the Spring of 1941.

During World War 11 he was severely wounded and after two years in hospital Gerdt found it impossible to return to his old work and joined a puppet theatre as the master of ceremonies. The group came to London in 1954, performing for some 45 days on the variety stage,



Gerdt had taught himself to speak English and he began to find work dubbing foreign films. In one year he was the Russian voice of Peter O'Toole as Henry II in "A Lion in Winter"; Richard Harris in the lead role of "Cromwell" and an Estonian actor's voice in a local production of "King Lear". He gradually began to appear in movies in his own right and has since made over a hundred films.

Gerdt's real work however is the one-man show he has been giving for over 30 years. He has toured America, Europe and the Soviet Union talking about himself and his life. "Everyone in Russia knows me very well," he says. "I always play to packed houses. My act is constantly changing, every day there are new ideas and new opinions." Gerdt has given the show in 26 different countries and he met his second wife in Egypt when she was his interpreter.

At the end of a long life during which he has seen the rise and fall of the communist state, Gerdt says, "So much has happened in my lifetime. All through my youth I was hungry and then the war came and I joined the army and my hunger was satisfied for the first time. Now I am richer and I don't want to eat so much. I need for nothing but everything has come so late in my life.

Gerdt has a son who is a mathematician but his daughter has followed him into films. She is a director of documentaries married to Yevetsgeny, a famous Russian cameraman who is the son of director Galina Volchov.

VALERIY ZOLOTUKHIN who plays Kilin, chairman of the local branch of the communist party, is one of Russia's best known actors. Born in 1941 he studied at GITIS, Moscow's Institute of Theatre Arts and for the past thirty years has been a member of the Taganka Theatre. His films include "Bumbarash"; "Intervention" directed by Polok; "Little Tragedies" directed by Shvejcar and "Ruler of Taiga".

MARIA VINOGRADOVA, who plays Granny Dunya maker of Redend's illegal vodka, is another of Russia's most respected artists. She was born in 1922 and in 1943 entered the VGIK theatre school.

In her long and distinguished career she has appeared in some 150 films, most notably "Red Kalina"; "From a Life of Resting"; "Field Crows"; Konchalovsky's "Close Circle" and "Mister and Marketa" directed by Kara.



YURIY DUBROVIN is Volkov, one-armed accountant and henchman to Golubyev. He was born in Rjazsko, Riazanska in Russia in 1939 and graduated from the VGIK theatre school, where he studied under Michail Romm, in 1963.

Dubrovin made his first film appearance with the Dovzenko Studio in Kiev and has since appeared in some 120 films that include "Alive and Dead" directed by Stolper and "In the War, Like In The War" directed by Tregubovic.

MARIAN LABUDA, one of Slovakia's leading actors is Battalion Commander Opalikov. From grammar school Labuda studied acting at the Academy of Arts in Bratislava and after graduating from University co-founded "Street Theatre", one of the country's most famous avant-garde groups which was forced to close when the Russian Ambassador decided their production of Gogol's "The Marriage Broker" was an insult.

Labuda and friends then founded the Nova Scena Theatre, keeping the "avant garde" alive by sneaking plays into the repertoire which said what it was forbidden to say openly on the streets.

Since 1990 he has been a member of the Slovak National Theatre making his first appearance in Mrozek's "Emigrants". Labuda's films include "The Unwoken" and "The Good Times Are Coming Back". He also starred in "The End of Old Times" and "My Sweet Little Village" both directed by Jiri Menzel. In 1991 he made his first appearance in an English speaking role in Istvan Szabo's "Meeting Venus".

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### THE LOCATION

MILOVICE... drive across a flat landscape along narrow roads lined with apple trees. This is the Czech Republic, some 50kms from Prague. There are few cars on the road but the small villages have an air of regeneration at odds with the surrounding countryside. Look closely at the seemingly featureless flat fields and you see signs of what was once a large military presence. Concrete blockhouses, overgrown runways and bunkers all being reclaimed and submerged by the encroaching countryside.

