

interview | aleksandr kuznetsov



credits

curious and pioneering — three words that encapsulate the very essence of [Aleksandr Kuznetsov](#)

The renowned actor recently graced our screens in J. K. Rowling's wizarding world, making an impressive debut in the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise as Helmut. Acting, however, is merely one facet of Kuznetsov; through the media of music, writing and directing, he relishes every opportunity to open his mind to any creative craft that stumbles upon his path with a warm vulnerability.

Join Schön! as Kuznetsov candidly discusses his experience growing up in Crimea, his journey into acting, joining the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise and his wishes for the future.

Hello! First of all, how are you? How has 2022 treated you so far?

Hi guys. I can't complain — I'm a lucky bastard. With all the horrors that our world has been experiencing the last years, somehow I always find myself having a lot of energy to move forward.

Especially now, after the war in Ukraine started, I feel more motivated and urged than ever to make art and challenge perspectives. That's why I think I'm lucky — no matter what's happening I only ever feel low for a few days tops. Then my mind is simply waking up with a new strength. The rest, I mean the career, the best people around you, ideas, solutions, songs, films, meetings — are coming just automatically. That's the only rule I've really learnt.



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How did you decide to pursue acting? Was there a moment that set you on this path?

You know, I was born in Sevastopol, a faraway port city in Ukraine. My father is a seasoned sailor, [and] I used to work as a sailor as well. There's literally nothing in this city that can set you on a path of doing any kind of arts. The people around me were honest, strong and warm-hearted but absolutely industrial-minded. It's a very hot and dusty city. Imagine some Spaghetti-western desert with just one bar; tough and gloomy cowboys, disturbing silence, sandy wind all around, and the scent of danger in everything. That's how I remember it, and my decision to become an actor and musician was rather a way to create my own reality — opposite to this chaos. I just didn't want to have anything in common with this place. When I was a kid I didn't find any common activities interesting; everything was boring and technically pointless to me. But when I was reading books and watching films with Al Pacino and Harrison Ford — everything was changing. I kinda wanted to hang out with those guys, not the guys in the courtyard.

I started to really associate myself with movie characters, [heroes from] Jack London's and Jules Verne's book[s]. I honestly dreamed of being a medieval knight, a sailing ship captain, a wizard, a Jedi. I started to read biographies of great people — adventurers, scientists, astronauts, directors, composers, rock stars.

So at some point, when I was 12, I accidentally watched *Empire of Dreams*, a documentary film about George Lucas and his creation of *Star Wars*. That event became some kind of a pivotal moment for me. I was so impressed with George's passion and bravery to bring to life exactly the world he imagined — despite all the enormous obstacles, with no compromises, no matter what. It gave me the last spark I needed. I became silent and was gone into my thoughts for weeks and weeks after I watched it and when I woke up one morning I had a concrete decision in my heart. From that moment on I knew I'm going to direct my life. I'm going to fight for every single detail on my vision of life and shape all this energy in the form of: acting, directing, making music and much more. The best decision of my life.

But I had no idea how it all works and how on earth do I begin as an actor. I didn't know where all these films were being shot right now. I was wandering around the city, through all these dusty streets believing that when I emerge around the next corner it might be a chance that I stumble upon a *Star Wars* film set. I thought back then, *if it happens, I will not get lost. I will go right over there, approach the director and tell him 'Sorry, mister, hi. I'm Alex. I don't need any money, possessions AND credits, I don't need to sleep and rest. I will work 24 hours per day for food. Just give me one shot to try that role and I will put into it everything the hell I have and more. You will see and won't regret it.'*



