



BALTIC

1/2025



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FILM

Flow & Beyond:

Animation
from Latvia

Lithuania's Stories

at Global Stage

ESTONIAN *Timeless Classics*

and Modern
Perspectives

Shooting STARS

*from Estonia,
Lithuania &
Latvia*





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Baltic Cinema Shines

This year, the Baltic countries illuminate the cinematic stage like never before. For the first time, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania each present a Shooting Star, with Maarja Johanna Mägi, Šarūnas Zenkevičius, and Kārlis Arnolds Avots embodying the region's dynamic creativity. Their recognition symbolizes a milestone for Baltic talent, uniting three nations under one radiant constellation.

Baltic cinema's narrative depth and diversity at Berlinale captivates audiences with compelling stories. Estonia's restored *Smile at Last*, offers a timeless critique of Soviet-era life through the lens of orphaned youth, while the Estonian series *My Dear Mother* reflects the region's growing presence in global storytelling. Latvia's *Time to the Target* examines the human cost of war with profound intimacy, and Lithuania contributes films in the Forum and Generation 14+ sections that explore resilience and transformation. Estonian sound designer Tanel Kadalipp's participation in Berlinale Talents further highlights the region's technical and creative excellence.

Beyond Berlinale, Latvian animation, led by Gints Zilbalodis' groundbreaking *Flow*, continues to thrive globally. A remarkable triumph for Latvian cinema, *Flow* has earned prestigious awards and nominations, including two Oscar nominations, a Golden Globe and a European Film Academy Award, underscoring the depth of talent within the Baltic animation scene.

Innovation and collaboration remain key drivers of this success. The Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival's Susi AI redefines audience engagement with personalized recommendations, while Creative Gate connects global filmmakers with Estonia's vibrant industry. These initiatives showcase the Baltics as a hub for creativity and innovation.

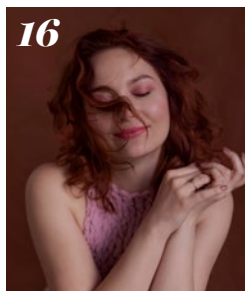
Beyond festivals and accolades, Baltic cinema reflects a movement of bold storytelling and shared vision. From introspective animations to emotionally charged features and pioneering series, the region's filmmakers craft stories that transcend borders. Though small, the Baltics offer boundless creative ambition and cultural resonance, promising a future of ever-expanding horizons.

Eda Koppel
Editor in Chief



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Photos by Virge Viertek, Artūrs Kondrāts, Sohvi Viik-kalluste, Miglė Kirklytė

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Achievements and Future Horizons 2024

The Baltic film industry achieved some remarkable milestones in 2024, from groundbreaking animations to bold new voices in cinema. **Heads of the film institutions** reflect on these successes and share their vision for an even brighter future.

By **Eda Koppel**

What do you consider the most significant achievement of your country's film industry in 2024?

Dita Rietuma, Head of the National Film Centre of Latvia: The past year has undeniably been marked by the animated feature *Flow*. Since its premiere at Cannes in May, *Flow* has become a phenomenon in Latvian cinema history. It has captivated audiences worldwide by winning over 60 awards at festivals, including the Golden Globe and the European Film Academy Award for Best Animated Film. It attracted over 500,000 viewers in France, surpassed a million in Mexico within two weeks, and is set to screen in China. Locally, *Flow* became the most popular film in Latvian cinemas in 2024 and the most successful Latvian film since independence. This co-production between Latvia, France, and Belgium showcased the hidden power of Latvian animation, elevating Gints Zilbalodis and producer Matiss Kaža to international acclaim.

Edith Sepp, Head of the Estonian Film Institute: Estonian cinema in 2024 embraced a bold wave of authenticity and artistic freedom. Films like *Alien 2*, *Two of Me*, *Rolling Papers*, and *Chainsaws Were Singing* showcased diverse voices unbound by convention. This



Photo by **Audrius Solomina**

cultural renaissance reflects filmmakers' confidence in taking creative risks, resulting in profoundly personal and resonant stories. Though not every work has reached international stages, this moment of unrestrained creativity has redefined Estonian filmmaking, highlighting our growing artistic diversity and fearless storytelling.

Laimonas Ubavičius, Head of the Lithuanian Film Centre: Without a doubt, Lithuanian creators were in the spotlight this year. *Toxic* and *Drowning Dry* won significant awards at the prestigious Locarno Film Festival. Both films tackle compelling themes - harmful beauty standards and the aftermath of trauma - through fresh perspectives. *Toxic* even earned a European Film Award nomination, further elevating its impact. Additionally, a Lithuanian actor was selected for the second year running for the European Shooting Stars program, reinforcing our artists' growing recognition in Europe. This success is a testament to the strength of our filmmaking community, which uses cinema to educate, unite, and capture today's experience for future generations.

What is the most exciting initiative or development we can expect in 2025?

Dita Rietuma: Our goals for 2025 are

to systematically strengthen Latvian cinema, especially in animation, and increase financial support for the industry.

Edith Sepp: Tallinn's upcoming cutting-edge sound stage is the most exciting development ever. This facility will serve as a creative playground for local filmmakers and a magnet for international productions, positioning Tallinn as a competitive hub for high-quality film production in Northern Europe. It will offer advanced technology and versatile spaces for ambitious projects, fostering collaborations between Estonian and international filmmakers. Beyond enhancing our industry's global visibility, it will contribute to the Baltic economy through job creation and innovation.

Laimonas Ubavičius: In 2025, focus will be on developing the concept for a National Cinematheque. This inclusive space aims to preserve and showcase Lithuania's film heritage, while connecting the film community with the public. Integrating with international film organizations will elevate awareness of Lithuanian cinema, and create opportunities for global knowledge exchange. Additionally, we will continue supporting co-productions and presenting Lithuania's vibrant film culture across Europe. **BF**

Photos by Agnese Zeltiņa



BSD screening venue in Riga.



MEDIA seminar: Basil Tsiokos, Sundance, Uldis Cekulis, NFS Films.

Baltic Sea Docs

Documentary industry hub in Riga

Riga hosts the region's leading documentary industry event - **Baltic Sea Docs** - a forum organized by the National Film Centre of Latvia and co-financed by the CE MEDIA Programme.

By **Zane Balčus**

Every year in early September, Baltic Sea Docs brings together around 150 film professionals from the Baltic Sea region, Eastern Europe, and beyond for presentations of new and upcoming documentary film projects in the co-production pitching forum, as well as a handpicked film programme screened in Riga, other Latvian towns, and online.

Founded in Denmark in the late 1990s, Baltic Sea Docs began as a platform for regional filmmakers to navigate the European documentary industry. After moving between several countries, it settled in Riga in 2006, maintaining its core mission: to support documentary filmmakers with artistically strong and thematically relevant stories from and about the region. While it has expanded its geographical reach to include countries from the Baltic Sea region, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus, the forum remains dedicated to connecting film-



BSD tutors team 2024.

makers with broadcasters, sales agents, distributors, and film funds that help bring these stories to the screen.

Each year, up to 20 new documentary projects are selected for pitching, representing countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Finland, and Poland. Additionally, up to four projects in the rough-cut stage - previously pitched at the forum - are invited for follow-up visibility. The forum welcomes both emerging and established filmmakers, with notable past participants including Audrius Stonys, Giedre Zickyte, Dagne Vildziunaite, Arunas Matelis (Lithuania); Riho Västriku, Marianna Kaat, Eva Kübar (Estonia); Laila Pakalnina, Ivars Seleckis, Gints Grube, Uldis Cekulis (Latvia); Irina Tsylik, Darya Basel, Alina Gorlova, Alisa Kovalenko (Ukraine); and Mariam Cha-

Have a compelling documentary project?

Apply and join Baltic Sea Docs! For more information, contact balticforum@nkc.gov.lv and follow updates on Facebook @ Baltic Sea Docs.

chia, Salome Jashi (Georgia) - just a fraction of the filmmakers who have presented their films at the forum in different stages of their careers.

Over the years, Baltic Sea Docs has built a strong reputation among regional filmmakers and industry professionals, forging lasting relationships with international broadcasters, sales agents, film funds, and other industry events.

Alongside industry activities, Baltic Sea Docs presents a non-competitive film programme featuring approximately 12 recent documentaries from across the globe. Curated by the forum's team, the selection highlights current themes and emerging stylistic trends in documentary filmmaking. The programme also includes films previously presented at the forum as projects, reinforcing the connection between the industry and audiences. **BF**

The 29th edition of Baltic Sea Docs will take place from 31 August to 7 September 2025. The call for projects opens on 10 March and closes on 9 May, with the selected projects announced in early June.

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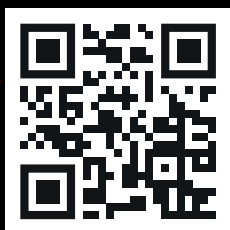
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OPENING IN 2026
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By Mikk
Granström

Team Up with SUSI AI



Photo by Evert Palmets / PÖFF

Imagine your festival as a vibrant, buzzing hub where attendees feel genuinely connected, not just to the films or events but to the experience itself. This is exactly what the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF) has achieved by pioneering Susi AI, a next-generation artificial intelligence tool. Now, PÖFF invites you to join this revolution and unlock the same transformative potential for your festival.

When PÖFF introduced Susi AI, the vision was simple yet revolutionary: make the festival experience personal, meaningful, and effortless for every attendee. With hundreds of films and a rich program of events, navigating the vast offerings could be overwhelming. SUSI AI changed all of that. This intelligent companion tailored recommendations for each attendee, from suggesting films based on their unique tastes, to pinpointing industry panels relevant to professionals. Suddenly, attendees were not just visitors but participants in a festival designed around them.

YOUR FESTIVAL'S PERFECT COMPANION

SUSI AI is more than a search tool – it's an intuitive, multilingual guide that adapts to your audience. Powered by advanced large language models (LLM), it connects with users in any language, making even the most international festivals feel accessible and welcoming. It crafts personalized itineraries, simplifies

decision-making, and turns the overwhelming into the enjoyable.

For attendees, this means discovering films and events that align perfectly with their interests, whether they're casual viewers or industry professionals seeking specific opportunities. As one visitor said, "I wasn't interested in the festival before, but now I've found films that truly excite me". SUSI AI transforms passive attendees into engaged participants, creating a deeper connection between audiences, filmmakers, and festival organizers.

RESULTS THAT REDEFINE SUCCESS

For PÖFF, the results of adopting SUSI AI were remarkable. Ticket sales increased by over 10%, marketing costs dropped by 15%, and media attention skyrocketed. But beyond the numbers, SUSI AI helped PÖFF achieve something every festival aspires to: a truly memorable, personalized experience for every attendee. Industry professionals also benefited, with targeted suggestions ensuring they didn't miss key panels or networking opportunities, making their time at the festival both productive and enjoyable. SUSI AI has redefined what it means to engage with audiences. It's no longer just

about offering great content – it's about creating a meaningful, seamless journey that leaves a lasting impression.

PÖFF SHARES ITS SUCCESS WITH YOU

SUSI AI isn't just PÖFF's innovation – it's a gift to festivals everywhere. PÖFF is committed to sharing the expertise and insights gained through integrating SUSI AI, helping other festivals harness its full potential. From addressing technical challenges to providing hands-on support, PÖFF's team is ready to collaborate with you in bringing AI into your event. Imagine the impact of SUSI AI at your festival. Attendees effortlessly navigate your lineup, industry professionals find the perfect panels, and your team

benefits from actionable insights that optimize resources and enhance planning. This is the future of festivals, and SUSI AI is the tool that will take you there.



TAKE THE FIRST STEP TODAY

Your festival deserves to shine, and SUSI AI is here to help make it happen. Join the AI revolution and elevate your event to new heights. **BF**

Contact mikk@poff.ee to explore how
SUSI AI can transform your festival.
Discover more at poff.ee.



TIME TO THE TARGET

at Berlinale

A Latvian, Ukrainian, and Czech co-production, ***Time to the Target***, directed by **Vitaliy Manskiy**, has been selected for the Berlinale Forum section of the Berlin Film Festival. This three-hour documentary delves into the unseen impact of war on daily life in Manskiy's hometown of Lviv in Western Ukraine.

By **Kristine Matisa**

Vitaliy Manskiy, who has lived in Latvia since 2014, has now dedicated the third film to his homeland, where a brutal war has been raging since 2022. Two years ago, Manskiy, together with Yevhen Titarenko, premiered their film *Eastern Front* (2023) at the Berlinale. In autumn 2024, *Iron* debuted at the IDFA festival, and now *Time to the Target* (2025) has followed. The title refers to a military term, one that,

tragically, is now all too familiar with peaceful residents of Ukraine. People's daily existence is affected by the constant threat of enemy missiles. The time it takes for these missiles to reach their targets now shapes the life of every Ukrainian.

CAPTURING RESILIENCE IN LVIV

Vitaliy Manskiy: "This film came into being on its own; I didn't consciously set out to make it. While driving through my native Lviv during the war years to gather material for both *Eastern Front* and *Iron*, I often stopped in the city. At first, I couldn't grasp what





Vitaly Mansky and Orchestra of the Hetman P. Sahaidachnyi National Ground Forces Academy.



TIME TO THE TARGET

179 min, 2025

Author & Director: Vitaliy Manskiy

DoP: Roman Petrusyak

Producer: Natalia Manskaia / Vertov (LV)

Co-producers: Filip Remunda, Tereza Horska, Vit Klusak / Hypermarket Film (CZ) & Nataliia Khazan / Braha Production Company (UA)



Ukrainian soldiers honor a fallen comrade, a solemn moment from *Time to the Target*.

had happened to my hometown – what had changed. The streets, the pavements, the buildings, and even the people seemed the same, yet the life they lived was entirely different.

The people themselves didn't seem to notice the shift. Of course, there is a war, but they don't feel the radical, fundamental changes because war has become part of normal life. As cynical as it may sound, this is their reality now. What I witnessed there was profound drama, great human tragedy, and, I dare say, potentially great cinema."

The central focus of the film is a military orchestra



– the Band of the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Ground Forces Academy. Every day, as Manskiy observed the city through a director's lens, he saw funerals for young guys. The people attending to pay their respects would change daily, but the musicians at these ceremonies were always the same. Manskiy said: "At first, I wondered how they could physically and emotionally endure this relentless strain. I began observing them more closely, getting to know them, and realised that their daily service – bringing together individuals of different ages, social backgrounds, and cultures – offered me a way to enter this altered space of life. This life, of course, is not truly peaceful; it exists only in the span of time while the missile is in the air, flying towards its target."

The film does not limit itself to sombre images of funerals, coffins, or cemeteries. It captures the essence of city life – cafés, theatres, shops, and souvenir stalls. There are moments of irony and levity, with scenes of people relaxing, dancing, and enjoying themselves. That's life, though always somehow connected to the war. A vivid example: At a street shooting range where people used to fire at various targets, they now aim at a portrait of Putin – children, women, men... It's one of the many unseen colours of this life.

Filming with cinematographers Roman Petrusyak and Aleksey Leskov spanned a year and a half. Both of whom, as residents of Lviv, shared a sense of the city's transformation but did not initially perceive the underlying drama the filmmakers aimed to capture.

Manskiy explains: "Yes, the film is three hours long, because time itself is the dramaturgy of this film, and sadly, this is the shortest possible running time it could have. It is a deliberate choice, one that may limit the film's future screenings, as not every festival will dare to programme such a lengthy work. But for me, what this film conveys is far more important than what we might lose because of its length."

The film's structure and visual style are distinctive compared to typical news footage from Ukraine. The use of full and long shots allows the viewer to become a participant in the events occurring on screen, the passage of seasons gives an element of duration and creates dramatic depth. Only a distanced observation allows one to fully and nuancedly see the depths of this tragedy. **BF**





Walls & Wings

Exploring Acting with Lithuania's Shooting Star

A chameleon, Lithuanian actor **Šarūnas Zenkevičius** is all about keeping his intensity, energy and tension inside, without bursting at the seams. At least, this is how he portrays Vilius, an ornithologist who accidentally becomes a smuggler in Ignas Jonynas' upcoming film *Borderline*, a role that made his rising star shine brighter. Lithuania's European Shooting Star discusses this particular role, acting, and what he is up to next.

By **Tara Karajica** Photos by **Miglė Kirklytė** *Borderline* stills and photos by **Baltic Productions**

What made you want to become an actor?
I grew up in a small town in Eastern Lithuania, Švenčionėliai. It was the kind of place where life revolved around basketball, car drifting, and the occasional fight at the local disco. I didn't really connect with those things, but I found myself drawn to Cinema and music instead. They weren't just entertainment – they felt like whole new worlds I could step into. Maybe that's where acting started for me – a way to escape and also explore something different.

How did you get on board *Borderline* by Ignas Jonynas?

I had worked on some short films with *Borderline's* producers before, and I had actually auditioned for Ignas Jonynas's previous film eight years ago, but I

didn't get the role. After several rounds in casting – talks, readings, and test scenes with the director – I was invited to join the film. I knew from the start it wasn't going to be easy, as the role required learning a lot of new skills beyond acting.

In this film, you play Vilius, an ornithologist who, due to unexpected circumstances, becomes entangled in smuggling. For Vilius, this marks an escape from the oppressive routine of life following his wife's death, as he raises his daughter alone. Can you delve deeper in this character? How do you see him?

The most important thing for me was that, deep down, Vilius is a good person who simply behaves wrongly. His life has been deeply marked by the painful suicide of his wife, and a series of unfortunate events. So, the film is really about Vilius' inner



journey, navigating his own personal hell and trying to understand himself. The film's central metaphor – the wall – represents the way we often shut ourselves off, both emotionally and physically. Vilius is trapped in this isolation, and his story is about confronting both his internal and external barriers – how we build walls, how we isolate ourselves, and, ultimately, how we need to find a way to break through them.

You play Vilius in a very subdued manner, like a ticking bomb, building tension all throughout the film. Can you talk about these choices?

Throughout the film, Vilius experiences such a spiritual and emotional state, where grief, guilt, anger, apathy and emotional outbursts are intense and very close to each other. As an actor, I needed to often find a different way to provoke myself to actually enter such an emotional field and mindset. Also, I had to think carefully about what specific emotion Vilius experiences in each scene.

What drew you to this role? How have you prepared for it?