Breaking the top of a small rise are apartment blocks once home to 80,000 Russian troops and their families. Abandoned with the break-up of the old Soviet Union this is now a ghost town without street name, number or sign to tell who lived here or when.

The road runs alongside a small birch forest and at the end of a dirt track is a Russian village with wooden houses, church and post office all dating from the turn of the century. This anachronism is Redend, formerly Deadend (pre-1917) where Ivan Chonkin makes fools of the Red Army and the KGB in 1941 in Portobello Pictures production THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN.

There is an eccentric justice in Redend and Chonkin's stand being sited on what was once the headquarters of the then Soviet Union's occupying force, even though it was not a premeditated decision to locate the film here. When it became certain the film would not be made in Russia, Production Designer Milan Bycek began the search for the right location in the Czech Republic. Milovice was one of the first places he saw and although he knew it probably was the ideal Redend Bycek travelled another 2,000 kms just to make certain.

"I travelled round quite a few potential locations in Russia and we couldn't have bettered this," says Eric Abraham. "The landscape, the birch forest are all exactly right and there is the extra irony that we are making our film in the 25th year of the invasion, the anniversary of the Prague Spring, on the site of the former Soviet HQ."



The site also included a runway and water, two facilities of great importance to the production. The land was leased for the duration of filming but because it was once a Russian base, like many such areas in the Czech Republic now, the exact ownership of the land is uncertain.

Planning and building the village brought its own special problems. First, some 30 Soviet landmines had to be cleared from the site and near vicinity. The Russians left no maps and it was dangerous to stray into the woods away from the cleared area. Then the gardens had to be sown in April with cabbage, corn and peppers which would be ready for harvesting when filming began in June.

Unlike most western film sets where the houses are just facades, Redend was a village of solidly built houses, church and post office. The timber used in their construction came from 200 year old farmhouses and barns in the hills outside Prague and the unique bundles of thatch for the roofs were hand-tied by local farmers.

"The village was designed to give depth wherever you looked," says Bicek. "I made a model first and then "pegged" it out on the location for the cameraman to see and he could then swing things around if necessary."

The interiors were layer upon layer of authentic bric a brac and minutiae of daily life in a remote Russian village in the early 40's. There were tins, jars, rugs, posters, pictures, photographs, pots, pans, jars of pickles, patchwork quilts, beds, old broken down sleds, everything to give the patina of reality and all brought in from Mosfilm in Moscow.

Costumes also were brought in from Moscow. "Because of the technical problems and crises in Russia it was hard to get fabrics," says Irina Ginno, the Moscow-based Costume Designer. "I took some from the costume store of Mosfilm but others, like the villagers and Nyura's clothes and the soldiers and KGB uniforms I had made. I sketch the clothes and work out the colours and fabrics but there is one truth in pictures and another on film. It is necessary to create the right look. I like the costumes to work organically with the surroundings and the story."



The largest and most important prop was an airplane, a U-2 bi-plane and the production was fortunate in finding the exact model mentioned in Voinovich's book in a local museum. It was built before World War 11 by a German company based in Prague. Exact in every detail it lacked only the machine gun with which Chonkin holds off the Red Army.

What the film did want but could not buy or fabricate was rain. Mud was needed mud and that they could make, but churned up muddy fields do not sit well with clear blue skies. Just when everyone thought rain would never come, and having seriously considered putting up giant balloons to give shade, the downpour came. But the weather never did get it quite right, there were acres of blue skies when clouds were needed and banks of clouds when all the Director of Photography asked for was clear blue skies. But, such are the traumas of film making.

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synopsis

THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF  
PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN

Soldiering does not come easy to Private Ivan Chonkin (GENNADIJ NAZAROV). A conscript in the Red Army, he is an innocent soul more at home with farm horses than marching up and down a parade ground. When Lt Colonel Opalikov (MARIAN LABUDA) orders Chonkin to a remote village to guard a downed military bi-plane, he little realises the confusion he is unleashing.

