

# east/west

He is already one of the biggest figures in the Russian entertainment arena, and now Alexander Rodnyansky has turned his sights and his resources to the US. With his first English-language film in competition at Berlin, he spoke to **Mike Goodridge** about his career and his ambitions in film



Alexander Rodnyansky got in touch with Billy Bob Thornton when a Russian reporter thought they would make a good match. They met, liked each other, and Thornton introduced Rodnyansky to his manager, Geyer Kosinski of Media Talent Group (MTG).

It did not take long for Rodnyansky to decide to back Thornton's next film as a director, *Jayne Mansfield's Car*, which has its world premiere in competition at Berlin on February 13. Rodnyansky and Kosinski produced the film which features Thornton, Robert Duvall, John Hurt and Kevin Bacon.

Kosinski also introduced him to another client, director DJ Caruso (*Disturbia, I Am Number Four*), who visited the set of the Thornton film in Atlanta. After many conversations, Rodnyansky came on board to produce Caruso's long-cherished film of the young adult novel *The Goats*, which is in post-production.

The success of the relationship between Rodnyansky's AR Films and Kosinski's MTG led to the recent formation of a \$120m fund which will see the two companies developing and producing up to six US films over the next two years.

But if you think Alexander Rodnyansky, who is Ukrainian, is another foreigner about to be taken for a ride in Hollywood, you're wrong. Rodnyansky is a titan in the Russian entertainment business, a film producer and director with distribution and festival operations as well as a background revolutionising the TV landscape in the post-communist era.

He has produced some of the most notable Russian films of the last decade including blockbusters such as Fyodor Bondarchuk's *9th Company* and *The Inhabited Island* (and the currently shooting Bondarchuk epic *Stalingrad*) as well as art films from Andrei Zvyagintsev (*Elena*), Alexander Sokurov (*The Sun*) and Alexander Mindadze (*Innocent Saturday*) and international productions such as Nana Dzordzhadze's *A Chef In Love* and Regis Wargnier's *East/West*, both of which won Oscar nominations for best foreign-language film.

"When I decided to focus exclusively on film in 2009," Rodnyansky explains, "I realised very fast that Russian movies have a basic weakness, which to some extent is the same as most European movies — they don't sell outside



Jayne Mansfield's Car

their home country. Even if it's a very successful film in the Russian market or a genre movie or a film by an internationally famous auteur, it's just hard to see these films crossing the border.

"But once the budgets of Russian films started to grow, it became comparable to producing independent films in the US, so I decided to go to the US and explore the opportunities of making films there. That's why I set up a company able to produce films in the US that could be distributed in my part of the world."

#### Russian-US slate

Rodnyansky will continue to produce three Russian films per year in addition to two or three US independents, and he wants to work only in English or Russian. "It is better to have a slate of movies — it is dangerous to gamble on just one film," he says.

Born in Kiev in the Ukraine, Rodnyansky came from a dynasty of film directors and graduated from the National University of Film, Theatre and Television in Kiev as a documentary director. He worked producing and directing documentaries at home

and then in Germany for ZDF while pursuing his passion for narrative movies as a producer.

In 1994, as the independent TV market was getting to its feet after decades of Soviet control, he set up an independent production company in the Ukraine, turning it into the country's first independent TV channel, 1+1, which took only a few months to become the most popular channel in the Ukraine TV market of 15 million people.

Within 18 months, he had sold 50% of the company to Central European Media Enterprises (CME).

In 2002, he moved to Moscow to head up Story First Communications, a "relatively small enterprise set up by US investors with the idea of bringing the US network model to Russia".

Starting out with a market capitalisation of \$50m, the company — which was later renamed CTC Media — developed into an entertainment channel which doubled its audience share by 2006. When the company went public on NASDAQ that year, it was valued at \$3bn and when Rodnyansky stepped down as chief executive officer in 2008, it had a market cap of \$4.5bn.

#### FACTFILE

##### ALEXANDER RODNYANSKY

■ Rodnyansky trained as a documentary director at Kiev's National University of Film, Theatre and Television.

■ In 1994 he set up 1+1, Ukraine's first independent TV channel, building it into the biggest channel in the country; sold a 50% stake to CME.

■ In 2002 he moved to Moscow to set up Story First Communications, a US-backed TV venture, building it into CTC Media (market cap in 2008: \$4.5bn).

■ In 2009, he cashed out of 1+1 and CTC to focus on film, creating AR Films which has interests across Russia, central and eastern Europe and now the US.

Rodnyansky sold his remaining 50% share in 1+1 to CME and also cashed out his large shareholding in CTC. He then decided to focus entirely on the movie business and created AR Films, which now controls film and TV production company Non-Stop Production, the prestigious national film festival Kinotavr in Sochi and two distribution ventures — leading Russian arthouse distributor Cinema Without Frontiers (Kino Bez Granits) and central and eastern European licensing outfit A-Company, which controls a distribution network across 20 countries.

"In the US I want to do the same as I do in Russia, which is work with outstanding writers, directors and casts," he explains. "I adore the US classics of the '60s and '70s and Billy Bob Thornton comes from that school. His film is an homage to the movies of that time, though I think it's unique, fresh and contemporary as well."

Kosinski, Rodnyansky says, has similar ambitions to develop and produce "character-driven, story-based films".

"I can do other movies, and he has his own projects with other partners," says Rodnyansky. "I am free from any commitments to work with his clients [his client management list includes Angelina Jolie and Nicole Kidman]. We are looking for great projects we love more than anyone else which we can produce."

Graham Taylor at WME Independent represents AR Films. Hyde Park International has taken on international sales for *Jayne Mansfield's Car*, but Rodnyansky says he is mulling over creating his own sales company for all the films in his output.

Meanwhile, he says, he sees plenty of synergies between the US and Russian operations. Rodnyansky is not in the business of forcing territories to buy Russian movies nobody wants to see, but Russian talent could certainly travel — as Timur Bekmambetov has proved — to the US, and the US movies can be fed into his distribution companies as well as sold around the world.

"I want to learn about the US business and I'm happy to partner up with great professionals and learn from them, while sharing my expertise from my part of the world," he says. "I really do have a unique combination of creative and business experience in this part of the world." ■

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The Goats