I think this is the kind of role many actors dream of. It's emotionally intense, full of layers, and packed with challenges. It pushed me in ways I hadn't experienced before. Physically, I had to transform as well, gaining weight and toughening up over four months. Another interesting aspect is that Vilius is older than me – he has a daughter, a family, so I had to become more mature emotionally and physically. I also learned to drive a motorboat, took up kickboxing, trained for underwater diving, and worked closely with stunt coordinators for fight scenes and car chases. On top of that, I had rehearsals with a choreogra-



The role of Vilius in *Borderline* is the kind of role many actors dream of. It's emotionally intense, full of layers, and packed with challenges.

pher for certain scenes. It was a demanding process, but that's exactly what made it so exciting.

Can you talk about working with Ignas Jonynas on this film?

Ignas' film *Invisible* is one of my personal favourite Lithuanian films. Ever since I saw this film at the cinema, I thought that I would really wish to work with him. I am intrigued by Ignas' characters, their complexity, dramatic stories and unique tone. The world he creates, both visually and through the subtle details of his characters, is memorable. I am also impressed by his dedication for work, knowledge, cooperation and demandingness.

How do you pick a role? Which is your favourite, if any?

The most important things for me are the vision of the director, interesting material, and the complexity of characters. I could single out my roles in other films such as *The Flood Won't Come* by Marat Sargsyan, and the short films *I Was Max* by Lukas Kacinauskas, *The Return* by Domas Vilčinskas, and *Old Rifle* by Jokūbas Vilius Tūras.



ŠARŪNAS ZENKEVIČIUS

is a shining light in the exciting Lithuanian film industry. The prolific young actor was exposed to the glitz and glamour of international film festivals right from the start of his screen career. *Frost* (2017) premiered at Cannes, and *The Flood Won't Come* (2020) in Venice. Other notable works include the short film *I was Max* (2022) and his leading role in Ignas Jonynas's upcoming drama *Borderline* (2025), where he plays a troubled ornithologist who gets involved in smuggling.

Do you manage to dissociate yourself from your own person in order to play someone else? Or, is there always a character that remains with you?

It really depends on the role. With *Borderline*, the process felt especially immersive because of how we shot the film. We spent the entire production on an expedition in Rusnė Island – a remote village that, at the end of winter, gets flooded by the surrounding rivers and becomes almost completely cut off from the world.

Even on my days off, I didn't feel like going back to Vilnius or distracting myself with other activities. I wanted to stay in that environment, to keep my mind fully on the script and the characters. This sense of separation and solitude was so connected to the role that it felt right to live in that state for the entire shoot.

Is there a role that has changed you, or your life, or your worldview, so deeply that have not been the same ever since?

I don't think so. Although, on the other hand, it may seem so when you manage to discover something new and unexpected. It's rare and memorable moments. Just because you've completed an acting course

|||||
With new and especially different roles, you learn new things and grow as an actor.
|||||

doesn't mean you could play any role perfectly. With new and especially different roles, you learn new things and grow as an actor. At best, it never ends.

What do awards mean to you? What do you think being a Shooting Star will mean for your career?

It's an honour and a privilege to be recognized alongside talented actors from across Europe. I don't know exactly where my career will take me, but I do know that acting is the path I want to keep following. Right now, I'm just enjoying this moment, staying open to new opportunities, and looking forward to experiencing Berlin as a Shooting Star.

What does it take to be a star, according to you?

I am not sure. Acting itself is what interests and inspires me the most.

You have acted on stage and in film? Is there a preference? If so, why?

Lately, I've been filming more, but basically I love both. I like theatre performance because the character is played from the beginning to the end, and because, on the evening of the performance, it is often an ephemeral experience, and I like that there is feedback to what is happening on the stage. However, in Cinema, the character is created on a different principle,

Just because you've completed an acting course **doesn't mean you could play any role perfectly.** With new and especially different roles, you learn new things and grow as an actor. At best, it never ends.



often non-linear, the role is put together from pieces, there are several takes and there is an opportunity to repeat or make changes, but you have to wait several years or more for the final result on the screen.

Is there anyone you would like to be directed by?

And, share the screen or stage with?

There are so many... But okay, I'll try... My favourite working directors are Roy Anderson, Jim Jarmusch, David Cronenberg, and Paul Thomas Anderson. And I find the late David Lynch's films to be very captivating as well. I admire the performances of Joaquin Phoenix, Mickey Rourke, Nicole Kidman, Javier Bardem, and Gary Oldman. There are also a few actors I want to mention who are no longer with us whose performances have been such an inspiration for me over the years. It's Phillip Seymour Hoffman and Rutger Hauer.

How do you see the current Baltic film industry?

I enjoy watching our national films – they have an authentic voice. But while Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are often grouped together as the Baltics, in reality, we don't have a strong tradition of distributing each other's films. We don't share a mutual TV channel, and it's still rare to see Latvian or Estonian films in Lithuanian cinemas. That said, the industry itself is growing rapidly. As an actor, I can feel it from the increasing number of international casting opportunities coming my way. It's exciting to be part of this new wave, and to see Baltic Cinema gaining more recognition on the global stage.

Do you have anything in the pipeline?

I'm really looking forward to the premiere of *Borderline* – it will be exciting to watch it with an audience. I'd also love to step into international productions. There's a growing number of strong collaborations between Lithuania and other countries, and I hope to be part of that, working with foreign directors as well. Beyond that, I have several upcoming roles currently in post-production. It's Jonas Alexander Arnby's TV series *The Cruise*, Klaudija Matvejevaitė's short film *All In*, Roberta Grossman film for the museum *The Lost Shtetl*, Amma Asante's TV series *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, including a major role in Gabrielė Urbonaitė's debut feature film *Renovation*. **BF**

SPECIAL OPERATION @ Berlinale

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė.**

The documentary *Special Operation* by Ukrainian director Oleksiy Radynski is a co-production between Ukraine (prod. Lyuba Knorozok, Kinotron Group) and Lithuania (co-prod. Jurga Kaye, Studija Kinema). The sound of the film was made by the Lithuanian-based supervising sound editor Vladimir Golovnitski. *Special Operation* will have its world premiere at the Berlinale Forum Expanded programme.

Based solely on surveillance footage, received from Ukrainian law enforcement, the film documents every aspect of one of the most notorious episodes of



Jurga Kaye



the Russian invasion of Ukraine: from the armed takeover of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on February 24, 2022, to the hasty departure

of Russian troops following their defeat in the battle for Kyiv, explains co-producer Jurga Kaye.

Special Operation was made working with the Public Interest Journalism Lab and evolved as part of The Reckoning Project, an international initiative

aimed at documenting and investigating Russian war crimes in Ukraine. It was supported by The Ribbon International and the European Solidarity Fund for Ukrainian Films, to which Lithuania contributes yearly since 2023. **BF**

SPECIAL OPERATION

Documentary, 64 min

Director: Oleksiy Radynski

Producer: Lyuba Knorozok (UA)

Co-producer: Jurga Kaye (LT)

Produced by Kinotron Group (UA), Studija Kinema (LT)



Kęstutis Drazdauskas

THE SWAN SONG OF FEDOR OZEROV @ Berlinale

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė**

The *Swan Song of Fedor Ozerov*, directed by Yuri Semashko, and produced by a Lithuanian producer Kęstutis Drazdauskas (Artbox), together with co-producers from Germany and the Belarusian Filmmakers' Network, working in exile, will premiere at the Berlinale Forum programme.

The Swan Song of Fedor Ozerov tells a story about a young musician Fedor, who struggles to form a band because everyone around him is preoccupied with rumours of an approaching Third

World War. When he discovers that his lucky daisy-patterned sweater is missing, Fedor embarks on a spiritual journey to retrieve it, and write a new song.

"This journey is a testament to the resilience of Belarusian artists in exile and their unwavering commitment to storytelling. I'm thrilled to have produced this remarkable film, which not only showcases exceptional talent but also exemplifies the unyielding spirit of independent filmmaking", shares Kęstutis Drazdauskas.

The visual post-production of the film was completed by Madstone (Lithuania), and the sound post-production was done by Shoot'n'Post (Germany). **BF**

THE SWAN SONG OF FEDOR OZEROV

Dramedy, 78 min

Director: Yuri Semashko

Producer: Kęstutis Drazdauskas (LT)

Co-producers: Marc-Daniel Dichant (DE), Christian Riegel (DE), Leonid Kalitenya, Vladimir Kozlov, Yuri Semashko

Produced by Artbox (LT), Shoot'n'Post (DE), Belarusian Filmmakers Network (in exile), Singo (LT)

Soulful & Resourceful DORIS

Doris Tääker, director of the sombre yet soulful drama series ***My Dear Mother***, talks about the origins of the story about an alienated young woman and the murder of her mother; as well as finding a balance between her professional and private life.

By **Andrei Liimets** Photos by **Sohvi Viik-Kalluste** MUAH **Liisi Põllumaa** Outfit **Ärni Blum**

As a director, you are probably most known for the *Office*-like comedy series *Alo*. *My Dear Mother* represents a significant shift. How did you arrive at this project?

Actually I think *Alo* is quite different from all the other projects I've done so far. A continuous thread has been women as the main characters. At one point, producer Jevgeni Supin called me and offered this story. A significant part of my life was becoming a mother three years ago. When this series was offered, my daughter was two years old, and I was in a strange, fragile bubble where I couldn't consume anything involving even a hint of violence, whether physical or mental. *Gilmore Girls* was too dramatic for me at times!

When Jevgeni Supin (producer) called and offered this kind of story, my first thought was: no! It's so dark! Then I began to feel the pain from a different angle. It's a very layered story about how the system has failed to help people and only punished them, and where that ultimately leads. When I read it, I primarily saw the mother-daughter relationship, and the most painful question is why the girl doesn't run away from her mother, why she doesn't cut communication, why she doesn't go elsewhere?

As a mother, I read a lot about child psychology. The way a mother treats her child gives an indication for the rest of life on how the whole world might treat

her. I couldn't suggest anyone else to direct this, and I figured maybe I should draw upon the pain that had emerged. Before saying yes, I spoke with cinematographer Elen Lotman and director Arun Tamm, both of whom are parents of several children, and they confirmed: use that pain, it will keep you on the right path.

Living a calm and healthy family life yourself, how did you immerse yourself in the very complicated world of the protagonists?

It involved a long preparation process. I received lots of help from Kait Sinisalu (a psychotherapist working with domestic and sexual violence - AL), who opened up the world of people who are depressed, have low self-esteem and self-worth. The most interesting realization was that being trapped is a quite universal feeling, where the mind imposes limits, and it seems you can't move in any direction. Even if we look from the outside and think about why one doesn't leave.

What else did you learn about the world of those in similar situations, through making this series?

Several things. An interesting realization was the relationship that a girl, who has been raped and pimped as a minor, has with sexuality. These women are incredibly sexualized outwardly, that's the value they emphasize everywhere. In the series, the main charac-





ter Alina draws, which is part of her self-expression. We made a long table of her pictures at different ages starting from five years old. At 11, she is raped for the first time, and her pictures change. Initially, there are beautiful mermaids, but at some point, strongly pornographic, masochistic content appears.

Genre-wise, *My Dear Mother* is also a crime mystery. Thrillers dominate the relatively small landscape of Estonian series. How much did you watch any predecessors for inspiration, and what were you trying to do differently?

I watched the third season of *Traitor* (TV series by Eliisa) just before the shoot. Raoul Suvi wrote both series. I tried to understand his writing style and how to bring it to the screen. *Traitor* also maintains intense tension, and I got ideas from there on how to create a feeling of suspense with limited resources.

You mentioned that a recurring theme in your work is telling women's stories. Do you feel these stories are underrepresented?

In a way, yes and no. I think right now is a good time, as we have many strong female directors – like my own coursemate Anna Hints, and also Moonika Siimets, and Triin Ruumet. However, stories like *My Dear Mother*, dealing with violence against women, are still quite rare. A film I watched for preparation was the Swedish film *Lilya 4-ever* (2002). It was one of the first major projects filmed in Estonia. Afterwards, everyone rushed to watch it and were disappointed

My Dear Mother

When the brutally murdered mother of drug addict Alina (30) is found on the beach one day, the question arises whether Alina is a cold-blooded manipulator or a lifelong victim of abuse.

Limited series 6x45"

Directed by Doris Tääker **Written by** Raoul Suvi

Developed by Tiina Lökk, Raoul Suvi, Toomas Ili

Produced by Jevgeni Supin, Toomas Ili, Olena Malkova

Main Cast: Doris Tislar, Elina Reinold, Indrek Ojari, Saara Pius



My Dear Mother deals with violence against women.

that Estonia was portrayed so negatively. I believe *My Dear Mother* could resonate with an international audience, as it deals with the burdens of our Eastern European past. We dive deep into history to try to uncover why people can behave in such ways.

The Estonian film industry is small, and the series industry is even smaller. Do you think it's possible to realize your ideas for the viewers that are used to Netflix and HBO?

I believe it is possible. Nothing diminishes the charm if a series is in Estonian. I myself have become enamoured with the series format. It's possible to take characters and develop their stories over six or eight episodes, allowing for more nuances and deeper exploration.





Everyone dreams of having their own country's *Squid Game*. What are your goals with the series?

I'm surprised that this series has made the international leap. When we started, we didn't have that ambition. I primarily wanted to prove that it's possible to create good quality in a short time. I knew exactly from my assistant work where the bottlenecks were, and managed to sidestep them with solid preparation. The attention has been surprising, and now I'm already thinking about reaching beyond Estonia, perhaps to make new contacts and find work abroad.

As a director, are there any themes you'd like to explore next?

In my life, there have been two significant changes, one being moving away from Tallinn to the countryside. Ott (actor Ott Kartau, Doris's partner - AL) wrote a series called *The Possibility of Life in the Countryside*, which has been the title of our life for some time. However, for me, the subtitle could be "the possibility of life as a filmmaker while being a mother". From

Doris Tääker on the set of *My Dear Mother*.

that, identity questions concerning motherhood have arisen.

A woman experiences several moments in her life when a complete transition occurs. The overwhelming hormonal changes that come with puberty, the body changes drastically, and social roles shift. When a woman decides she wants to become a mother, she goes through a very similar process with at least the first child, and to some extent the following ones. There's a hormonal imbalance, a new social role, and body changes. Then all of this happens again during menopause. These are significant themes that are relatively rarely discussed. They resonate with me deeply.

Have you learned anything about balancing these roles that you wish you'd known earlier or could share with others?

There are a lot of points, but I would highlight a positive example. While working on *Tenet*, I quickly realized with the American film industry that if you have a family, that's your own issue. In Estonia, this hasn't been the case, there has been gradual progress in recognizing that a person also has their own life alongside work. Many Scandinavian projects that have come here have likely influenced this shift.

The first project I worked on after my parental leave was the Finnish sci-fi series *Utö*. It was a big project with 48 shooting days and three directors. We filmed for about a month on Utö Island, which takes 20 hours to travel from Tallinn. There was no option to



Photo by Marek Metslaid

Doris Tääker

is an accomplished filmmaker with over a decade of experience in directing and assisting on films, TV series, and commercials. She has worked on both local and international productions as 1st and 2nd assistant director, including Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*. Her recent projects include directing the acclaimed TV series *Alo* (2019), which earned nominations for Best Director and Best TV Series at the Estonian Film and Television Awards, and *My Dear Mother* (2025).

just pop back for the weekend so we had to be there the whole time. There were very few accommodations, and fitting everyone in — technical crew and actors — meant counting beds rather than separate rooms. I said I couldn't do the project unless I could bring my family because my daughter was one and a half years old.

I saw how the film industry was becoming more accommodating. The Estonian producer Anu Veermäe-Kaldra said: sure, we'll make an exception for you, Ott, and the baby so you can come together. I was constantly on set,

while Ott was writing his first series. It was funny that the Finnish colleagues would occasionally ask: oh, is your partner babysitting the kid? I could respond that he's not a babysitter, he's the child's father. We managed to slightly break the mould — it's normal for mom to be working while dad stays at home with the child.

What is the current state of Estonian film on the world map?

I feel like we're doing well. Since there are fewer opportunities and a lot of competition, people are really dedicated to making their films. I've been on sets where this dedication is lacking, more with the old-school filmmakers.

You mean Christopher Nolan?

Hahaha! Yes, that guy doesn't seem dedicated at all! But I feel sorry that the number of Estonian films is decreasing. It's hard to make a film that is solely an Estonian film. Everything now goes through collaboration and co-production, which isn't bad in itself and enriches things, but it makes it hard to create something truly our own.

Secondly, people come here for international projects, which keeps all filmmakers employed and raises salaries, but it's difficult to give a boost to Estonian films from that side. Director German Golub put it well a few years ago — it's nice that we're building a film studio, but it's not for Estonian films. I feel this very strongly. To be honest, I also earn my bread through international projects, and making Estonian projects feels a bit like a hobby. I've worked on *My Dear Mother* for a year and three months, but I constantly have to take on external projects to pay the bills.

Is it even possible to produce world-class content under these conditions?

You must be aware of the shortcomings in advance, then you can think of solutions to mitigate the visibility of those gaps. You need to be very resourceful. **BF**





Photo by Anastassia Volkova



Photo by Nafta Films



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Finding Your Next Film Partner in Estonia Has Never Been Easier

By Egle Loor

Estonia has become a favoured destination for international film and television productions in recent years. To support filmmakers in finding collaboration partners in Estonia, the Black Nights Film Festival and Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event have launched Creative Gate – a platform designed to connect filmmakers with Estonia’s vibrant film industry.

The platform brings together a wide range of resources, including filming locations, industry professionals, and creative talents, providing an efficient and user-friendly gateway for those looking to produce in Estonia.

ESTONIA’S GROWING FILM INDUSTRY

Estonia, and particularly its capital, Tallinn, has hosted an increasing number of high-profile productions. Christopher Nolan’s blockbuster *Tenet* was filmed in Tallinn in 2020, followed by the American comedy *Bubble & Squeak*, directed by Evan Twohy. Most recently, the Paramount+ TV series *The Agency*, executive-produced by George Clooney and Keith Cox, utilized Estonia as a filming location in 2024.

These projects have highlighted the country’s versatile settings, from untouched natural landscapes, to historic and modern urban backdrops. Filmmakers have also praised the professionalism of local partners, which all make Estonia a popular choice for productions.

WHY ESTONIA?

In addition to its visual appeal, Estonia offers significant financial advantages. Production costs are competitive compared to many European countries, and filmmakers can benefit from experienced local crews and affordable equipment rentals. These factors make Estonia an ideal choice for high-quality, cost-effective filmmaking.

Creative Gate was born from a need to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical networking was impossible. The Black Nights Film Festival team sought a solution to support the Estonian film industry by ensuring its visibility internationally, and simplifying the process of connecting with global filmmakers. As Tiina Lokk, the festival’s director, puts it, the platform creates “one accessible gateway that connects Estonian companies with filmmakers looking to bring their projects to life here.”

