

Latvian Film Magazine



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2017

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Several dimensions of Latvian cinema



Dita Rietuma

Director of the National Film Centre of Latvia

Latvian cinema is currently experiencing an active period of creativity. In fact, this is the most intense period of work in recent Latvian cinema history. Since independence was restored in the early 1990s, filmmaking in Latvia has gradually picked up speed, and the approaching centennial celebrations in 2018 have provided additional motivation for the film industry. At over 9 million euros, funding for the sector in 2017 is the highest since restoration of independence.

In anticipation of the special programme planned for Latvia's centennial, the film sector has received additional funding (7.5 million euros over the course of several years), which

allows it to significantly increase the number of films being made. Sixteen full-length films are currently in the works for the centennial: six feature films, two full-length animated films and eight documentaries (most of them docudramas, combining elements of feature films and archival material). In addition, half of them are directed by women, talented filmmakers with unique outlooks on the realities of Latvia's past and present.

The first films made in honour of Latvia's centennial will come out already in the autumn of 2017, with the others following throughout 2018. They will hopefully confirm the potential of the Latvian cinema sector, both at home and with international audiences. To that end, several of the centennial programme films are intended to be international co-productions. For example, Madara Dišlere's feature film *Paradise '89* is a co-production with Germany.

The goal of film institutions everywhere is to support the production of films. But these institutions are also interested in helping each film to become an event not only in its country of origin but also internationally. Several recent Latvian films have managed to participate in national cultural processes and draw impressive crowds to local theatres as well as gain recognition abroad. For example, Viesturs Kairiņš' historical drama *Chronicles of Melanie* was one of the leading box office hits in Latvia in 2016, taking fourth place after



About 700 extras helped to recreate the events of 1989 for the Latvian Centenary film *Paradise '89*





three big-budget animated Hollywood films, which are traditionally the most-watched films in Latvia. Kairišs' work convincingly defied notions that only entertainment films, films in which the viewers can "lose themselves", can become hits. *Chronicles of Melanie* is a dramatic and shocking story of survival – its main hero, Melānija Vanaga, was deported to Siberia by the Soviet regime in 1941, where she lived in harsh, inhumane conditions for sixteen years.

With its black-and-white, refined visual style and Swiss actress Sabine Timoteo's portrayal of the main character, *Chronicles of Melanie* has restored an important part of Latvia's historical memory. The director used an artistic approach to tell about one of the 20th century's many tragedies. Based on real events, the film avoids naturalism to create an aesthetically distanced message. The work's

dramatic strength is concentrated in Timoteo's superb ability to express emotion through her body as well as cinematographer Gints Bērziņš' skill in capturing that emotion on film. *Chronicles of Melanie* is a co-production with the Czech Republic and Finland and thereby also a marker of the international dimension of Latvian cinema.

The historical dimension is also manifested in the newest films by two other Latvian directors. Laila Pakalniņa's *Dawn* is a visually ambitious work that contemplates motifs from *Bezhin Meadow* (1937), a film by Riga-born cinema master Sergei Eisenstein that was suppressed by censors and believed to have been destroyed, and moves the location of those motifs to Latvia. A Latvia-Poland-Estonia co-production, *Dawn* was included on the European Film Academy's selection list in 2016 and received many international awards. ▶



The feature film *Chronicles of Melanie*, based on the story of a woman who survived 16 years in Siberia, became one of the leading box office hits of 2016



The historical themes, the directors' distinct styles and the fruitful work with world-class European actors that characterise both *Chronicles of Melanie* and *Dawn* are also evident in Dāvis Sīmanis' film *Exiled*, in which the main role is played by the outstanding German actor Ulrich Matthes. The action in *Exiled* takes place in a hospital during the First World War, and the film testifies to the strength and tradition of European art cinema, or arthouse cinema, in Latvia.

Even though well-known European actors (such as Matthes and Timoteo, and Wiktor Zborowski in *Dawn*) have played in several recent Latvian films, Latvian actors have also



Exiled (2016) is director Dāvis Sīmanis' debut in full-length films, and in January 2017 he began filming his Centenary film, *Boy With a Dog*



Laila Pakalniņa's film *Dawn* was included on the European Film Academy's selection list

proved that they can break into the European elite. For example, *Mellow Mud*, which features the young Latvian actress Elīna Vaska, won the Crystal Bear at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival, and in 2017 Vaska returns to Berlin as a rising star in the European Shooting Star programme.

