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**WILL
KEEN**

with
**JEFFREY
WRIGHT**

and
**JUDE
LAW**



THE WIZARD OF THE KREMLIN

A FILM BY OLIVIER ASSAYAS

Based on the novel by Giuliano da Empoli © Editions Gallimard, 2022
SCREENPLAY - ADAPTATION - DIALOGUES BY OLIVIER ASSAYAS et EMMANUEL CARRÈRE

Duration: 2h25

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A man in a dark suit and tie is looking down and to the left. He is in a room with Soviet propaganda posters in the background. One poster features the hammer and sickle symbol and the words "РОСС" and "ОСТА".

SYNOPSIS

Russia, early 1990s. The USSR has collapsed. Amid the chaos of a country rebuilding itself, a fiercely intelligent young man, Vadim Baranov, is charting his path.

First, an avant-garde artist, then a reality TV show producer, he becomes the unofficial advisor to a former KGB agent destined to seize absolute power, the man who will soon be known as "The Tsar", Vladimir Putin.

Immersed in the heart of the system, Baranov becomes the spin doctor of the new Russia, shaping speeches, fantasies and perceptions. Yet one figure remains beyond his control: Ksenia, a free-spirited and elusive woman who embodies the possibility of escape – far from political influence and domination.

Fifteen years later, after retreating into silence, Baranov agrees to talk. What he reveals blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction, belief and strategy. The Wizard of the Kremlin is a descent into the dark corridors of power, a film where every word serves a scheme.





INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER ASSAYAS

HOW DID YOU DISCOVER GIULIANO DA EMPOLI'S NOVEL? DID YOU IMMEDIATELY SENSE ITS DRAMATIC, CINEMATIC POTENTIAL?

Giuliano da Empoli sent me his manuscript in early 2022, prior to its publication by Gallimard, and I set it aside intending to read it soon. As it turns out, I know Giuliano personally, we live near each other in a remote corner of Tuscany. That summer, just after arriving home, I received a call from a producer touting a novel he believed could make an exciting film: *The Wizard of the Kremlin!* I told him that the book was already sitting in front of me – and through my window, I could even see the author's house. That intrigued me, so I read it immediately. Its literary excellence stood out, combined with a sharp, demanding understanding of contemporary power dynamics. Even when dealing with events I barely knew, I was consistently surprised by the original and pertinent angles through which the book addressed political complexities. Yet I remained unsure it could become a film – it felt too abstract, too dialogue-heavy; many elements that flow naturally in the novel – reflections on power, modern Russian history – seemed overly thorny for cinema. After much thought, I called the producer back to explain why, in my opinion, adapting *The Wizard of the Kremlin* presented insurmountable challenges – and why I couldn't see how to resolve them.

BUT YOU EVENTUALLY CHANGED YOUR MIND...

A few days later, my agent and friend François Samuelson called me on the same note: "Know *The Wizard of the Kremlin*? I mentioned it to Emmanuel Carrère, who spoke to his mother, Hélène Carrère-d'Encausse, about it and they're both enthusiastic. What do you think?" I replied that I'd read it too, and shared their enthusiasm – but regarding a film adaptation, I didn't know how to approach it. Nevertheless, I discussed it with my producer, Olivier Delbosc – while working with him on *Suspended Time* – and he encouraged me to give it more thought. A dialogue began between François Samuelson, Emmanuel Carrère, Olivier Delbosc, and me. As a result, I returned to the novel and started thinking that perhaps it could be adapted – and that collaborating with Emmanuel might be the right approach. We've known each other for ages, as we both started out in film criticism, which is quite a small environment. The idea of joining on an ambitious project felt genuinely inspiring. Emmanuel brought both deep family-rooted knowledge of Russian history and far deeper insight into contemporary Russia than I had – he speaks the language and has conducted field investigation into post-Soviet Russia. In short, I became convinced that *The Wizard of the Kremlin* offered everything necessary for a rich, ambitious film whose development would unfold over the long haul.

HOW DID YOU WORK ON BRINGING THE BOOK TO THE SCREEN ALONGSIDE EMMANUEL CARRÈRE? WHAT CREATIVE LIBERTIES DID YOU TAKE?

Very early on, I met Giuliano da Empoli and formed a friendship with him; he became something of a guardian angel. Despite the novel's success and numerous competing offers, he never wavered in wanting



Emmanuel and me to handle the adaptation. He consistently supported our work, fully aware from the start that the film would differ from the book. We needed to take liberties: give a visual dimension to often static, dialogue-heavy scenes; convey cinematically the historical sweep underpinning the novel; capture the energy of the era, the pivotal events, the scale of settings. Also, like many readers, I felt Ksenia needed further development – she was lacking in the book – and I saw from the outset that placing a strong female character at the story’s core was essential.

WHAT RESEARCH DID YOU UNDERTAKE? WAS THE NOVEL ALONE ENOUGH DOCUMENTATION?

I needed to familiarize myself with the locations, the era, and the characters. I am not Russian, but having directed *Carlos*, I knew that in making a film about contemporary politics, truthfulness is non-negotiable. One must have a solid, fact-based foundation to portray events authentically, avoid cutting corners, and prevent approximations. After that, narrative liberties are acceptable, but factual and historical integrity must be rigorous – that’s where a film’s credibility lies. I therefore conducted extensive research and worked with a researcher who gathered myriad materials – TV documentaries and books about the period. Emmanuel also recommended texts that complemented or clarified Giuliano’s. Our dialogue was constant, and whenever we had doubts about a fact or assumption, Giuliano mediated our discussions. Later, while preparing the film in Riga, Latvia, I met Russian journalists who had known Vladislav Surkov or Boris Berezovsky – and in fact, I didn’t have to look far: the Latvian producers of the film, who had previously worked as political journalists in Russia, had crossed paths with several of the key figures in our story. They were invaluable sources – rich, and generally reliable.