Currently, Creative Gate provides an extensive overview of Estonia’s film funds, production companies, casting agencies, and other industry resources. To enhance its usability, an AI-powered tool is in development. This tool will allow users to describe their specific needs – whether for a particular service, talent, or location – and receive customized recommendations, making the search process even more dynamic and precise.

EXPANDING ACROSS THE BALTICS

While the platform currently focuses on Estonia, its developers plan to broaden its scope to include the wider Baltic region. By incorporating resources from Latvia and Lithuania, Creative Gate aims to become a regional hub for filmmakers, fostering collaboration across borders. The ultimate vision is to present the Baltics as a united, vibrant destination for international film productions.

START CONNECTING TODAY

If you’re ready to find your next creative partner, setting up a profile on Creative Gate is simple. Join today and discover the opportunities Estonia offers to filmmakers worldwide. **BF**



ACTING

as a Way of Life

Kārlis Arnolds Avots brings energy and sensitivity to his roles, be it the critically acclaimed Latvian TV series *Soviet Jeans*, or the country's official Academy Awards entry 2022. It's precisely these qualities along with an impressively wide acting range that singled him out as the 2025 Latvian European Shooting Star.

Avots discusses his roles in both works as well as his views on acting and what is next for him, among other topics.

By **Tara Karajica** Photos by **Artūrs Kondrāts**

What made you want to become an actor?
Throughout my life, I was connected to sports, but I felt spiritually empty as a young person. But seeing one professional theatre production about my favourite, and at that time pretty much the only poet I knew, was enough to change my mind and be ready to leave sports altogether. Now, it seems logical as I was trying all types of sports like clothes – when I fitted and mastered one, I moved on to the next. Film and theatre allow this kind of swapping – ending and beginning anew, while mastering one craft.

In the series *Soviet Jeans*, you portray Renars, a young Latvian man living in Riga who dreams of freedom, rock, and denim trousers. He is a costume designer in Riga's public theatre, who is also dealing in prohibited Western goods. Can you delve more into this character? How do you see him?

While creating this role, I talked a lot with a good friend who is a child psychiatrist. He has also worked in the psychoneurological hospital where Renars ends up, due to unacceptable behaviour for a Soviet person. Together, we created his psychological profile and, conditionally, a diagnosis. He is a "people pleaser".

His father passed away before he could imprint himself in his memory, and his mother mysteriously fled from Soviet Latvia to the West – this fact on an unconscious level defines my character's obsession with Western goods. Renars was raised by his grandmother who shapes his relationship with the world. He is interested in "unattainable women" like Tina, because deep down he knows they will never leave or hurt him, quite simply because he'll never actually have them. His highest currency is friendship, so he takes every wrongdoing or betrayal particularly hard. Initially, Renars isn't actually someone who wants revenge or to cheat the system. He just loves life and navigates through the Soviet wonderland with his tongue out. Despite life's injustices, he is neither a victim nor a hero – after all, he does have an agent's card – and is not an anti-hero, but a cheerful, untamed, normal guy.

In this duality of a society, the thirst for forbidden things including romance is the main theme of both the story and the times it is set in, and the Walkman is the physical embodiment of the future. Can you expand on that, and on how Renars is precisely a product of this society and of its/ his time?

Any person is also a child, and any prohibition excites

the urge to break it, doubling the intrigue of everything beyond any red line drawn not by the individual. In the seventies, few believed that the Soviet giant could collapse, and that Latvia could become a democratic, independent state, but every lived day nurtured its opposition and sentenced itself to death – dissidents, beatniks, punks, flower children arose... and the more they were repressed, the more resistance emerged. It was a world of lies, where the system lied to society, knowing well that society knew it was lying, and society lied back to the system, knowing the system knew it was lying. Lies in a cube! How can one believe in a world where students trample each other to death over a chewing gum? What is that gum? Such is also Renars' story – the system created an innocent son, leading him to want to kill his father.

Moving on to the role of Jazis in Viesturs Kairish's *January*, he longs to become a filmmaker inspired by Ingmar Bergman and Jim Jarmusch, and is in love with Anna, who dreams of artistic success. Can you talk about this character and how you see him?

Spiritually rich, easily wounded, driven by heightened ideals, independently thinking, naive, an adult to be. Jazis is an archetypal character also today. There are still young people whose dreams and lives are halted, paused, often trampled by the "big players". Here lies the generational crack portrayed in *January*, in the first month of the year – the month of initiation, the beginning of everything, and in Jazis' family. Two different worlds – each with its own heroes and convictions.

Would you agree with the assumption that both films are timely, each in their own way?

Absolutely. I have to say that unfortunately *January* premiered around the same time as the war in Ukraine began, if I am not mistaken. When I started preparing for *January*, I was more focused on the real events of the nineties and the protests in Belarus in 2020. Of course, also Andrzej Wajda's films *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* about the seventies and eighties, but then suddenly the bloody reality of today hit hard.

Do you manage to dissociate yourself from your person to play someone else?

I always pass everything through myself. I've heard those stories where one actor runs around the house because the script says he was out of breath, then another stops him and says – maybe try acting? I am the one who indeed will run, in a metaphorical sense. Perhaps not always literally running, but I know how to accelerate my heartbeat, I know what emotionally wounds me, and so on. Even if the role has a prototype, $A+B=C$, one of the first two letters is always you. In my view, that's the only key. But I don't believe in the idea that someone can't step out of a role – to me, it seems like a highly romanticized notion, where in that case, an actor ends up closer to being a madman rather than a professional.

Photo by Gatis Glierts



KĀRLIS ARNOLDS AVOTS

is one of Latvia's most compelling actors - building a career through unique & challenging roles. Having starred in Viesturs Kairish's *January* (2022), submitted as Latvia's official entry for the Academy Awards, it won Avots the Best Actor award at the Rome Film Festival in 2022. The actor received international recognition, taking home the top actor prize at Series Mania in Lille for his performance in *Soviet Jeans* (2024). The performer, who stands tall figuratively and literally, is using his height to his advantage, starring as female basketball player Ulyana Semyonova in her forthcoming biopic.



Kārlis wants to do something that no actor from Latvia has done yet, and he believes that it's possible.

Is there a role that has changed you, or your life, or your worldview so deeply that you have not been the same since?

Yes, we recently concluded a phase of filming *Ulyana*. I dedicated one summer to meeting with Ulyana Semyonova's teammates, interviewing them, and undoubtedly, many of them changed something in me. That's what I love about this profession - it enriches you as a person. Your worldview doesn't always change, but an imprint is left, and you have changed. Anything can happen. Who knows, perhaps my new film will come out, and nobody will accept me as an Ulyana in it, and maybe I'll be cancelled as an artist, and that would again certainly change everything...

You've won many awards. What do awards mean to you? What do you think being a Shooting Star will mean for your career?

I have no idea... So far, I have never actually received an award at a live ceremony because I always had to perform in the theatre. I'm very happy that I've been noticed and, this time, I will be there. I see it as a "verified" badge - we can give a job to this person, he's good enough, but will anyone actually give it? I don't know.



Recently, it has become very clear that **I prefer film**. I really want to do something that no actor from Latvia has done yet, and **I believe that it's possible**.

There are various destinies, who knows what mine will be. But as a former athlete, of course, I really like medals. And what's better in this world than a proud mom? That's my biggest cup and title.

You have acted on stage, on TV, and in film? Is there a preference? If so, why?

Recently, it has become very clear that I prefer film. I really want to do something that no actor from Latvia has done yet, and I believe that it's possible. I want to discover new horizons, and I see this opportunity through film. It seems that I am more destined for the world of film as an actor. I would be ready to leave the stage if necessary.

How do you see the current Baltic film industry?

I think we are increasingly asserting ourselves on the global map. In recent years, we have managed to leave a mark in significant festivals with a minimal budget. I really hope that the Baltic politicians won't think that the funding can remain just as unreasonably low "because look, there are great successes anyway". I feel very sorry that Latvia allocates only 8 million a year for the film industry, which is the lowest funding of all three Baltic states. Every Latvian, and presumably every Baltic citizen, feels proud this year of Gints Zilbalodis animation film *Flow*, whose achievements in the Baltic context are absolutely unprecedented. The whole society hopes for the first Oscar nomination. The same goes for *Soviet Jeans*, a series that also achieved unprecedented success in the Baltic context, but these TV series could happen only because of the ERDF COVID Relief funding.

My favourite Baltic director comes from Lithuania,

and is Laurynas Bareiša, whose first film, *Pilgrims*, premiered in Venice, and the second triumphed at the Locarno Film Festival. It generally seems that Lithuania is experiencing a new wave in film right now, and I genuinely enjoy following my brothers.

Estonia has always been ahead of us in terms of both budget and understanding of the film market. The Estonian Government seems most aware that the film world is also a fantastic tool for public diplomacy. We must mention the Estonian documentary *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*, which won the European Academy Award, and the co-production with Georgia, *Tangerines*, which was nominated for the Golden Globes and also Oscars. Pride and joy for the Baltics.

I understand you are acting and writing your next film, *Ulya*, directed by Viesturs Kairish and shot by Wojciech Staron, with whom you worked on *January*? Can you talk about the double duties on this film?

Yes, this project was my idea, which I presented to Wojtek and Viesturs. They were brave enough to ask me to try to write something, even though I had never written a script before. So, I travelled all over Latvia, interviewed people, read books about scriptwriting, and in those conversations, I was looking for my film. I wrote the first ten drafts in a kind of Aristotelian structure myself, then handed this task over to professionals and focused on the role. That's truly a great value because I was so immersed in the film, controlling the story's backbone at any time of day and night, and as an actor, I tried to incarnate all the backstory I had collected over the years.

While writing, I often stood up and tried those scenes right away in the room. I literally dedicated a large part of my life to Uljana Semjonova's life instead of my own; I hope that this will somehow reflect in the film. But it definitely helps because I, as an actor, also gained a way deeper understanding of story and arc development, both mathematically and intuitively.

Do you have anything else in the pipeline?

We need to finish the filming phase of *Ulya*, with five days left in the spring. It's already known that *Soviet Jeans* will have a second season co-produced with Germany, which will happen at the earliest next year. Perhaps one Estonian film, but perhaps not. And then, I'll work with a great Polish theatre director, Lukasz Twarkowski; this performance will premiere at the Ruhrtriennial. He will stage a production about Alan Turing, the father of artificial intelligence. But after that... What's next? I don't know. We'll see. **BF**





Photo by Sangam Panta

Composing the Sound

This year, Estonian sound designer and composer **Tanel Kadalipp** is joining the Berlinale Talents programme, the talent development initiative of the Berlin International Film Festival.

The theme for this year is "Listen Courageously: Cinematic Narratives in Times of Dissonance". Andrei Liimets asks some questions from Tanel Kadalipp.

Congratulations on being selected among the Berlinale talents! What are your expectations?

Director Anna Hints was part of it the last time around and she recommended it to me wholeheartedly. I think this week will be really exciting, with many new people and experiences. I talked to a friend of mine, who was there five years ago, and he described it as intense and full of interaction. Although there are over 200 participants, which is a large number, there are only 12 that work with sound and music, which is a small circle. I want to understand better where I stand in my development

compared to other sound directors around there.

You've worked on some of the most renowned Estonian films of the past years. Are you looking abroad next?

To be honest, the feeling of success has never been the main driver for me. I don't even have a showreel. Life has kind of kept me moving from project to project. I choose them mostly based on gut feeling. There are many more invitations than I can accept, so I go step by step. Estonian cinema is at a very high level, and is diverse. I feel that to go abroad, I need more experience. Today I still feel I keep inventing some things. At times I keep wondering who I am - people hire me as the sound director, but I also end up composing. There's a fine line that really interests me.

I guess most moviegoers don't really know what a sound director does.

What makes a good sound director?

My short description would be that the sound director is responsible for how a viewer feels and perceives the film. The visual side is one part of the equation, but I like to think that sound is what gives

the pictures their spirit. Sound determines the feeling that remains - if all emotions are drawn out, or if there is space. I think for a good sound designer the key is to feel what needs to be said, and phrasing it through sound in a way that reaches the audience.

Is there a project of yours where you feel your work has had the most impact?

I think the films of Eeva Mägi, because we discuss everything a lot. Sound and music play a huge role in them, and Eeva trusts me a lot. The wildest ride was the animated film *Old Man Movie*. It was a good lesson, because we had very little time, and I only agreed to do it if I got to choose the team.

Is there a film you'd recommend to understand what good sound direction is?

Lately it has been difficult to go to the cinema a lot, since I have two kids and two jobs. However, *Love & Mercy* from around ten years ago really got to me. The viewer gets taken into Brian Wilson's inner world sonically. That's the film I always recommend for students to see in order to understand how you tell a story through sound. **BF**



SANDBAG

Will Premiere at the Berlinale

During the early announcements, it was revealed that ***Sandbag Dam*, directed by Čejen Černić Čanak**, will have its world premiere at the 75th Berlin International Film Festival. The film's Lithuanian team - co-producer **Ieva Norvilienė**, composer **Domas Strupinskas**, and colourist **Jonas Zagorskas** - share their experiences working on the project.

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė**

The film is set in a village on the brink of flooding. Young Marko's life is turned upside down when his childhood friend Slaven returns for his father's funeral, and rekindles their forbidden romance. Marko then must confront his family and make a difficult choice.

Sandbag Dam is a co-production between three countries: Croatia (Kinorama, prod. Ankica Jurić Tilić), Slovenia (Perfo Production, co-prod. Aleš Pavlin), and Lithuania (Tremora, co-prod. Ieva Norvilienė). It was the second time that Ieva Norvilienė had worked with Ankica Jurić Tilić, therefore there was already a sense of familiarity and teamwork beforehand.

Ieva found the project appealing overall: it had a well-written scenario dealing with relevant topics that were presented in a compelling way. To her mind, the film doesn't have a specific age limit: "It could be im-



Lithuanian
co-producer
Ieva Norvilienė

Right: Colourist
Jonas Zagorskas

Composer
Domas
Strupinskas

here they were made warmer and more alive. When you think about it, it even seems to reflect the fragile borderline state explored in the story," adds Domas.

Jonas Zagorskas explains how the film was shot: "The cinematographer Marko Brdar decided to use a digital camera while trying to achieve the effect of 16mm film, and to adhere to the style of a documentary with almost no additional lighting." After that, he worked closely with Marko

to define the colours.

Jonas gives something to look forward to: "My favourite scene is the arm-wrestling championship at the end of the film, where an exciting colour scheme with a lot of bright green and red used. It is aesthetically pleasing, and contrasts perfectly with the extremely uncomfortable and tense situation, further intensifying it." **BF**



portant to a young audience searching for themselves as well as adults with a more conservative mindset," tells the co-producer.

Because the film deals with universal topics that could reach a broad audience, the director found working with collaborators from different countries essential. One of the collaborations she sees amongst the most beautiful and significant is her work with the composer Domas Strupinskas.

He remembers that the first thing that caught his attention was the film's aesthetics. "I felt that the director subtly captured the contrast between the old beliefs of a small town and the encroaching present," shares Domas. As the film's composer, he had to understand the director's vision and use the right sounds to enhance the visual atmosphere.

Something unique about this film is the organically sounding synthesizers. "Usually, they are associated with coldness, futurism, or something artificial, but



Photo by Rytis Šeškaitis



IT'S TIME TO CELEBRATE!

The Baltic Film, Media, and Arts School celebrates its 20 year anniversary in 2025. Founded in 2005, the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School of Tallinn University (BFM) has become a highly valued film and media school both locally and at an international level.

By **Tallinn University** Photos by **Tallinn University**

The school is a proud member of the European universities alliance FilmEU, further solidifying its position on the global stage. BFM's dedicated lecturers place a strong emphasis on cross-disciplinary cooperation between programmes. These programmes encourage the students and lecturers to look beyond their own fields to better understand their art. In turn, this approach results in interdisciplinary projects. A good example of such a collaboration is seen in our dance films – a joint effort between BFM choreography and Kino Eyes film students.

Out of 7,000 Tallinn University students, BFM is home to over 800, including around 300 international students from more than 50 countries. In addition to students, there are over 2,000 people participating each year in BFM's professional training programmes.





Two decades of excellence in nurturing talent in film, media, and arts.

The school offers study programmes at BA, MA, and PhD levels. Some programmes are taught in English by BFM's internationally recognized researchers and practitioners.

The school has over 60 partner universities all over the world. In 2022 BFM joined the Film and Media Arts European Universities alliance FilmEU. The alliance offers universities the opportunity to learn from and build on the best practices of others. The ultimate goal is to develop a European University which will be able to confer degrees jointly with FilmEU alliance universities.

With the school's main focus on film and media studies, BFM is a hub for innovation, creativity, and practicality. BFM students organise their own film festival known as BOB (Best of BFM). And BOB serves as a great example of a student-led gala event, gaining attention within and beyond the school; which is a good kick-start for future talents. Tallinn is also home to the prestigious PÖFF Black Nights Film Festival. And over the years, BFM students have actively participated in PÖFF and other local film festivals, as team members, interns, and volunteers; and presented their own films in its programmes.

BFM's main study subjects are film, media, music, art, and dance. Programmes taught in English are Audiovisual Media (BA); Crossmedia (BA); Communication Management (MA); Documentary Film (MA); Screen Media and Innovation (MA); KinoEyes Fiction Film (MA), a joint programme between four European film schools; and Audiovisual Arts and Media Studies (PhD). This year a new programme started, FilmMemory, which is a two-year Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM) programme delivered by four art schools from Estonia, Ireland, Portugal, and Belgium.

Celebrating a jubilee year is not just about remembering the past. The institute plans to expand the selection of study programs, and further develop international cooperation. A new research area in BFM is Artificial Intelligence; this year, BFM initiated a two-year project in cooperation with the Institute of Digital



Technologies and the Institute of Humanities, which focuses on the systematic integration of generative artificial intelligence into creative education and practices. Also, a research project led by BFM, focused on creating and analysing a knowledge graph describing Estonia's economic and technological development, has received positive funding approval from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications' research and development grant program. The project aims to create a linked dataset combining Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) content data, the National Library of Estonia's digital materials, and economic data from Statistics Estonia and Eurostat. By leveraging machine learning, an economic knowledge graph will be developed from media content data. The resulting knowledge graph is expected to offer new insights into Estonia's economic and technological development by highlighting key connections and trends.

