

# 'Make Your Dream Come True':

## Lubomir Levitsky, One of Hollywood's Young Ukrainian Filmmakers



**Lubomir Levitsky is one of the most successful Ukrainian directors working in the film industry today. His 2006 film, *The Pit (Shtolnya)*, was particularly popular among young audiences, and helped to jumpstart his career in Ukraine and abroad. We recently caught up with Lubomir to discuss his journey in the film industry, the challenges he has faced, and his plans for the future.**

**Q:** Tell us about your early years. When did you realize you wanted to be a filmmaker?

**A:** I was a quiet, daydreaming child, sort of a loner, but I loved cinema immensely. I used to draw shots in my school notebooks, and I could quote dialogue from Keanu Reeves movies by heart. One day, after eight hours of standing in line to watch *Rambo*, I understood that the cinema was everything for me. A friend of mine had a VHS (video cassette) player, which was rare at that time. We had a mutually beneficial deal: I would help him with his chores, and he would let me watch my favorite movies over and over.

I was distracted from cinema for a while when I studied archaeology at Chernivtsi National University. I wanted to be a sort of Indiana Jones, but the reality of archaeology turned out to be more routine, and I realized it wasn't my calling. So, I continued moving towards cinema.

I went to Germany, where I studied English and was able to attend masterclasses in script writing. I started writing my first scripts there. After returning to Kyiv, I decided to become a film production assistant. At the time, I dealt mostly with music videos and commercials, but it was there that I started to develop some practical skills.

**Q:** How did you break into the film industry in Ukraine? What challenges did you face?

**A:** I developed my skills — in directing, script-writing, producing — in parts. I entered the cinema business as a script writer, but I also worked on music videos and commercials as an assistant and as a co-director. In my films today I keep this up: I act as the director, a co-author of the script, and an editor. It is very important to be able to do everything, especially in low-budget projects.

Was it difficult to join the industry? Yes and no. There wasn't much of an "industry" in Ukraine when I started, due to low demand for locally-made product. My strategy was to get started in local films, which would begin paying off at release, and later to make international films, shot in collaboration with Hollywood partners and actors.

My first film was *The Pit*. The idea of shooting it arose on one of my trips abroad, when I met Oleksii Khoroshko, who became the cameraman and co-producer for the film. We shot the film at our own expense, which sounds pompous, but it all came from the pocket change we had been able to earn ourselves. Miraculously, *The Pit* was quite a success.

We got plenty of "tomatoes" from the critics, but the main thing was that we got great practice. We learned how a national film release worked, and we got to know our audience. Still, the large studios and television companies were not sure how to react to us. "Where are these boys from? Whose people are they? Who stands behind them? Where did they get their budget? Who paid for the billboards?" There were too many questions, and we had nobody behind us.

With each of my subsequent films I changed my method. I think that each film requires its own, separate, creative process. In contemporary Ukraine, this is possible. It's a young state; there are constant changes. It's the best era for creativity, but one must work all the time!

So far I have screened three motion pictures, which have proven themselves well upon release. I am also honored to be one of the members of the Ukrainian Film Academy.

**Q:** How did you end up in Hollywood? How does it compare to filmmaking in Ukraine?

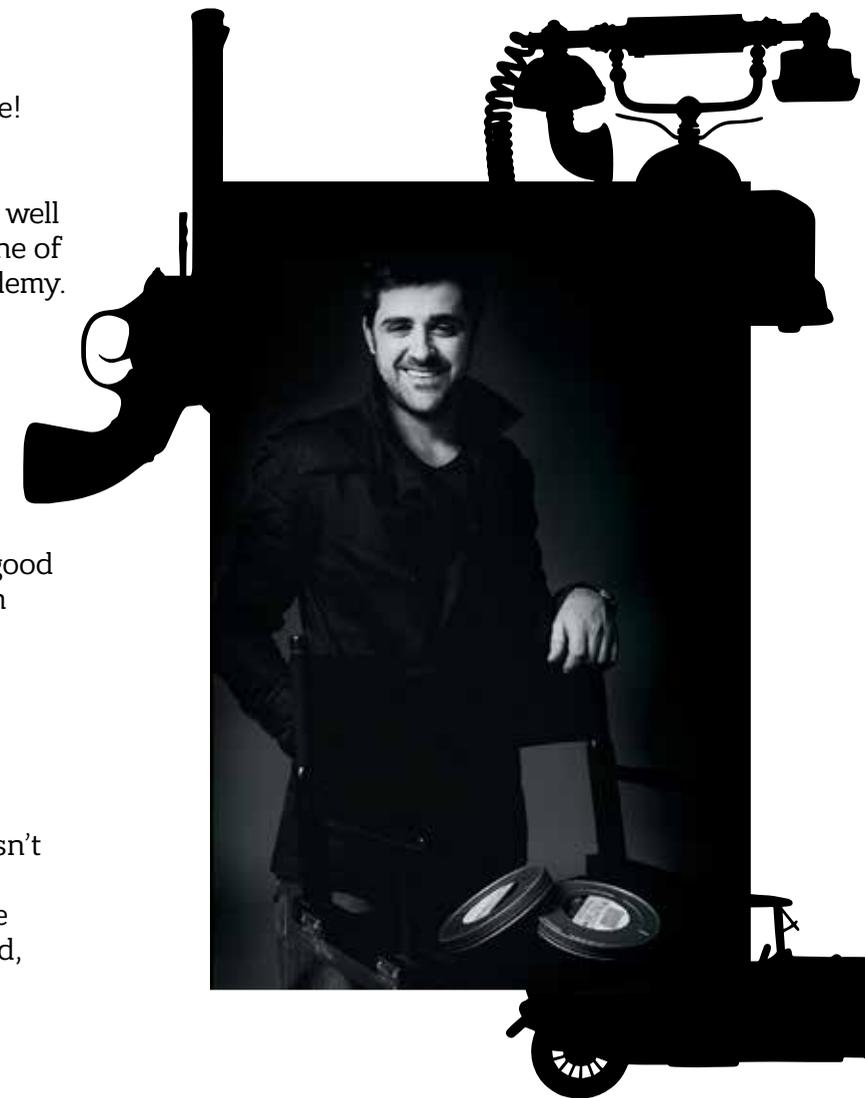
**A:** It's not about just being lucky, it's about making efforts and waiting for a good moment. In my case, I used to work with Mark Eberle, when shooting my film *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*.