WHAT IS FASCINATING ABOUT VADIM BARANOV – THE SHADOWY “KINGMAKER” – IS HOW QUIETLY, ALMOST SECRETLY, HE CRAFTS RUSSIA’S NEW STRONGMAN.

I knew nothing about the process that brought Putin to power – and I found it utterly compelling. I was unaware of Vladislav Surkov, who served as one inspiration for Baranov, even though the two men cannot be mistaken for one another. Surkov is obnoxious; our

Baranov, while complicit in the worst actions of the regime and somewhat perverse, retains a certain humanity. We intentionally treated him with less leniency than Giuliano does in his novel – especially since his book was written before the Ukraine invasion and had more latitude.

When Paul Dano watched an early cut, I sent him to gather impressions, I found his take both concise and sharp: “The film’s subject is complicity – and how chance or life’s fluctuations can make us complicit in evil,” he said essentially. Baranov is characterized by emotional detachment – a nonchalance that may mask perversity – and ultimately, he’s condemned for being complicit with power, and thus with evil. His story holds universal resonance: it shows how any of us, on our own scale, can become part of our era’s worst.

DO YOU SEE PARALLELS BETWEEN BARANOV’S WORLD AND TODAY’S POLITICAL-MEDIA CLIMATE, WHERE STORYTELLING OFTEN BECOMES REALITY?

We’re talking about events from a decade ago – when political methods and strategies that now dominate contemporary power were being formulated – with, needless to say, devastating effects. It’s almost trivial to say today – everyone is aware – but what interested me was showing how, within Putin’s inner circle, strategies emerged that redefined modern politics.

IT OFTEN SEEMS THAT IN BARANOV’S ORBIT, OLIGARCHS AND MEDIA FIGURES ARE MERE PUPPETS.

He is a manipulator, endowed with a strategic intelligence that gives him an edge over everyone else, including his own allies. He is a strategist in the sense that he acts with an acute awareness of the transformations shaping the contemporary world – and, by extension, the shifting battlefield of modern politics. It is in this light that he takes the war to the terrain of the Internet. As he says in the film: “The Americans invented the algorithm – it’s up to us to use it better than they do!” In a certain sense, Baranov understands that the world is changing, and that to survive in this rapidly evolving landscape, one must go faster, further, and harder than one’s rivals – or risk being destroyed by them.





WOULD YOU AGREE THAT THE FILM BREAKS DOWN INTO THREE MAJOR CHAPTERS: THE HEADY DAYS OF POST-SOVIET 1990S, PUTIN'S RISE TO POWER, AND THEN THE CONSOLIDATION OF TYRANNY?

Absolutely. There is the strictly post-Soviet period – the early 1990s – when young people felt the world was theirs, and that from the collapse of the Soviet Union a democracy would emerge, one capable of reinventing itself and its time in ways their parents had been denied. That brief moment of freedom coincided with Yeltsin's presidency, even if that fledgling democracy was largely in the hands of the oligarchs. Little by little, that breath of freedom was stifled, discouraged, ultimately crushed, giving way to a regime that now resembles the Soviet one – version 2.0.

AT THIS POINT IN HIS LIFE, WHAT REALLY MOTIVATES BARANOV? IS HE DRIVEN BY A HATRED OF WESTERN VALUES?

That depends on which values we're talking about. Baranov is shaped by both Russian and Western culture. Intellectually, he's a hybrid. I don't know what was true of Surkov – the "real" Surkov wasn't particularly relevant to us as we were writing. But Baranov, as imagined by Giuliano and developed with Paul Dano, is defined by a worldview and cultural background far more cosmopolitan than that of most Russians of his generation. His understanding of history – and of the philosophy of history – goes beyond what's typically found within the circles of power. That's part of what gives him the edge I mentioned earlier. When he becomes the target of sanctions and finds himself under a kind of house arrest in Russia, it affects him – because, whether he admits it or not, he loses a part of himself.



THE CHARACTER OF BORIS BEREZOVSKY, INITIALLY A SUPPORTER OF PUTIN'S RISE, EVENTUALLY BECOMES ONE OF HIS MAIN OPPONENTS.

What concerns the character of Boris Berezovsky is as close to the truth as possible – and since he's no longer alive, we can speak about him all the more freely. With other figures, we remain under strict legal scrutiny, so at times we've had to soften certain portrayals to avoid the risk of defamation. The Berezovsky in the film is quite faithful to who he was: a mathematics professor who took advantage of the collapse of the Soviet empire to build a vast business empire that brought him to the doorstep of power. He became the shadow adviser to Yeltsin, who was in very poor health at the time, to the point that Berezovsky was virtually President of the Russian Federation during Yeltsin's second term. But he was also the first to understand that, under Yeltsin, the country was heading for disaster – that Yeltsin wouldn't finish his term and that a successor was needed to stabilize the system. That's why he sought out a figure still relatively unknown, and potentially pliable: the head of the FSB – namely, Vladimir Putin – to replace Yeltsin. Once Putin became President, the rivalry between the two men could only escalate. Berezovsky was powerless against the machinery of Russian counterintelligence, and so he had to give up his fortune and was forced into exile. In 2013, he was found hanged in the bathroom of one of his residences in England.