In twenty years, many internationally recognized creators and academics have graduated from BFM. The recent globally appreciated filmmakers that studied at BFM are documentary director Anna Hints, and the producer Marianne Ostrat, who were wildly successful with their movie *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* and started a new wave in documentary movies. BFM is planning to continue this success story and support and educate many more talented people in the coming years. **BF**





Embracing CHAOS



& Crafting Characters

With the full range of human emotions vividly expressed on her face, **Maarja Johanna Mägi's** star is rising not only in her native Estonia but also across the Old Continent, especially now that she is a European Shooting Star.

By **Tara Karajica** Photos by **Virge Viertek** Style by **Kärt Hammer** MUAH **Maris Rätte**

In the film *Aurora* directed by Rain Tolk and Andres Maimik, Mägi plays the title role of Aurora, the daughter of a religious leader who embarks on a secret affair that dramatically changes her life. The role required significant improvisation, drawing heavily on Mägi's theatre experience. Here, she shares her insights into the role, her experiences on set, and much more.

What made you want to become an actress?

I don't think there was one specific reason. It just kind of happened. When I was little, I played a lot with my friends. We made theatre plays, had performances, and then performed them for my grandmother. So, acting was just part of my life. I took drama classes because I enjoyed them, and eventually, I auditioned for Drama School. Everything came together step by step.

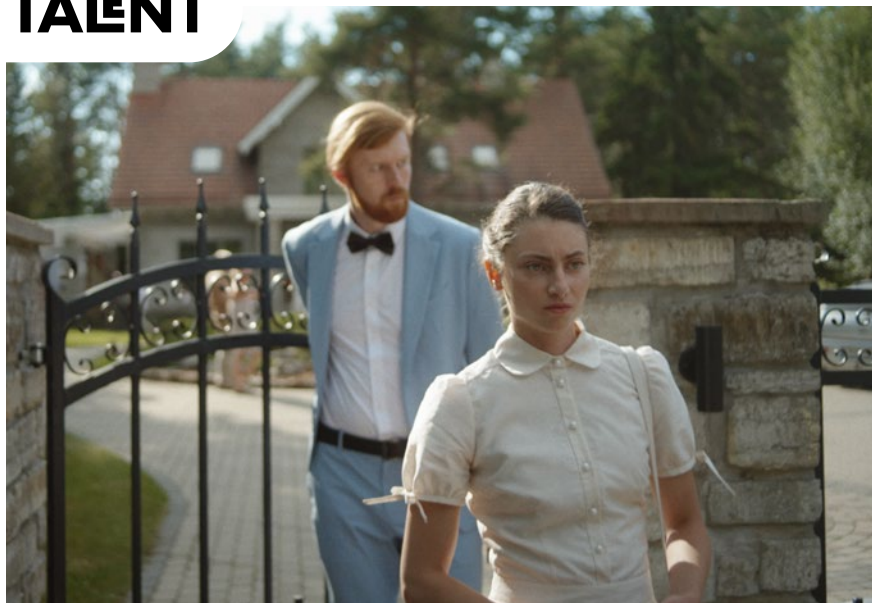
How did you get on board *Aurora* by Rain Tolk & Andres Maimik?

Actually, the project had been in development for a while. I think it started about four years before I came on board. The original actress, who was supposed to play the role, got pregnant and couldn't continue. I had a casting, and it was quite interesting. The audition

was based on improvisation, and I didn't have a specific scene. They gave me just the character's background and traits – "Who is she?" and "What is she like?" I also knew the directors from before, though not personally. I believe Andres had seen me in Melchior, and that's why they invited me to the casting.

In the film, you portray Aurora, the daughter of a religious leader who enters a secret extramarital affair that challenges her life arrangements. She's also introverted, almost insecure and shy. How do you see her?

I don't actually see her as extremely introverted or shy, maybe because I can relate to her in that way. It feels quite normal to me. I tend to be quiet at parties and in public, so I don't find it unusual. It's a hard question – describing your character in just a few sentences is tough. It's like trying to describe yourself in a few words. You can't see yourself from a distance, and I think it's the same with characters, especially with Aurora. We worked a lot with improvisation, which made the character feel very close to me. So, it's hard to see her objectively. But yes, she's definitely shy, and I think that's why she starts this relationship with Leni, a wild guy. There's something inside her that



Maarja Johanna Mägi

is a beloved figure among Estonian audiences, and she is admired for her versatile and accessible work in film and theatre. She gained widespread recognition for her starring role as Ketserlyn Kordt in the three-part historical drama film series *Melchior the Apothecary* (2022), directed by Elmo Nüganen. Her exceptional performance earned her the Best Actress award at the Estonian Film and Television Awards, building on her earlier accolade as a Black Nights Star at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival. Looking ahead, she will take on a starring role in *Aurora* (2025). Another standout credit in her career is Ergo Kuld's *Faulty Brides* (2023).



craves this kind of chaos. Personally, I'm shy too, but for me, the "wildness" comes from theatre, where I get to play many different characters and live lives far from my own.

The directors relied on character-based improvisation, and you had to tap into your theatre experience. Can you talk more about that? What did you learn in terms of acting?

By the time I worked on *Aurora*, I had already been acting for three years, so I wasn't a total beginner. It wasn't a long time, but I had learned to create characters and use different methods. However, *Aurora* was a whole new approach for me. It opened up a whole new way of creating a character. With a script, you know exactly what's going to happen with your character, and you analyse why they make certain choices. You try to understand them and bring those feelings into your own life. But this character-based improvisation was different. It was more intuitive – I didn't know why I was doing things, but it felt right. All the emotions came naturally, and I didn't have to think too much. It was more about letting my subconscious guide me rather than doing a deep analysis.



Maarja Johanna Mägi shines in *Aurora*, *Melchior the Apothecary*, and *Faulty Brides*, showcasing her range as Estonia's rising European Shooting Star.

Can you talk about being directed by two directors at the same time?

It was really interesting. Rain and Andres have been working together for a long time, so they collaborate very well. We would all talk together, the three of us, which was good because sometimes they didn't agree on certain things. So, I had the opportunity to choose which opinion I agreed with more. I think that was a positive thing, as it brought more perspectives and viewpoints to the scenes.

How did you prepare for this role?

We had a long rehearsal process – about six months before filming started. We did a lot of improvisation during that time. There was a month without rehearsals, and then another improvisation session. I also did solo improvisations on my own. Sometimes, I would just go to a café and



Photo by Robert Lang

Photo by Joosep Kivimäe

pretend to be Aurora. That really helped me connect with the character. In Estonia, it's common for actors to be involved in multiple projects at once, but with Aurora, I was lucky to focus only on this one role, and that made a big difference.

How do you pick a role? Do you have a favourite, if any?

I don't really have the privilege of picking roles. I don't get so many offers that I can choose. But for me, the most important thing is the story – when it touches me. I've worked in repertory theatre, which means I don't always get to pick my role. Sometimes, you have to play a character or do a play you don't particularly like. But I've learned to find something valuable in each piece, something that speaks to me.

Do you manage to dissociate from your own persona in order to play someone else? Or is there always a piece of you in each character?

I try to create characters that are different from myself, but of course, there's always something of me in every role. With Aurora, I see a lot of myself in her, but I admire actors who can play very different characters. I like to think I can do that too – every new role gives me the opportunity to explore a new part of myself.

Is there a role that has changed you or your worldview so deeply that you've never been the same since?

I remember when I was in Drama School, we had this final exam with a big scene where I was holding my dead husband in my arms. He had cheated on me and done many bad things, but my character forgave him for everything. It was a godly, larger-than-life kind of forgiveness. I felt that, as a person, I couldn't do that, but playing the character made me understand the depth of that forgiveness, and that feeling of goodness. It really changed me.

You've won many awards. What do awards mean to you? What do you think being a Shooting Star will mean for your career?

Of course, it's nice to receive an award. I

Madli believes in the transformative power of films, no matter how naive that may sound.

do my work for the audience, so when people say that my work is good, it's great feedback. It gives me motivation. But awards are not objective, right? Winning doesn't necessarily mean I'm the best. I just hope that being recognized will lead to more interesting projects and opportunities to work with great people.

What does it take to be a star, in your opinion?

Well, I don't think I'm a star. But it's easy to think that big superstars are just lucky to have everything they have – fame, money, and power. But if you really focus on their work, it's incredible what some people are capable of doing. I believe being a star requires a lot of hard work and talent.

You've worked in theatre, TV, and film. Is there a preference? If so, why?

I enjoy film and TV. What I like about them is the intimacy of the camera work. The camera can get so close, and you can play with small details. In theatre, you have to project more because the audience is farther away and needs to see everything clearly.

Is there anyone you'd like to be directed by or share the screen/stage with?

These are more dreams... One of my favourite directors is Paolo Sorrentino, so it would be amazing to work with him.

How do you see the current Baltic film industry?

I think the Baltic countries should collaborate more. I've watched many Latvian films, and I see a lot of similarities. Our histories are so similar. Some of the stories I've seen from Latvia could easily be Estonian stories too. It's really understandable for us. I think the Baltic film industry is doing well – just look at *Flow*, which has won a lot of awards.

What's your opinion on the situation of women in film today? How is it in Estonia?

I think it's quite good. We have a lot of talented Estonian female directors, but there could be more women in technical roles on crews, because those tend to be very male-dominated.

What are you working on next?

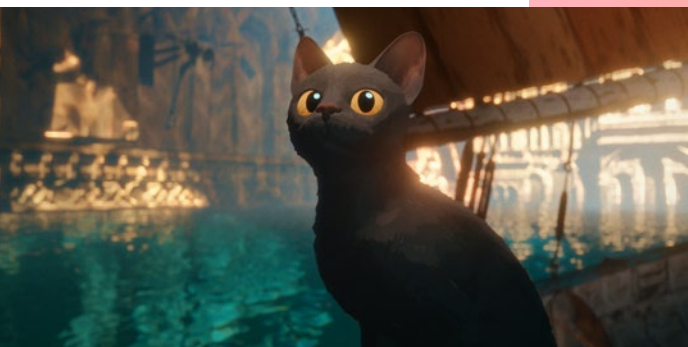
Actually, I don't know! I'm quite open to whatever comes next! **BF**



A DARK GREY CAT in the Flow

The European Film Award, the American Golden Globe, two Academy Award nominations – no Baltic filmmaker has ever reached such heights. They are the first: the little grey cat from Latvia, director **Gints Zilbalodis**, and the animated film **Flow**.

By **Dārta Ceriņa** Photo by **EFA** ©**Chloé Desnoyers**



tic world devoid of humans but inhabited by a small group of animals, named: Cat, Capybara, Lemur, Labrador, and Secretarybird. The film has surprised many with its visual storytelling, hidden layers of prophetic meaning, and its deliberate avoidance of overused contemporary themes and clichés. Gints insists that viewers must “unlock” the film on their own terms, and the world seems to have embraced this challenge wholeheartedly.

The appeal of *Flow* lies in its visual language, which resonates with diverse audiences.

I think that since Cannes and other festivals, people have recognised the potential of this film – it’s something made for the big screen. Ensuring films are seen in cinemas is both a huge job and a major success. I believe *Flow* doesn’t work as well on smaller screens; it’s an experience that demands the viewer’s full attention. The sound, the expansive imagery, and the audience all come together to create that experience.

How do you feel about the film’s international success? *Flow* is being listed for nominations and awards alongside big-budget works by renowned studios.

I’m still processing it all – I can’t quite step back and view it from an outsider’s perspective. I’m happy that the film is being recognised at various festivals, especially those where animated films are rarely featured.

Director Gints Zilbalodis can be described as a visually gifted animation prodigy, seamlessly incorporating video game and cinematic techniques into the animation medium. He is something of a Renaissance man, involved in nearly every aspect of his filmmaking process, and adept at addressing the emotional depth of his work, while retaining an interest in the allegorical characters he creates. His vision resonates profoundly with audiences.

As the director, cinematographer, editor, producer, and co-author of the script and music, Gints is reluctant to reveal too much about the ideological and philosophical layers of the film. Together with his creative team from Latvia, France, and Belgium, he spent years carefully crafting *Flow*, a story set in a post-apocalyptic



SELECTED AWARDS:

Golden Globe - Best Motion Picture-Animated
European Film Award - European Animated Feature Film 2024

Awards at film critics associations

in USA (New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago etc.)
- 20 PRIZES

SELECTED PRIZES AT FESTIVALS:

Cannes FF, Guadalajara IFF, Ottawa IAF, Athens IFF
- 2 prizes, Sevilla IFF - 3 prizes, Annecy FF -4 prizes,
Melbourne IFF, Silk Road IFF China, Fredrikstad AF,
Young Horizons IFF, Manchester AFF, Animafest IAAF,
Bogota IFF etc.

More than 60 awards by January 2025

SELECTED NOMINATIONS:

BAFTA - Animated Feature; Children's & Family Film
LUX The European Audience Film Award 2024
Academy Awards - Animated Feature Film,
International Feature Film

Often, *Flow* and I are the only representatives of animation in those contexts. This ties in with the main theme of the film – the longing to be accepted. Sometimes, we feel like we're from another world, standing out with our unusualness.

In a way, television series and Hollywood films are becoming more and more alike – everything is produced so quickly that adhering to a formula becomes inevitable. But we've been accepted, and that's gratifying.

We've stepped onto the global stage with an unconventional, risky film. The festivals and awards are crucial not just for *Flow* but also for the prospect of creating similar films in the future. In Latvia, *Flow* is considered a big-budget project, but in France, it's seen as a small, independent animation. Even within this structure, there's room for creative manoeuvre.

For me, it's a lot of pressure because I bear full responsibility. I can't simply hand over a script and insist it must be done in a particular way. The process is fluid, decisions need to be made constantly, and there's always an element of unpredictability. It's exhausting, but animation has to feel organic – it should give the impression of capturing a live event, rather than being something overly rigid or contrived.

Previously, you worked entirely on your own.

Yes, I used to handle every aspect of my films by myself. If I had an idea, I executed it alone. Now, I've had



Photo by Agnese Zeitina

to learn how to communicate my ideas to others. This is the first project where I've truly stepped into the role of a director – directing is about guiding and instructing others.

That said, I don't think things have changed dramatically. Every new project comes with the same challenges; you always begin from square one. It doesn't necessarily get easier – it's always difficult to start.

So, *Flow* is a chapter in your life where, like the main character - Cat - you learn to connect with others. The selection of animals and birds is intriguing from the perspective of collective psychology. How does it resonate with you?

I think I identified with all the characters, but most directly with Cat. I wanted the characters to have their flaws, and for us to understand them and their motivations. At the heart of it all is the main theme of the story: the desire to be accepted and to fit in. At the same time, there's another layer – learning to embrace independence. These ideas can't be distilled into a single sentence or message. For me, the theme serves as a backbone, but it's far from the entirety of the story.

I started with the cat. Initially, the idea was to craft a story about a cat afraid of water – something universally understood, requiring no explanation. Later, I introduced another character, Dog, inspired by two

Flow showcases the seamless collaboration between director Gints Zilbalodis and producer/co-writer Matiss Kaža, bringing their creative vision to life.

Flow had its world premiere at the *Un Certain Regard* section of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival, where it received critical acclaim.



Gints Zilbalodis giving speech at European Film Academy awards ceremony.

dogs I've had myself. This opened up the theme further: a cat, fiercely independent at first, gradually learns to trust others and cooperate. That's why I included a dog – a character who usually follows others but, over time, learns to make his own decisions. It was essential that the film didn't deliver a single didactic message, like "independence is bad, and cooperation is good." I wanted to explore the other side, too – how making your own decisions is valuable, and how the truth might lie somewhere between these two extremes.

You seem to have been searching for balance, both visually and narratively.

Exactly. The other characters stemmed from this idea of duality. There's Lemur, obsessed with shiny things, and over time, we understand why his desire for acceptance manifests in this way. Then there's Bird who tries to fit in with a flock of birds. These characters weren't chosen at random – they are both psychologically and visually distinct. Silhouettes were a key consideration in the animation process.



Gints Zilbalodis and Dita Rietuma

Photos by Andrejs Strokins



Photo by EFA ©Chloé Desnoyers

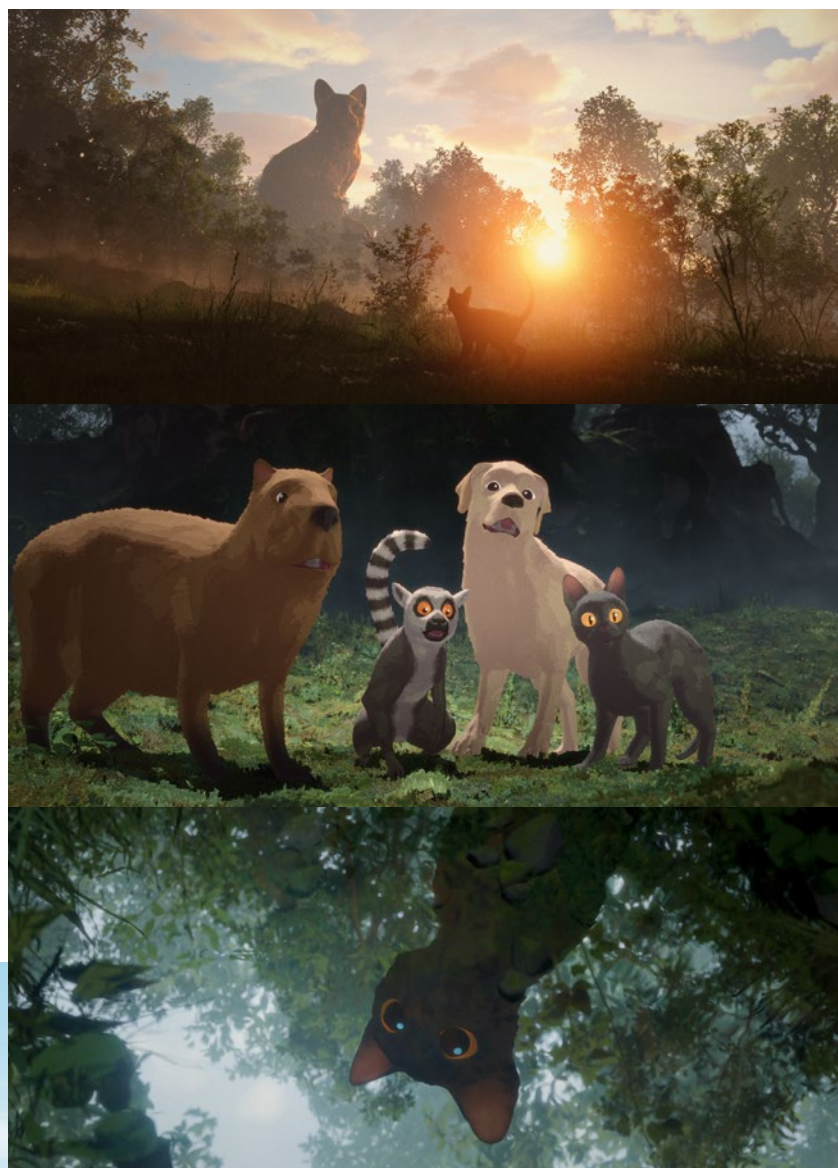
It was important to create something recognisable, **where viewers could see their own pets** or even their own behaviour reflected in the characters.

