

Pavel Zakharov – life and work in the US.

Apollinary Zakharov is a composer, animator, with extensive experience in movies, music videos, advertising, the industry of software, and computer games.

- Besides working in Russia, I am involved in projects in the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Currently, I live and work in Los Angeles.

More details about what I do, graphics, videos, links to articles and interviews can be viewed on my website www.pollvfx.com, and today I would like to talk about my current work in one of the main Hollywood studios and also talk about the life abroad in general.



Early summer I got an offer for the position of Senior Composer at Encore Hollywood. This is one of the divisions of the large media group Deluxe, which unites the world-famous post-production houses: Method Studios, EFILM, Company 3, One Post, Stereo D, and many others. Encore is engaged in creating visual effects for the top American TV show like House of Cards, You, Castle, Elementary, Flash, Supergirl, Titans. So you can imagine my happiness to be an ingredient in this mix, haha!





To be honest, I do not think it was a random offer. During my previous period of my life in the USA in 2013-2016, knowing that I would have to return to Russia, I purposely spent around six months for job interviews. It was not always possible to schedule a personal meeting, but if there was a good opportunity, then without hesitation I hit the road to another city. The main thing was to expose my talent and leave a good impression about yourself. Right before the interview, many companies take a picture of candidates and fill out a personal questionnaire, and this is not the same as if you filled out a career profile on the job board. Also, your interviewers, usually project managers, change their jobs from time to time, and of course transfer contacts ... like bees :)

So, this time I was not even asked to pass an interview - no needed. The supervisor checking my resume remembered me, so he simply asked when I can start.



Guys, no matter how ready you are for moving to Hollywood, no matter how strong your wish, this is the moment of your first “heart attack”. Especially if you previously worked in the USA. Because saying “yes, I can start tomorrow!” you have to leave everything in Russia.

- fix financial issues, credit cards, taxes, bills. Transfer the money from California to St. Petersburg (to keep paying bills and for family support) is a problem;
- again your kids need to quit from schools or drawing courses, and stop medical insurance, with obtaining its certificates, vaccination and notarized translations the documents into English;
- again to sell or to leave to your friends the car you just bought so that they would not be stolen or damaged;
- have a cottage or house? Yeah, look what will happen with them in a couple of years of your absence;
- cats or dogs? Sad to leave, right? And what if there’s no one to care for them?
- your favorite electronics - forget and keep in Russia. American power voltage is not compatible.

At the same time in the US:

- new bank accounts and credit history;
- new cell phones (not all of your Russian MI or Samsung will work in American networks);
- new rent, school, and painting courses;
- vehicle;
- update documents like TIN and driver's license;
- medical insurance;
- new furniture: at least a table, a chair, a mattress, a refrigerator, a microwave, and for a first month good to bring some dishes, clothes, and also working tools would not be extra. Every saved dollar will help. For example, screwing another screw into the wall, I mentally thanked my wife for the carefully laid indicator of wooden beams inside the walls, which migrated to Russia from San Francisco last time. With me now, bro!
- I have to explain to everyone and to myself: why did I get involved in all this again? “Pavel, you’re behind forty, you have half a million rubles a month for your family, heal a hernia, go to your dentist, and finally buy a fur coat for your wife, what else do you need !?”
- “Adventurer artist,” I tell myself. - Dreams must come true, peaks must be reached. Cats to kids, it will wait for me a second time. I’m going to earn some money!



But the food and goods in the stores did not change the color, taste, or even a position on a shelf. And the weather is great!! And, despite the popular belief, English has not been forgotten after three years, I would say it's even become much better. Of course, I did not stop practicing, because I had much remote work in Russia, but I wrote and did not speak, which, fortunately, almost not affected by my speech apparatus.

I arrived in Los Angeles three weeks before the start of work, and while I was “on household” in a new place, the process of checking my background was going on. This is a common practice in the US. Usually, it does a specialized HR company. Not your employer's HR department. The reason for the background check is to look closely at your resume. Yes, guys, be careful what you post on LinkedIn, post on Facebook, and even, it seems to me, what you watch on YouTube :) First, they check my university degrees. Second, my previous employers were sent questionnaires about me as a person and a professional, and I know it only because my previous employers are still in contact with me and kindly informed me about the questionnaire (and they wanted to know what to answer so it looks cool, hehe). Thank you guys for your help! Thirdly, I had to provide contracts for my freelance work and show financial statements of income for previous years. The whole process took almost a month. Of course, you should have visas and a US work permit.