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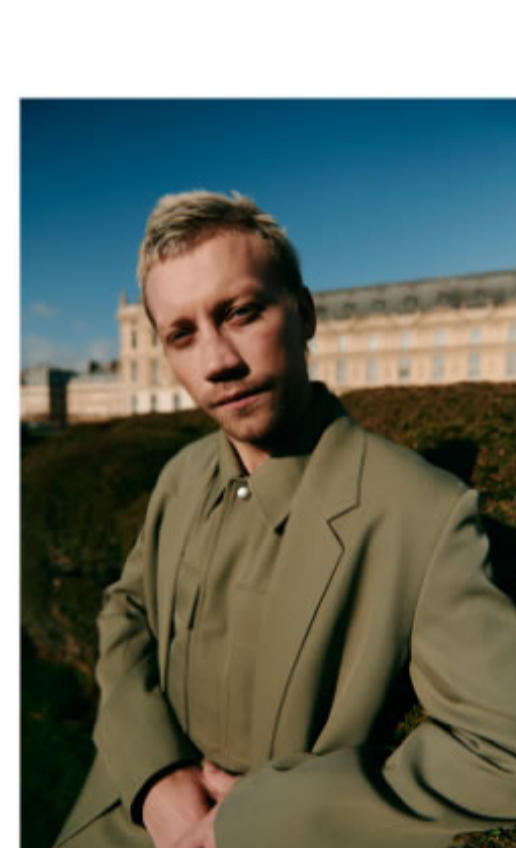
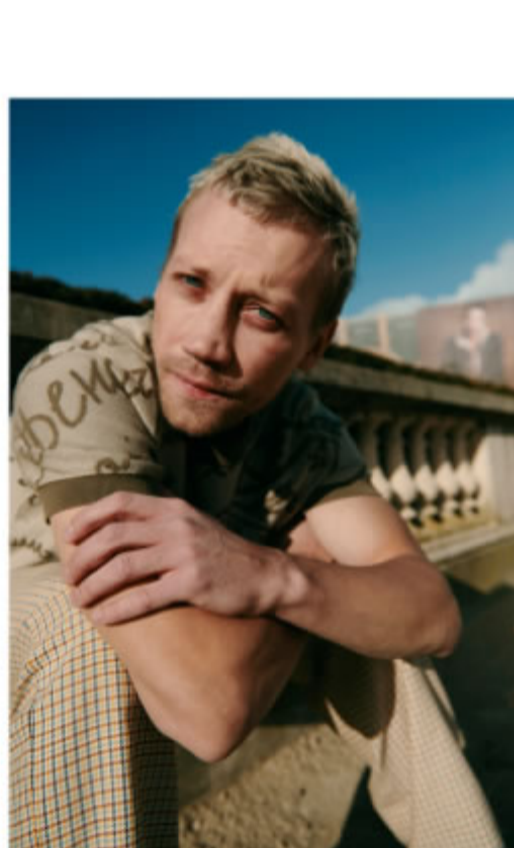
When you're acting, you also have a passion for music. Which musicians are you interested in at the moment?

Yeah, I have a brit-pop band myself, that's what I do most of the time when I'm not on a film set. I'm working on an album right now and the ideal plan is to split my life touring and filming 50/50.

At the moment I'm super inspired by Balthazar, Royal Blood, OK Go, Kaleo and, now and forever, Muse. But I've built my musical DNA on many more: The White Stripes, Queen, Kasabian, Rammstein, Arctic Monkeys, Damien Rice, The Beatles.

In your opinion, what is the most rewarding part of working in the creative industry?

It's the feeling that your work, the little world that you've created, made someone feel happier, braver and more confident. That it helped someone feel less alone and not to be afraid to pursue their dreams. When I was a teenager, I listened to Freddie Mercury and watched Heath Ledger's films — these guys helped me to get out of my shell and go for it. I could even say, in some ways, they have become my friends and teachers. I think this is the most rewarding thing for me — when the audience can feel somehow more comforted, united and motivated to be their better self through my work.



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What are some of the challenges or setbacks you faced in your career? What did you learn from these challenges/setbacks?