WHO IS KSENIA, THE ONLY FEMALE CHARACTER IN THIS DEEPLY MALE-DOMINATED WORLD? IS SHE THE EMBODIMENT OF TRUE FREEDOM?

In this male-dominated world, where freedom of thought, action, and expression is extremely limited, I wanted to have a young woman who possesses autonomy, freedom, and an analytical intelligence that allows

her to constantly judge the man she loves – and to hold up a mirror to the reality of his actions. Baranov is accountable to her: in the name of their love, their shared past, and the idealism of their youth.

Much like Berezovsky – though in a very different way – Ksenia questions Baranov, challenges him. And she is never fooled by his schemes. She becomes a major driving force in the narrative.

IN YOUR VIEW, IS THE FILM MORE OF A POLITICAL THRILLER, A CHARACTER-DRIVEN PIECE, OR A REFLECTION ON POWER?

All three at once! The film aims to give human form to complex political realities, and to distill them into stakes that are accessible to an audience without any need for a background in political science. The challenge is to reduce things to their essence – facts whose relevance lies in their universality. This isn't just about Vladimir Putin or the Russian Federation today; it speaks to broader, more universal questions.

That's actually what struck me most when I first met Giuliano. I told him I found his book gripping, and I assumed he must have had high-level sources within the state to possess such detailed insight into its inner workings. He replied: "Not at all. I've been to Russia four or five times, and I have no mole inside the government. But I did serve as Matteo Renzi's deputy for cultural affairs when he was mayor of Florence, and then as his advisor when he became Prime Minister. In the end, getting close to power, learning its language and methods – whether in Russia or in Italy – is essentially the same. I understood how Russian power functions by observing, on a day-to-day basis, how power operates as I was alongside Renzi."

DID YOU FEEL COMPELLED TO STICK CLOSELY TO HISTORICAL EVENTS, OR DID YOU SOMETIME BLUR REALITY AND FICTION DELIBERATELY?

There are moments of slight acceleration, and I do play with the timeline here and there in order to land on my feet from a dramatic standpoint – but I never allowed myself to cheat. The point was to stay as close to the facts as possible, even though we were adapting a novel that

itself takes some, albeit measured, liberties. With Emmanuel, we not only made a constant effort to bring truth and authenticity into the story, but also to sharpen, as much as possible, the critique of the moral compromises and democratic shortcuts taken by Russian leaders – both of that era and of today.

PUTIN IS PORTRAYED AS A PROFOUNDLY COMPLEX CHARACTER.

For me, the key is that politics belongs to the realm of complexity – not simplifications or demagogy; this is not the evening news! It's a world that is hard to grasp and understand, where often the most convoluted explanation is the most authentic and truthful. The nuances of political maneuvering vary by country, era, and context, but at its core, the question of power remains eternally the same. Giuliano, like all politicians, has read Machiavelli and Baltasar Gracián, and even if he doesn't apply their principles literally, he understands the mechanisms and constants that allow him to build everything else on top. As for me, with a far more modest political background, it is through this very lens that I have always understood politics and reflected on my own time.

HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE CASTING PROCESS?

The hardest part was Putin – because he's been in power for such a long time, and we see him on the news every day. Everyone knows his face. In a way, that was the gamble of the film: could Jude Law portray a credible Putin? We've known each other for years – we were on the same Cannes jury in 2011, got along very well, and over time he even brought me one or two projects as a producer. Sadly, none of them came to fruition. But as I followed his career as a viewer, I had the feeling that he was increasingly drawn to transformation – that he'd developed an ability to truly morph. And even without a strong physical resemblance, I believed he could reinvent a convincing Putin from the inside out. There's something of Putin that comes through in Jude. That said, even in full transformation, Jude retains more humanity than his model – which, admittedly, isn't very difficult.

For all the other roles – fictional or not – there was no obligation to aim for physical likeness, since the general public wouldn't necessarily recognize their faces. My only criterion was



to find the best actors possible, especially since I knew from the start that this would be an actor-driven film. And I ended up with a dream cast.

Paul Dano, playing a fictional character, was instantly believable. He's an astonishing actor, full of nuance, who through sheer virtuosity and painstaking attention to detail manages to find, in every circumstance, the most intimate key to his character. He has such extraordinary self-control that it can at times feel dizzying. In the editing room, you're usually trying to find the right take. With Paul, every take is right – and in some way, each one tells a slightly different story, as if his work consisted in offering the director a kaleidoscope of choices that spans the entire emotional range of the scene.

Alicia Vikander was the obvious choice for Ksenia. I had just worked with her on the HBO series *Irma Vep*, we got along really well, and very early on, it just became clear that she would be Ksenia. You could even say the character was inspired by her.

DID YOU KNOW EARLY ON THAT YOU WOULD SHOOT THE FILM IN ENGLISH?

There was never really a question. Even if we had decided to shoot in Russia, which was highly unlikely, we would never have found an actor willing to take the chance of appearing in a film critical of Putin. And beyond that, we wouldn't have been able to secure financing unless the film was in English and featured well-known actors.