Working in Hollywood is all about personal contacts. It is impossible just to show up at an office and tell them what a good filmmaker you are; it doesn't work. Everything is built on trust, and on reputation. It takes a very long time to earn a good reputation in Hollywood, and it can be lost rather easily.

So everything has a certain development. You can't say it was just "good luck", because in order to be successful it is also necessary to do a lot of work. But you never know how you will get on. Hollywood is a machine: it can raise you very high, or grind you up and throw you down. It's a roulette wheel, which is why you should try to do what you are best at.

We're in a period of remakes, but not because of a lack of ideas. Instead, big studios don't want to risk big budgets on unknown plots. That's why remakes of comedies appear, as well as remakes of classics. The task is not to make the remake better than the original; in Hollywood they say that if you want to succeed you must give the spectator something well-known, but in a new way.

We are also in the era of digital monsters like Netflix and Amazon. This makes it much easier for young filmmakers in Hollywood to find distribution. In order for the world to see your film, you no longer



need a traditional release in cinemas. This suits me as a producer; but as a director, I want to have all my films in the cinemas! I have never been a television director.

The toughest thing I came across in Hollywood is the mentality. Because I've

loved America since my childhood, I thought I knew the culture and the way that Americans think. It turns out that I was deceiving myself. When I tried writing an American thriller, my best attempts failed completely. I had to admit to myself that I just won't be able to write American dialogue. Therefore I decided to work with a script writer who had some experience in that genre.

In Hollywood we are afraid to approach the big stars, but it really isn't difficult. I recently went up to Guillermo del Toro at a screening and asked him for some advice, and he happily talked to me. His advice was that a young filmmaker in Hollywood should make something simple elaborately, rather than to make something elaborate simply.

The project on which I am working now is a psychological thriller named *Skeleton In The Closet*. It is the story of someone who finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I think it will keep spectators glued to their seats from the first seconds. Now we're working on the script, and I think we'll start shooting as soon as this year. The film will have a worldwide release, though we are still looking for a distributor. Of course I'd like us to be picked up by one of the "big birds," but time will tell. I'm planning a big promotional campaign in Ukraine, and I also want to engage a Ukrainian actor or actress to star.

**Q: Who are your international and American idols in filmmaking?**

**A:** In Hollywood, I'm inspired by experts like Steven Spielberg due to his ability to make absolutely different films while at the same time staying true to himself as an excellent storyteller. I admire Guy Ritchie due to his ability to inspire with his works.

He was the director who motivated me to pay attention to the importance of the soundtrack in the film. If you close your eyes and watch any motion picture by Ritchie, you will complete the image yourself ... it is very cool. Michael Bay has also inspired me for many years, due to his tireless work ethic and the explosive tempo of his films.

