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- National News
- State News
- Politics
- Business (World)
- Business (US)
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- Industry
- Science
- Medicine
- Sports
- Education
- Entertainment

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- View Topics
- View Authors

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- View Topics
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**NOTES FROM THE NEW WORLD - An Interview With Vitaly Sumin**

*Christina Hamlett*

During cinema's early years, it isn't surprising that much of its fare was derived from melodramas and vaudeville skits that didn't require sound in order for the plot to be understood. As title cards and ambient music gradually gave way to talkies, fledgling writers began to adapt more material from novels and short stories appearing in Collier's and The Saturday Evening Post. By the 1970's, adaptations of pre-existing works accounted for nearly a third of all films produced in the U.S. Fiction and stage plays, of course, aren't the only sources of inspiration. Diaries, comics, board and electronic games, lyrics, psychological case studies, vintage photography, and even the 11 o'clock news provide no shortage of fodder for big-screen entertainment. For filmmaker Vitaly Sumin, inspiration for his latest project, "Notes From The New World", came from Dostoevsky's "Notes From The Underground". In this contemporary retelling of the author's novella, the action unfolds against the backdrop of modern Los Angeles and orchestrates a suspenseful collision of love, terrorism and deception.

After receiving his M.S. degree in Oceanography, Sumin produced ocean-related documentaries (Jacques Cousteau style) which eventually led him to abandon his scientific pursuits to get a B.A. in film directing and subsequently work as a co-writer and producer on numerous productions. His career shift was unmistakably a sound one that not only garnered a following but allowed him to add prestigious awards and study grants to his repertoire of industry accomplishments. In 2005, he wrote, produced, and directed the feature film "Shades of Day" ([www.shadesofday.com](http://www.shadesofday.com)) in the framework of his "Dostoevsky-Los Angeles Project" (<http://www.shadesofday.com/VMP/new-projects.htm>). His ambitious adaptation of Dostoevsky's novella "White Nights" was selected by Rutgers University's Professor Gerard Pirog for his course in cinema along with the classic works by Bertolucci, Kurosawa, Bresson, Scorsese, Shroeder, and Von Sternberg. In 2009, Sumin wrote, directed, and produced "Notes From The New World" ([www.notesthemovie.com](http://www.notesthemovie.com)), the second chapter of the Dostoevsky-LA Project". As he prepares for his next project, "Shades of Blood", Sumin took time to share his insights on the adaptation process and his passion for Russian literature.

Q: Do you view your film as an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's work or a continuation of it?

A: Whatever is depicted, it's essential that a film's content resonate with contemporary audiences. In transporting the essential elements of "Notes From The Underground" from mid-19th-century Russia to modern-day California, I have underscored the universality of Dostoevsky's tale as well as the commonalities of the human experience. The film proposes a certain reading of the book using it as a pretext to show the conditions of existence in 21st-century Los Angeles. I've never been particularly interested in the exact re-creation of stories by classical authors, including the appropriate attributes of the corresponding historical time involved. With all my respect and admiration for the great writers, I believe that as human beings we're all equal - some of us simply serve as mediums for 'the voices' that help to discover the laws of the universe. Each classical fiction work represents for me a patent serving as base for the explorations of our own age.

"Notes from the New World" is both an adaptation and a continuation of Dostoyevsky's work. At the same time, it is also a re-telling. What's important are the ideas and themes of the original writing. This is not like a typical adaptation of a novel where the story is faithfully re-told in an overly serious and drab tone. Instead, what was important was the faithful re-telling or representing of the ideas and themes in the most accessibly modern way.

Q: Beyond the storyline you have developed in your film, what is your broader message regarding the state of society both in America and throughout the world?

A: Well, we're living in the unprecedented time of a technological revolution and the fall of the walls. Hamlet who lived at the time of another revolution - a passage from Renaissance to Baroque - stated that "time has dislocated the joint!" (citing by memory). Whatever happens in a faraway corner of the world may become known right away anywhere in the world.

The problem is that to change a living human being and the corresponding elements of the evolution of the matter requires a longer time, if ever possible. Most - if not all - social revolutions that intended to quickly change the world failed but provided us with experience. On the other hand, the technological revolution made the dreams come true - in a way the world has become One. Has the Underground Man become a modern Hamlet (similar to Greek's Orestes who was born again as Hamlet)? Steven, hero of "Notes From The New World", who is assigned to portray a modern Underground Man in Los Angeles of 2010, claims: "Not all the civilizations progress at the same pace but then the losers use bombs to make all of us equal. We have to pay for the time the third world lost because they want to be in the family... So finally, the world will become One. Should it take one hundred years or one thousand years, I don't know."