What did come up, though, was whether or not to let everyone keep their own accent. Paul is American, Jude, Tom Sturridge, and Will Keen are British, Alicia is Swedish – and most of the supporting cast is Latvian. It felt risky, but there wasn't a real alternative. At first, I worried that their speech patterns – depending on their background – might sound too distinctly British or American, and I wanted the whole to feel as unified as possible. Paul, for instance, worked hard to soften his American accent – we needed to maintain a European tone. It was easier for Jude and for Alicia. But fairly quickly, I let go of that concern. I realized that what mattered most was having the best possible cast – whether they were Anglo-Saxon or Latvian – and then letting the actors do their work.

HOW DID THE ACTORS PREPARE TO PLAY CHARACTERS INSPIRED BY REAL PEOPLE?

Paul worked really hard – his approach to acting is extremely rigorous. He immersed himself in the Russia of that era, and whenever he came across a line of dialogue that didn't feel true to the historical context or the emotional logic of a scene, he would bring it up with me – and sometimes he was absolutely right. He truly engaged in a process of research and reflection. Jude worked just as seriously. He was keen to speak with Giuliano to ask him about Russia and his sources of inspiration. He focused intensely on physicality – how the character holds himself, speaks, walks. A key reference point for him was a moment early on, when Berezovsky offers Poutine the presidency, and Putin replies: "I don't speak well. I've maybe spoken in public once or twice – and it didn't exactly shake the walls!" Jude held on to that idea, and built a Putin who's slightly stiff, a bit awkward, uncomfortable speaking – but also quietly self-assured. Despite projecting confidence, he's always somewhat blocked in his expression – his speech is never fluid. I found that imbalance deeply nuanced. In the editing room, I deliberately chose the more hesitant takes, because that's where the power and complexity of Jude's performance came through. Even when there were technically flawless takes, I preferred the ones where he stumbled slightly – because in those moments, you could feel he had truly captured something essential about the character.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE LATVIA AS THE FILM'S PRIMARY SHOOTING LOCATION?

It was Kirill Serebrennikov who gave me the idea, after he recreated Russia in Latvia for *Limonov - The Ballad* to do the same. Shooting in Russia was, of course, out of the question, and for a while we didn't know where we would film. No single country offered all the locations we needed. That would have meant multiple trips and a production logistics plan that was economically unfeasible. To be clear, it would have made the film impossible.

But once we began scouting in Latvia, we realized there was a surprising diversity of landscapes and atmospheres that could solve all our problems – on the condition that we shot the entire film there. And that turned out to be doable. We recreated Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Black Sea, down to Sweden. The Kremlin palace, for instance, was rebuilt inside a 17th-century castle in the southwest of Latvia, in a region that was once part of the Duchy of Courland.

The only scenes we couldn't recreate in Latvia were those set in Cap d'Antibes and on the French Riviera, so we shot those separately, over just three days, in the south of France.

WHERE DID YOU RECREATE PUTIN'S OFFICE?

In a 1900s-era building in Riga, which had vast interior spaces – we used it as a soundstage and rebuilt everything from scratch. The production designer relied on every piece of available documentation to get as close as possible to the real office, but we had to supplement with furniture sourced from neighboring countries, even having chairs custom-made in Poland. The goal was to evoke a certain Russian state grandeur that simply couldn't be found in Latvia.

We were less exacting when it came to his office as head of the FSB, simply because there are no available photographs.

YOU OCCASIONALLY MIX IN ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE. WHY?

There are three distinct categories. First, archival footage we needed to bring Moscow back to life, which we integrated directly into the film. Then, there's footage related to political events, featuring real public figures. Finally,





there's the kind we couldn't use – like images of Yeltsin's re-election or the announcement of his resignation. Since we had an actor playing Yeltsin, we were obliged to recreate existing footage. As a result, all the "official" material involving Yeltsin was meticulously reproduced, then aged to match the specific texture of television from that era.

Ironically, the most difficult archives to handle were those of Putin's two inauguration ceremonies. The videos from that time have aged poorly, and the existing footage is in dreadful condition.

HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE ART DIRECTION? HOW DOES THE VISUAL STYLE REFLECT THIS WORLD OF SHADOWS, MIRRORS, AND MANIPULATION?

I never start with a preconceived or theoretical idea when it comes to these things. What guides me is filming in the most credible way possible, with the best actors, within the logic of the scene. Yorick Le Saux, the cinematographer, and I work very instinctively – but we do establish a framework. For *The Wizard of the Kremlin*, we chose to shoot with CinemaScope lenses. It's not the easiest option, and it wasn't an obvious one at first, but it gives the kind of depth of field and visual breadth that felt right for the story. I wanted the characters to move through vast spaces, based on the notion that power is space – an abundance of it. Just look at Putin's office: I hadn't pictured it that way initially, but in preparing the film, I realized space is inseparable from power, and power from space.

We also treated the political scenes differently from, say, the punk party scenes of the 1990s. For those, we used handheld cameras and longer lenses to recreate the energy and chaos of the time.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN THE STORY. WERE YOU AIMING TO SHOW HOW THESE NEW MEDIA RESHAPE POWER?

I didn't set out to deliver a message on the subject, but I was struck by how Giuliano describes

this phenomenon in his novel. The internet is undeniably the new battlefield of modern warfare, and that's where we intersect with the strategies that now dominate the political landscape. We're talking about Putin's Russia, of course – but to me, Xi Jinping, Mark Zuckerberg, or Donald Trump are, in their own very different ways, politicians whose authority also hinges on their ability to manipulate the algorithms that underpin their hold on power.

WHAT DID YOU WANT FOR THE SCORE?

There isn't an actual soundtrack for the film, but there are several pieces by Thurston Moore, whose sonic world aligns with what I was looking for. I had also worked with him on earlier projects, including *Irma Vep*.