Each character's story complements Cat's journey – they all have to work together. It was incredibly challenging to balance this, especially without dialogue. We had to find ways to maintain the audience's attention and avoid repetition, as the film unfolds mostly in a single setting. The lack of dialogue and a limited environment imposed constraints, but those challenges shaped the creative process.

To me, dialogues don't feel necessary. The film communicates so much through interactions and non-verbal language. Why did you decide to omit human language entirely?

From the start, I wanted the animals to behave as animals. While there are moments where we've allowed ourselves some artistic flexibility, we've consistently tried to ground their behaviour in reality. Animals are fascinating and often humorous just as they are – there's no need for exaggeration.

It was important to create something recognisable,



where viewers could see their own pets or even their own behaviour reflected in the characters. Interestingly, like many others, I find that moments involving animals in films – especially when they're in danger – move us the most.

...even when we know it's fiction, there's an instinctive saviour response. And it's true – children and animals inevitably steal the spotlight.

Perhaps that's why *Flow* resonates universally. Animals share commonalities that transcend culture, making their stories accessible to everyone.

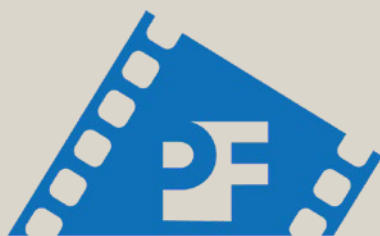
You've chosen to omit people from the world of *Flow*. They're simply not there. We are not there.

Most likely, people exist somewhere, but they've managed to escape, leaving the animals behind, neglected. That would be my interpretation. It's more of an emotional concept with a logical framework around it. Even the statues seen at the beginning of the film serve as a time marker – they show the passage of time. It felt visually and conceptually expan-


 100%

A black cat and a white dog are sitting on a rooftop. The cat is on the left, looking towards the camera with large yellow eyes. The dog is on the right, looking towards the camera with its mouth open. In the background, a seagull is perched on a roofline against a cloudy sky.

40



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NEW HORIZONS FOR ESTONIAN TV SERIES

Jevgeni Supin, producer of two anticipated upcoming crime series, ***My Dear Mother*** and ***Von Fock***, speaks about putting Estonian TV on the map.

By **Andrei Liimets** Photos by **Viktor Koshkin**



On the set
of *Von Fock*.



What attracted you to becoming a producer?

I think it was a bit of a coincidence. I could have gone to study law, get a 9 to 5 job, guaranteed income, but I had this sense of adventure and a fear of routine. My father also worked in TV, so I ended up in film school.

So, no routine work as a producer?

Definitely not! Of course I did not become a producer right away. I studied media and did different TV shows while also working for a newspaper. Television attracted me the most and I did a lot of editing. At one moment, I was looking for a change and production drew me in – the question of how to organize things, and bring everything together into a final product.

How do you choose which ideas to start developing?

It's probably not down to form or genre. I am prepared to do anything – TV series, game shows, scripted, non-scripted, comedy, tragedy, drama. Though I do need to really like it, I need to understand what I am doing.

It seems you have mostly focused on crime series, is there a reason for that?

I can't really say, as I mostly believe in fate. However, I do tend to grab on to those kinds of ideas because the questions of who did it, how, and why, are thrilling for me. If my friends or other viewers later say they were excited as well, that gives me a great sense of joy. I kind of feel responsible for someone else being thrilled, being entertained.

I'm not that creative myself, I can't really write, so this is my way of contributing to something creative happening. I seek out ideas I like, and try to help them become as good as possible. Storytelling is probably most important for me, even in the case of a TV show or a documentary. I think at heart we are all romantics, and I really enjoy being by the side of directors and screenwriters who are true professionals. I really envy and admire them.

Is there a project you have produced that you are especially proud of in hindsight?

That's like asking a parent to name their favourite child!

Secretly everyone does have one...

(*Laughing*) So let it remain a secret! Of course, in hindsight I always see faults as well, bits that could have been made better or different somehow. Sometimes you know about things that are noticed by others. I don't think there's ever anything that's perfect.

The success of a film is mostly evaluated based on the box office, awards, or critical reviews. How do you assess your series?

The same way. The ratings – how many people have seen it? At the moment we are also making our first steps outside of Estonian borders. International success is very important – do foreign networks pick the series up? If so, and if it speaks to a foreign language audience, we have done something really well.

How much international interest is there today in Estonian series?

The Traitor was the first series that gained

broader attention a few years ago. *Who Shot Otto Mueller?* has also been sold to over 30 countries. At the moment, there are multiple series that are looking for distribution outside of Estonia. People are starting to see that even with smaller budgets we are able to tell stories that grab attention everywhere. Now we have *My Dear Mother* screening for distributors at the Berlinale, which is the first time ever a TV series from Estonia has been picked up by a big market before the actual premiere.

Is there a dream goal for you as a producer? Netflix?

Netflix sounds fancy, as all large platforms do, but it might not be the best destination for every series. I guess the main reward is when something you have been a part of reaches as many countries as possible.

The Estonian film industry is small, the series industry is even smaller. Do you think it's possible to make something truly world class here?

I do! It is most definitely possible. Everything starts with the story, and we do have the stories. Many of my foreign colleagues are saying that the attention on the Baltics is rapidly growing. Many large networks and production companies are eyeing what's coming from here. What we do have to keep in mind is that it's difficult, almost impossible to go far only on our own. We are, however, on the doorstep of being recognised as an equal partner. Doors are starting to open.

What do you mean by equal partner?

It's financial as well as creative. Companies are interested in hearing your sto-

Photo by Andreis Strokina

Von Fock

8 x 45 min series

When Paul von Fock, the youngest of three brothers, inherits Sagadi Manor, he struggles to fit into his new role socially - but his brilliance at managing his estate and his keen sense of justice quickly secure him the position of assessor at the local court. Expecting to only solve pub brawls and border disputes, he is wholly unprepared for what awaits him - murder mysteries, fake identities, paintings and cash, stolen fortunes and futures. Realising that not only is his appointment at stake, but his reputation and sometimes his life, he admirably rises to the occasion and proceeds, with the help and intervention of the notorious femme fatale Maria von Nottbeck, to become a seasoned detective. The greatest mystery, however, is Maria herself - but somewhere along the line, she allows Paul to unravel it.

Based on a novel by Ain Kütt Written by Leana Jalukse and Lilian von Keudell **Director** Arun Tamm **DoP** Mart Ratassepp, E.S.C **Producers** Jevgeni Supin, Helen Lõhmus **Co-Producers** Gunda Bergmane, Markus Frings **Executive producers** Toomas Luhats, Esko Rips, Wilfried Gufler, Silke Wilfinger, Carlos Hertel **Associated producer** Üllar Saaremäe **Produced by** Zolba Productions, Berghein Production, movie.mento, Nafta Films, Albolina **Distributed by** ZDF Studios

ries, and are prepared to finance bringing them to life.

Is there a common denominator about our stories that seems to draw attention elsewhere?

I don't think it's one specific thing, but I do see that considering what is happening in Latvia and Lithuania as well, we are seeing something like a Baltic new wave. Nordic Noir became immensely popular some time ago. Today, something similar is happening here and I think our history plays a huge part in that. You can't erase the Soviet occupation, and it has its impact on our culture and our narratives. The key thing is that now we are telling these stories ourselves from our own perspective.

Our society today is also different from Western Europe. Both visually and mentally it feels fresh for people who are looking to get a taste of something new.

The historical Soviet impact is on show in *My Dear Mother*. Where did that project start for you?

I remember Elisa's head of content Toomas Ili called me and asked what I was working on. He had an idea and wanted to discuss it with me. That was autumn

2023 and we had just done series 12 of *Summers Ago* which had been a wonderful experience. He pitched me an idea he had developed with the screenwriter Raoul Suvi. I was really surprised because it wasn't very commercial, but a poignant drama. There was a sense of sincerity, and the themes were very contemporary. I felt right away it wouldn't be easy to watch or easy to make. The story deals with difficult subjects and there's quite a lot of violence, but it's also very interesting so I didn't have to consider for long.

Why did you choose Doris Tääker as the director?

We felt that to tell this story a female perspective would be more fitting. I had already known Doris for a long time, and knew she is very talented, creative and has a great taste in what is good, and what feels cheap. We offered the role to her and were very happy she accepted.

What about making it to the Berlinale?

The genre itself is well suited for festivals. We submitted the series and waited for a confirmation, which did come luckily. We didn't get much feedback, but I think the commission saw that it's a great story that deserves to be seen widely.



Stills from *My Dear Mother*





Photo by Oliver Oppitz

TV Series *Von Fock*, directed by Arun Tamm, will premiere in March 2025.

You have another big show coming out soon, one with a bigger budget and going further back in history. Tell me about *Von Fock*.

It's an adaptation of a series of books. Ain Kütt, who is the director of the museum at Sagadi manor as well as a historian, wrote crime novels where each part is about a separate mystery. A good friend of mine, theatre director Üllar Saaremäe said to me one day: it's a great book, something should be made from it. I read it and thought: that's true! It's a great story!

It follows in the steps of *Melchior the Apothecary's* popularity, which has also been sold abroad thanks to its depiction of medieval Estonia. Do you see *Von Fock* gaining the same kind of attention?

We are looking to distribute it, and we already have official partners to do that. They believed in us from pretty much day one, right after seeing the first concept photos from the set. We are currently in the finishing stages, and it will have its TV premiere at the end of March. *My Dear Mother* will be out later in autumn, hopefully first featuring at multiple festivals.

What's coming up for you after that?

Difficult to say. I have multiple projects in development, including some TV series and a couple of documentaries. I have one Estonian-Ukrainian cooperation coming up, and another Estonian-Finnish-Croatian project. One of them is dealing with the nineties in Estonia, so

yeah, we can't escape our past. I'm also looking for partners for a large project I can't yet speak of.

So, are you really going for international markets?

Definitely. There are multiple reasons for that. Most simply, the Estonian market is too small to fully finance big productions. And secondly, cooperation is becoming more important all over the world. I don't want to sound too pathetic, but international cooperation is the basis of the European Union. It's the only way forward for me. **BF**





THE CHAMPION'S JOURNEY

Our Erika is a biographical sports drama marking a significant milestone for young Estonian director **German Golub**. This debut feature film follows Golub's success with the Student Oscar-winning short film **My Dear Corpses**.

By **Eda Koppel** Photos by **Liisabet Valdoja**

The movie unites emerging talent and seasoned professionals to tell the inspiring story of Estonia's Olympic cycling champion, Erika Salumäe. Filmed during the summer of 2024, *Our Erika* is now in post-production, with its premiere scheduled for spring 2026.

The production is spearheaded by Filmivabrik (Marju Lepp and Manfred Vainokivi) alongside Hansafilm (Armin Karu), Elisa (Toomas Ili), Uljana Kim Studio (Lithuania), and Kultifilma (Latvia, represented by Marta Romanova-Jekabsone and Inga Pranevska). With a budget of €1.88 million, the collaboration showcases a shared pride in Erika's story, resonating across the Baltic region.

The film traces Erika's journey from a challenging childhood to her triumphant victory at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. More than a sports story, *Our Erika* delves into themes of perseverance, independence, and the resilience to overcome life's obstacles. Golub collaborated closely with one of Estonia's most renowned cinematographers, Rein Kotov (*Tangerines*, *Kalev*), whose masterful work adds depth and beauty to the narrative.

Director German Golub says that few cinematographers can tackle the unique challenges of sports films, which require balancing the dynamic tempo of action with the emotional depth of drama. "Collaborating with Rein Kotov, a master of cinematic fundamentals,



Photo by **Manfred Vainokivi**



Photo by Manfred Vainokivi

Our *Erika* is a tale of athletic triumph, and a profound testament to determination, self-discovery, and the courage to overcome adversity.



Our *Erika* is a collaboration between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

gave us the tools to seamlessly merge these elements, allowing us to create precise and impactful visuals that captured the complex simplicity essential to *Our Erika*,” explains Golub.

Despite being a first-time feature director, Golub has showcased a strong artistic vision reinforced by Kotov’s expertise. Together, they balance fresh creativity and technical mastery, crafting a film that promises to be visually stunning and emotionally compelling.

The cast features Karolin Jürise as Erika, Rodion Kuzmins as Solovjov, her demanding coach, Viktor

Lanberg as Leonov, the trainer who helped her achieve her first Olympic gold, and Erki Laur as Kalmus, the coach who first recognized her potential.

Producer Marju Lepp of Filmivabrik highlights the exceptional collaboration between the three Baltic countries: “I greatly value the contribution of Lithuania’s internationally acclaimed producer Uljana Kim, who entrusted us as producers and supported German in his debut. The partnership with young Latvian producers Marta and Inga has also been dynamic and seamless. We’ve had a significant part of the cast from Latvia and Lithuania, remarkable locations enhancing the film’s visuals, and a professional, cooperative technical team. The collaboration continues in post-production with Latvia’s award-winning young composer Aleksandra Vilcinska, and Lithuanian sound director Saulius Urbanavičius. Additionally, our filming in Georgia was outstanding – particularly the contributions of the Georgian art team.”

Our Erika is a tale of athletic triumph, and a profound testament to determination, self-discovery, and the courage to overcome adversity. With a dedicated team of Baltic producers, the film celebrates one of Estonia’s most iconic athletes, poised to inspire audiences across the region and beyond.

The Estonian Film Institute, Cultural Endowment of Estonia, Tartu Film Fund, Viru Film Fund, National Film Centre of Latvia, and Lithuanian Film Centre support the film. **BF**



Photo by Manfred Vainokivi



EKA Animation

An International Talent Hub

Tucked into one of the trendiest Tallinn neighbourhoods, the aroma of artisan coffee drifting from corner cafes, and just a few blocks from the hip Balti jaam train station, sits **the Estonian Academy of Arts** - the only higher education institution in Estonia specializing in architecture, design, art, and art culture.

By **Aurelia Aasa** Photo by **Raido Nurk**

The animation department was established in 2006 by Estonian animation legend Prit Pärn. International MA studies, taught in English, were initiated a year later. "Nowadays, animation is everywhere - from digital graphics to computer games. In EKA, we focus on helping students realize their potential and uniqueness as animated film authors," states the current head of the animation department, film director and scholar Ülo Pikkov.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

Known for its auteur-centric approach, EKA's animation department has shaped international animation talents like Sander Joon, Heta Jäälinoja, Lucija Mrzljak, and Anu-Laura Tuttelberg. Joon, whose student short *Velodrool* (2016) picked up awards at festivals like Ottawa and Fredrikstad, made history as the first Estonian director shortlisted for an Academy Award in the short animation category with his 2022 festival darling *Sierra*, which took top honours at Palm Springs ShortFest, San Francisco IFF, and AFI Fest, among others.

Mrzljak's Croatian-Estonian co-production *Eeva* (co-directed with Morten Tšinakov), which premiered at Berlinale, secured a shortlist spot just a year later, while Jäälinoja's Finnish production *Nun or Never* (2023) made waves at TIFF, and earned an audience award at Annecy. Tuttelberg, who is currently teaching at EKA, will enter the Oscar race in 2025 after receiving an Oscar-qualifying award at Dok Leipzig for her latest *On Weary Wings Go By* (2024).

"EKA is immensely proud of its success in fostering internationally acclaimed animation talents. How-

ever, what truly defines the department is the vibrant community it has cultivated over the years,” states Pikkov. He continues: “This sense of community is further evident in the number of graduates who have returned to EKA as educators, whether for long-term or short-term engagements.”

DIVERSE CURRICULUM

EKA’s curriculum moves fluidly between theoretical foundations and hands-on technical training. Students delve into film history and contemporary animation trends, while mastering industry-standard tools like TVPaint and After Effects. The program also emphasizes production skills such as communication and project management, preparing graduates for the realities of animation production. Pikkov notes that in the international arena, flexibility is one of EKA’s defining characteristics. “At EKA’s animation department, we always find a way. If we don’t have certain skills or know-how in-house, we’ll bring in specialists or connect students with experts in the field.”

This flexibility is reflected in the program’s structure. “In addition to our annual courses, the curriculum includes three intensive masterclass weeks per year, designed to meet students’ needs and interests,” explains Lilli-Krööt Repnau, head of MA curriculum.



Photo by Viktor Koshkin

Head of the animation department
Ülo Pikkov.

Lilli-Krööt Repnau and EKA alumni
Andrea Gudiño.

“We offer a wide range of workshops, from classic animation techniques such as claymation and stop-motion, to interdisciplinary masterclasses exploring areas such as interactive media and choreography. We embrace animation as an ever-evolving art form, encouraging students to push boundaries and explore expanded possibilities of animation.”

Repnau highlights that, in addition to mastering technical skills, EKA aims to provide students with opportunities to attend key industry events, emphasizing that “visiting festivals is an integral part of the learning process.” She notes that some of the standout moments of 2024 were visits to Zagreb Animation Festival and the Venice Biennale. “This year, we are returning to Zagreb and will also hold a screening at Fantoche,” Repnau shares enthusiastically.

