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Ilya Averbukh: “My Dream Is To Build My Own Ice Theater”

He has been working as choreographer for more than 20 years in Russia and abroad. His famous projects are not limited to ice shows only — the Olymicps silver medal winner creates competition programs for best figure skaters of the country, organizes ceremonies at major events and implements his own projects as producer. In his exclusive interview to BM.Moscow Foresight Ilya Averbukh spoke of the tough fate of the Russian figure skating, ice dance officiating specifics and nearest future plans.

How does figure skating feel today in Russia?

Over the last two years the figure skating has been going through hard times, just like all of the domestic sports. I feel especially frustrated about figure skaters, considering the phenomenal level of the new generation of Russian athletes, which they are ready to demonstrate at international competitions. Lack of these tournaments by all means affects morale of our athletes. A large number of competitions, including prize competitions, motivate them to keep upholding the honor of Russia in sports.

I am sure that the unfair ban on participation of our athletes in international competitions will end soon. Russia has made a very large constribution to the figure skating, achieving the current status that we all — both coaches and viewers — cherish, and our country is ready to keep developing this sport. But now we have to live with what we have.

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What is your view on officiating? Figure skating fans just fail to understand how points are awarded to world's best skaters, it often happens in a biased and prejudiced way.

Indeed, ice dancing was considered a subjective sport for quite some time, but relevant federations have long taken the course to improvement of the athletic part of the competition. And I think this is the right thing to do! Now many criteria have been introduced, adding more athletic components to ice dancing: this is what is primarily evaluated by officials.

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Today it is often mentioned that coaches are unnecessarily strict to their students, that they ignore interests of athletes. And what kind of a coach are you?

All our coaches have graduated from the Soviet figure skating school, where a strict approach to young athletes was an important part of raising future champions, who created the figure skating that we all love today. I know this approach as a person who was raised under the Soviet system, and the insistence of coaches on high standards is something very familiar and understandable for me.

The current generation of coaches, as I see it, is much softer than their coaches had been to them in their time, but this does not prevent their trainees from achieving great results. At the same time there is understanding that coaches must demand specific achievements. The key objective of a coach even today is to help an athlete unlock his talent to the maximum, reveal all abilities.

I do not think there is anything bad about demanding high results. In this case it is only the desire to mobilize efforts of young athletes in the shortest possible time, so that they could unleash their physical abilities, of which they are often unaware.

Today there is a lot of talk that dance couples fall apart far too often now in Russian ice dancing, athletes change their coaches. Why does this happen? Could this drive the level of Russian figure skating down?

Indeed, lately rotation of dance duets has been happening quite often. It is largely due to the unfair exclusion of the Russian sport from international competitions.

Athletes, especially in ice dancing, are perfectly aware that it would be hard to come to a tournament and start winning at once. This is almost unrealistic. A couple has to be evaluated first, including evaluation by international specialists. And only after a few years in the international sports arena, a skater could hope for high results.

I hope that the isolation of Russia will end soon, and our figure skaters will be able to once again compete for Olympic medals. But under the current conditions age of athletes plays a very important role, that’s why couples are falling apart. Some no longer feel motivated for figure skating, others do not see any personal prospects in this sport.

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Everything is clear. But I would like to point out, that there is another parallel process: new very bright and beautiful duets are still coming up in Russia.

There is an opinion that in figure skating, especially in ice dancing, one has to “wait in line” to get a title. Would you agree with this?

This is a common view. I would only add that now this assumed line has started moving much faster. But it would be wrong to hope that you would come to your first ice dance tournament and start winning outright. Sometimes this happens at singles competitions, because jumps and spins today represent more specific criteria to evaluate skater’s skills.

Ilya, last year you celebrated your fiftieth anniversary. What career and business achievements mean the most for you?

Fiftieth anniversary for every person is a time to take stock, and I am sure that many things are yet ahead. Along with my sports achievements, I consider the “Ice Age” project a true success, it has been on TV for 20 years now. I produce and direct the show. Over this time viewers watched various versions of the show. In 2018 the “Ice Age. Kids” show won the TEFI, the Russian national award for the highest achievements on TV, established by the “Russian Television Academy” Foundation.

I also managed to revive ice shows in Russia, which have been picked up by my colleagues, and now families with children can choose, which fairy tale on ice they would want to see this weekend, and which one they will see on the next weekend.

Moreover, I am now busy with creating an ice theater, theatrical shows on ice, which now enjoy great success and have all-around support from large and small city authorities in Russia. So, for example, for the “Anna Karenina” show our team, which today, by the way, consists of 200 people, received multiple awards, including the prestigious Oleg Yankovsky theater award, which was important for me personally.