Latvia is also represented in the animated film section of the Berlin Film Festival with the film *Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures*, made by director Reinis Kalnaellis and the Rija Films. This achievement confirms the creative potential of Latvian animation traditions.

Several Latvian cinema achievements are linked with the Generation section of the Berlin Film Festival. In addition to animation films, feature films by young Latvian directors have also been presented in it, such as Renārs Vimba's *Mellow Mud* (Crystal Bear, 2016) and Jānis Nords' *Mother, I Love You* (Grand Prix, 2013).

Documentary films are likewise a Latvian tradition. The annual international Baltic





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Sea Docs forum in Riga is organised by the National Film Centre of Latvia and enters its third decade this year. And in recent years the internationally known director Vitaly Mansky has also made films in Latvia and with financial support from Latvia (*Under the Sun* [2015], *Close Relations* [2016]).

As in many European countries, one of the goals of the Latvian cinema industry is to attract filmmakers from abroad by offering cash rebate schemes. For more information about locations and filming in Latvia, visit www.filmlatvia.lv.

Financial support for international projects is offered by the Riga City Council's Riga Film Fund (since 2010) and the National Film Centre of Latvia (since 2013). Both financial schemes can be combined, thereby totalling a 25% cash rebate. During the period in which the funds have been in operation, twenty-five international productions from ten countries

have received co-financing. Last year, director Sergei Loznitsa made his newest film, *A Gentle Creature*, in Latvia; it was produced by Marianne Slot (Slot Machine, France).

Latvia is also open to co-productions – for example, support was granted for Peter Greenaway's upcoming film *The Eisenstein*



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1. At the Berlinale competition in 2017 – *Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures*

2. At the Berlinale competition in 2016 – Elīna Vaska and Renārs Vimba receive the Crystal Bear for *Mellow Mud*

3. Rundāle Palace is one of the variable locations in Latvia available for filmmakers from abroad

Handshakes, the director's second film dedicated to Sergei Eisenstein, and Latvia will join this project as a minority co-producer. And this, too, is proof of the country's dynamic and modern cinema industry, which is able to work in a variety of genres and directions, both on a local and international dimension. ■



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Latvia's "Shooting Star" – Elīna Vaska



Daira Āboliņa

Elīna Vaska always stands up straight. She has an open yet deep and mysterious look in her eye. She observes directly, seeing through things and looking inward. Her fearlessness is almost scary, and one feels pride for her. There is something archetypically Latvian about her, something ancient. And yet she is very much of this century. She is aristocratic in her human simplicity.

Vaska's convincing, heartfelt performance in director Renārs Vimba's debut film *Mellow Mud* has moved audiences. It also helped the film win the Best Film award in Latvia and several awards beyond the country's borders, including a very noteworthy Crystal Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016. Film critic Alissa Simon of *Variety* has written about the debutant actress: "The phenomenal Vaska, who currently studies audiovisual and stage art at the Latvian Academy of Culture, is a remarkable find, certain to be in demand at home and abroad." It is no surprise, then, that Vaska has been named one of the European Shooting Stars of 2017.

In 2016 Vaska was also awarded a Lielais Kristaps award for Best Actress, the Latvian version of an Oscar. On stage, when receiving the award for her portrayal of the main role in *Mellow Mud*, Vaska said: "The greatest boldness should not be attributed to me, for

playing this part. Instead, it should be to you, for choosing me for this film. Thank you!"

A few years earlier, Vimba had tasked the Latvian agency *Casting Bridge* to find a young woman who could, as the film's main character, carry the emotional burden and dramatic coming-of-age narrative onto the big screen. The agency searched all around, including at a school in the small town of Cesvaine, Latvia. At the time, 18-year-old Vaska was in 12th grade and, like many other girls at her school, decided to audition in between classes. "To me it seems like a lucky string of coincidences: Why did they specifically come to my school? Why did I get in line to audition along with the other girls? More likely, it might have been to overcome my insecurities, to try something I'd never done before. And the fact that I didn't harbour any great hope of getting the part gave me a sense of lightness and unrestraint," Vaska remembers.