In the village of Redend, formerly Deadend (pre-1917, the plane's arrival has caused fear and consternation. Nyura (ZOYA BURJAK), a young peasant girl and the village postmistress, falls face down into her potato patch and the entire village turns out to gape at pilot and plane. Gladyshev, village know-all and amateur scientist trying to grow a cross between a potato and a tomato, explains how the plane stays up in the air and Volkov (YURI DUBROVIN) goes in search of Golubev (VLADIMIR ILJIN), Chairman of the local co-operative. He, as usual, has over-indulged in Granny Dunya's (MARIA VINOGRADOVA) home-made vodka and is convinced the pilot has been sent to spy on him and check up on the village's milk production.

Chonkin, delivered to the village by Opalikov with orders that as a sentry he must obey only him or a General of higher rank, becomes bored in the oppressive summer heat. He sees Nyura tending her potato patch and soon there are two backs moving up and down the rows.

The next morning Chonkin pulls down the fence separating Nyura's garden from the landing field and pushes the plane into the garden. Forgotten by his unit, the little private settles down to life with Nyura. He milks the cow, mends fences, cleans the house and tends the land while Nyura goes about her work as postmistress.

But, his conscience pricks him and Chonkin writes to Opalikov reminding him of his existence. Golubev is thrown into a panic. Persuaded that Chonkin really is a spy and the letter a report denouncing him, Golubev loses his nerve and offers to return his party card. Nyura, not wanting to lose her new-found love, simply tears up the letter.



The radio brings news that Russia is at war with Germany and Kilin, local Party Chairman (VALERA ZOLOTUCHIN), Golubev and Volkov telephone Comrade Borisov (RUDOLF HRUSINKSY) for instructions. Uncertain himself of what to do, Borisov tells them to organise a spontaneous meeting but the villagers have already gathered outside. This cannot be, says Borisov, if people come together of their own will without party supervision there will be anarchy. Kilin orders the villagers back to work and then tells Shikalov, leader of the agricultural workers (ALEXANDER ILJIN) to round them up again for a spontaneous meeting.

Kilin delivers what he considers to be a rousing speech while Granny Dunya and the village women strip the local shop of goods to see them through the coming hardship. Chonkin does his bit for the war effort by camouflaging the plane against attack from the air. In the excitement Nyura's cow escapes and devours Gladyshev's garden including his precious hybrids. The amateur botanist takes his revenge by denouncing Chonkin as a deserter and traitor.

The letter lands on Milyaga's (SERGEI GARMAS) desk. He is busy interrogating an old Jewish shoemaker (GERDT ZINOVIJ) who claims to be Stalin's father. The KGB Captain's confidence is shaken by the old man's composure and the name on his identity card - Stalin Moshe Solomonovich - but his spirits are lifted by Gladyshev's letter and Milyaga gives the order to leave for Redend.

Nyura is the first person Milyaga and his men meet and one lets slip that they are looking for a deserter. She rushes to Chonkin with the news. He is not at all perturbed and refuses to hide. A sentry stands guard, he does not cower in a cowshed.

Golubev panics when Milyaga bursts into his office. Convinced he is going to be arrested, he tries to eat the milk production chart with its downward curve before passing out on the floor. Volkov at first denies all knowledge of Golubev but tells the KGB where to find Chonkin.

Milyaga tries to arrest Chonkin who fires a warning shot into the air. He will only surrender to Opalikov or someone of higher rank and is not impressed by Milyaga being a Captain who anyway is wearing a different uniform.



The arrest warrant in one hand Milyaga stands up and Chonkin fires a bullet right through the middle of the stamp bearing the emblem of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Another bullet hits Svintsov (ALEXANDER GARIN) in the buttock.

With Nyura's help Chonkin persuades the men they are surrounded. She collects their guns, Chonkin ties them up with the clothes line and the next day puts them to work lifting Nyura's potatoes.