Oh, to be honest, being Russian-Ukrainian and fighting my way into the film industry world — it's not an easy walk. First of all, globally, almost no one ever done that. So far there are so few A-List Hollywood actors having fully grown up in Russia or Ukraine. There seems to be some kind of a natural barrier which prevents people from Slavic countries to go on to become really successful internationally. It's an eternal riddle. So, first of all, you can't get any practical advice or read any guidebook on how to do it. You have to become an actual pioneer and a loony diver ready to make millions of mistakes, rise and fall, rise and fall, and never stop. You're a pathfinder. It's a super interesting, exciting and potentially mega rewarding way but definitely not the easiest one. It's naturally the opposite to comfort and stability. You have to accept that it will be a constant battle, with a lot of failures, obstacles, injustices and with zero guarantees. And if you are still happy and energized about it, that's your way.

I've had so many challenges — from learning and mastering the language to the ongoing war in my countries and a total cultural blockade of Russia — that I don't see it as a challenges anymore. It's just a given equation for me. It will take some time, but I will deal with all of this and get to where I want to be. All these setbacks taught me to look at everything as a scientist, break down all your failures, learn how things work and how to make it all better. That's my only superpower — to be relentless and passionate in studying the object of interest and then go and try to do my very best in it.



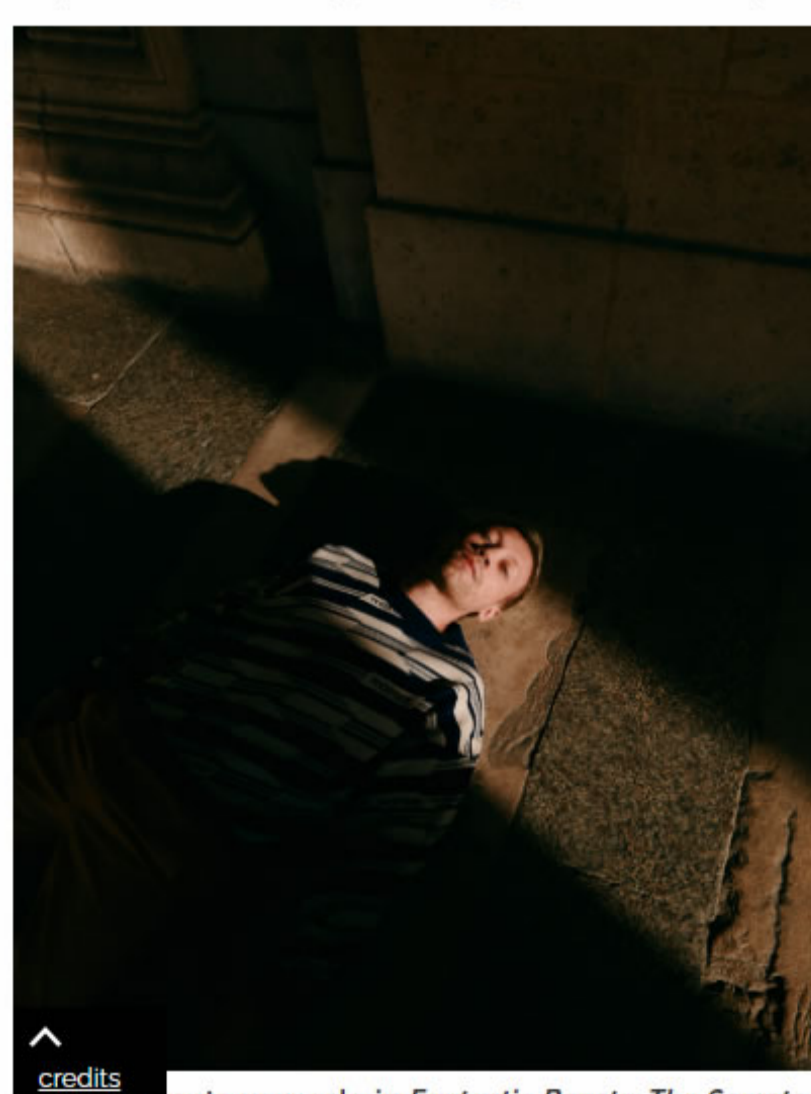
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How does working on film in Russia differ from working on a Hollywood production?