When reflecting on the department’s potential future, Pikkov envisions that one day EKA could offer advanced studies for producers, or as he calls them, “animation curators”. He elaborates: “The role of a modern producer goes far beyond securing funding. Producers now function as curators, navigating a wide array of responsibilities. These range from collaborating with art galleries and festivals to exploring commercial opportunities, all while showcasing exceptional taste, creativity, and organizational expertise. But one thing is certain - no matter where we go next, a tailored, auteur-centric approach will remain at the core.” **BF**

ADMISSIONS FOR EKA ANIMATION DEPARTMENT ARE CURRENTLY OPEN

MA of Animation

Admissions: 01 February - 03 March 2025

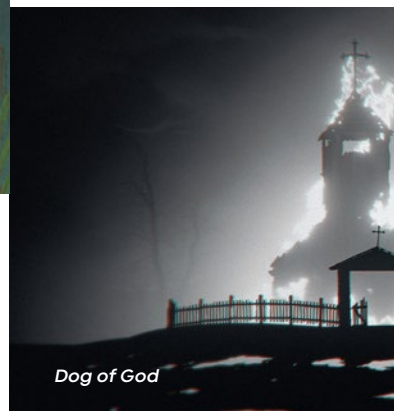
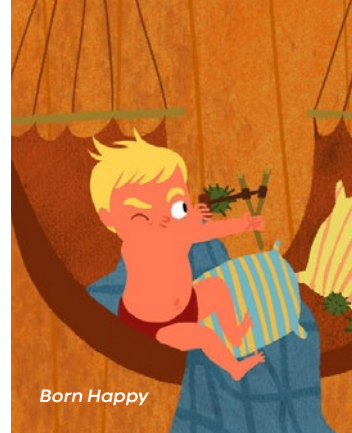
Requirements: Must hold a bachelor’s degree.

Duration: 2 years

Language: MA / English (English proficiency at least B2)



Photo by Ya-Chuan Chen



Animation from Latvia Riding the Wave

Following the thread of associations sparked by ***Flow***, the most famous Latvian animated film to date, other **Latvian animation creators are currently “riding the wave”** of its international success. With five full-length animated films in production and two premieres expected in 2025, the momentum shows no sign of slowing down.

By **Kristine Matisa**

Despite the relatively modest budget of Latvia's film industry, *Flow* is not a lonely beacon in the ocean. Over the past seven years, several acclaimed full-length animated films have been produced, including Edmunds Jansons' *Jacob, Mimmi, and the Talking Dogs* (2019), Signe Baumann's *Rocks in My Pockets* (2014) and *My Love Affair with Marriage* (2023), Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen's *My Favorite War* (2020), and Gints Zilbalodis' first feature *Away* (2019). These works have collectively elevated Latvia's reputation in global animation, and their creators are now working on their next full-length projects.

Additional directors have joined the scene, promising even more animated premieres in the near future.

BORN HAPPY

The closest to release is *Born Happy*, directed by Edmunds Jansons. This adventure story, aimed at school-aged children and families, presents an extraordinary series of events inspired by the life of Latvian-born adventurer Aleksandrs





Laime (1911–1994). After World War II his world travels come to a close, and Laime settled in the jungles of South America. The film begins in 1958 in Caracas, Venezuela, where Laime’s wife and daughter board a private plane to visit father and little brother deep in the jungle.

Born Happy is being produced at the internationally renowned Latvian animation studio Atom Art as a co-production between Latvia, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Contributing studios include Letko (Poland), Hausboot (Czech Republic), and Portugal’s Easy Lab for specific animation work. The project has received support from Creative Europe MEDIA and Eurimages, and international distribution rights have been secured by the experienced French company Dandeloo.

DOG OF GOD

Another highly anticipated release for 2025 is *Dog of God*, an experimental animated feature created in the rare genre of a folk tale for adults. In 2024, the film was already showcased in the Fantastic 7 genre programme at the Cannes Film Festival’s Marché du Film. Directed by brothers Lauris Ābele and Raitis Ābele, the story delves into European ancient history, this time set in the autumn of 1692 in Livonia.

Dog of God employs a distinctive roto-

scoping technique, where live-action performances are transformed into animation. The narrative draws on historical events, specifically Northern Europe’s most infamous “werewolf trial.” During this trial, an 82-year-old man boldly declared himself a werewolf – the Dog of God – who transformed into a wolf at night to battle witches and wizards in the depths of hell. The resulting film promises a mystical and otherworldly experience, with its eerie visuals and atmospheric storytelling.

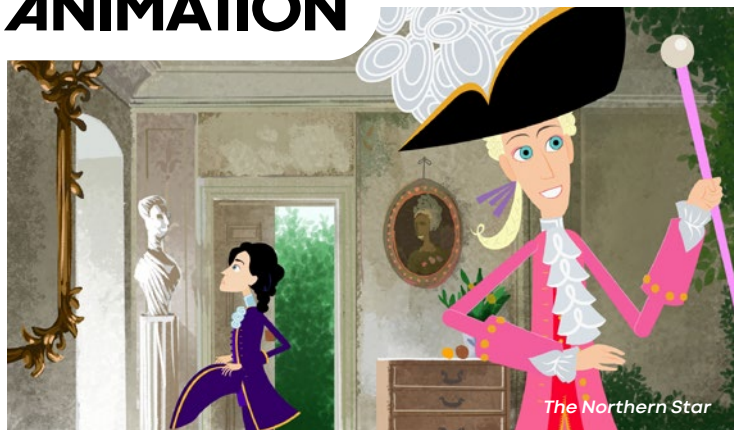
The production is a collaboration between Latvia’s Tritone Studio and Lumiere Lab in the USA, with financial sup-

port from the National Film Centre of Latvia through a special ERDF funding programme.

KARMIC KNOT

Director Signe Baumane, a prominent figure in the animation world who came closest to Oscar nominations with her previous films, and is a member of the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, is currently working on her new feature film, *Karmic Knot*. This will mark the final instalment of her deeply personal trilogy of feature films. Following *Rocks in My Pockets*, which explored family history and women’s destinies





The Northern Star



within the context of 20th-century European history, and *My Love Affair with Marriage*, an inventive take on a woman's personal coming-of-age, Bauman now focuses on her family's experiences during the tumultuous 1990s. This period, marked by the collapse of the Soviet regime, was a time of uncertainty and transformation for Latvia and Eastern Europe.

The film will continue the combined animation technique that Bauman pioneered over a decade ago, and has refined throughout this trilogy. Two-dimensionally drawn characters interact within intricately constructed three-dimensional settings, blending artistic styles to create a visually distinctive narrative. *Karmic Knot* is being produced as a collaboration between studios in Latvia, Ireland, and Italy.

THE NORTHERN STAR

Another exciting project is the feature-length debut of director and artist Kārlis Vītols, who brings his background as a painter to the visually lush *The Northern Star*. Using vibrant two-dimensional animation, Vītols playfully reimagines 18th-century aristocratic life, complete

with powdered wigs and evocative landscapes spanning various countries. The story follows the young and ambitious scientist Nikolaus von Himsel, a historical figure who embarks on an educational journey to collect exhibits for what would become the first public museum in the Baltics.



Thelma's Perfect Birthday

THELMA'S PERFECT BIRTHDAY

At the early stages of its journey, but already garnering recognition, is *Thelma's Perfect Birthday*, a Latvian-Luxembourg co-production by Rija Films (Latvia) and Paul Thiltges Distribution (Luxembourg). Directed by Reinis Kalnaellis, the film received an award from the European Chil-

Meanwhile, Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen, who won the main prize in the Contrechamp competition at the Annecy Festival for her documentary and family history-based animation *My Favorite War* (2020), is working on a new feature-length project, *Roach Coach*. Produced in collaboration with Norway's Bivrost Film and Latvia's Ego Media, the film follows school friends Viga and Sana, who discover that everyone has their own metaphorical "bugs." These "bugs" help them unlock their talents and navigate life's challenges with creativity and resilience.

dren's Film Association (ECFA) and was nominated for the ECFA Award 2025 after its world premiere at the Schlingel Festival in Chemnitz, Germany, in autumn 2024. This ECFA award will also place the film in contention at the Berlinale in 2025, marking a promising start to its international reception.

Lastly, celebrated director Gints Zilbalodis is also immersed in creating a new film – drawing animated characters on his computer since the Cannes Film Festival, in hotel rooms around the globe where the remarkable success of his distinctive film has taken him. **BF**



Roach Coach





Silent City Driver – Grand Prix for the Best Film of Official Selection Competition, and Best Production Design Award



No Dogs Allowed – Best Film Award in The First Feature Competition

Southern Chronicles – Best Baltic Film award



Protected Men – Best Film in the Rebels with a Cause competition programme



The Watchman – Best Film award in the first-ever Doc@PÖFF competition

By **Martina Tramberg**

Celebrating the Winners of the 28th PÖFF

The 28th Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF) wrapped up in style with an awards ceremony that spotlighted the year's most striking achievements in cinema and reaffirmed its reputation as a key platform for boundary-pushing global talent.

Across the festival's six competition strands, jury panels recognized a diverse array of bold storytelling and innovative filmmaking. Here's a look at the standout winners who left an indelible mark on this year's event:

- ***Silent City Driver*** - Grand Prix for the Best Film of Official Selection Competition, Best Production Design Award;
- ***No Dogs Allowed*** - The Best First Feature Film Award;
- ***Southern Chronicles*** - Best Baltic Film award;
- ***Protected Men*** - Best Film in the Rebels with a Cause competition programme;
- ***The Brothers Kitaura*** - Best Film award in the Critics' Picks programme;
- ***The Watchman*** - Best Film award in the first-ever Doc@PÖFF competition;
- ***Pyre*** - Audience Award;
- **Lana Gogoberidze, Peeter Simm** - Lifetime Achievement Awards. **BF**



Pyre – Audience Award.

The Brothers Kitaura – Best Film award in the Critics Picks programme

Lana Gogoberidze – Lifetime Achievement Award





ORPHANAGE of SOCIALIST DREAMS

Karlo Funk writes about the most important female director of the Soviet period, **Leida Laius**, and her classic youth movie ***Smile at Last*** (1985).

By **Karlo Funk** Photos by **Estonian Film Institute & Film Archive of the National Archives of Estonia**

1986 was the year when Perestroika reached the Soviet cinema. The state cinema institutions were reformed and the films that were kept away from international distribution reached the festivals for the first time. Among the new films brought to Berlinale the next year was *Smile at Last* (*Igry dlja detej Schkolno-go vozrastal/ Spiele für Kinder im schulpflichtigen Alter*) in the Kinderfilmfest section, by the Estonian directors Leida Laius, and Arvo Iho. The film is set and shot in an Estonian orphanage. It was one of the first to reveal the cracks in the myth of a cloudless socialist youth, and the Soviet social engineering project in general. Eventually *Smile at Last* won the UNICEF award, and can be seen again in the Berlin Classics section of Berlinale. The body of work of Leida Laius, dealing with the tensions between strong female characters and traditional society, remains to be discovered internationally.

On a winter's day during the Second World War, a 20-year-old girl decided to go to the front as a volunteer. The girl had been forcefully deported from a border village inhabited by Estonians, to the deeper heartland of Russia, together with her mother; and the only way out was through the war. Just before her de-

parture, she bought herself a pair of cheap plastic earrings, that her little savings could afford, and climbed on a wagon headed west. She had to spend the night on the floor. In the morning she couldn't move because her hair had frozen to the floor.

BECOMING A FILM DIRECTOR

Future film director Leida Laius never made it to the front. Some war-time committee, generally indifferent towards the deportees, spared the women, and Laius ended up reading books in hospitals to the wounded. Leida Laius, who had grown up in an Estonian village in Russia, was a unique entity in Estonian cinema, but her films are not that well known internationally. The status of women position was superficially good in the Soviet ideological system, where everyone was supposed to be equal: they could often find work in professions that were dominated by men. In reality – and especially in the film industry – the situation was not that rosy. In the field, where you had to fight for your creative ambition and choices every step of the way, former military experience came in handy.

Laius, a bright kid and an eager learner from a very young age, reached cinema with the first wave after the World War II, in the middle of 1950s – she was among the young ones who got sent to Moscow from Estonia, to study in the fields of theatre, and cinema, so that they could help the new governing power to establish and legitimize itself through a culture that it didn't really understand. For a year, Laius could study under the guidance of Aleksandr Dovzhenko. She graduated from the Russian State University of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1962 as a film director. Many authors who shaped the Estonian cinematic landscape later on, also came from the same university.



A HEARTBREAKING STORY ABOUT KIDS IN A SOVIET ORPHANAGE

Laius directed seven feature films in her lifetime. *Smile at Last* (1985) was the last but one of her films, and came to signify several turning points in Estonian filmmaking, and Laius' approach to it.

The film opened a door to the orphanage, where the unstoppable progress of ripe socialism was substituted with typical family issues, and the alcoholism that had become characteristic of the closed society. A decade earlier, Laius had made two documentaries, one in a nursery and the other in a special boarding school type of kindergarten, where 4-5-year old kids were sometimes forced to spend a whole week without their parents. *Smile at Last* was a story about youngsters, who grow up without a family, according to their own laws and principles. The type of youngsters that were used to scare unruly kids in normal schools, and who couldn't fit into the Soviet worldview. Even less reason to turn attention to them in such a controlled and presentable field like cinema.

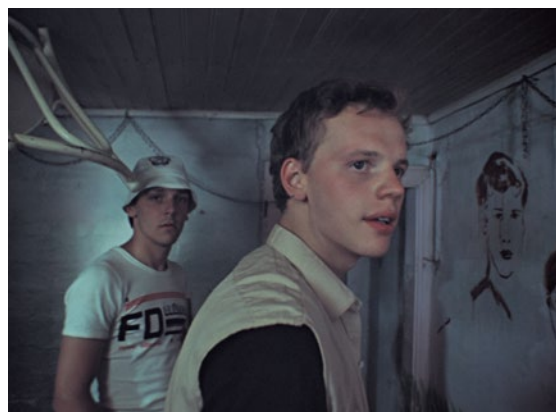
Mari (Monika Järv), the main protagonist, seems to return from a trip home, but it soon becomes apparent to the viewer that she had run away from the orphanage after one week there. Despite some empathy from another of his temporary girlfriends, Mari's dad throws the girl out of the house, sending her off with a barrage of self-justification. Three young boys start to harass Mari in a park at night, but suddenly a gang of girls comes to her rescue and they all end up in a police station. Mari is sent back to the orphanage. The first backstories start to unravel there, and the first relationships form, but the film's narrative is mainly concentrated around Mari's unsteady and contradictory relations to two young guys, and inevitable conflicts with other girls.

Mari (Monika Järv) after attempted suicide, another taboo topic in Soviet cinema.



The orphanage has its own internal hierarchy. The dashing Robi is considered the informal leader. Among the girls, the harsh, nervous Katrin, who ended up in an orphanage after her mother was imprisoned, dominates.

Written by: Marina Sheptunova (based on Silvia Rannamaa's youth novel *Stepmother*) **Starring:** Monika Järv, Hendrik Toompere, Tauri Tallernmaa **Composer:** Lepo Sumera **Cinematography:** Arvo Iho **Running time:** 86 minutes **Country:** Estonia **Language:** Estonian



THE WIND OF CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

Smile at Last is one of the first films in Estonia that is openly critical about the contemporary society. In the middle of the Soviet progressive social order, there was paradoxically a rather Protestant notion of work and societal ideals. Grand schemes were hatched from one five-year plan to the next, and people were mobilized to achieve their goals with military methods. The price of this endless struggle, morally supported by the constant narrative of the great victory in World War II, was often at the neglect of personal and family life. An exemplary worker could hope that the state would solve all of their problems, and even raise their kids if necessary. Even in this film, one boys' father is actually an important director of a company, who simply has no time to take care of his kid.

Stories of the supporting characters bring forth the half-truths of social self-justification, but the film goes further than that. *Smile at Last* legitimizes the young opposition and thirst for freedom that would cause various repressions at work for their parents. These twisted truths take clearer shape when presented through the eyes of the kids. When Kerttu (Kerttu Aving), a girl barely old enough for school, steals an older

Smile at Last

(Estonian: *Naerata ometi*) is a 1985 Soviet Estonian drama film directed by Leida Laius and Arvo Iho. After the death of her mother, high school student Mari ends up in an orphanage. Three days later, the girl returns home, but her drunken father makes it clear that she is not welcome.



Smile at Last is one of the first films in Estonia that is openly critical about the contemporary society.

Monika Järv and Leida Laius.



Photo by Arno Saar
First Assistant Camera

girl's passport, it leads to one of the most shocking scenes in the film that many viewers remember vividly until this day. Katrin (Katrin Tamleht), leader of the older girls, is convinced that Kerttu is the thief. Kerttu flees naked from Katrin, hiding in the washing machine. Katrin switches it on in a bout of anger. A naked child in a spinning tub was a sharp reminder of the machinery that the state had created in the name of ideological purity. Kerttu's excuse for theft is just as startling. She has heard that everyone leaving the or-

phanage has to have a passport and a toothbrush. She had obtained the passport – now she was only short of a personal toothbrush.

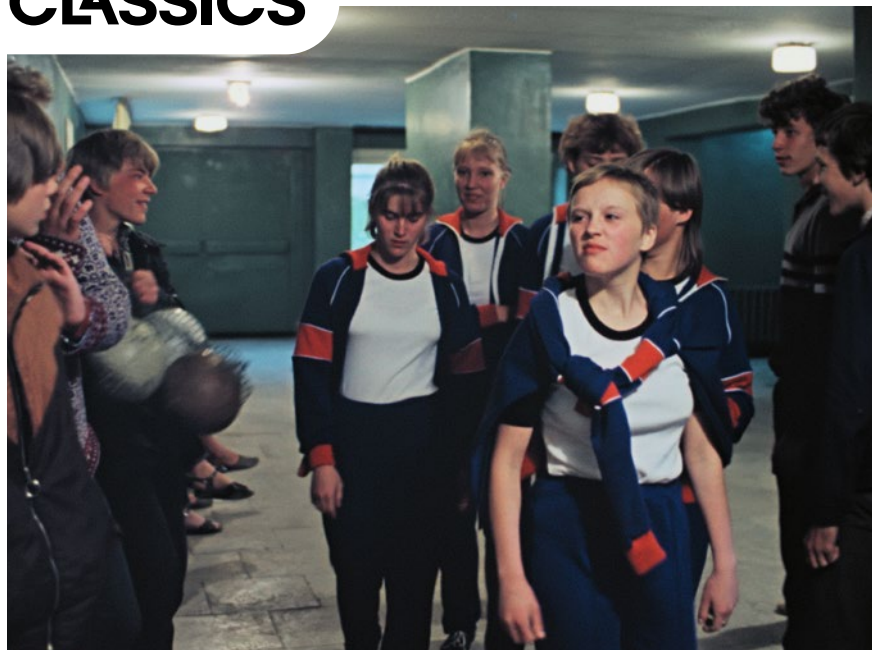
WOMAN AS THE STRONGER HALF IN LAIUS' FILMS

The cast of the film consists mostly of a young, amateur actors, who can really carry the ever-defiant stance, and hidden ferocity that characterized the counterculture of the day. The film's visual rhythm is hectic and fast, the flexible and impulsive camera of cinematographer and co-director Arvo Iho follows the parties and the fights in several scenes. The style of the film was obviously contrary to her previous films that were based on Estonian literary classics and history.