For sure, I was very worried about the initial period of work. Despite all my background, I thought that the only heavenly creatures work in Hollywood, and everyone deeply knows their craft, working software, methods, and art techniques, no problem speaking English, plus long work relationships in the team. And for example, I have been doing my job in Fusion all my life, and here it's Nuke, which I only use if the client demands. Of course, it's totally clear that the process of creating graphics and animation has no difference in both software, and the transition from Fusion to Nuke is similar to a translation from Russian into English, the words are different, the meaning is the same. The "muscle memory" comes pretty quickly to your fingers. But, nevertheless, I was very worried as well for some of my knowledge in compositing. I thought the company pays \$ 500-600 a day, and certainly not to sit and know anything. I rushed to over-study Nuke tutorials and other fields of computer graphics and animation, afraid to be not ready for a shot.

Everything turned out to be much simpler.

America is a multi national country. Honestly, I see very few Native Americans. There are many immigrants around: Russians, Armenians, Mexicans, Koreans, British, Australians, thus no one expects you to speak perfect English. Speak as you can, no one will laugh. I would say the immigrants know better the grammar of the language because they learn it specifically! I have had some occasions when I did not understand the notes of the supervisor and asked another supervisor to help clarify the text. And it turned out that the sentences were written grammatically incorrect and in this form do not really make sense, but they can be translated "from English into English", I mean from wrong into right. Well, we had some fun at it :)

Also, no one expects from you an overdose of work, everyone needs a period of adaptation. For several weeks, I generally just dealt with "internal traffic". Who is the leader, where to get shots, how to do, where to save, how to operate work hours, do daily routine, corporate emailing, corporate chats, kitchen, snacks...



So here is my workday schedule:

9:25

I came to the office, touched the card reader, and took the elevator to my department. Without a card, no doors in the building will open and the elevator does not work. The security issued my card with my photo and personal data right at the first coming. They waited for me :) That is, nice :) In my department, I punch out another reader to start counting working hours. The time will be rendered in my personal account.

9:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

The body of the workday. I look into my account, what shots are assigned to me, a description of the task, who is the supervisor (each show has its own), the due time, additional materials.

I was surprised by the lack of file explorers. You do not need them. I do not write manually the names of the shots, I do not create savers, I do not "pull" loaders from different places of the hard drive. The human factor excluded from the naming convention, which is hello cool! Corporate Nuke is half-scripted by programmers for the specific tasks of the studio. Opening it, I see a personal account, assigned projects, and frames. Starting a new shot, the script automatically creates a project structure it in the right place on the corporate network, automatically assigns names, adjusts the range, frame parameters, and also creates a saver, and sets the right color space, creates LUTs, previews, alpha-channel (if a chromakey plan) and a bunch of things. Also, all related materials are automatically imported and automatically updated during the work: roscope, 3D cameras, 3D models,

source plates, final render - everything that was created by other departments for this frame. My task is to combine them all together with my artistic look, without being distracted by making masks or occlusion or 3D tracking – believe me, the corresponding departments will make this work much better than you and will save production time. You don't need to do everything, just do one thing, but very well. In a large company, it is important to share the tasks.

13: 30-14: 30

Dinner. You won't be starving in the USA. The food is affordable and tasty. Every day, food trucks come to the office building - looks like a kitchen on wheels. Steaks, salads, burritos, a lot of things, but I prefer homemade food, so I take my lunch-box and go in the shade, there are a lot of tables around.

You can take your lunch in the dining room. There are varieties of coffee, tea, bananas, snacks, cookies, fruits, chocolate, chips, protein bars, cereals, pasta, dishes and tools. For free :)





14: 30-18: 30

The second half of the workday. Most likely, I have already got feedback, to fix something, actually as in any other post-production house. Every day I see on my screen Batman, Supergirl, Titans, Black Lightning, and other super-heroes.

If I don't know how to do something, the team will help, teach, give advice. Shy is not accepted. Everyone willingly shares their experiences. And all the artists are different! The shock is that a specialist at tool 12" sometimes does not know how to use the tool 14". I was surprised. I see the great artist working on a stunning composition with a 3D tiger, a dinosaur, a spaceship, lasers, and at the same time, this artist may be an absolute rookie in particle systems. But the whole point is that each artist has his own gift and strong skills! At someday, I noticed that Encore did not assign me a task that I don't know how to do or that I have little experience with, and I realized that the heads of departments are not just random employee, but they know their job very well and hire staff for projects very thoroughly. Then I stopped to feel compressed :)



18:30

At the end of the workday all the workstations do not turn off, but I log out of my account and log in using the RENDER login. At the same time, my computer becomes part of the render farm. And it continues to work day and night without turning off, but simply changing the user. That's smart. Punch out the terminal to close the workday, and go home. It is not allowed to stay working after you have already closed the day. We are all specialists here and must value our time. Willingness to work "for food" is a negative example of behavior that poisons the team.

Overtimes happen regularly, but they must be confirmed by the supervisor. Usually, it is no more than two hours a day for one and a half rate, but it could be 4 hours a day plus work on the weekend to deliver the project on time. This costs the company a double rate, so overtime is under control.