It differs drastically, to be honest. Russia is Russia. I hope one day it will be a totally different country, but at the moment you can see everything with your own eyes. The film industry in Russia is super censored due to the war — we fought hard against the government's intervention in every stage of film making, especially the editing.

Now — it's just almost impossible to film anything at all. First of all — concrete and lasting lifetime blacklists of actors and directors who spoke out against the war and Putin's government. If you want to do anything in Russia — you have to keep absolute silence all the time. Second, every film now is 100% supervised by the government's 'film experts' at one stage or another (can't believe it's happening in 2022). So the more shallow and obscure your film, the better chance it has being finished and released. Were regressing back to the film industry system of the Soviet Union era where incredibly talented and intelligent people are making sad, safe, visually formal films, hiding hundreds of gems of their free-minded beliefs, trying to camouflage it as best as they can in order to not to be caught by the regime. Thankfully the regime experts are pretty dumb, that's why we have so many iconic Soviet films.

As you can see, it's all very entertaining, but it's not the way I want to make films and live my life. It was enough.



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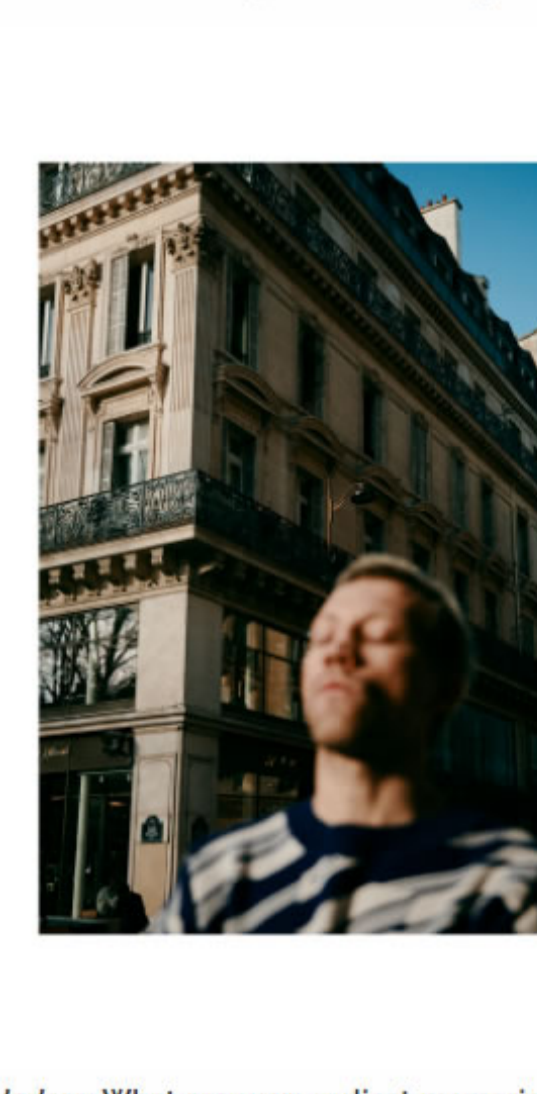
How did you get into your role in *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore*. What are your earliest memories of J. K. Rowling's wizarding world?

So I was seven when I watched the first *Harry Potter* film. Right after that I started reading the books and read all three that were available very quickly. After that I faced a horrible truth — the rest of the books hadn't been written and released yet. So I had to desperately wait for my single one of them. I didn't wait for anything in my life as much as I waited for those books. New Year, Christmas, Birthday, whatever else you can look forward — nah, forget it, it was just nothing. And for some reason I didn't discuss *Harry Potter* films or books with anyone; it was just too sensitive for me. My love of J. K. Rowling[s] books became my secret and some kind of hidden magical superpower nobody knew about. I didn't want to share it with anyone; I just partially lived in that world and I knew that I was meant to become a part of it one day.