I also used pieces by an Italian musician I greatly admire, Franco Battiato, a little-known pioneer of electronic music.

I should add that I had the pleasure of working again with Angelin Preljocaj, who choreographed the few dance sequences in the film and with whom I had already collaborated on *Irma Vep*...

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED HOW THE FILM WILL BE RECEIVED IN TODAY'S GEOPOLITICAL CLIMATE, PARTICULARLY IN RUSSIA AND THE WEST?

From the outset, we decided that a release in Russia was out of the question. In any case, once politics enters the frame, audience perception becomes unpredictable. When I directed *Wasp Network*, which addressed rather old events, I assumed I could tell that story quite freely and as authentically as possible. Yet I realized then that passions were still very intense, and the film provoked very strong reactions from the Cuban community in Miami, even though we represented them neither better nor worse than the Cubans in Cuba. On the other hand, I thought *Carlos* would spark vehement political reactions, but it did not. So, I have no idea what reactions *The Wizard* will provoke, though as long as we stick to the facts, it does not seem to me that the film poses major issues.



A photograph of Paul Dano in a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie, holding a white corded telephone receiver to his ear. He is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. In the background, another man in a suit is partially visible, looking towards the camera. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong blue tint.

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL DANO

"We follow Vadim Baranov through, essentially, the fall of communism, the Wild West of '90s democracy, and into Putin's Russia - and it's through his eyes that we experience about 30 years of Russian media and political history. He began as an avant-garde theatre director, then worked in Russian television, and eventually moved into politics. I see it as a sort of tragedy, because I think there's a cost - a kind of tax on the soul, maybe - when you venture too far into the dark arts of wizardry, so to speak."

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE PROJECT?

The script was extremely compelling – and it still is. Strangely enough, I actually find it even more relevant now than when I first read it. It's really beautifully written. Olivier Assayas is a wonderful writer, and he worked on this with his writing partner, Emmanuel Carrère. I had heard of the book, though I hadn't read it yet. But I learned so much just by reading the script and stepping into that world. It's not a part of the world most of us ever get to see. And that's something I love – and I think audiences do, too – when you're given this kind of exclusive, detailed window behind the curtain. That's how it felt to me while reading it. I was struck by the sort of epic quality it had – maybe an intimate epic. It spans a lot of time, introduces so many great characters, and takes you on this journey that gives a real sense of how we got to where we are today. Getting to work on something with a tapestry that large, that vital, that rich – it's exactly the kind of project that makes you want to dive in, start researching, go down the rabbit hole right away.

HOW DID YOU PREPARE FOR THE ROLE OF A POWERFUL, ENIGMATIC FIGURE LIKE VADIM BARANOV?

You're just very lucky when the material naturally compels you. So that when you get up in the morning, the engine naturally starts to hum. And this had that partially because the research was just so compelling. I feel like while the character is sort of an enigma or may come across that way to others, I actually think he's quite the opposite to me now at this point. I think my job is to be not only as specific as possible, but really to become an authority on what you're talking about, which is what you're striving for. So it felt really important to me to continually, for months, start to fill up the tank on modern day history. I talked about tracing his own lineage as a Russian man, where his grandfather and his father came from, how the generations above go into this character's body. And so, I took a tour through time and it's so easy to do that kind of work now, between books, YouTube, podcasts, etc. And I think aside from research work, for every part, there's spiritual work involved. You're looking in any door you stumble upon to see if there's something there that you can take with you. But it's about point of view and how do I understand and adjust and believe and earn that point of view for myself.

HOW WAS IT WORKING WITH OLIVIER ASSAYAS?

I feel like with most of the great writers-directors I've worked with, it really does start with the writing. And as I said, Olivier's script is beautifully written. The writing is strong – and that's really the best gift you can get as an actor. What's interesting about Olivier is how many layers there are in the material – different meanings and intentions hidden within it. I'm glad I started asking him questions early on, because his answers were always really thoughtful – and sometimes not at all what I had assumed. He's incredibly intelligent, and also very clear. He'd say, "Whatever you need, I'm here for it. If you want to talk a lot, great. If not, that's fine too, you know?" So he's really supportive of whatever the actor might need. And that continued on set – he's working with an incredible crew. Also, when I first read the script, I was struck by the scope of the film – it felt really ambitious. And I was curious how we were going to pull that off. But I think it's come together really well.

WERE THERE ANY SCENES OR MOMENTS THAT WERE PARTICULARLY CHALLENGING?

Every day brings its own kind of challenge – whether it's about where a scene needs to go emotionally, or something more practical. There have definitely been plenty of those moments. And the way we've been working, with such a strong ensemble around us, has felt almost episodic. For example, when someone like Jeffrey Wright comes in for a couple of weeks, we dive into all of his scenes. I have to say, working on those with him—the writing was just so beautiful. It really captured the contradictions of being human. You can care deeply about something and still be capable of cruelty. You can love someone and still make choices that feel justified to you – even if someone else sees them as completely wrong. That kind of complexity has been fascinating to explore. There's the personal relationship with the character Ksenia – and with Alicia, who plays her – and then this whole political world with Jude. One moment I'm in the middle of this intense, sweaty, communal experience at a punk show, and the next, I'm walking through the Kremlin Palace. So, for me, the journey of this piece – going through all of that, day by day – has been something I've really loved. Of course, some days are tougher than others. There are definitely days when I'm a little moodier than usual because of it. But overall, I've genuinely enjoyed the experience.



