



THE BANISHMENT

A film by Andrey Zvyagintsev

2007 / Russia / 157 min. / In Russian with English subtitles

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Logline:

A trip to the pastoral countryside reveals a dark, sinister reality for a family from the city.
Based on the novel *The Laughing Matter* by William Saroyan.

Synopsis:

Soon after extracting a bullet from his brother's arm, Alex (Konstantin Lavroneko) relocates his family from the city to his father's old house in the countryside. As the family settles into their rustic existence, Alex's wife Vera (Maria Bonnevie) reveals that she is pregnant by another man. Enraged by his wife's announcement, Alex consults with his brother and demands that Vera terminate the pregnancy. When the forced abortion goes horribly awry and Alex's brother suffers a severe heart attack, a confrontation with the man Alex believes to have seduced his wife send events quickly spiraling out of control.

Major Awards and Festivals:

Cannes, 2007 (Main Competition)

- **Best Actor, Konstantin Lavronenko (winner)**

Karlovy Vary, 2007

Toronto, 2007

Background on THE BANISHMENT:

The Banishment is the title that director Andrey Zvyagintsev has given to his second film, a film in which he has once again chosen as the object of his creative examination one of the most interesting and difficult, yet evident and ordinary components of human existence – the family. But unlike *The Return* in which the attention of the director and viewers was focused on a father and his sons, the protagonists of *The Banishment* are a husband and wife, a man and a woman.

The dramatic character of a human situation. The nature of love. Betrayal. The necessity to choose. Misunderstanding. Death. Revelation...All of these generalized words, finding their form in specific actions, materializing in the characters and their circumstances, become piercing facts of both normal domestic life and of a higher existence. Realism, detailed elaboration, a chain of events, and a secret all sustain tension and captivate from the first scene to the unexpected, inexplicable finale and beyond, feeding the brain and the heart, forcing compassion for not only the drama's characters but possibly for our neighbors as well, no matter how distant or "different" they may seem. Because it doesn't matter who we are, where we are, or what we are when we are in banishment.

Zvyagintsev on THE BANISHMENT

Tell us your feelings about your second film after the triumph of *The Return*.

There is a superstition that the second film is always a flop. Some call it a drop in energy. But as soon as you start working, all of these superstitions and fears step back. The syndrome of the second film is a myth that needs to be dispelled. Vindication can only come from your work, from the film, because the film itself is the goal and not a means of proving something.

Is a festival a means?

Yes, it is. Besides, success at a festival is a guarantee of the next project. Of course, this is a piece of luck that has to be appreciated. And yet you have to stay on your guard about it, otherwise it's easy to turn into some kind of unit that produces success.

***The Banishment* is based on a story by William Saroyan. How important was the original story for the film and how much was changed from the original?**

We made a lot of changes. It's enough to say that Saroyan didn't let any of his characters survive. In the beginning I came across the script by Arthur Melkumyan based on *The Laughing Matter*, a story by William Saroyan – a relatively unknown piece of his prose. I felt something extraordinary. The language was very peculiar, with a heavy sentence structure that was characteristic of the middle of the last century. Sometimes the brothers Alex and Mark (who had different names in the original) spoke to each other in an incomprehensible language. It was intended to be Armenian but it disturbed me – if you specify the language you give their exact address. Then came the idea – let them speak in a dead language, something reconstructed by linguists. However, this could have created an excessively artificial effect in the film, so we dropped the idea.

The film gives the impression that the story takes place in a Northern country. Where was the movie shot?

In Belgium, Northern France, and a major part in the south - in Moldova. By the way, we started in Sardinia, but thank God we stopped in time because otherwise we would never have had a big enough budget. In Moldova we found wonderful scenery with rolling hills and the occasional cluster of trees.

How, avoiding the exact address, did you construct the space and time of the movie?

The world of Saroyan's characters was conceived as true "retro". There were derby hats, steam engine trains and the spirit of old California. We moved all of this a bit closer to modern times. We removed concrete markers. In the computer we removed a French sign in the bar, altered Finnish bank notes so they would seem more abstract, we even wanted to drop the cross from the church to avoid indications of a specific religion, but at the last minute we put it back. Architecture, signs, license plates and specific car models were all important, even down to the windows and window frames. Stage props were bought at German flea markets. But to fully create a universal world in cinema is not easy. Material culture carries with it the hallmarks of time and place.

Mikhail Krichman lensed the new film as well as "The Return". What can you tell us about your comrade-in-arms?

Yes, he is my comrade-in-arms and I think he's an outstanding person. Just like three years ago, I'll say it again; he has unique eyes that see the invisible.

How did your acting ensemble come together?

After *The Return* I wanted to run from Konstantin Lavronenko because I didn't want to enter the same waters. In the end I couldn't find anyone else who could be his equal. In the beginning I imagined Alex being younger but later understood that he should be a bit over 40, halfway through life – thus the crash of this life would be taken much more seriously. Moreover, Konstantin and I are in complete agreement on the nature of movie acting. Meeting Alexander Baluev was a pleasant eye-opener for me. He's very famous in Russia but he worked without the least sign of fatigue. He did 19-20 takes, which for him was probably unusual. We worked on Mark's role with many other actors, famous and unknown, but Baluev in the end had no competitors.

The image of Vera stands out in the film. She is played by Maria Bonnevie – the only non-Russian in the group, an actress from the Scandinavian school who worked with Bergman. How and why did you decide on her?