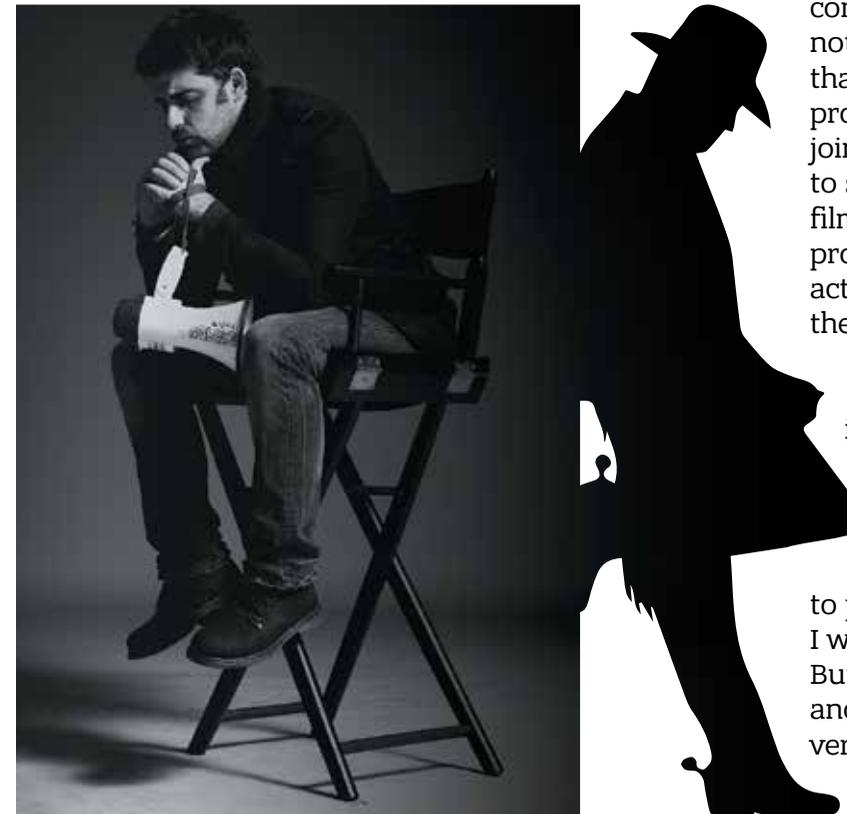
**Q: What are the top five things you like best – and dislike most – in the US?**

**A:** I dislike exaggerated bureaucracy; immigrants who speak badly about their homeland; the difficulty of parking your car; the lack of criteria for friendship (in contrast with Slavic cultures); and the fact that most Americans don't understand what Ukraine is and where it is.

I like the friendliness and sociability you find practically everywhere; the affordability of things (here in the US you can buy what you need, and it won't be too expensive); the sense that anyone who loves to work has great prospects (Americans might work harder than anyone in the world); the

cheap money in banks (though US interest rates have been rising, they still can't be compared to the rates back home in Ukraine!

[editor's note: 12 to 20 percent in Ukraine]); and finally the sense that you can go everywhere directly, and talk to whomever you want without mediators



**A:** My way is not necessarily innovative, but it is a process I intend to stick to. In order to earn trust in Hollywood and build a good reputation, you must do something commercially successful, even if it is not what you most want to make. After that, you can do anything. For my future projects, I aim to make some films with joint US-Ukrainian production. I want to shoot in Ukraine, invite American film stars there, and place them at the production site alongside Ukrainian actors. I want to make Ukrainian films that the whole world will be interested in.

Frankly speaking, I am fed up with playing in a sandbox. I played there for a long time by myself while it was still dull and rainy, but then when the sun came out, many more children came out to play and it became crowded. My desire to play in that sandbox has disappeared. I want to open a bigger sandbox now. But to do that I need to go to the quarry and bring back more sand. The task is very difficult, but I am dedicated to it.

I am afraid every time I start to shoot. Any person with a sense of responsibility is always afraid, no matter what business they are in. However, I always try to face these fears. I think making mistakes is normal. The question is what you do next: you can either give up, or you can remedy the mistake. All of us make mistakes during our lives; what is important is to admit your faults and to get better. Some people are so afraid to make a mistake that they never take a single step. But behind these fears, people are hiding their dreams. It is necessary to do our jobs and to make mistakes so we can make our dreams a reality.

**Lubomir Levitsky's upcoming projects include two thrillers: *Skeleton In The Closet*, and *Egregor*. (Yes, he remains devoted to his favorite genre.) You can read more about his projects in English at [www.levitskyfilm.com](http://www.levitskyfilm.com), under the Movies section.**

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(though lobbyists, connections, and recommendations certainly help).

**Q: What are three useful tips you would give to a young filmmaker from Eastern Europe who wants to make it in Hollywood?**

**A:** First, don't expect to sell your first script for \$10 million. Start more simply: write a film script for \$150,000 to \$200,000. Second, your success will depend on the quality of your team. Pick a great team, and it'll all work out well for you. Third, never be afraid of anything. You can never foresee anything in filmmaking. You may hope that everything will go according to plan, but this never happens. A film is like a natural disaster, and you must try to control the chaos. Later you will understand that this seeming chaos is merely what production looks like.

**Q: What are your current projects and future plans?**