In the movie, Steven and Irina discuss the difference between themselves and the characters of the "Notes From The Underground" whom they are selected to portray on stage. Steven claims that he doesn't feel a big difference between himself as a young angry American man of the 21st century and the Underground Man from the Dostoevsky's story: "You're nobody in America if you don't have money or connections! The poor folks become poorer. And the rich f\*\*\* richer! I think our world is an awful place to live." On the contrary,

**Christina Hamlett**



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Her latest publication, "Media Magnetism," is targeted to writers, artists, entrepreneurs, nonprofits and small business owners that want to work more effectively with the media. (<http://www.mediamagnetism.org>)

She is also the originator and author of the "Buy the Book/Get the Coach" writing series which is currently available at [www.offthebookshelf.com](http://www.offthebookshelf.com).

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Irina, an actress who's working as a call girl for a living sees a big difference between herself and Lisa, the prostitute in the 19th century Russian bordello from Dostoevsky's book: "I'm an educated, strong, independent woman. I know what I want..." It may be a simplified way to see the things related to the notion of Freedom but - talking about the present state of the world - societies with more or less fair representation of woman in the governing bodies didn't exist in the time of Dostoevsky.

Q: How is the action in your film juxtaposed against the futility of The Underground Man and his inability to change either himself or the society he blames for his misery?

A: Every common man of no particular influence or stature throughout history has felt that he has no real control over his own fate. In today's modern society, however, the common man has the illusion of control of his own destiny through technology. And even though Steven is surrounded by modern technology - such as the spy cameras throughout his living quarters for his research - he ultimately finds that he is not in control over them. They merely gave him the illusion of control. As such, he is really no different than the Underground Man that he is researching.

Q: Describe the process that you went through to develop a "life imitates art" storyline where the characters are actually living the modern version of the play in which they are acting on screen.

A: When an actor performs on stage, a process of identification with a character takes place. Depending on the degree/scope of the identification, an actor may need some time to "get back" and restore her/his inner self. In the story of "Notes From The New World", Steven, a young actor at the beginning of his career is asked by Bob, a mad Machiavellian-type director and playwright, to perform the part of the Underground Man in real life. Bob places Steven like a guinea pig in a secluded space surveyed by numerous spy cameras and expects the walls between life and art to melt. As a former scientist myself, I believe that there's no frontier between art and science as far as the discovery of the Laws of the Universe dealing with the everlasting transformation of the matter is concerned. The stories by the great writers in their basics represent the timeless mythical structures corresponding to the essential elements of human existence. Once Steven puts on himself a mask of the Underground Man - there's no way back - he's entering the magical world of mythical forces that will push him all the way through the labyrinth into the Unknown. There's no way back and no possibility to resist. Bob can write a modern version of Dostoevsky's myth resurrected in 21st century Los Angeles as the adaptation unfolds on his spy monitors.

Since one of the major leitmotiv of the Dostoevsky's story evolves around the Underground Man's relations with a prostitute, Bob encourages Steven to hire a former Russian actress and high class call girl, Irina. Bob assumes all the expenses so Steven can consult the girl as he struggles to understand the origins of Dostoevsky's masterpiece, particularly its treatment of Love as a form of Terrorism. Bob even edits a video clip where he intercuts explosions caused by terrorists and revolutionists - including images of the Bolshevik revolutions - and

the orgasmic explosions of partners in sex. While both Bob and Steven enjoy Irina's reaction as she watches the clip, little does either of them know that by inviting Irina, they opened the door to the call girl's past with the Russian Mafia and her present involving stolen Mafia money.

Q: Does Steven ultimately accept Underground Man's view of the world, or do you think he recoiled against it when confronted with the conflict with the Russian mafia?

A: After he witnesses what he perceives as being a murder of a Mafia spy executed by Irina, Steven ends up heavily drinking. He blames the higher forces rather than society for the injustice in the world and for all his troubles, and he blames himself - here's the difference between him and the Underground Man - "I'm a coward I'm a betrayer of society. I didn't report the murder! Like Dostoevsky hero I'm a talker, I like courage and conviction. I'm a zero and at least 99% of all the people are like me."

Q: If Misha had found the money, what do you think would have happened to Steven and Sonia? How does the introduction of the money affect the ability of Steven to define his own reality?

A: Well, it may well be that should Misha really have wanted it, he could get the stolen money. He prefers, however, a cat and mouse game with Irina whom he believes is hiding the money. He is a very rich guy who needs love and power more than he needs money. After Irina passes the audition in Bob's theater and is offered the main part of a prostitute vis-à-vis Steven as the Underground Man, Misha decides to make Irina a "Hollywood star". As far as Steven is concerned, he doesn't really think about the money until the very end when Sonia comes to him with the key to where the money is. So Steven just changes the "owners" - first he was manipulated by Bob, now he's manipulated by Sonia. Should Misha find the money earlier, then Steven and Sonia still may run away from LA after Irina's death and the failure of Bob's play - towards an uncertain future together.

