



NEW RELEASES

# Firebird

Peeter Rebane came across the story of *Firebird* seven years ago, through the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival. There, he spoke with film critic and actor, Sergei Lavrentiev who gave him a copy of 'The Story of Roman' by Sergey Fetisov. 'I read the story over the weekend, and it made me weep,' said Rebane. 'This is such a tragic, yet fascinating story.' He knew right away that he had to make this movie.

After writing the first draft, Rebane contacted producer Brigita Rozenbrika, to help him get the project off the ground. Rebane knew Rozenbrika from his days of promoting concerts and making concert movies, when she was producing music concerts across Europe. When Rozenbrika first read the script, it reminded her of growing up and living under Soviet rule. 'It took me back to that world when you had to hide your thoughts from the world for fear of being arrested... or worse.' For her it was, 'A human story about freedom.'

Taking the memoir as a starting point, Rebane collaborated on the script with actor and screenwriter Tom Prior, who is best-known for his performances in *The Theory of Everything* (2014) and *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014). Prior, who also stars in *Firebird* as Sergey, met Rebane in 2014, and they instantly connected to the story. 'We worked extremely well together, but we brought different skills to the project,' said Rebane. 'My strengths are more analytical, whereas Tom's are rooted in feeling the truth of the moment. It was a perfect collaboration; we could develop the story so that it felt honest.'

The central challenge was being truthful to the historical events and respectful of Sergey's memories, while also crafting a film that was universally understood and relevant to audiences today. *Firebird* is a period film, but both Rebane and Prior immediately felt this was a profoundly contemporary story. During the writing process, Rebane experienced a breakthrough moment when he stepped away from Sergey's book to consider how each of the central characters had recalled the events of the story. 'I realised there are many perspectives on this story – I knew that while we were telling it from Sergey's point of view, it was equally important to give space for Luisa and Roman.' This gave them some sense of liberation from the historical details, allowing Rebane and Prior to explore how love can blossom even in the most hostile of situations.

Rebane and Prior were fortunate enough to interview Fetisov before his death in 2017. 'We had 11 hours of audio recordings that we used to inform the finer details of the performances,' said Rebane. Prior was fascinated, both as an actor and a writer, to have the chance to speak with the real Sergey. 'He told us stories about being in the air force and memories of Roman,' said Prior. 'I hadn't read the book when I began working on the script. It was fascinating to discover what it had been like for him,' Prior added, 'He didn't speak English, and I don't speak Russian, so Peeter was doing the translating, but it was obvious to me that he had a warm heart and beautiful energy.' As well as the interview tapes, Rebane also had permission to scan Sergey's photo archive. This, along with documentary footage from the era, allowed them to be exact with the period details.

As well as the love story, Rebane and Prior wanted to capture what it was like to live in an age of paranoia. 'It wasn't just about the KGB,' said Prior. 'It was also the fear generated by those living around you – your neighbours and friends.' This atmosphere heightened the drama of Roman and Sergey's love story. 'Their love was a massive risk, which is why when they accept their love it becomes so encompassing, and it's also why it all starts to go so wrong – it's a tragic love story.'

Prior was approached to play Sergey before becoming involved in the writing process. Being a writer and a performer presented some new challenges for the British actor. 'Sometimes I would walk into a scene, and it would be completely different to how I had imagined it when we were writing the script,' said Prior. It was a fascinating process for the actor. Unlike any other project he had worked on, he had lived and breathed this story for two years while developing the script with Rebane.

Next would come finding the right people to play Luisa and Roman. '90% of a director's job is casting,' said Rebane. 'If you cast the right personality, with the right energy for the role you are off to a good start.'

Rebane knew that he had found the right person to play Roman when he met Ukrainian actor, Oleg Zagorodnii. Before *Firebird*, Zagorodnii had performed on stage and in several successful TV shows in Russia. *Firebird* presented a new endeavour. 'My first thought was, "I can't do this." It was in English, and at the time, my English wasn't good enough.' Despite the challenge of mastering a new language in a few months, Zagorodnii was adamant about playing the part. He connected with Roman, and drew on the experience of his own life to inform the character.