There are other achievements. I can say in all modesty: I was instrumental in bulding six ice arenas over the last few years in Russia, which, I hope, made a certain input into development of sports in our country.

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Please share your plans for the future with our readers.

My near-term plans are to show what has already been created and directed. For example, the “Carmen” ice show, a story which got a second wind due to a new star team. In the first days of November the show was demonstrated to viewers and got a lot of positive feedback. We hoped that figure skating fans would appreciate our efforts and would want to see the legendary story in a unique interpretation with figure skating stars. And our expectations came true.

My main dream, construction of my own stationary ice theater, has not yet been implemented. I want viewers to have an opportunity to watch ice shows as theater plays. This project requires a lot of work, but my team and I, we are ready for hardships, what matters is the end result.

You are continuing to actively develop your coaching career and at the same time creating wonderfully colorful ice shows. Which role do you like best?

We have opened the Ice Dance Club together with Yelena Maslennikova. She is coaching, I supervise the group and try to help with comprehensive development of athletes.

Our group has only turned three years, but it is developing very well. It has a lot of young talents, some of them are even on the Team Russia roster.

In my life there are lots of projects outside sports events, and they have gone beyond ice long ago. I directed the World Football Championship opening ceremonies in 2018, the World University Games in Krasnoyarsk in 2019, the celebration of the 800th anniversary of Nizhny Novgorod in 2021 and many other events.

Currently I have many projects totally unrelated to ice, where I act as an organizer, director, producer etc. There are many more of these than there are large arena shows.

And still, how is the “Ice Show” project developing? What other shows are you working on, which stars are

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involved?

This year we decided to thrill our viewers with “Mama”, a new New Year show. I have already touched upon this theme once. But the new show has nothing to do with my previous work. This is an absolutely new show with an original scenario and unique music, with inimitable choreography and distinctive scenic design. Overall, the only thing that connects the two shows is that they are both based on the “Wolf and Seven Baby Goats”.

This is a very heartfelt story, an absolute family story, with 0+ raing, which means children of any age or whole families could watch it. What matters most is that after the show a child would say: “Mommy, I love you so much!”

The fairy tale features various vivid characters. Our stars – Oksana Domnina, Maxim Shabalin, Yevgenia Medvedeva, Anastasia Mishina, Alexander Galyamov, and of course, Dmitry Aliev take part in the show.

Viewers who come to the show would see a constellation of champions in a very colorful musical fairy tale, where all characters speak with live voices. An orchestra would start playing during the show. The idea is to deliver a live, energetic musical on ice for children.

Athletes, participating in your shows, say that skating to live music is a great pleasure. How did you come to this idea?

I know from my own experience: skating to live vocals is very exciting! This always leads to a good improvisation on ice. Viewers are ecstatic!

Do you take your shows abroad? Are there any offers for tours, let’s say, in the BRICS countries?

We are developing international cooperation. In April we plan to perform in the United Arab Emirates. I think we will take our shows to other BRICS countries as well. Most of these countries never get to see snow and they can hardly imagine what a Russian ice show could be! Figure skating could be Russia’s calling card in the Middle East or in South America.

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Do you get any tour offers from abroad, or is it centrally managed by the Figure Skating Federation?

You see, an “ice show” is a commercial enterprise. The Figure Skating Federation has no relation to us whatsoever. The Figure Skating Federation has its own activities, its individual projects with federations of other countries. Anything that is done in relation to ice shows abroad is in no way connected to any government agencies.

Nevertheless, we performed in China, in Italy at Arena di Verona, at Malta, in Germany’s Dortmund. We had a large tour of Germany. Our shows enjoyed great success in Singapore. All this time we have been open to international projects.

What are you relations with Moscow? Does the city help you with implementation of your ideas?

The Moscow Government does a whole lot for support and development of our projects. The city is the absolute headliner among major Russian cities.

Mossport, in particular, supports a project that is very important for me, and which, I hope, would kick off in winter — this is WinterFest-2025. This year we will be holding it for the third time. This is a winter festival, conceived by me, for the first time we held it in the Hermitage Garden. At the time the city authorities liked the idea and they supported further continuation of our show.

I am in awe of the volume of activities and various festivals, concerts and exhibitions in Moscow, and not only in winter. I consider the “Theater Boulevard” a most wonderful summer festival, a most organic and bright event of the past season.

Moscow is trying to support every creative person, improving infrastructure for development of sports and arts. Just look at how many cultural and sports facilities are under construction today in Moscow! The Russian capital is in the top best cities of the world in any field, whatever you may think of. I am sure that our beloved city will keep on flourishing and actively developing. And this would mean that the Russian figure skating and our ice shows will make their statements yet again!

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