

The Do-It-Yourself Issue

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house





Cathryn Collins

By Justin Quirk Photographer Marc Pilaro

HOUSE MEMBER Cathryn Collins is the director of *Vlast*, a new independent, feature-length documentary about the arrest and imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Khodorkovsky was formerly the wealthiest man in Russia, having made his fortune with his oil company Yukos in the violent political and economic upheavals of Russia in the 1990s. He has become the most high-profile of the oligarchs who fell foul of the current government.

So what drew you to Khodorkovsky's story?

I started studying Russian in 1970, still in the Soviet period, and my interest was piqued for reasons I can't really describe. Being slightly familiar with the place, when it started coming apart I was old enough to know where they were coming from and curious enough to pay very close attention to it. I was fascinated – like, 'watching a train wreck' fascinated.

Could this story have happened at any other time?

That group of people around Khodorkovsky represents a totally unique blip. The character of that blip is that this group was old enough to have lived through Soviet times, and old enough to have experienced the desperation of it, how deprived everything

was. They were old enough to be the immediate recipients of the new openness, but young enough to have not become inculcated in the Soviet structure. If they were intelligent and had supportive families, they were the first ones to go abroad and experience the market economy. And they absolutely drank the Kool-Aid of this idealism.

None of the people around Khodorkovsky seemed willing to just cut their losses and back down, even with the risks to themselves. Why do you think that was?

When the rouble collapsed (1998), those guys had already launched. They'd barely tasted this new stuff and it was all suddenly coming apart. When things started going backwards politically, they were the ones who were the most outraged by it.

Was there any altruism to them, a sense that they were improving the country?

I don't believe in altruism. All of those people worked from the time they were teenagers and they all still do work like fiends. But they were picked by Khodorkovsky because they were the smartest. They were riding

the highest waves, they were making money. They thought they were doing great things.

Did you not feel at personal risk when you were sniffing around this stuff?

I did this so below the radar – I just kept my head down and worked. But the people I was talking to are, in some cases, in very perilous situations. That was a good way of keeping perspective on it. I'm a nobody; they're known quantities and there are definitely incentives for them not to be around.

Khodorkovsky really seems like a gift to a film maker as a character...

I was always interested in him as a symbol, a sort of hologram. He represents this arc of everything that happened in Russia for 25 years. Good, bad, confusing, alarming. The hardest thing about making the film was to try to be as hands off as possible in presenting who he is. We don't know who he is. I don't know if he's guilty, innocent, whatever. He's a gigantic, very complex cocktail, which is what that period is about. His story really captures that complexity.

www.vlastthefilm.com

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