

JENNIFER WOLFE

PUNK ROCK PROTEST

Tracing the Trials of Russian Band Pussy Riot

A documentary on the imprisoned members of Russian punk rock group Pussy Riot had its world premiere in January at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival in the World Cinema Documentary Competition. *Pussy Riot—A Punk Prayer*, co-directed by Mike Lerner (*Hell and Back Again*, *The Afghans*) and Maxim Pozdorovkin (*Capital*), chronicles the arrest and trial of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich (Nadia, Masha and Katia).

The three women attracted worldwide attention last year when they were arrested and charged with hooliganism following the staging of a “punk prayer” protest against recently re-elected Russian president Vladimir Putin in Moscow’s main cathedral. Amid a storm of media attention, the ensuing trial was criticized as a show staged to discourage other dissenters, with artists such as Madonna, Paul McCartney and Sting voicing their support for the group. The women were sentenced to two years in prison in October, though Samutsevich was later freed on appeal.

Russian-born Pozdorovkin, who grew up in Moscow and New York and was living in Moscow during the trial, found himself drawn to the women and how their story was being portrayed around the world. “The story hasn’t been properly represented in the media, on both



Several members of the Russian feminist punk-rock collective Pussy Riot



On February 21, 2012, several members of the group staged a performance/protest at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Pussy Riot turned the performance into a music video called "Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!"

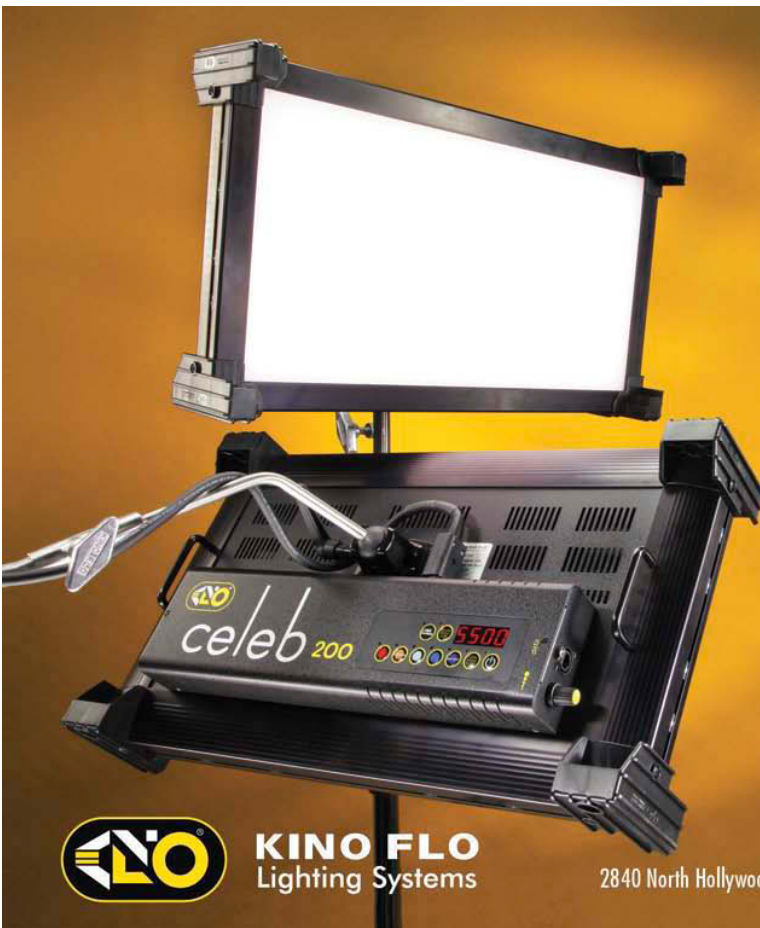
the Russian and Western sides," he says. "It isn't about dissent—it's about this huge generational divide and the conflict that creates. This is about a younger generation making itself heard by any means necessary."

A punk pastiche, the film combines footage from Russian news agencies with material captured with equipment ranging from mobile phones and handheld cameras to stabilized DSLR

rigs. "There's footage from places where cameras weren't allowed, [recorded] using iPhones or whatever," says Pozdorovkin, who in addition to attending Harvard grew up playing in bands and producing his own fanzines. "It's a true punk rock media collage, which is appropriate to the film and to the subject matter."

The UK-based Lerner, who runs his Roast Beef production company from London but has been

a frequent traveler to Russia, sought to present an accurate picture of the three women. "One of our goals was to show the process of the trial, but this is very much a story of these women and their families," he says. "We wanted to find out what made these women—their upbringing, their backgrounds. Who are they? We see their images daily in the press, but it's hard to get a sense of who they really are, so that's what we wanted to do with



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Pussy Riot members staging impromptu and unauthorized performances around Moscow

this film.”

The production team shot extensive interviews with the families of the three women. To make the best use of available light inside subjects’ homes, director of photography Antony Butts (*After the Apocalypse*) employed a Panasonic DMC-GH2 camera outfitted with a SKIER stabilizing rig and follow focus and Olympus 14-35mm Zuiko zoom lens, which allowed him to shoot at *f*/2 and provided increased depth of field. Audio was captured with a Zoom recorder and a combination of shotgun and lavalier mics, and recorded onto solid-state drives.

“The setup allows mid shots, wide shots and even some close-ups, but there’s always a trade-off,” Butts admits. “I’ve come to the conclusion that, because of the zoom, the DSLR cannot fulfill the role of a documentary camera. You want to be shooting the close-ups and mid shots and wide

shots without switching lenses, but unless your subjects allow you to come right up close to them, the material you get is limited.”

“Ultimately it’s a stylistic choice,” Butts continues. “Shooting DSLR gives a great image but is not without its challenges. It gives a far, far superior image than anything a camcorder can provide, and the results can be stunning. You will get amazing cinematography. But you will also screw up. You’ll screw up material and you will potentially screw up scenes because you have more to think about.”

“There’s no silver bullet, and it really depends on the relationship you have with your subject,” he concludes. “The only camera that gives everything is the Panasonic AG-AF100, but that’s looking a little dated now. As they say, the best camera is the one you have with you.”

With sentencing handed down in October,

completing the project in time for its Sundance premiere proved to be one of the biggest challenges for the filmmaking team. With more than 200 hours of material to be transcoded into ProRes format for editing in Apple Final Cut Pro, Pozdorovkin found his apartment filled with hard drives. “What would normally take six months is happening over a period of weeks,” he says.

And with so much of the film’s dialogue in Russian, Pozdorovkin must serve as the main translator. “In a film with subtitles, the director is pretty much always the main translator,” Pozdorovkin laughs. “You’re always perfecting, trying to tighten and refine the translation as you go along.” **dv**



Left: Director Mike Lerner
Right: Director Maxim Pozdorovkin