Just as important was the role of Luisa. Again, Rebane saw that the Russian actress and dancer, Diana Pozharskaya, had the right energy to play the part. Pozharskaya met with Peeter in her native Moscow, and she admired the character of Luisa, sympathising with her story. 'She just wants to be happy, but her life is a tragic one,' explained Pozharskaya. As part of her research for the role, Pozharskaya spoke with her relatives, including her mother, to try and grasp what it would have been like for an unmarried woman like Luisa, living in the USSR. 'They said that any woman at that time without a husband or children would be treated as if something is wrong with them.' Things may have changed in Russia, but Pozharskaya could relate to the character's desire to find love and build a family. 'Here we have a woman who loses her husband, and worse, loses her husband to her friend. During the Soviet era she couldn't possibly imagine such a thing happening, because it was so unheard of.' She added, 'Then there is the fact she had a child with a man who betrayed her. What could be worse?'

Prior, a graduate of RADA, Zagorodnii who studied at The National University of Theatre and Cinema Art in Ukraine, and Pozharskaya, who attended Moscow's prestigious VGIK, all came with different approaches to the film. This meant rehearsal time was vital. 'Not everyone's first language is English,' said Prior, 'so it was important that we had the time to get everything right.' They rehearsed for two months and became alert to each other's methods. 'We care about one another and listen to what the other one needs,' said Pozharskaya. Zagorodnii noted that it was easier for him and Pozharskaya because they were able to discuss the script in Russian, but added, 'We may come from different schools of acting but from the first time that we met, there was a connection.'

While learning each other's approaches was important, Rebane also wanted the dialogue to sound right. As Rebane wanted the film to be in English, in order to reach the widest audience globally, he felt that each character should have an authentic accent. 'We didn't want to limit our casting choices,' he explained. 'We also didn't want glib Russian accents like a lot of films do.' This meant months of work with the cast and dialect coach Catherine Charlton honing accents that would be authentic to the period. 'We had four different language bases on set, so we had to find a common ground that would sound natural and truthful,' said Rebane. 'The accent work has been challenging across the board,' said Prior. 'We had to find a middle ground accent we could all achieve. It's relatively easy to find a heavy stereotypical accent but we worked diligently with Catherine to create the subtleties and nuances which sound believable.'

Rebane found Estonian actor Margus Prangel to play the villain of the piece, KGB agent Major Zverev. 'He represents the oppressive Soviet regime – he, like those in power, is always watching,' says Prangel. Unlike other members of the cast, Prangel grew up in the Soviet era, and drew upon his memories and family history to inform the role. 'My father was asked to be in the KGB,' he said. 'They put pressure on him, still he said no, and then they put him in jail on false charges. He ended up writing to Leonid Brezhnev (Former General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) to be released. Back then, they didn't need much to put you in jail.'

## Production notes

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### FIREBIRD

*Director:* Peeter Rebane  
*Production Companies:* The Factory, No Reservations Entertainment, Film Estonia  
*Executive Producers:* Michael Edelstein, Mauro Durant  
*Producer:* Brigita Rozenbrika  
*Screenplay:* Peeter Rebane, Tom Prior  
*Based on 'The Story of Roman' by:* Sergey Fetisov  
*Casting Director:* Beatrice Kruger  
*Director of Photography:* Mait Maekivi  
*Edited by:* Tambet Tasuja  
*Costume Designers:* Mare Raidma, Marjatta Nissinen  
*Composer:* Krzysztof A. Janczak

### Cast

Tom Prior (*Sergey*)  
Oleg Zagorodnii (*Roman*)  
Diana Pozharskaya (*Luisa*)  
Jake Thomas Henderson (*Volodja*)  
Margus Prangel (*Major Zverev*)  
Nicholas Woodeson (*Colonel Kuznetsov*)  
Kaspar Velberg (*Pilot Selenov*)

UK-Estonia 2021  
107 mins

A Jade Films release

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### NEW & RE-RELEASES

**Cries and Whispers (Viskningar och rop)** From Fri 1 Apr  
**Playground** From Fri 15 Apr  
**Ennio** From Fri 22 Apr  
**Firebird** From Fri 22 Apr  
**The Northman** From Fri 22 Apr  
**Croupier** From Wed 4 May  
**Vampyr** Thu 5 May Preview 18:15; Mon 23 May 14:00 Seniors' Matinee + discussion  
From Fri 20 May  
**Cabaret** From Fri 6 May  
**Vortex** Tue 10 May 18:00 Preview + intro by Gaspar Noé  
From Fri 13 May  
**Get Carter + The Frighteners: The Manipulators**  
Mon 30 May 18:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager  
From Fri 27 May

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