HOW WAS IT PLAYING OPPOSITE JUDE LAW?

Jude and I first met over Zoom, and I have to say – before we even got into anything work-related – he was just really lovely. And for someone so well-known and successful, he was incredibly easy to talk to. I felt like I could be myself around him right away – which, as you can probably tell from the way I’m talking, isn’t always the case. I tend to be a little shy at first. We chatted a bit about the work. But it’s funny – acting is such a strange thing, especially on film, where you don’t often rehearse much. Occasionally a director will want that, but usually you just show up. It’s this weird kind of alchemy: you’re both interpreting the writing, you bring your character to set, and then you just dive in. I think we both had a clear sense of what we needed to bring each day. We’re both pretty collaborative, and I found him really easy to work with. And Olivier too – he sets the tone. I always think the director is the one who sets the vibration on a set, and Olivier’s energy is kind and gentle. It’s a trip. I’m really enjoying it – but it’s also tough, it’s challenging. So I’m grateful to have someone like Jude as a scene partner. You need that.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL AUDIENCES KEEP AWAY FROM *THE WIZARD OF THE KREMLIN*?

For me, it felt like such a dense piece of material to dive into – in the best possible way – because it kept me thinking and working hard every day, and I love that feeling. So my hope for the audience is that they find something in it that’s deeply interesting, compelling, and complex. I hope it stirs up a lot of feelings – and maybe even some that contradict each other. I don’t think I’ve ever worked on something that feels so directly tied to the world we’re living in right now. So I’m really curious to see how that lands. Ideally, I hope they walk away feeling like they’ve had a really big meal.





Alicia Vikander is shown from the chest up, wearing a black, long-sleeved dress with gold buttons and large, ornate hoop earrings. She is holding a glass of water with a lime wedge. The background is a blurred party scene with warm lighting and other people.

INTERVIEW WITH ALICIA VIKANDER

"Ksenia is a woman whom Baranov, our main character, meets early in his life, and she remains a constant presence throughout the entire time span covered by the film. She's someone who evolves - who transforms alongside the society around her. Deep down, I think she believes she can achieve the most by adapting to the era she lives in. What really drew me to the role is that Olivier [Assayas] has created a character with many different versions of herself - each one authentic and true. She even says at one point that truth is one of her strongest values. And as long as she can hold on to that, she's able to shape herself to fit the time and place she inhabits."

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE PROJECT?

It's a character who appears at different points throughout the film, and Olivier Assayas gave me the opportunity to explore a very wide range, because she's someone who wants – and needs – to adapt and evolve with the times. And of course, getting the chance to work with Olivier again was also one of the strongest reasons I wanted to take on this role.

HOW DID YOU APPROACH PORTRAYING A CHARACTER IN SUCH A POLITICALLY CHARGED NARRATIVE?

I think we're living in a time where I feel more strongly than ever about telling this kind of story. It's pretty incredible that the book was published just two months before Russia invaded Ukraine, and with the news we were reading while on set, it really felt like art was closely imitating life. What's remarkable is that we're telling this story from a point of view that doesn't ignore the powerful, intelligent people behind these political forces – people who have always existed throughout history. That's why I think it's even more important not to look away if we want to understand how and why things unfold the way they do. To make sense of history, we have to try to understand what drives people to act the way they do.

IN PORTRAYING KSENIA, WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU ENCOUNTER AS AN ACTRESS?

Olivier gave me the chance to explore such a wide and diverse range of Ksenia personality throughout the film's timeline. At one point, while reading the script, I discovered I'd have to perform some sort of underground-style stage act at a party near the beginning. I thought, wow – I had no idea how I was going to approach that. But that nervous excitement was exactly what energized me. We had about two days to prepare for this scene, so there was some pressure, though a wonderful kind of pressure. By the time we wrapped, Olivier said, "That was the day I was most nervous." I thought, "Thank goodness you didn't tell me beforehand – I really was nervous myself!" I know Olivier likes to challenge me, and I genuinely appreciate him for that. They were wonderful challenges! I think it's usually those challenges that draw me to a role in the first place.

YOU HAD ALREADY COLLABORATED WITH OLIVIER ASSAYAS ON THE SERIES IRMA VEP. HOW DID THIS COLLABORATION GO, THIS TIME FOR THE BIG SCREEN ?

As an actor, truly being able to experiment, push yourself, and try new things only happens when you feel completely comfortable and safe with the director. I've admired Olivier's work for many years, even before working with him. As an actor, I notice how nurtured and well cared for all the performances in his films are – that's a real testament to how actors feel on his set. He arrives extremely well prepared. Before working with him, I was curious because his films often feel very naturalistic, especially in the way people speak. I even wondered if there was some improv involved. But you soon realize that the care he puts into the script actually gives actors great freedom – it's almost like working in a play, where you don't need to change a word. There's always a hidden subtext and layers in the scenes that unfold as you read, which makes every take feel fresh and different. On set, I sense that actors feel they have a wonderful playing field with his lines and script.

Olivier is also incredibly open. This being my second time working with him, and mostly with the same crew as before – people he's collaborated with for years – the atmosphere is joyful, relaxed, and creative. That's where the best work happens. Regarding what I said about actors feeling safe, that sense of security extends throughout the entire set and crew. Earlier in my career, I watched actors and directors do several projects together, and now I understand why. You develop a shorthand communication – it's quick and precise. Sometimes just a glance from Olivier is enough for me to know exactly what he thinks, means, and wants me to try differently.

