

Official Selection

**tiff**

Toronto International  
Film Festival 2019

**A Gabriel Polsky Production  
in Co-Production with Norddeutscher Rundfunk and Studio Hamburg**



Total Run Time: 80 min

**TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Thu Sep 05 at Scotiabank 4 at 6:30pm (Premiere)  
Fri Sep 06 at TIFF Bell Lightbox 2 at 3:15pm (Public)  
Sat Sep 07 at Scotiabank 14 at 11:15am (Press)  
Tue Sep 10 at Scotiabank 10 at 11:15am (Press)  
Sat Sep 14 at Scotiabank 4 at 6:30pm (Public)

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**Logline:**

An eccentric American marketer journeys into the heart of “The Wild East” - Russia in the 90's. From award-winning filmmaker, Gabe Polsky, comes a bizarre and absorbing story highlighting a pivotal moment in U.S.-Russian relations in a lawless era when Hollywood and advertisers meet oligarchs & gangsters and multiple murders went unsolved.

**Synopsis:**

Complete with gangsters, strippers, and live bears serving beer on a hockey rink, Red Penguins tells the wild forgotten true story of capitalism and opportunism run amok in Moscow. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Pittsburgh Penguins and the famed Red Army hockey team formed a joint venture that redefined what was possible in the new Russia. Eccentric marketing whiz, Steve Warshaw, is sent to Moscow and tasked to transform the team into the greatest show in Russia, attracting some of the biggest names in Hollywood and advertising along the way. He takes the viewer on a bizarre journey highlighting a pivotal moment in U.S.-Russian relations during a lawless era when oligarchs made their fortunes and multiple murders went unsolved.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

My parents immigrated to America in 1976 from Soviet, Ukraine in hopes of opportunity and a better life. The Soviet Union was corrupt, backward and gave little agency - especially for Jews. When my mom and dad left they had almost no money and were told they may never see their parents again. When they got to America, they had no contacts and my dad didn't speak a word of English, it was pure survival.

I was born and raised in America. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, the behavior and mentality in our home was vastly different from what I saw on the outside. At home, emotions were immediate and frank, with little room for small talk. Away from home, people wore many masks concealing real feelings. It was an adjustment straddling both worlds and mentalities, and my parents at times had challenges fitting into the community, which I later realized was a blessing.

I'll never forget how shocked my dad was when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed. I was an adolescent and didn't grasp what it actually meant. Nobody knew what would follow. It seemed like an exciting and optimistic time. But, soon after it became apparent that instead of getting better, things got worse and more chaotic in the former Soviet Union through the 90's. We would hear bizarre and scary stories from relatives about what was happening on the ground. It seemed dangerous, and I remember my dad was resistant to even going there. My mom opened an art gallery and began representing Russian artists, and started travelling there.

When Steve Warshaw told me about the Russian Penguins story, I was incredibly reluctant to engage. I'm repulsed by creative repetition and felt that somehow I may be pigeonholed as the Russian hockey guy. But even so, I felt a continuous pull, knowing there was an opportunity to tell a fully unique story - wild, profound, and soulful. At a certain point, I made the plunge and there was no turning back. In hindsight, I see that this is the reverse of my parents story. It's a story about Americans going to Russia, trying to adapt and survive in a completely different culture - behaviors and experiences alien to them. Making matters more complicated, Russia in the 90's was changing radically by the day. But still, there was a window of hope and optimism between US and Russia that has since disappeared. I wanted

to explore how our two cultures relate to one another and what lies at the core of it. The most fascinating aspect in telling this story was thinking about what it means in the context of today and for the future.

## FEATURING

**STEVEN WARSHAW-** Steven Warshaw was the Pittsburgh Penguins man in charge on the ground in Moscow. With a “special talent for generating firestorms in arenas,” Warshaw was instrumental in the success of the Russian Penguins and was asked to stay after the venture fell apart. He did not. He is currently the Arena Guest Services Supervisor at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

**HOWARD BALDWIN-** Howard Baldwin is an Oscar nominated film producer and entrepreneur. In addition to film, Baldwin has been in the business of Hockey since the 1970s, when he founded the Hartford Whalers at 28. He purchased the Pittsburgh Penguins in 1991, and shortly after conceived of the Russian/ American joint venture. Some of his films include *Ray*, *Sudden Death*, and *Mystery, Alaska*.

**VALERY GUSHIN-** Valery Gushin was the General Manager of the Russian Penguins Hockey team and side-kick of Victor Tikhonov during the venture. He had a reputation as a heavy drinking General Manager who cared only about business.

**VICTOR GUSEV-** Victor Gusev was the Russian Penguins Liaison during the years of the joint venture. As one of the only members of the team fluent in both English and Russian, he was responsible for communication between the Owners, Managers, Coaching Staff and Players, and had to navigate many of the cultural peculiarities that arose as Americans and Russians attempted to work together on Russian soil for the first time. He is now one of the lead anchor men for Channel 1 in Moscow.

**ALEXANDER LYUBIMOV-** Alexander Lyubimov is one of the most famous TV Personalities in Russia. His show *Vzglyad* broke from the Traditional Soviet news format and offered a more progressive view on Post-Soviet Russia. He reported on the chaos and uncertainty of Moscow in the 1990s firsthand.

**TOM RUTA-** Tom Ruta was the CFO and Co-Owner of the Pittsburgh Penguins during the Russian Penguins Venture.

**ALEXANDER VON BUSH-** Alexander Von Bush was the mascot of the Russian Penguins. He is now an artist living and working in Moscow.

**ALIMZHAN TOKHTAKHUNOV-** Alimzhan Tokhtakhunov is an infamous Russian Businessman now living in Russia in safe harbor.

**ALEXANDER BARANOVSKY-** Alexander Baranovsky is a Russian General who was the head of CSKA during the Russian Penguins Venture.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Gabe Polsky wrote, directed, and produced the feature documentary *In Search of Greatness* - a cinematic journey into the secrets of genius as told through the greatest athletes of all time. It was released theatrically to critical acclaim in 2018 and was nominated several awards including a WGA Award.

In 2017, Gabe Executive Produced *Genius*, the 10 time Emmy® nominated TV show on National Geographic about Albert Einstein. He and his brother Alan acquired the rights to the Albert Einstein Estate and the best-selling Walter Isaacson biography, which became the bedrock of the series.

In 2015, Polsky directed, wrote, and produced the award-winning documentary *Red Army* which was released by Sony Pictures Classics to universal acclaim. Executive Produced by Jerry Weintraub and Werner Herzog, the film premiered at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival. The story chronicled the epic rise and fall of the Soviet Union, through its famed Red Army hockey team.

Polsky co-directed and produced *The Motel Life*, a feature film starring Emile Hirsch, Dakota Fanning, and Steven Dorff. The film won numerous international awards and was described by Indiewire as “a perfectly formed indie with a heart of gold.”

In 2016, *The New Yorker* commissioned Polsky to make a short documentary called “The Blimp-Maker”. Additional producing credits include: Werner Herzog’s *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* which was named in over 40 top-ten lists of 2009 and *His Way*, an Emmy® nominated documentary released by HBO in 2011.

## **CREDITS**

Written, Directed, and Produced by Gabe Polsky

Executive Producers

Thore Vollert

Eric Friedler

Scott Kaplan

Co-Producers

Anthony Melillo

Dmitry Saltykovsky

Associate Producer

Madison Horton

Kathleen Peiris

Director of Photography

Aleksey Elagin

Editor

Christina Stiles

Music By

Leo Birenberg

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