So the new books started to come out, and every new year in my school was marked by spending it with a new chapter. I was deliberately reading it very slowly, like 10 pages per day, so that I did not run out of books.

Literally everything in my city didn't look like *Harry Potter*. Aesthetically and mentally everything was just against that world, there was zero magic in this desert port city. So I had to fight for it (as I suppose many kids had). I was picking up fallen pigeon feathers, dyeing A4 paper sheets in cold black tea making the paper look old and writing down all the spells in ink. I didn't expect myself to be taken to Hogwarts by Hagrid, no, but I did know that my life's path was leading that way.

But the environment I was surrounded by was super unfriendly; it was a pure muggle world with Dudley's all around, in every neighbourhood. So when I became 12, me and my best friend decided that we'd had enough, and that we couldn't lose anymore time. At 6 AM on a hot July morning we packed, stole 100 dollars each from our parents and fled our homes, as we thought back then — forever. We decided to escape to England through Europe. The plan was quite loony, I still don't know how we came up with this. The plan was to take a train to Kyiv first, hiding in the gap between carriages (with no passports), then on to Poland, Germany and France, where eventually we were supposed to walk the La Manche



to Oxford.

I remember my legs shaking on my way to the meeting point at 6 AM on the morning of the escape. Unfortunately the furthest we got was Kyiv where we were stupidly caught by police at the railway station and sent back home. To be honest by this point we were scared as hell of the whole concept, so we gladly accepted the deportation.

But I don't regret a single second that we have tried. I think I am where I am now partially because of doing these kinds of crazy stupid things from time to time.



credits **Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore** you portray Helmut, an entirely new character. What can you tell us about Helmut and where he fits into the story?

Helmut is the Head of German Aurors, elite and the most honorable group of magical police, tasked with protecting the magical community against the Dark Forces and serving under the German Ministry of Magic. Their main specialisation — dueling. As many say, the coolest job in the Wizarding world.

Helmut bears a great responsibility on his shoulders and has a lot of strong and brave wizards under his command. In *The Secrets of Dumbledore*, Helmut has to face a lot of truly hard choices and challenges, [and in] Dumbledore[s] words, 'We must all face the choice between what is right, and what is easy.' [Those] are indeed a representation of his circumstances.



credits **Challenges** come from playing an entirely new character from an established series, and how did you overcome those challenges?

You know, in such universes as *Harry Potter*, where everything is so extremely detailed and vivid, where every fan perfectly knows the magical history from our days to medieval times, where every single character of every book is so brilliantly and carefully described and brought to life — it's both a huge privilege and luck to be portraying somebody completely new. It's a big responsibility, but the responsibility I always looked for. This kind of responsibility is exactly why I've become an actor.

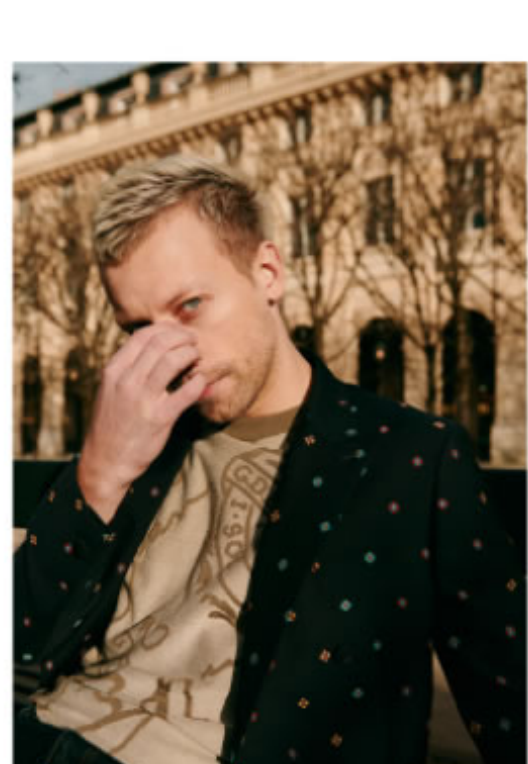
It's a pure and beautiful chance to put all your own energy, love, desires, fears and dreams into a character who will step into the *Harry Potter* universe now and start his own journey there, his own story. Something that you kinda can't control after the film's premiere.