But there was still a long way to go before she reached the role of Raya. A second round of auditions, this time with Vimba himself, took place a few months later. Due to a misunderstanding, however, Vaska believed he was just one of many assistants sent to speak with the teens. Their conversation was therefore informal, friendly and easy. "As I left the audition, he (Vimba) asked me whether I have freckles.... And from the way he looked at me I knew I had piqued his interest," she says. ▶



Artūrs
Kondrāts

Debutante actress Elīna Vaska has been selected for the European Shooting Stars list following her first cinema role



Film critic Alissa Simon of Variety has written about the debutant actress: “The phenomenal Vaska, who currently studies audiovisual and stage art, is a remarkable find, certain to be in demand at home and abroad.” It is no surprise, then, that Vaska has been named one of the European Shooting Stars of 2017.



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Zeltiņa



Winning the Crystal Bear at the Berlin Film Festival is a significant event for Latvian cinema, and it is a heady achievement for the new director and young actress.



Vaska is, in fact, a Rigan. She spent her childhood in Latvia's capital, where she also attended ballet school and nourished her dream of becoming a contemporary dancer. "Dance is one of my great unfulfilled dreams," she says. Her parents moved to a small town when Vaska and her siblings were still quite young, forcing her and her younger sister and brother to find different outlets for their creativity and energy. Ballet school was now too far away, so Vaska chose to enroll in the local music school. Her main instrument was the cello, and she spent an additional two years studying the flute. Vaska's grandfather is the internationally known composer Pēteris Vasks. Everyone in the family played the piano, but Vaska describes her relationship with music as quite intimate. She plays when alone or with only a couple of friends and believes that, instead of providing an

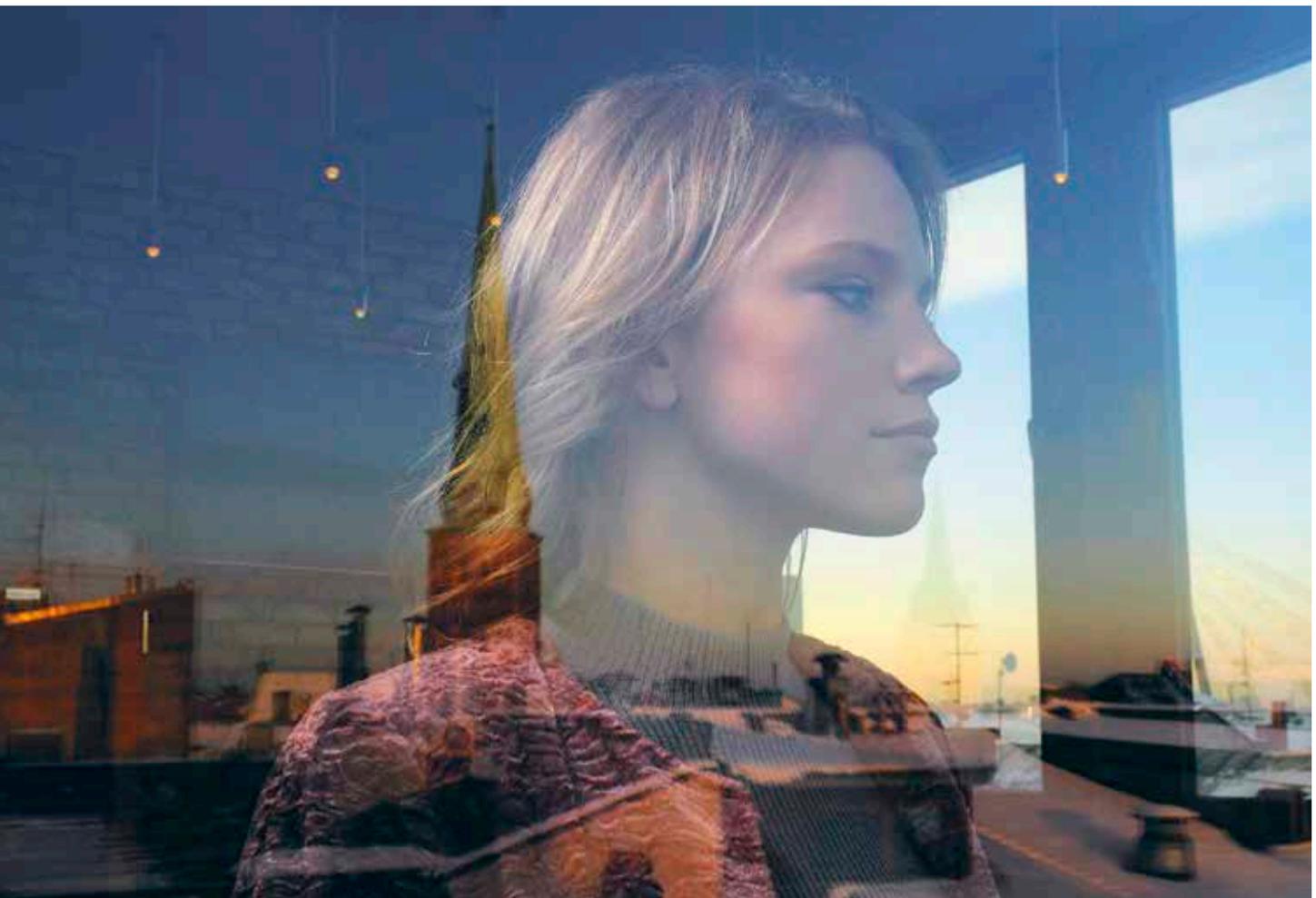
opportunity to be noticed, music school taught her to feel the power of music and to become a good listener of music.