I saw her in the Norwegian film “I am Dina”. I was struck by her fantastic energy and understood that this is a new actress of a new age. I didn’t even know she was Norwegian until we were introduced at the Golden Beetle Award ceremony in Stockholm and I saw her photo among the portraits of the leading actors of Stockholm’s Royal Dramatic Theater. Many Russian actresses auditioned for the role but Maria won, despite the fact she had to play in very difficult scenes in a foreign language. While still maintaining her soaring and flowing beauty, she almost embodied “The Meek One” by Dostoevsky, which fits within the matrix of my understanding of art. When an actor tries at any cost to surprise or be expressive it really ruins the character. An actor should focus on living the part and not caring about the fact that someone is watching.

I heard about arguments over the ending of the film. Some thought that it should have been cut. How do you react to other people’s perception of the film?

I think that everyone will have their own interpretation of the film and that’s their right. I remember comments on *The Return*: “A Russian man returns home after 12 years and drinks wine - not vodka?! I don’t believe it!” That view is a straightforward, simple interpretation. Vodka is an everyday reality. Wine is a different reality. It’s mythological. The same is true for this film. The meaning behind the ending with the women in the field will be interpreted by some in the following way: Russia will endure everything and will fray everything through. For me this is strange because there is no Russia in my film, it is the myth of eternal return, the natural and Christian cycle of life. When we are guided by other’s opinions, we become like the institution of the Focus Group. You need to be true to a film and not to someone else’s opinion. Just like in life, you can’t even listen to a wise man, you have to do what you think is right. To change the film I have to feel the necessity to do it from inside.

What technical problems did you have to solve in the new project?

In *The Return* stunts were the most difficult problem. The most complicated shot in *The Banishment* was a panoramic shot on a stream, where we see the reflection of a house in a puddle. And another difficulty was a circular shot around Alex sleeping in a car that was made with the help of computer graphics. In my opinion, technical effects in a film should be kept to a minimum.

How was the musical concept of the film created?

Under the closing credits is a section of Arvo Pärt’s *Kanon Pokajanen* performed by the Estonian Chamber Choir in a Tallinn cathedral. Andrei Kritsky’s text is sung in Old Slavonic. In the body of the film is the music of Andrei Dergachev, the sound director of “*The Banishment*”, who also composed music for “*The Return*”. There is also *Kirie Eleison* and *Exsilium*, both performed in Latin. So inside the film there is Latin and at the end Old Slavonic performed by an Estonian choir, the polyphony and interpenetration of cultures.

Andrey Zvyagintsev Bio

Andrey Zvyagintsev was born in Novosibirsk in 1964. After graduating from theatre school he worked in the theatre. In 1986, he moved to Moscow where he graduated from the acting department of the Moscow State Theatre School. Mr. Zvyagintsev then worked as an actor in independent theatre projects and acted in several films.

In 2000, he made his debut as a television director of 3 episodes for the series “Black Room” for REN-TV. *The Return*, his feature debut received two Golden Lions at the Venice IFF for Best Film and Best Debut. The film won more than 40 international awards including the European Film Academy Discovery – Prix Fassbinder, the Russian Film Academy Award Golden Eagle for Best Film and Best Cinematography, a nomination for the Golden Globe in the category of Best Foreign Language Film, the Swedish Film Institute Award for Best Foreign Language Film, a nomination for a Cesar in the category of Best Foreign Film, a BBC World Cinema Award for Best Foreign Film, and the FIPRESCI Award for Best Foreign Language Film at Palm Springs IFF. Following *The Banishment*, his next feature was 2011’s *Elena*, for which he was awarded with numerous international prizes, including the Un Certain Regard – Special Jury Prize at Cannes. 2014’s *Leviathan* became the filmmaker’s most acclaimed film to date, winning Best Screenplay at Cannes, Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globes, while earning an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. His most current credit *Loveless*, has already won multiple prestigious nominations and wins, including the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film (nomination), the Cannes Jury Prize (win), and two European Film Award wins (Best European Cinematographer and Best European Composer).

Filmography

2017 *Loveless*

2014 *Leviathan*

2011 *Mystery* (short)

2011 *Elena*

2009 *Apocrypha* (short)

2007 *The Banishment*

2003 *The Return*

2000 *Black Room*, (TV series), 3 episodes: “Busido,” “Obscure,” “The Choice”

Credits:

Director	Andrey Zvyagintsev
Writers	Artyom Melkumyan Oleg Negin William Saroyan (based on his novel, <i>The Laughing Matter</i>)
Director of Photography	Mikhail Krichman
Producers	Dmitriy Lesnevskiy Yelena Loginova (executive) Anthony Rey (executive)
Editing	Anna Mass
Production Design	Andrey Ponkratov
Visual Effects	Dmitriy Tokoyakov
Cast:	
Alexander	Konstantin Levronenko
Vera	Maria Bonnevie
Mark	Aleksandr Baluev
Robert	Dmitriy Ulyanov
German	Vitaliy Kishchenko
Kir	Maksim Shibayev
Eva	Yekaterina Kulkina
Max	Aleksey Vertkov
Viktor	Igor Sergeev
Liza	Ira Gonto
Faina	Svetlana Kashelkina
Frida	Yaroslava Nikolaeva
Flora	Elizabet Dantsinger
Vera (voice)	Elena Lyadova