It's all big and scary, and every single day on set during seven months of shooting I was reflecting, thinking and worrying. *Am I going my own unique way and bringing my dreams into it or will I fail and just dissolve into this universe like brief rain?* But that is the gamble you choose as an actor, as an artist, every time you step on set. The most worthy gamble possible. I'm very honoured and grateful to David Yates and Warner Bros for giving me this chance and letting me live out my childhood dream.

You have 30+ diverse acting credits – what type of role would you like to pursue next?

Oh, thousands of them. Complex heroes, strong and vulnerable, weak and brave, forced to go against the right thing, but in the end choosing to die fighting instead. Fallen heroes like Anakin. Failed ones. Silent ones like Severus Snape and Ryan Gosling's character in *Drive*. I'm a huge fan of Joaquin Phoenix's way of choosing roles, Daniel Day Lewis, Jake Gyllenhaal's, Adam Driver's. I would love to get a chance to work on a Taika Waititi film, Nicholas Winding Refn, Wes Anderson.

I would love to play a leading part in a *Star Wars* film. That has been one of my biggest professional dreams for a long time. My dear dream that evolved into a goal. A complex and epic Jedi or Sith. Doesn't matter which side he is. The one and only rule — the hero has to go all his way till the end. Live out his destiny, whether he succeeds or tragically fail. It doesn't matter. Every role has to be a book, a way, a dream. I don't want to waste my life playing something that doesn't matter.



credits **When** you're not an actor today, what do you think you might be doing instead?

I'm interested literally in everything, to be honest. Acting is just a perfect form of putting my energy into something at the moment. It might change. The most important thing for me is to keep creating things, study this life and try and bring something new and honest. It doesn't matter whether it's acting or playing concerts or it's a space shuttle building and exploring the Antarctic ice research ship. Or working on a gas station in Iceland near the Vatnajökull glacier. Or having a bakers' shop in Brooklyn. I can make the best and unique [tasting] bread and create the most cozy atmosphere in my shop.

Everything in life is directing. You direct how your bedroom looks, how your dumbbells and socks are messed up around the bed, you direct which flowers you give to your loved one and which music is playing at this moment in your BMW. You direct how you want to see your mornings, where to live and what to love.

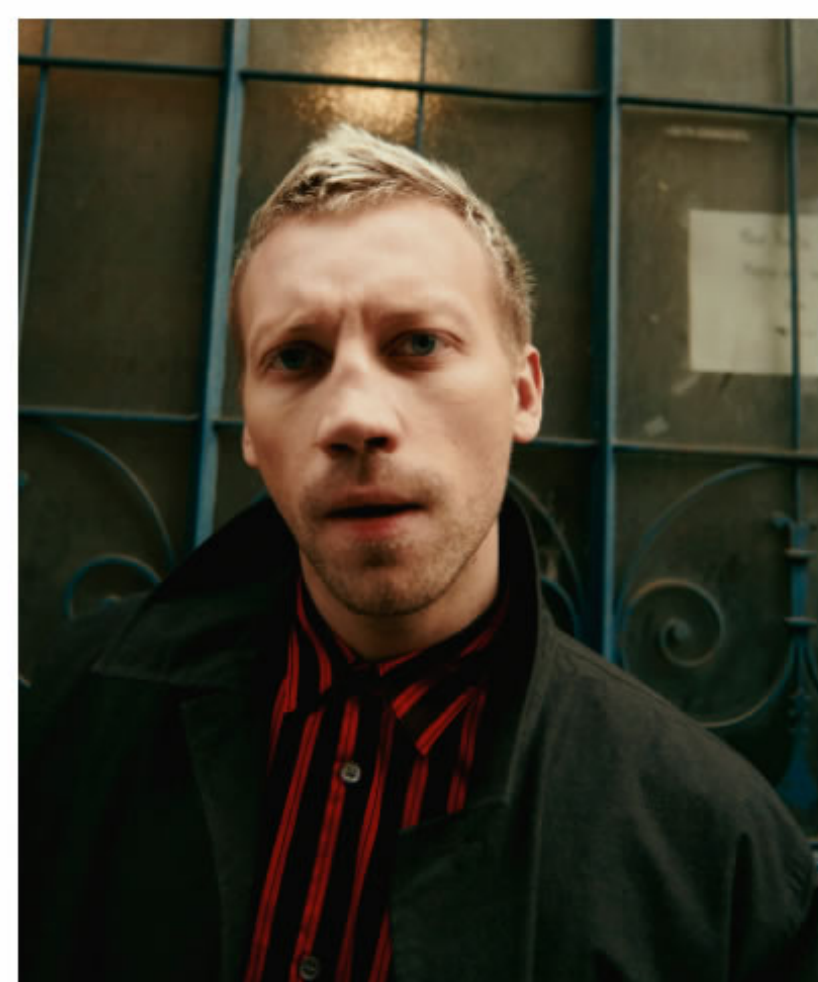
All I want is to keep exploring life, wake up every morning and do what I truly want to do. And not do what I don't want to do. That's the biggest and simplest secret for me and the best knowledge I have so far.