Q: Is Misha more like the Underground Man than Steven?

A: Well, Misha is a different animal. He's like Harvey Keitel in "Pulp Fiction". When Irina and Steven are desperately trying to get rid of the dead body of the former Irina's pimp, Irina declares, "You and I, we're from the books. We don't know how to get rid of him. We need the help of a Real person." Therefore, she makes a call to Misha, the all powerful Mafia boss, knowing that he will help. And indeed, he helps.

Q: Contrast the characters of Irina and Sonia through Steven's eyes. Does the play's failure and Irina's death liberate Steven from the shackles of the Underground Man or condemn him to them? Does this all make sense to him?

A: There's a saying that during her/his lifetime an artist creates One Book, One Painting, One Musical Composition, etc. Usually one can recognize a "signature" of an "auteur" be she/he a composer, a painter, a writer, a film director, etc. without knowing a title of the artist's work. There's only one major female character in the original "Notes From The Underground". There's no Misha, Mafia boss. It's only later when the script was already completed, I understood from where these additional characters came into the story. They emerged straight from the myth of my earlier film, "Idiot". In the original novel "Idiot" by Dostoevsky, Rogozin ("Misha") kills Nastassia ("Irina") because she loved Count Leo ("Steven"). Although Misha suspects that Irina and Steven are about to fall in love, it doesn't come to Misha's mind at all to kill Irina (or Steven) because of that. The fight for the Idiot (Count Leo) between Nastassia ("Irina") and Aglaya ("Sonia") in Dostoevsky's book never becomes physical and often doesn't go beyond an exchange of poisonous words. On the contrary, in 21st century Los Angeles, Sonia actually "kills" her "ancient" competitor by pushing Irina under the wheels of a moving car. A great example of the freedom and the liberation of women in Western civilization achieved since Dostoevsky's times (in a manner of speaking)!

Moreover, in our world of Reality TV and the never-ending chain of the screens embracing- uniting the continents in live time (TV-computers-cell phones and beyond) Art becomes Life and Life becomes Art for everybody. After the death of Boris, Misha bursts into Steven's underground place and aims his gun at Dan and Brian, two successful businessmen. The event is documented live by the numerous spy cameras. Bob, who observes the video recording of the event in his office together with Steven and Irina, comments: "As an amateur this Misha is not so bad!"

So may we extrapolate and claim that Steven as the Underground Man (by the way, one of the masks of Dostoevsky himself) could be in a way the incarnation of the innocent Count Leo? Like Count Leo, Steven remains passive while the real strange fight for him is going on between the two women! Here's the difference: what couldn't be possible in the "prison" of 19th century European part of Russia for Aglaya ("Sonia") is possible nowadays in America - after killing Irina, Sonia saves Steven. However, could Steven after separation from Bob and Irina be "born again" as an "Up-ground" Man? Maybe not. I assume that Bob selected Steven - who represents a lot of young men of his generation - for the part precisely because he felt in him the Underground Man's qualities. Carl Marx noticed somewhere that the gods of ancient Greece died twice - first in the Greek tragedies, secondly in Roman comedies. That's why, in accordance with Dostoevsky's tradition, there are a lot of humorous and comic situations in the "Notes From The New World" which I can call a post modern tragic-comic fairytale.

Q: Isn't there an element of fatalism in Steven's character arc - and how does that fit into the over existentialist theme of the movie?

A: Well, Steven never takes a real initiative... As an actor/and human being, he agrees to be directed by Bob, then by Irina and Sonia. He's talking a lot about the modern terrorism (that was born in 19th century Russia), about this "awful world", the "bad society" of America and beyond, but is he doing something to "improve the current state of the world"? Or does he volunteer to help the poor folks in his neighborhood, or the Third World countries, or join "Green Peace", etc.? He doesn't. Most people don't. Do we have a market for this film in the major territories?

Q: Describe the challenges of doing an adaptation of a work such as "Notes from the Underground" in terms of time and location as well as trying to bring life to the nuances of the story when translating to English.

A: I wrote the first draft of the script in about three weeks - working from 9 to 1. The fringe Theater Hub in NoHo art district, owned by my friend and casting director Rich Crater, served as a source of inspiration. Part of the story takes place in Rich's Theater and that's where we planned to shoot the movie. Unfortunately after the auditions, Rich lost the theater. In any event, the story came easily to me because it is based on a certain experience I acquired while living in LA. Later, the script was adjusted, corrected, and refined during the numerous readings, discussions, and rehearsals with the actors. This process is well represented in Behind The Scenes Documentary that we're about to edit. The website [www.notesthemovie.com](http://www.notesthemovie.com) which contains blogs by the actors and all kinds of production diaries also provides a great insight.



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