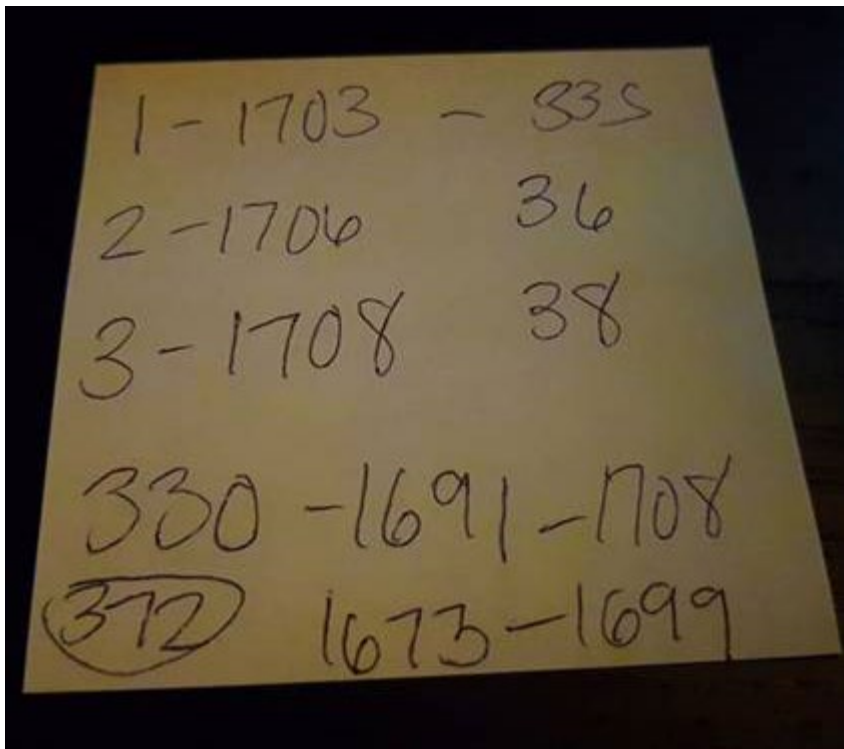
Looking at the volume of work I've done around 75 shots in 5 months. The visual effects like a chromakey, 3D integration, blood, explosions, gunshots, and superpowers of course. Rarely a rotoscope or digital cleanup. Speaking politely this kind of work

mostly done by foreign vendors from India.

The fun happens too. One of the artists told me a story about how he began work on Toy Story 2 with one shot and ... It was the first and last shot during a year of work. And 250 of its versions. Just every day a new version until the end of the project.

More funny working moments:

- 1) The studio is large, but with a limited number of software licenses. Sometimes in our common chat, among general work questions, you can see a request as: "Hey folks, I need a Nuke X license, please close if unused!". So it needs to be careful and use the only tools you need.
- 2) American sevens are very similar to Russian digit one. Sometimes it's not clear how to read a message on my desktop, frame 312 or frame 372? And you should be careful with handwriting documents because your Russian 1 can be mistakenly turned into 7. This is not a joke - this is my personal experience.



- 3) The senior supervisor does not spend time writing feedbacks checking our work. He sits on a sofa in front of a huge screen just saying notes, and the secretary instantly prints that what I'll read later. Effective, isn't it.

The heat of Los Angeles.

The heat is killing me. I walk on foot 15 minutes from home to the office and during this time the shirt becomes completely wet. I don't understand the children who play football on the schoolyard. Holmes, HOW ?! So, first of all, I go to the restroom and change my shirt to a fresh one, I have three of them in my backpack. I have been living here since June, and I saw the first rain in December.

LA is a desert. All urban vegetation is irrigated artificially. And the water comes (!) from San Francisco! The city does not extract groundwater because of the rocks.



The sun is incredibly bright. All photos are in contrast. At sunset, the sun is close to the horizon, but it still powerful and in the evening you can watch fantastic shadows, long like a hundred meters!





Russian knows America is a "one-story" country, but Los Angeles is mountains, mountains, and mountains!





It's hard to live in two countries. The eldest son has remained to develop a family business in Russia, the youngest son is living with me, learning my craft. We have to pay household expenses and taxes both there and here. Frequent flights, the wife lives 2 months in Russia, then two months here in the USA. This is the cons. Plus 30 pounds for 4 months is the cons too. But I can work in the heart of the film industry that's the big pros! And everything is going to be alright!

The monthly payment for rent:



I've been writing music for all my life. Choir, rock band, I still write arrangements, by the way, as a freelancer. But for some reason, only here, despite my tight schedule and overtime, I found some time and inspiration for a home studio. I'd like to record everything that we sing to the guests for the last 25 years.

Like, subscription, bell? Ha-ha! What else you'd be interesting to read about the Hollywood life?





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