THE STORY TAKES PLACE IN RUSSIA IN THE 1990S. HOW DID YOU IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THAT VERY PARTICULAR ERA? HOW MUCH DID THE COSTUME DESIGN HELP YOU BECOME KSENIA?

For me, the makeup, hair and costume design means a lot and is one of the first, most important steps for me creating my character. You've been home working with the script and you had your imagination and creative thoughts take you to certain places, but it's not until I come



for my first costume fitting or makeup and hair tests that I suddenly feel like it starts to embody me in another way. It does things to you that you can't really help. You walk differently, you move differently, and you act differently. The costumes in this film were pretty extraordinary and I've had a lot of fun creating Ksenia – she also has some very different looks, so I almost got the chance to do several different roles within one.

THIS WAS YOUR FIRST COLLABORATION WITH PAUL DANO.

I've admired Paul and his work for a long time, so I was thrilled when I found out he'd be playing Baranov. We had a brief chance to meet and get to know each other before filming began, and he's such an open, collaborative artist – that always makes things much easier on set. I immediately felt he was someone I could really explore scenes with. Olivier's script is also something of a dream for actors: rich in subtext, offering a wide playing field. With Paul, I felt from the start that we could spar with our words and really play off each other. And, of course, your performance naturally evolves in response to the other actor's interpretation. When you see the character they've created, it shifts your own portrayal in an organic way.

WERE YOU SURPRISED TO SEE JUDE LAW AS PUTIN?

To be honest, I think he's an exceptionally accomplished actor. What he's proven time and again is his ability to embody very complex, larger-than-life characters with incredible precision. He's hardworking, does extensive preparation, and always arrives on set with a fully realized character. Unfortunately, we don't share any scenes in this film, but I'm really looking forward to seeing what he does with Putin.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL AUDIENCES TAKE AWAY FROM THE WIZARD OF THE KREMLIN?

You know, like with any great work of art, I hope people will have deeply personal reactions to it. I believe this film will spark a lot of debate, which was one of the reasons I wanted to be part of telling this story. So, I hope it inspires a wide range of imaginations and reflections in those who see it.





INTERVIEW WITH JUDE LAW

"At the beginning of the film, Vladimir Putin is head of the FSB and very happy with his position there but aware that change is afoot because it's becoming clear that Yeltsin won't remain president much longer, which possibly puts his role in the FSB in jeopardy. If you were to specify his role in this story, he is the guy who's given an opportunity, and we watch him gradually realize the extent of the power at his disposal. And we see that his personality traits and genes, prior to this opportunity, were locked away. So, we see someone unearthing, peeling back layers and discovering who they really are, much to the dread of everyone else."

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE PROJECT?

The first thing that really drew me in was Olivier Assayas. I had met him before – we were actually on the Cannes jury together back in 2011, and we got along really well. I already knew and admired his work, and I've continued to follow it ever since. So, when he reached out, it felt like a friend getting in touch – and that's always such a compliment. He had written this remarkable piece that felt so relevant, timely, and layered. And I loved the challenge of bringing someone like Putin to life – at least within the context of this story.

HOW DID YOU PREPARE FOR THIS COMPLEX ROLE?

Olivier was very clear that he didn't want us to use prosthetics – that it wasn't about mimicking or impersonating Vladimir Putin. It was really about trying to find him, his essence, within this particular story – through myself. He recommended a few books – biographies, essays by journalists, reflecting on this early part of Putin's career. And of course, there's an endless amount of footage, which is fascinating to go through, plus some great documentaries and all the interviews he gave. He's a very interesting subject – a very interesting man to study. So, once I started, even though Olivier didn't necessarily want me to obsess over it, it was hard to shut the door on something like that – it's endlessly compelling. And of course, there are so many perspectives, so many opinions about Putin. At first, the whole thing felt like a mammoth task. But Olivier really helped narrow the focus. He said, "Remember, we're just telling this one part of the story – it's like looking at an iceberg and just focusing on an ice cube." That made it feel less overwhelming. He was also very clear that he's telling a story – so again, it wasn't about delivering a pitch-perfect impersonation. It was about placing this character within the narrative and trying to arrive at something that feels truthful.

HOW CHALLENGING WAS THIS PARTICULAR MOVIE?

Every time I take on a role, it feels like it's a mountain because you're looking at a blank canvas. And that's the fun, the challenge and the fear of taking on a new role. You layer it up

and you build it as you go. And you hope to accumulate enough to have confidence to step out and play it. What were the challenges? Relinquishing myself of the pressure that I had to really feel like I knew the real man. You can only ever have your own perspective. And again, having faith that the man I was creating was true to this story, if not necessarily to real life, which wasn't my responsibility. I suppose it was about drawing the parameters around that, rather than feeling like I had to completely understand him, which would have been an impossible task, because no one ever will other than maybe himself. And we don't even know if that's the truth, right? Does anyone know themselves? I don't know.

HOW DID YOU APPROACH PLAYING SUCH A CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE?

I thought that the piece, the book and the script were very measured, and I don't think they cast severe judgement. I think they are balanced, and I think Olivier has very good taste in how to tell a story like this. So I knew I was in very good hands. It doesn't feel like a hatchet job – the point of the piece, and certainly the point of playing this role isn't to sling mud, it's simply to tell a story that I hope fills in gaps or perhaps makes people better understand the beginning of his political career.

THIS IS YOUR FIRST COLLABORATION WITH OLIVIER ASSAYAS.