These had been clear tales of men and women, whose relationships are tested by the environment. Woman is the stronger half in Laius' films, challenging the pressure to conform and comply, endangering

One of the most shocking scenes in Estonian film history – a naked child locked into a washing machine.

***Smile at Last** is one of the first films in Estonia that is openly critical about the contemporary society.*



consistency. Initially Laius – maybe influenced by her theatre studies – creates classical characters, whose choices gradually stem from their nature. In *Smile at Last*, the characters get into trouble rather randomly, due to conflicting and contradictory urges, inexperience, and a reluctance to compromise. It is somewhat surprising that a 60-year-old director verges towards more provocative cinema, and gives a distinctive voice to the characters and co-authors who are from a younger generation.

Arvo Iho undoubtedly had a big part to play in this, having also been a working partner of Laius a decade earlier, shooting her two documentaries. Well composed scenes and beautiful nature shots give way to an anonymous and impersonal dormitory. The characters' only escape is an abandoned house that gives an impression of an unfinished art project, with a chair hanging from the ceiling and drawings on the walls. Much to the surprise of the director, the set designer and the cinematographer decided to paint the room pink, but you can't see it in the film, because the notorious green hue of the Soviet film stock balanced out the colours.

The film was loosely based on Silvia Rannamaa's youth novel *Stepmother*, published in 1963.

There are traces of the story in Tallinnfilm archives, dating back to 1965, but Laius lost interest in the project back then. The new script, based on the narrative themes of the novel, was written by a young screenwriter from Moscow, Maria Sheptunova, who could introduce topics descriptive of the 1980s, as well as maintain the local flavour of the characters. Disillusioned reality, an ideologically unredacted message, and an almost documentary approach, were new qualities in the whole of Soviet cinema. After completion, the readers of a pan-Soviet film magazine voted *Smile at Last* one of the best films of the year, bettered only by Elem Klimov's *Come and See*. The film won the UNICEF award at Berlinale and attracted attention in France.

The cast of the film consists mostly of a young amateur actors. But Robi's alcoholic mother is played by the legendary actress Mari Lill (right).



The film is set and shot in an Estonian orphanage.

Laius had worked with several youth-themed scripts as early as the 1970s. This interest possibly stemmed from the post-war period, when the orphanages had to accommodate the children of the repressed, as well as the orphans. Leida Laius had remained fatherless too, in the course of Soviet cleansing. Interest towards the bothersome generation on the western fringes of the Soviet empire was confirmed a





year later in Juris Podnieks' Latvian documentary *Is it Easy to be Young?* Podnieks captured the protest, and the youth's opposition to their parents and society much in the same way as Laius.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER ESTONIAN FILMS

In *Smile at Last*, you can hear a classic quote from a legendary 1960s movie *Spring* (directed by Arvo Kruusement) that belongs at the absolute top of Estonian cinema, the latter being a bright example of the Estonian traditional way of life, with its nationally characteristic childhood and generational consistency before the great wars of the 20th Century. The success of *Spring* was greatly assisted by the young budding cast of actors, and the film presents a gallery of various characters. The kids had to come to school for the whole week because of long distances, and live apart from their parents. But the contrast between the turn of the 19th Century's *joi de vivre* and the dead-end life of the 1980s couldn't be starker. Juxtaposing these two films, the director's attitude toward the changes that had taken place in culture silently prevails.

Later, several films looked back upon the era, and its characteristic choices and mentality, but mostly from a distance, as a bystander, aware of historical de-



Photo by Viktor Mentunen

Loneliness is one of the main motifs in *Smile at Last*.

The film's narrative is mainly concentrated around Mari's contradictory relations to two young guys, and conflicts with other girls.

velopments that have already taken place. Jaak Kilmi's *Revolution of Pigs* (2004) captured life in a youth summer camp in the 1980s, where first salaries were earned working on a field. Triin Ruumet's *The Days that Confused* (2016) painted a picture of the chaos that struck the peripheral rural territories in the 1990s, when familiar ground was lost, and the whole notion of being young had to be re-created again, influenced by shady business practices and violence.

Laius' inherent empathy makes *Smile at Last* an insightful film, prohibiting it from becoming a straightforward socio-critical manifesto. In a key scene, Katrin reads everyone excerpts from Mari's diary. A light party mood is eclipsed by Mari's public humiliation, and takes another dramatic turn when Robi (Hendrik Toompere, Jr.), the boy who had previously harassed her in the park, sticks up for her, and changes the dynamics back towards the lighter mood again, seemingly careless flirting between the kids. The exposure of secret thoughts causes the girl to attempt suicide.

In her films, Laius reflects the female character's ability to stand up for themselves, but also their vulnerability, from different angles.

In this Cinderella story, the pumpkin doesn't turn into a carriage, and the orphan prince never finds the glass slipper. **BF**



How to Find Money in Lithuania

Learn more about how to save money while making your dream project in Lithuania come true.

**The key funding body:
Lithuanian Film Centre**

LITHUANIAN FILM TAX INCENTIVE

The Lithuanian Film Tax Incentive came into effect in January 2014 as a new policy measure to foster local and foreign film production in Lithuania. Recently it has been extended until 31st of December 2028. The Lithuanian Film Tax Incentive provides an opportunity to save money on film production budgets through a private investment scheme.

KEY INFORMATION

- Save up to 30% of your film production budget.
- Available for the production of feature films, TV dramas, documentaries, and animated films, including domestically produced, co-produced, or commissioned films (produced under the service agreement).

HOW IT WORKS

As a foreign filmmaker, you must cooperate with one of the local production companies that submit the application. The local company takes the responsibility of finding a local business company

willing to support up to 30% of your production budget in exchange for reduced corporate income tax.

PRODUCTION CRITERIA

The Film Tax Incentive is only available for films that meet the approved production and cultural criteria requirements. For more detailed information on the requirements, visit www.lkc.lt/en.

The project has to meet all of the following production criteria:

- At least three days of shooting take place in Lithuania in the course of the production (except for animation projects).
- At least 20% of an animated film's production costs in Lithuania must be incurred for producing two of the elements: shooting (if it is required by the script); characters and/or backgrounds design; layouts and/or storyboards; visual effects; 2D, 3D, stop-motion and other forms of animation production.
- At least 51% of the crew hired by the Lithuanian production company are citizens of Lithuania or citizens of other European Economic Area (EEA) countries.

- The total amount of eligible spending in Lithuania has to be no less than € 43,000.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Due to the Lithuanian Film Incentive, in 2024 film productions received € 18,109,633.

- Foreign projects received € 10,854,586.
- Co-production projects received € 1,604,252.
- National projects received € 5,650,795.

In 2024, the Lithuanian Film Incentive was used by 67 national, 10 co-production, and 12 foreign (production service-based) film projects.

The biggest foreign projects that benefited from the Lithuanian Film Incentive in 2024:

- New adaptation of mystery novel *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (Germany - Constantin Television), € 2,684,115 received.
- Historic mini-series *Sisi 4* (Germany, Austria - Epic Drama), € 2,201,050 received.
- Based on a true story, TV drama *Truth and Conviction* (USA - Truth and Treason), € 1,097,105 received.



Photo by **Gabriel Khiterer**



Vilnius Old Town



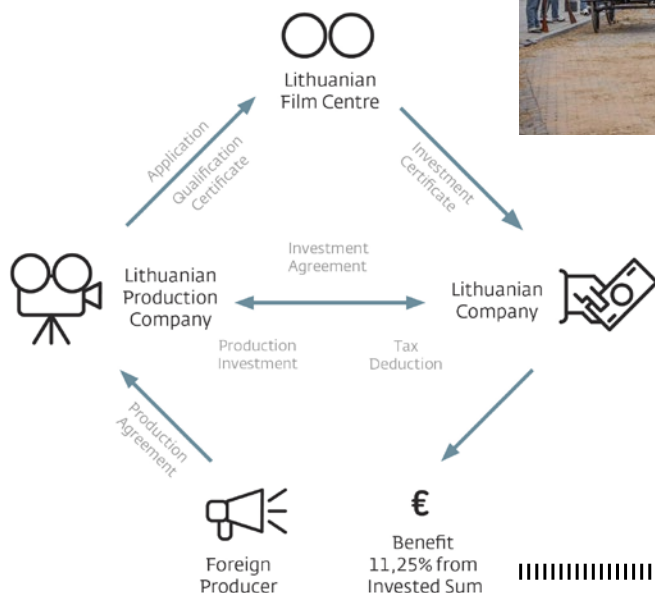
Photo by **Andrius Aleksandravičius**



Photo by **Saulius Žiūra**

Pažaislis Monastery in Kaunas

Filming of *Sisi* in Vilnius.



Maximum amounts of funding per project (agreements must be provided):

- Up to € 100,000, if the project involves at least one Lithuanian film editor, sound director, costume designer, main actor, senior animation artist, or senior animation frame artist.
- Up to € 200,000, if the project involves at least one Lithuanian co-author-director, scriptwriter, director of photography, production designer, composer, director of animation, or senior animation character artist.



lkc.lt/en

CONTACT:

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a.kuprevicius@lkc.lt

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTIONS

Requirements to be considered a minority co-production:

- Co-production (preliminary) agreement that complies with the provisions of the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production or other international Co-production Treaties between Lithuania and other countries.
- Production companies must deliver substantial information confirming that the financing for production which makes no less than 50% of the whole budget has already been committed.
- 95% of the financial grant should be spent in Lithuania.
- A script or script treatment in Lithuanian.

BASIC FACTS

Lithuania is a country in the Baltic region of northern-eastern Europe, with a population of 2.8 million. One of the three Baltic states, it is situated along the south-eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. Lithuania is a member of the EU; its currency is the euro; official language - Lithuanian although English and Russian are widely spoken.

Locations: with an area of 65 200 square kilometres, Lithuania is full of unique and versatile locations. Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, was founded in 1323. Its Old Town is one of the largest in Europe and is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The three biggest cities, Vilnius,

Kaunas, and Klaipėda, are full of architectural monuments that speak of a multifaceted history and offer gothic, neoclassical, baroque, art-deco, constructivist, and contemporary backdrops.

Nature: 30% of the country is covered with forests, there are 2 830 lakes larger than 0.5 hectares, and 18 rivers longer than 100 kilometres. Thanks to its four seasons, Lithuanian landscapes are rich with colour from white to yellow, red and orange, to green and blue.

Advantages of filming in Lithuania: talented & experienced crew, high-speed internet, wide range of filming backdrops in one place, perfect for projects set in any time period.

How to Find Money in Latvia

THE KEY FUNDING BODIES

- National Film Centre of Latvia
- State Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia
- Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (cash rebate)
- Riga Film Fund (cash rebate)

Annual State Support for film industry 2024

(from all 4 key funding bodies) -

€ 11,349,382

Number of film productions supported by the National Film Centre of Latvia

in 2024 - 39 films

NATIONAL FILM CENTRE OF LATVIA

Minority co-production scheme

- Budget 2024: € 400,000
- For producers from all over the world (except for projects whose delegate producer is a company registered in Russian Federation or Belorussian Republic or who has received or has planned to have funding from the public sources in either country). The participation of Latvian co-producer is necessary. The bilateral treaty is not required.
- Supported films: fiction features (over 65 min), documentaries and animation films of any length. The film must comply with the terms and conditions for a Latvian film (according to the Film Law, a Latvian film is a film, which is produced by a Latvian film producer registered in the National Film Centre producer's register, and in the key creative team at least one member (director, scriptwriter, composer, set designer, animation artist or cinematographer) is a citizen of Latvia.
- The project can only be submitted by a production company registered in the producers' register in Latvia and the

planned budget from Latvia is at least 20% for bilateral coproduction, and 10% in multilateral coproduction, or, if applicable, comply with the Council of Europe Convention on Cinematographic Co-production.

- The film's delegate producer must be able to prove at least 50% of financing in place from his/her own country.
- 80% of the subsidy must be spent in Latvia.
- Call once a year, application time, deadline: March / April.
- Decision: 1 month.

CONTACT:

Inga Blese, Head of Production,
inga.blese@nkc.gov.lv

STATE CULTURE CAPITAL FOUNDATION

A public agency that supports different strands of culture, including audiovisual sector (various kind of projects: film productions, development, research projects, festivals, etc.).

- Supports documentaries of any length, fiction shorts and animation films.
- Applicant for film projects - Latvian producer.

- Funding for audiovisual sector in 2024: € 1,391,806 (no specific amounts indicated for film productions, depends on the competition and available funding).
- Three application deadlines: January, May, September.
- Decision: 1 month.

CONTACT

Film curator Gita Krātiņa,
gita@kkf.lv

INVESTMENT AND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF LATVIA

Cash rebate scheme Latvia Co-financing programme for foreign productions. The programme is a production incentive supporting the incoming productions of full-length feature films, documentaries and animation films, TV films. An application can be made for international production service or co-production to receive a cash rebate of 30% on eligible production costs. The support can be combined with other public funding sources in Latvia in case if the Co-financing programme's support together with other funding sources does not exceed 50% of the film's total expenses in Latvia.





Danish feature fiction *Boundless* (Nordisk Film Production A/S), was largely shot in Latvia in cooperation with Munchhausen Productions and support by cash rebate programmes of Riga Film Fund and Investment and Development Agency of Latvia.

- Support intensity: 30% of eligible costs.
- Deadlines: open call twice a year.
- Agreement with the local production company of the collaboration is required.
- Applicant: a company registered in Latvia.
- Decision: 1 month.
- The film's delegate producer must confirm that at least 50% of financing is in place at the time of submission of the application.

The scheme is open for:

- fiction features and animation films with a budget of at least € 711,436;
- feature documentaries with a budget of at least € 142,287.

In 2024 co-financed foreign film productions with the total of € 1,658,118.

CONTACT:

jautajumi@liaa.gov.lv
www.liaa.gov.lv

THE RIGA FILM FUND OF THE COUNCIL OF RIGA

Cash rebate scheme Riga Film Fund co-financing programme

The programme is a production incentive supporting the incoming productions of full-length fiction features, documentaries, and TV films. An application can be made for international production service or co-production to receive a cash rebate of 20-25% on eligible production costs. The support can be combined with Latvian co-Financing programme's funding.

- Support intensity: 20-25% of eligible costs (25% if the film's story is set in Riga or with significant featuring of Riga in the story, and at least partly shot in Riga, 20% - if the film is shot in the territory of Latvia).
- Deadlines: open call until 30 September

on first come first serve basis until the budget is depleted.

- Shooting must be finished and reports submitted by 30 November.
- Applicant: a company registered in Latvia.
- Annual budget: € 800,000.
- Decision: 1 month.
- The film's delegate producer must confirm that at least 50% of financing is in place at the time of submission of the application.

The scheme is open for:

- for feature films, documentary and fiction TV projects;
- budget of at least € 700,000

CONTACT:

Eva Medjāne,
eva.medjane@riga.lv
www.filmriga.lv

PUBLIC BROADCASTER

Latvian Television (LTV) is the stateowned

public service television company in Latvia. LTV operates two linear channels, LTV1 and LTV7. LTV is part of Public Broadcasting of Latvia, consisting of LTV and radio (6 stations), joint news content and digital access is provided on the broadcaster's site www.lsm.lv.

LTV acquires Free TV and Free VOD rights to drama series, fiction features, documentaries, children's content, live events, etc. LTV mainly acquires completed films but is also open to considering projects in production if LOC is needed.

CONTACT:

Zane Valeniece, Head of Acquisitions,
Zane.Valeniece@ltv.lv

OTHER IMPORTANT CONTACTS:

- Baltic Sea Forum for Documentaries: balticseadocs.lv
- Riga International Film Festival: rigaiff.lv/en/
- Documentary Film Festival Artdocfest/ Riga: artdocfest.com/en/

Basic facts: Latvia is the member of the EU and NATO. Currency EUR. Latvia covers an area of 64,589 km², with a population of 1.9 million. Access to high-speed internet in Latvia is among the best in the EU.

Accessibility: Riga, the capital of Latvia, has the largest airport of the Baltics just 20 min drive from the city center. There are more than 100 direct flight destinations. Locations. Latvia and its capital Riga offer a wide

variety of locations. Riga city has Northern charm, Medieval, Art Nouveau and industrial architecture, as well as Soviet modernism heritage. The most beautiful Art Nouveau buildings in Riga were built by Mihail Eizenstein, the father of the iconic filmmaker Sergei Eizenstein. Throughout Latvia there is wide range of castles, palaces, ancient fortresses and manor houses. The most popular shooting location is Rundale - a baroque

palace built in 18th century, 100 km from Riga
Pristine nature: There are four distinct seasons in Latvia. Over 500 km long white sand beaches - the coastline of the Baltic sea. Abundance of rivers and forests, lakes and swamps.

Advantages of filming in Latvia: Internationally experienced technical crews, strong art department and construction teams, competitive costs, stages and backlots, wide range of extras.

How to Find Money in Estonia

If you want to make your film with Estonian partners, these are the film funds ready to **finance your project**.

By **EFI**

ESTONIAN FILM INSTITUTE PROGRAMMES FOR FILM PRODUCTION

MAJORITY CO-PRODUCTION

- Subsidy of up to 70% of the budget.
- 50% of the subsidy must be spent in Estonia.

FEATURE FICTION:

Budget 2025: € 4,182,000

- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 900,000.
- Two application deadlines: May 6 and December 9.

FEATURE DOCUMENTARY:

Budget 2025: € 990,000

- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 150,000.
- Two application deadlines: March 18 and September 2.

ANIMATION (all lengths):

Budget 2025: € 1,065,000

- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 900,000 for feature animation & € 300,000 for short animation.
- Two application deadlines: February 18 and September 9.

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION

Budget 2025: € 600,000

- For producers from all over the world. Participation of an Estonian co-producer is necessary. Bilateral treaty not necessary.
- Subsidy of up to 70% of the Estonian part of the budget.
- 100% of the subsidy must be spent in Estonia.

- Estonian creative and production related participation in a project should meet the requirements of minority co-production grading table.
- Two application deadlines: February 4 and October 14.
- Decision in 50 days.

CONTACT:

Estonian Film Institute
Viola Salu / Head of Production
+372 627 6000 / viola@filmi.ee
filmi.ee

FILM ESTONIA CASH REBATE

Budget 2025: € 6,000,000

Film Estonia cash rebate is a production incentive supporting the incoming production of feature films, feature documentaries, animation films, animation series, high-end TV-drama and the post-production of all previously mentioned works. An application can be made for international production service or co-production to receive a cash rebate up to 30% on eligible production costs.

