

A detective hunts a costumed vigilante in *Major Grom: Plague Doctor* trailer

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Major Grom: Plague Doctor is adapted from the Russian comics of the same name.

A rogue detective who doesn't always play by the rules hunts a costumed vigilante serial killer in the first English-language trailer (well, subtitled) for a Russian superhero film called *Major Grom: Plague Doctor*, directed by Oleg Trofim (*Ice*). There's some pretty strong *The Punisher* vibes here, as well as *V for Vendetta*. The *Major Grom* comic books, created by Artem Gabrelyanov, have been likened to the early *Batman* comics in tone, which might explain the *Dark Knight* overtones as well.

(Some spoilers for the Russian comics below.)

The original *Major Grom* comics were published between 2012 and 2015, later spawning several spinoffs. The protagonist is Major Igor Grom, a detective in St. Petersburg who has mean martial arts skills and takes part in the occasional amateur boxing competition (aka Russian Fight Club). He has a tendency to bend the rules, which irritates his young rookie partner, Dmitry "Dima" Dubin, who prefers to play things by the book. Grom's love interest is an investigative reporter named Yulia Pchelkina, whose skill set proves useful in helping solve

Grom's various comic book cases. A billionaire social media mogul named Sergey Razumovsky is Grom's archnemesis. Razumovsky is a philanthropist by day but murders homeless people by night, all in the name of cleaning up St. Petersburg.

Those cases have involved human trafficking rings, a gang of female bank robbers who like to dress up as fairy tale princesses, and child abductors, as well as the vigilante serial killer the Plague Doctor, who metes out justice to those whom the system has failed to convict. The killer's identity is protected by donning the distinctive costume historically associated with his moniker. In the comics, at least, Grom wins their first encounter, but the Plague Doctor returns in a later arc (*The Game*), abducting and killing many of Grom's close friends (including poor Yulia). Grom ends up depressed, unable to sleep, haunted by nightmares, and ultimately resigns from the police force. The spinoff comics follow his adventures as a private investigator.

Bubble Comics announced their formation of a film division, Bubble Studios, at the 2015 Comic-Con Russia, starting with a short prequel film, *Major Grom*, in which Grom (played by Alexander Gorbatov) foils the plans of a trio of bank robbers wearing masks of characters from a popular Soviet cartoon about hockey players, *Puck! Puck!* (Yes, the cartoon is real.) The short film made its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2017 and was screened for American audiences at San Diego Comic-Con that same year, accompanied by a panel Q&A with the creators. The final scene depicts the Plague Doctor, in full costume, tossing a lit match to the ground and letting it blaze.

- Our hero, Major Igor Grom (Tikhon Zhiznevskiy).
- A judge presiding over a distasteful case.

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- The accused doesn't look too concerned.
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- Whatever he did to this little girl is probably really bad.
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- But he is released anyway.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Ah, but who is that dark costumed figure?
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Every vigilante should have built-in flame throwers.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- All that's left of the accused.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Grom is tasked with solving the case.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Learning more about the Plague Doctor.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Grom's partner, Dima (Alexander Seteykin), appreciates the costume design.
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- A Plague Doctor sighting.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Investigative journalist Yulia (Lyubov Aksyonova) might have a lead.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Bank robbers wearing cartoon *Puck! Puck!* masks.
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Go get 'em, Grom!
YouTube/Bubble Comics
- "I achieved justice."
- The next generation, ready to fight.
YouTube/Bubble Comics

The feature film, *Major Grom: Plague Doctor* picks up where the short left off, with the vigilante killer taking out numerous high-profile and wealthy individuals who have managed to escape justice for their crimes. Judging by the trailer, the

film will hew closely to the original comic story arc. (Gabrelyanov did help pen the script.) We even get to see Grom taking on the bank robbers in *Puck! Puck!* masks, although Tikhon Zhiznevskiy replaces Gorbатов as Grom in the feature film. Alexander Seteykin plays Grom's partner, Dima, with Lyubov Aksyonova as Yulia and Sergei Goroshko as Razumovsky.

This is the second Russian feature film to grab some attention this year, starting with *The Iron Mask* (aka *Viy 2: Journey to China*). *The Iron Mask* is a Russo-Chinese fantasy adventure with a bonkers trailer that played up the campy antics of Jackie Chan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, even though they were not, technically, the stars. As I wrote when the trailer dropped earlier this year, "The tone is constantly shifting, the dialogue seems silly, and frankly that's some questionable CGI."

But it's the kind of silly that can be a lot of a fun in the right setting, and Schwarzenegger seemed to be having a blast gleefully vamping it up in a tricorne hat: "You're not going anywhere! It's the Tow-ah!" It's been available in the UK on digital platforms since April. (I haven't been able to find it yet on any US platforms accessible to me.) The UK critics mostly savaged the film, alas. Danny Leigh of the Financial Times described it as "a film daubed in CGI, with dialogue by Google Translate, and a narrative logic so bamboozling it could pass for avant-garde." Ouch. At least The Guardian found the Chan/Schwarzenegger fight scenes "diverting."

Major Grom: Plague Doctor is clearly a very different beast, taking itself much more seriously. Budgeted at \$10 million, the film is still in post-production and due to get a wide studio release in Russia next year. There is no word yet on if/when it will come to the United States. And there's certainly no guarantee that it will be good; it's not an especially original premise. But I'd be willing to give it a shot and hope to have that chance.

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