

STRINGS

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Philippe Quint Plays Russian Violinist in Indie Film

By Rory Williams

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He may be a force in the concert hall, but Russian violinist **Philippe Quint** is out to prove he can be just as moving on the big screen. Quint stars in award-winning director David Grubin's new independent film, *Downtown Express*, which was produced by Michael Hausman (*Brokeback Mountain*, *Gangs of New York*, *Amadeus*). At press time, Grubin was looking for a distributor for the film. Quint plays Sasha, a Russian violinist who emigrates to New York to study at the Juilliard School, but falls in love with a singer-songwriter (Nellie McKay) much to the chagrin of an overbearing cellist father (Michael Cumpsty). It's a familiar role: Quint himself defected from the Soviet Union to avoid mandatory military service and study at Juilliard.

Strings: Your character, Sasha, comes to the United States with his father. How did you arrive?

Philippe Quint: I actually came by myself. I defected because I was supposed to serve in the Soviet army at the time I was of that age. While American embassy gave me official papers and refugee status to come to the states, the Russians did not give me permission. So, I had to come to the states as a tourist and just never used my ticket back to Russia. In that sense, it's a little different from the film.

This is a story of conflict between father and son. How did you channel that? Did you have particularly good relationship with your father?

I grew up without a father figure in my life and it was interesting to have a father for four weeks because my father was played by a fantastic actor—a British actor living in the States—Cumpsty, who's done many films. To have this relationship was so refreshing. I loved it. To this day we call each other father and son, you know.

This was something I had to find in myself—what it's like having a father, having this man that is really overbearing, protective, very opinionated. He's certainly not happy with where he sees his son going, but there is not much he can do because his son is not a little boy anymore. That's how this conflict develops.

You're an accomplished violinist, but you're a complete beginner in the acting field. What was that like for you?

I always felt that the two worlds are more similar than different. As an actor, you have to stay in the moment and as a musician you have to stay in the moment. If you are a great, conscious musician, you are very good at listening to your partners whether they're a symphony orchestra or chamber music ensemble. Any acting teacher will tell you that acting is not about acting, it's about reacting. This has to do with the art of listening—how you respond and interact with your partners on stage. All of that felt natural to me. Again I was not playing rocket scientist, I was playing Russian violinist.

You had spent three years with producer and acting instructor Sondra Lee . . .

A lot of people underestimate what it's like being actor. There's sort of a notion that you can just show up in front of a camera, say a couple of lines, and you get an Oscar. But I knew right away that this was not the way to go. Of course, a lot of careers have been made like this. But if we're talking about true actors with substance—Lawrence Olivier, Sir Anthony Hopkins, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino—these are actors with great training. So I thought I should study in depth the world of theater and television. The producers recommended me to [Lee's] studio. Of course I couldn't take classes consistently because of the violin schedule. But whenever I was in New York, I would jump into her studio. It was a great experience because I got to study a lot of great plays, and I found more than one parallel between theater and music. So, inadvertently, one benefited the other.

Who is Sasha besides a Russian violinist?

He's this young naive kid but very excited about coming to New York, which is all too familiar to me. I remember vividly what my first impressions were of New York, of the United States. It was such a sudden change. I was coming from the Soviet Union. It was still the country behind the Iron Curtain. Going from that to this new life—attending Juilliard, getting different perspectives from American teachers—everything was shocking.

With this character, it was a little strange for me to go back 10, 15 years ago and try to recall how it felt because at this point I feel very Americanized. I certainly call the United States my home and New York my favorite city in the whole world. I had to sort of strip down all the experiences that I went through and become that boy that just showed up in America for the first time full of excitement, full of ideas, full of dreams. So that was very refreshing and interesting.

Again, I don't think there was some fascinating transformation that I had to go through as an actor. But there was certainly a lot of dialogue, a lot of interesting things.

You know, I had to do—I don't even know if I should mention this—but I had to do a shower scene by myself. There're some affectionate scenes with my co-star. I don't know if it's good to mention this to the young *Strings* magazine readers [laughs].

Also, my character drinks and joins this band and does all this different type of music. I never really had interest in that personally, and I would very rarely do something like this only if I feel that there's something of substance to the crossover movement.

There's a scene with Russian hip-hop music blaring from speakers. A source tells me you were the rapper.

[Grubin] asked me if I'm familiar with any of the Russian bands, some obnoxious Russian underground music. I went home and for the first time in my life I downloaded some absolutely ridiculous Russian hip-hop rap, and then I composed some lyrics and figured out my own melody. I went to the studio of my good friend and the composer of the film, Michael Bacon. You may be familiar with him because of Kevin—the Bacon brothers. I did two absolutely unrecognizable voices to the point that when I sent it to my mother, she called me back—my mother lives in Russia—she said, "Why do you send me such disgusting Russian band?"

I said, "You didn't like it."

She said, “No, it’s absolutely terrible.”

I said, “Good, mission accomplished. What you heard was me—the two voices, the drums, the piano, all the beats. I did a multi-track recording.”

The director thought it was fantastic. It worked beautifully for the scene. I got the biggest kick out of that [laughs].

Should we expect you to pursue a career in Russian hip-hop?

You know, really, I wouldn’t go that far [laughs]. Everything I did in the film, which also includes some singing and dancing, are all the little things that I used to do just for my friends or in the privacy in my own home. But I enjoyed acting greatly and if another project comes my way, then I may just take it.

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