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“Vysotsky. Vysota” Show: Is Digital Immortality Possible For Legend?

This fall, an unusual show-concert featuring digital avatars of artists, accompanied by a symphony orchestra, is scheduled in Moscow, where viewers will get to see Vladimir Vysotsky “come alive”. The ambitious project has been performed by “Digital Legends”, an EnTech industry leader, creating immersive digital shows at the intersection of technology, art and cultural heritage. Alexander Mamonov, manager and general producer of “Vysotsky.Vysota” show answered questions by the BM.Moscow Foresight magazine.

In late October Live Arena in Moscow will host the “Vysotsky. Vysota” show, featuring a digital avatar of Vladimir Vysotsky. But before you tell us about the show, let’s get our terminology strait. What is a “digital avatar” or a “digital twin”?

The “digital twin” concept is often used for describing many different things: holograms, artificial intelligence, etc. We at “Digital Legends” are the first in the world to create an exact digital twin for a legendary artist of this scale with complete physical and emotional authenticity. Our technology for neural network analysis of archival records allowed us to recreate not only the appearance, but also psychological patterns of behavior. We have integrated cutting-edge technology, holographic projections, and a live orchestra into a single ecosystem. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we have created a new genre: the digital immortality of cultural icons.

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Where does the idea to “bring Vysotsky back to life” come from?

The idea was born from understanding that Vysotsky is not merely an artist, but the cultural code of the nation. We asked ourselves the question: how can we preserve and pass on to future generations not only the songs but also the very energy, charisma, live presence of Vladimir Semyonovich. Vysotsky passed away at the peak of his fame, 42 years old, leaving behind a colossal legacy and millions of fans who never saw him perform live.

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Did the family of Vladimir Vysotsky give their consent for the concert?

Nikita Vysotsky, son of Vladimir Semyonovich, immediately realized the scale and significance of the project, he saw in our technology a way to preserve the image of a great artist for eternity. We presented not just a business plan, but a cultural mission. The heirs became full partners in the project because they understood — we are not creating just a show, but digital immortality of world-class quality.

Nikita Vysotsky is our main custodian of the authenticity of the image of Vladimir Semyonovich in our project. He controlled every gesture, every intonation of the digital avatar. We recreated not only the appearance, but also the demeanor, the way the material was presented, even the pauses between words. Nikita helped us understand his father's psychology, his inner world. Without this expert contribution, the project would have been technically perfect, but spiritually empty.

How ethical do you think it is to “resurrect” artists using new technologies?

We do not resurrect — we preserve. Nikita Vysotsky says that Vladimir Semyonovich belong not only to his family, but to the whole nation, Vysotsky is in our DNA. Our project is a digital Tretyakov Gallery with live images instead of paintings. We treat Vysotsky’s heritage with the same reverence with which restorers treat the paintings of great masters. Is it ethical to deprive future generations of the opportunity to see a genius in action?

What unusual experiences will Moscow’s Live Arena show offer to the audience?

Spectators will experience something that is impossible anywhere else in the world – a meeting with a living legend. It's not a concert, it's a time machine. The audience will hear Vysotsky’s voice of ideal quality, they will see him as he was in the prime of his creative powers, feel his energy. I think the entertainment industry will never be the same after “Vysotsky.Vysota” show.

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Could you please reveal the secret of what innovative technologies you use in your show?

Essentially, our project is a high-quality, hyper-realistic project on a huge (50x12 meters) screen. The feeling of reality is enhanced by a light show synchronized on the screen and in the house, a transition of scenery from reality to the screen and a live symphony orchestra. The realism of the show is also enhanced by contemporary pop stars, singing Vysotsky's songs solo or in a duet with him. For this purpose, we have created avatars of Polina Gagarina, Grigory Leps, Leonid Agutin and Sergei Shnurov.

To create the digital image of Vysotsky, we used motion capture — a technology for capturing motion. It was a huge technical and psychological work, because, for example, Pushkin is easy to play now - no one remembers what he really looked like. And any slightest deviation from the familiar live facial expressions and manners of Vysotsky will be immediately noted and criticized by everyone.

We have spent two years developing this very project to create a living, breathing Vysotsky, not a wax figure. The main difficulty is not even in working with avatars and animation, where our "Digital Legends" production studio is an absolute industry leader. Our task was to make sure that every wrinkle, every movement of the eyebrows corresponded to the original. We processed terabytes of archival materials, created unique speech and motion synthesis algorithms. The technical base of the project features massive scale render farms, working in real time for months to create super high-quality content for viewers. A screen the size of half a football field where the show will be displayed, the only one in Russia capable of such high quality currently, and a surround sound system. And, of course, there is the unique team of specialists who worked on this show. Let me go back to the question – technically, this is a revolution; we had to create a technological ecosystem for this project. During the work process we have produced many proprietary, Russian IT developments, patented by us.

How did you select artists for digital avatars to perform together with Vysotsky?

We focused on spiritual closeness of artists to Vysotsky's art. Agutin, Leps, Shnurov, Gagarina — each of these artists performed songs by Vladimir Semyonovich, imparting their own interpretations. This is not a random collection of stars, but a constellation of like-minded people united by their love of Vysotsky's poetry. And of course, it was very important who would operate as a guide to the present day, and we unanimously decided that it would be Sergei Bezrukov.

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