- Support intensity - 20%-30% of eligible costs

- Deadlines - open call
- Applicant - company registered in Estonia
- Recipient - foreign company
- Decision - in 30 days
- Auditing and payment - in 40 days

The scheme is open for:

- Feature films with a budget of at least € 1 million; minimum local spend € 200,000.
- Feature documentary with a budget of at least € 200,000; minimum local spend € 70,000.
- Animation with a budget of at least € 250,000; minimum local spend € 70,000.
- Animation series with a budget of at least € 500,000; minimum local spend € 70,000 per series.
- High-end TV-drama with a budget of at least € 200,000 per single episode; minimum local spend € 70,000 per series.
- Post-production; minimum local spend € 30,000

Supported projects include:

Azrael (US), *Bubble & Squeak* (US), *Tenet* (GB/US), *The Agency* (US), *Memory of Water* (FI), *The Burial* (GB), *Deliver Us* (US), *Besa 2* (RS)

CONTACT:

Nele Paves / Film Commissioner
nele@filmi.ee / filmestonia.eu

THE CULTURAL ENDOWMENT OF ESTONIA

Public agency that supports culture, including audiovisual art, and sport.

MAJORITY CO-PRODUCTION

Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 200,000.

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION

- Participation of Estonian co-producer is necessary.
- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 100,000.
- There are four application deadlines: February 20, May 20, August 20 and November 20

CONTACT:

Liis Viira
Curator of Audiovisual
Arts endowment
+372 5855 9483 / film@kulka.ee
kulka.ee

REGIONAL FILM FUNDS

TARTU FILM FUND

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate

Budget 2025: € 150,000

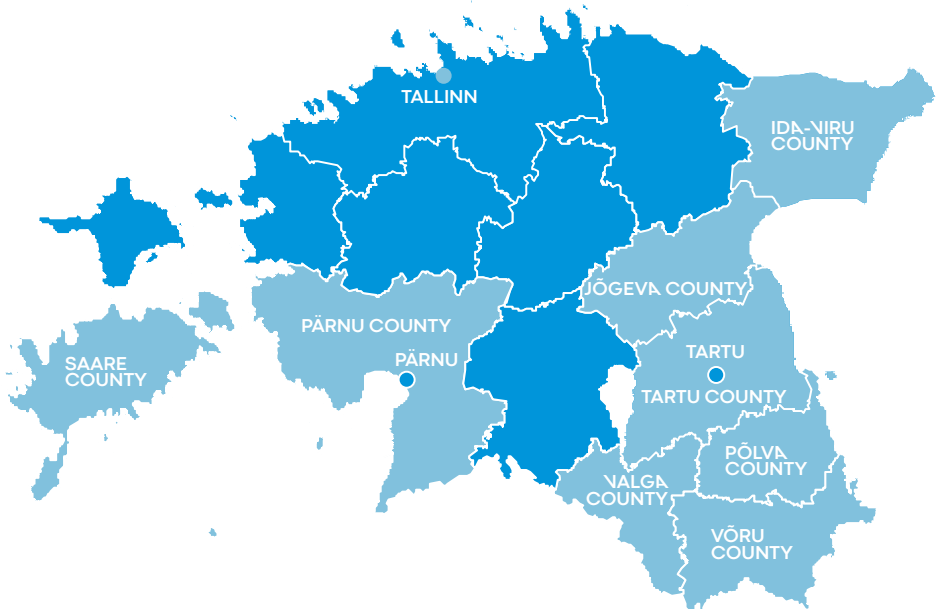
- Support intensity: up to 35%
- Objective: production of an audiovisual work in Tartu and the region of South-Estonia
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, TV-series, documentaries, short films.
- Participation of an Estonian production company is necessary.
- Two application deadlines: in Spring and in Autumn.

Recently supported projects:

The Black Hole (EE/FI), *Aurora* (EE), *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* (EE/FR/IS), *8 Views of Lake Biwa* (EE/FI)

CONTACT:

fund@tartufilmfund.ee
tartufilmfund.ee



PÄRNU COUNTY FILM FUND

Type of fund: regional incentive / cash rebate

- Budget 2025: € 100,000
- Support intensity: up to 25%
- Objective: production of an audiovisual work in the Pärnu County (except Kihnu municipality).
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, documentaries, short films.
- Participation of an Estonian production company is necessary.
- No deadlines.

CONTACT:

Association of Local Authorities
of Pärnu County
pol@pol.parnumaa.ee
parnumaa.ee/en/film-fund

VIRU FILM FUND

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate

- Budget 2025: € 200,000
- Support intensity: up to 40%
- Objective: production of an audiovisual work in the Eastern region of Estonia.
- Support for the production of feature films, documentaries, TV-series, short films, music videos.
- Participation of an Estonian production company is necessary.
- Two application deadlines: March 1 and October 1.

Recently supported projects:

Myyrä (s3) (FI), *The Agency* (US/UK), *The Swedish Torpedo* (SE/FI/EE/BE)

CONTACT:

Piia Tamm
piia.tamm@ivek.ee
vff.ee

FILM FUND OF ESTONIAN ISLANDS

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate

- Budget 2025: € 25,005
- Support intensity: up to 40%
- Objective: production of an audiovisual work on the islands of Saare County.
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, TV-series, documentaries, short films and film education.
- Participation of an Estonian production company is necessary.
- No deadlines.

Recently supported projects:

The Swedish Torpedo (SE/FI/EE/BE), *Jungle Law* (EE)

CONTACT:

Saaremaa Development Centre
+372 452 0570 / filmifond@sasak.ee
minusaaremaa.ee/en/projects/
film-fund-estonian-islands

Rising Stars & Global Glory

The Lithuanian film industry will remember **2024 as one of the most successful years** in the country's history. Lithuanian films were widely celebrated at European film festivals and international events, and young filmmakers established themselves among the ranks of emerging talent.

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė**

PROJECTS THAT RECEIVED SPECIAL RECOGNITION IN LITHUANIA AND EUROPE

Saulė Bliuvaitė, with her debut feature film *Toxic* (prod. Giedrė Burokaitė, exec. prod. Justė Michailinaitė), was perhaps the most prominent Lithuanian filmmaker in European cinema last year. Her film, which tells the story of two teenagers entering the modelling industry, captivated European audiences with its deep and original story about young girls' search for identity.

Photo by TI Press / Locarno Film Festival

Saulė Bliuvaitė



Drowning Dry

At the prestigious Locarno Film Festival, *Toxic* took the main prize, the Golden Leopard, was awarded for the best debut, and was given two additional prizes from the independent ecumenical and junior juries. The film also participated in the European Film Awards, competing in the European Discovery category.

Another Lithuanian project that received a lot of attention was the film *Drowning Dry* by director Laurynas Bareiša (prod. Klementina Remeikaitė, co-prod. Matiss Kaža), which explores the drama of the rela-

tionship between two couples who come to a country house to spend their weekend.

Laurynas Bareiša won the best director award at the Tallinn Black Nights and Locarno film festivals, while at the latter, the film's cast – Gelminė Glemžaitė, Agnė Kaktaitė, Giedrius Kiela, and Paulius Markevičius – was awarded for the best performance. The film was also selected as Lithuania's candidate for the Oscars.

MORE SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS DURING THE YEAR

One of the most anticipated films of 2025 in Lithuania – *Pietinia Kronikas* by director Ignas Miškinis (prod. Lukas Trimonis, co-prod. Andreas Kask, Ilya Medovy, and Esko Rips) – takes viewers on a nostalgic journey back to the 1990s. At the Tallinn Film Festival, it was named the best Baltic film, while the actor Robertas Petraitis, who played the supporting role, received the Black Nights Stars award as a recognition for being selected as one of the young talents from the Baltic region.



Toxic



Drowning Dry team in Locarno.

Photo by Ti Press / Locarno Film Festival



Murmuring Hearts

Additionally, at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, Linas Žiūra won the award for best cinematography, for his work on the observational documentary film *Murmuring Hearts* (dir. Vytautas Puidokas, prod. Rūta Jekentaitė, co-prod. Maria Galliani Dyrvik, Anita Vedā, and Estelle Robin

You), which tells the story of a remote community of recovering addicts and former prisoners through the perspective of a 14-year-old boy.

For the second time in the history of Lithuanian cinema, the short film *Ootid* (dir. Eglė Razu-maitė, prod. Lineta Lasiauskaitė) competed in the main short film program at the Cannes



Linas Žiūra won the award for best cinematography at PÖFF.

Photos by Erlend Štaub

2024 LITHUANIAN FILMS' Awards

Ignas Miškinis and Narvydas Naujalis.



Southern Chronicles

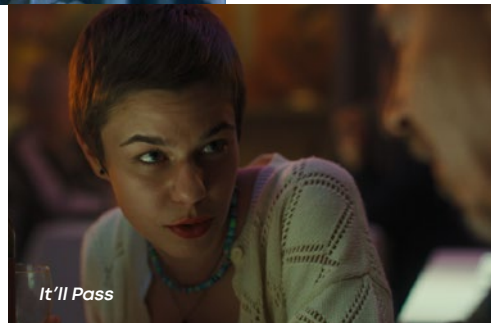




Ootid

Film Festival. The film *It'll Pass* (prod. Mantas Macenavičius and Jing Zhao), by Dovydas Drakšas, a graduate of the London Film School, participated in the special program La Cinef, dedicated to short films created in film schools from around the world.

The Polish Lithuanian co-production *Trains* (dir. Maciej Drygas) was selected as the best film, and awarded for best editing at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. The film, created from archival 20th-century footage, was produced by Vita Želakevičiūtė (Drygas Film) and co-produced by Rasa Miškinytė (Era Film).



It'll Pass



Trains

THREE HIGHLIGHTED NAMES

During the Season of Lithuania in France, the Lithuanian Film Centre and the Centre Pompidou organized a retrospective of the works of one of the most prominent Lithuanian documentary film directors, Audrius Stonys, in Paris. Film lovers had a unique opportunity to see twenty of his films, from the short film *Open the Door to Him Who Comes* (1989) to *Bridges of Time* (2018), which was shown for the first time in France.

In 2024, the largest short film event in Switzerland – the Winterthur International Short Film Festival – put the focus on the director and cinematographer Vytautas Katkus. Festival visitors were presented not only with two special programs of Vytautas Katkus' short films, including works directed and filmed by him, but also with a masterclass led by the filmmaker himself.

At the end of the year, the European Film Promotion organization announced that Lithuanian actor Šarūnas Zenkevičius had been selected for the European Shooting Stars international program, dedicated to

Right: Audrius Stonys' retrospective was screened at Centre Pompidou in Paris.



Middle: Skalvija Cinema Center was awarded by Europa Cinemas. **Right:** Vytis Purnas (on the right) at San Sebastian FF.

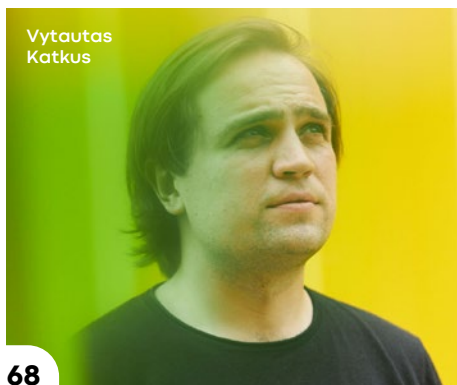
rising European film stars. The actor particularly impressed the jury with his leading role in the latest film by the director Ignas Jonynas, *Borderline* (prod. Rūta Jekentaitė and Martynas Mickėnas).

OTHER ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN THE CINEMA FIELD

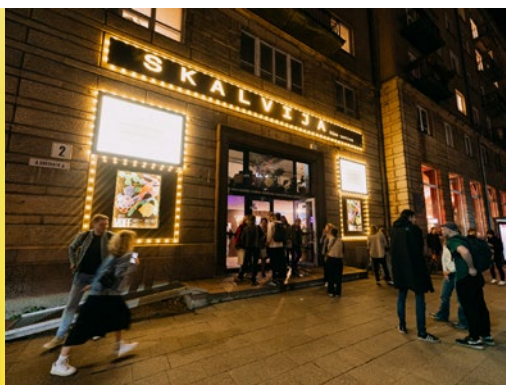
The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences revealed that the Vilnius Short Film Festival was included in the list of film festivals whose winners can qualify for the Oscar consideration. As a result, the festival's Grand Prix winner will now be eligible to compete for an Oscar. This is the first time that a Lithuanian film festival has been included on this list.

During the Europa Cinemas Network Conference in Vilnius, the Europa Cinemas award for the Best Young Audience Activities was given to the Skalvija Cinema Center. Rated among more than 1,200 European cinemas, Skalvija has been implementing educational projects for children and teenagers since 2007.

Another award went to the Lithuanian-made sound design platform Sonic Alchemist, founded by the sound editor Vytis Purnas. The platform won the Best European Project prize at the Zinemaldia Startup Challenge Awards organized by the San Sebastián International Film Festival. **BF**



Vytautas Katkus



Sauna Day
team in Cannes.

On Weary Wings Go
By team in Locarno.

Photo by Locarno Film Festival / Ti-Press



Photo by Erlend Staub

From Sundance to Cannes

ESTONIAN SHORTS IN 2024

Recent years have been fruitful for Estonian short-form cinema, showcasing both artistic diversity and receiving international acclaim. **In 2024, with Estonian shorts making waves** at Sundance, Clermont-Ferrand, Cannes, and TIFF, among others, the country cemented its reputation as a rising powerhouse in short-form filmmaking.

By Aurelia Aasa

Shorts often push the boundaries of filmmaking by exploring narratives that feature films might deem to be risky. The topics of the previous short film year ranged from deeply personal (*Sewing Machine*) to playful, featuring meowing digital cats (*Miisufy*), and sinister unborn twins (Tampere FF premiere *The Little Other*). A standout initiative was tied to the European Capital of Culture program – Tartu 2024. A call for filmmakers to capture the essence of South Estonia resulted in eight shorts, four by Estonian filmmakers (Ülo Pikkov, Eva Kübar, Maria Aua, Jaan Tootsen) and four by international authors (Carl Olsson, Andrey Paounov, Viesturs Kairiņš, Andris Gauja), all exploring the region's communities and peculiarities while tackling the overarching theme of "Arts of Survival."

Among the "Arts of Survival" docs is Ülo Pikkov's *Sewing Machine*, featuring archival footage, a wide array of animation techniques, and modern travel dia-

ries shot on 16-mm. *Sewing Machine* follows the life of filmmaker's great-grandmother who was forced to flee the town of Pechory, after her father, the deputy mayor, was killed by Bolsheviks for refusing to hand over the keys to the town monastery. *Sewing Machine* was named Film of the Year by the Estonian Association of Film Journalists (FIPRESCI). It's a first for Pikkov, whose previous animated docs have screened at Annecy, Ottawa, and Clermont-Ferrand, among others.



Photo by Greta Sauter

Ülo Pikkov

EVENTS



Madli Lääne

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

Other highlights included Liisi Grünberg's debut *Miisufy*, a playful exploration of digital companions in our increasingly virtual world. Selected from more than 12 000 submissions, the film secured a spot at Sundance's competitive short film program while also competing at Clermont-Ferrand. Building on the intimate documentary *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*, a winner of the European Film Academy Documentary Award, Anna Hints and Tushar Prakash (editor of *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*) returned with *Sauna Day*, a tender exploration of intimacy that premiered at Cannes Critics Week before traveling to TIFF. Meanwhile, Madli Lääne's drama *Jungle Law* received the Artist Award at Odense Short FF for its unique design and cinematography and was awarded in Rome FF parallel section Alice nella Città as the Best International Short Film.

The diverse artistic directions of Estonian animation gave us horror comedy *Yummy* (dir. Martinus Klemet) that received the Grand Prix at Hungary's Anilogue, while Priit Pärn released *Luna Rossa* alongside Olga Pärn, earning two lifetime achievement awards. One of these honours came from Fredrikstad, Norway's leading animation festival, where Pärn was celebrated for his profound influence on Nordic and Baltic animation. Anu-Laura Tuttelberg's poetic stop-motion *On Weary Wings Go By* premiered in Locarno and qualified for the Oscars through its win at DOK Leipzig. A promising sign given that three Estoni-

an animated shorts – (*Sierra*, directed by Sander Joon; *Dog Apartment*, directed by Priit Tender; and *Eeva*, directed by Lucija Mrzljak and Morten Tšinakov) have been shortlisted in two subsequent years.

ESTONIA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

"The competition in the short film scene is fierce, and while success on the festival circuit isn't the only measure, it remains an important one," explains Mirjam Mikk from the Estonian Film Institute's distribution department. "Alongside cherishing individual achievements, we're dedicated to solidifying Estonia's presence on the global festival map with focused showcases." Besides the Baltic film festivals in London and New York, 2024 included an Estonian focus at BEAST, a cutting-edge festival in Porto spotlighting fresh Eastern European voices. Beyond its short film lineup, the festival delved into Estonian archival footage and experimental video art from the early 2000s.

"We propose films, but the final word is always with the festivals," Mikk notes, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the selection process. Looking ahead, Estonia will be in the spotlight at Fantoche,

one of the world's leading animation festivals, while the year will begin with Baltic Film Days in Paris, featuring films like *Sierra*, *Miisufy*, and *Sauna Day*. "We have big plans for 2025," Mikk shares, signalling another ambitious year for Estonian short cinema. **BF**



Priit Pärn with the EAA Lifetime Achievement Award

Photo by European Animation Awards

Photo by Robin Marshall

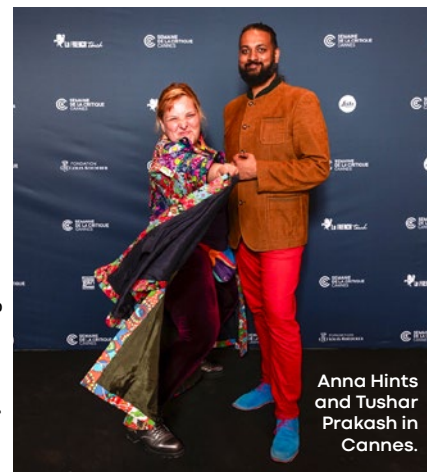


The producer of *Miisufy* Aurelia Aasa (second on the right) at the premiere at Sundance FF 2024.



Anu-Laura Tuttelberg

Photo by Susann Bargaz Gomez



Anna Hints and Tushar Prakash in Cannes.

Photo by Julia Hervouin

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