I have a favorite book: it's *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, [and it's] where I found the best words I've ever read in my life: 'When you truly want something, the entire Universe conspires to make it happen.' Which means, that what you really, honestly want is exactly something [what] you have to do, with no excuses, fears, procrastination or compromises.

What else are you working on at the moment?

After *Fantastic Beasts* I did 5 films back to back in Russia, spending around 300 days on set over 12 months — including [the] very much anticipated by me *The Shaman* show, and my first solo feature film *Free Fall*, about a space station engineer Maxim, who has drifted away into space. The film was shot entirely on a virtual screen, like *The Mandalorian*. Probably the hardest thing I've ever done so far. It was a very rich, dynamic and grown-up year for me, but now it's a totally new period of life ahead.

After the war started I decided to focus exclusively on international films. I'm excited about it and we will see what's coming next soon.



credits **When** you're not acting, what are you looking forward to right now?

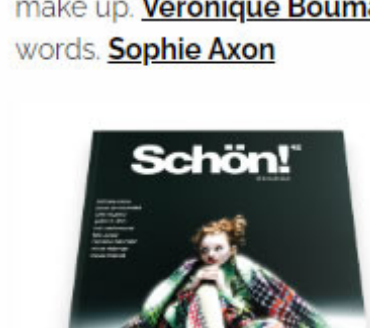
I'm working on the release of my first music album right now with my rock band. Having pre-production of my first short movie *Red Letter* in the UK, which will be my directorial debut. I'm also writing a big feature film script about Formula 1 and preparing for my long-term punk travel motorcycle show. It's called *Come Rain or Come Shine*, like the Ray Charles song. The plan is me and a fellow actor friend have to travel from Siberia to Cape Town through 25+ countries with two Sony FX3 cameras in 3 months. The whole idea is not to have any kind of support cars following us, no producers, no cameramen and no security, and to face every possible danger and challenge we might meet along the way with an open heart and a sharp mind. To talk to all people, meditate, laugh, cry, keep rolling and keep riding our motorcycles no matter what. Some kind of an autobiography, not in the traditional sense, but in the form of a travel show. Our team will fly over every four days to wherever we are on the journey to collect the footage and bring it back to London to make backups, so that if we lose the material at any point we will still have some footage. We don't want to avoid dangerous places, no matter how imprudent it seems. The idea is to try and find a common language with literally every single person, animal and environment we meet — overcoming fear, and finding our best selves.

It's a crazy, pretty much impossible and really stupid plan. But, well — fine by me. As I said, sometimes these kinds of plans are the only things that bring us further down the road.



credits **Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore** is currently in cinemas.

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