Olivier is a brilliant filmmaker, and he also happens to be a very approachable, intelligent and warm person, so it always makes the job easier when you're working with someone who's collaborative and clear. He has a very, very good crew around him, a lot of whom he's worked with before, which means there's a sense of familiarity and trust on set, which is always very helpful. And he's very generous with his actors. You feel very quickly that you are the right person for the job, for him, and therefore you are free to speak your mind, you're free to try things out. So, it's a place of safety, where you feel encouraged, confident, and all those details are really important, I think, to achieve something challenging like this.

HOW DID YOU IMMERSE YOURSELF IN 1990S RUSSIA?

All the effort that goes into the details of the world around us as actors is incredibly helpful. And on a piece like this, you've got a really great team building beautiful sets, putting all that detail in the costumes, the hair and makeup, everything is considered and everything of course makes our job so much easier. And we get to just sit in the middle of this world - this world that once existed.

WHAT WERE THE MAIN CHALLENGES FOR YOU IN PORTRAYING PUTIN, AND IN THE WAY THE SCRIPT DEPICTS HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH POWER?

First of all, the piece is written in such a way - and that was one of the things that really appealed to me - where, each time you see Putin, you actually see him shift direction. It's like a penny drops, and he takes another leap forward on his path to power. And that's not always the case in storytelling. Paul's character is doing the heavy lifting - he's very much the narrator, and you're watching his whole journey with Putin. So every scene, honestly, had potential - and every scene was a challenge, because I wanted to bring a sense of contained frustration, contained power, even contained fury at times. And yet I think all of that lives inside our version of Putin. So, drumming that up - and also knowing how to keep a lid on it - was tricky. And I think that's been the biggest challenge for me.

HOW WAS IT PLAYING OPPOSITE PAUL DANO?

First and foremost, we're fortunate as actors to have such a very strong script to work from. It's like starting a journey with a detailed map - every turn is clearly marked. Paul's had this incredible career. He's incredibly versatile, clearly very intelligent, and so you come in with the confidence that you'll be able to just jump in together. We spoke a couple of times





before filming began, shared some thoughts, and he was generous enough – since he started before I did – to give me a sense of what the set was like, so I wouldn't be walking in blind. It's always nice to know what you're stepping into. But honestly, it was a bit like playing tennis with someone who you know is going to elevate your game. You're stepping into a world opposite someone who will raise the bar, who can handle any curveball you might want to throw. And he's also just a very nice, generous person to be around – which makes the environment feel safe and comfortable too.

WHAT IS BARANOV'S INFLUENCE ON PUTIN ?

I think Baranov, in our *THE WIZARD OF THE KREMLIN*, offers Putin an alternative perspective – one that doesn't come naturally to him, but one he knows he needs. I love the line where he says he's "an artist to politicians and a politician to artists." He needs that element, and

he knows it – but he's also suspicious of it. He's wary of the liberal leanings, skeptical of the intellectualizing of this political journey. And yet, he's smart enough to recognize he needs someone like Baranov – even if it's someone he has to tolerate.

WHAT ASPECTS OF THE WIZARD OF THE KREMLIN MAKE IT, IN YOUR VIEW, A PARTICULARLY CAPTIVATING EXPERIENCE?"

At its core, it has the feel of a political thriller. It's intelligent and, as I think is clear, it offers some insight – however slight – into today's political landscape, with characters who are still very much active within it. It's always fascinating to look back in order to better understand where we are now, and this certainly shines a light on the early political career of Vladimir Putin. And you're in the hands of a great storyteller. Olivier Assayas is a remarkable filmmaker, so I think it's both a smart and entertaining.

CAST

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| PAUL DANO | Vadim Baranov |
| ALICIA VIKANDER | Ksenia |
| TOM STURRIDGE | Dimitry Sidorov |
| JEFFREY WRIGHT | The narrator |
| JUDE LAW | Vladimir Putin |
| WILL KEEN | Boris Berezovski |
| ANDREI ZAYATS | Igor Sechin |
| KASPARS KAMBALA | Alexander Zaldostanov |
| ANDRIS KEISS | Yevgeny Prigozhin |

CREW

A film by
Based on the novel by
Screenplay, adaptation & dialogues
Director of photography
Editor
Production designer
Costume designer
Assistant director
Script supervisor
Sound

OLIVIER ASSAYAS
GIULIANO DA EMPOLI © Editions Gallimard, 2022
OLIVIER ASSAYAS and EMMANUEL CARRÈRE
YORICK LE SAUX
MARION MONNIER
FRANCOIS-RENAUD LABARTHE
JÜRGEN DOERING
DOMINIQUE DELANY
CHRISTELLE MEAUX
NICOLAS CANTIN
NICOLAS MOREAU
GWENNOLE LE BORGNE
SARAH LELU
OLIVIER GOINARD
ANTOINETTE BOULAT
SYLVIE BARTHET
STUART MANASHIL
FRANÇOIS SAMUELSON

Casting director
Executive producers

Associate producer
Produced by
Production
In coproduction with
With the essential support of
With the participation of
With the participation of
In association with

Distribution and international sales

LEE BRODA
JEFF RICE
ROBERT McLEAN
MICHAEL PALETTA
THOMAS PIERCE
ÉMILIE BIGNON
OLIVIER DELBOSC and SIDONIE DUMAS
A CURIOSA FILMS and GAUMONT
FRANCE 2 CINÉMA
CANAL+
FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS
DISNEY+
CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE
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JEFF RICE FILMS
GAUMONT

Photos : Carole Bethuel

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