In the course of a garbled and misinterpreted telephone conversation the army gets to hear of Chonkin's prisoners and General Drynov (SLAVA MOLOKOV) and Colonel Lapshin (VADIM ZAVJALOV), at the head of a regiment, set out for Redend to capture the dangerous traitor Chonkin. Instead they capture the mud-spattered Milyaga who has escaped from Chonkin and is convinced they are Germans. Bukashev (IGOR VETROV) is equally certain that Milyaga is a big fish in the German military. The two Russians continue to misunderstand each other in appalling German.

Drynov meanwhile has decided to attack Chonkin at dawn, his platoon has plenty of machine guns but no ammunition and a field gun with only three shells.

Nyura and Chonkin are woken by the first field gun shell shattering their hay loft, while a second demolishes Gladyshev's latrine. A squad of men in white camouflage slowly advances across the meadow and Chonkin assumes they are Germans who mistakenly think it snows in Russia in July.

Lapshin's men have only white camouflage and cannot fire their rifles because they have no bullets, but the explosion of the last field shell blows up Nyura's house with Chonkin inside. But he survives.

General Drynov is so impressed by the young private's stand that he immediately pins one of his own medals on Chonkin's swelling chest. But, Chonkin's moment of glory is short lived. Milyaga's men are released to tell their story.

And so Chonkin's fate hangs in the balance - will he be shot as a traitor - will he keep his medal and stay a hero - and Nyura, what will happen to her.....



# Portobello

PICTURES

## CAST LIST

IVAN CHONKIN  
NYURA  
GOLUBEV  
KILIN  
GLADYSHEV  
VOLKOV  
BUTCH  
MILYAGA  
STALIN  
OPALIKOV  
GRANNY DUNYA  
AFRODITA  
KAPA  
SHAPKIN  
GENERAL DRYNOV  
BORISOV  
NINKA  
TAYKA  
ZINAIDA  
ZHIKIN  
SHIKALOV  
TALDYKIN  
KURZOV  
LUKOV  
RAISA  
MELESHKO  
LYUSHA  
MALAKHOV  
DOCTOR  
SVINTSOV  
PROKOPOV  
BUKASHEV  
LAPSHIN  
SYRYKH  
FILYUKOV  
ZAVGORODNYI  
PESKOV  
YARTSEV  
BALASHEV  
SAMUSHKIN  
1ST TELEPHONIST  
2ND TELEPHONIST  
GIRL

GENNADIY NAZAROV  
ZOYA BURYAK  
VLADIMIR ILYIN  
VALERIY ZOLOTUKHIN  
ALEXEI ZHARKOV  
YURIY DUBROVIN  
SERGEI STEPANCHENKO  
SERGEI GARMASH  
ZINOVII GERDT  
MARIAN LABUDA  
MARIA VINOGRADOVA  
TATYANA GERBACHEVSKAYA  
LYUBOV RUDNEVA  
IVAN RYZHOV  
VYACHESLAV MOLOKOV  
NIKOLAI MARCHENKO  
TATYANA AGAFONOVA  
TATYANA OSHURKOVA  
GALINA PETROVA  
HENRIK BISTA  
ALEXANDR ILYIN  
ALEXANDR KUZMICHEV  
SERGEI BATALOV  
IGOR FOKIN  
IRINA LAZAREVA  
ALEXANDR MOKHOV  
OLGA ANOKHINA  
ALEXANDR MASALOV  
JOSEF DALECKY  
ALEXANDR GARIN  
SERGEI GABRIELIAN  
IGOR VYETROV  
VADIM ZAVYALOV  
VADIM LYUBISHIN  
OLEG DYEMIDOV  
MIKHAIL VASKOV  
ALEXANDR PASHKOVSKIY  
VLADIMIR GORYUSHIN  
VALERIY NIKOLAYEV  
VALERIY YARYEMENKO  
YEVGENIY SOKOLOV  
KONSTANTIN CHEPURIN  
NASTYA DYOGTYEVA