However, when watching Vaska's debut in *Mellow Mud*, one cannot fail to notice the young actress' skill at expression. She speaks, as it were, with her whole body, tensing up with spite or curling up in despair. She animates her hero with her entire human essence. Raya is no longer a child, nor is she already a woman – she tumbles through life without the support of adult family members, all the while preserving her very human but still immature sense of self-awareness.

Vaska explains: "The director told me that Raya will not cry when her brother is brought home with an injured leg. Raya will only cry once during the whole film.... It's important to feel with your whole body the things that are going on around you. I always keep my eyes



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and ears open – I'm sensitive to that. I work intuitively, because I'm not a professionally trained actress and don't have my own 'acting couch'.... I don't lacerate and beat myself up, but it's always important for me to know that I believe in what I'm doing."

Vaska has moved viewers in Latvia and abroad with her organic approach to acting. She has a natural knack for acting, a "film gene" that lets the camera see the finest emotional nuance in her face – the way she forms a thought, the way her hero doubts and then finally makes a decision. She has about her a freshness, a not yet fully comprehended feminine power, a most intense naturalness.

As the filming for *Mellow Mud* was wrapping up, Vaska sought ways to stay in contact with the cinema world. To that end, she spent a year working as a recruiting assistant at *Casting Bridge*, the same agency that had discovered her. "I don't like statements about becoming obsessed with theatre and cinema, but at one point you realise that you do want to be a part of all that, that you want to understand the different parts that go into it. It's important for me, as a young actress, to understand and appreciate the amount of work put into a project by the people all around me on the set. My first big project as an assistant was for the BBC series *War & Peace* (2016), directed by Tom Harper," she says.

While continuing her studies in art theory, Vaska agreed to try her hand at acting on a professional theatre stage and now plays a double role in *The Lover* (directed by Gennadiy Ostrovskiy). In the play, a deceased young woman is remembered by her husband and her lover, whose memories are visualised as amateur home movies. Vaska's role as a happy young woman is only shown on screen. On stage, she plays the woman's 15-year-old son, and she does this so convincingly that, were it not for her name in the programme, one would never guess it's a young woman behind the unkempt, obstinate teenager. "I trained in boxing to learn how to move like a

boy, and I worked with a speech therapist to learn how to express my character's thoughts. Every little thing says something about a person, even the way he opens a door or picks up a glass," says Vaska.



In January 2017, another stage performance by Vaska took place at Dirty Deal Teatro in Riga. The production, titled *The Other Side*, is a story for children that centres around the topic of death. "I'm interested in acting, and I'm looking for opportunities in Europe to further my education in this field," says Vaska.

Winning the Crystal Bear at the Berlin Film Festival is a significant event for Latvian cinema, and it is a heady achievement for the new director and young actress. In February, Vaska will participate in the festival's European Shooting Stars project, which is a wonderful opportunity for a select group of promising new actors like herself. When asked what she expects of this project, she answers: "It's important for me to receive advice from professionals. Latvian actors do not have agents, who can help them work on a broader scale. It's very difficult to continue working on your own, it's very touch-and-go.... I need someone by my side who believes in me and can help me make the right professional decisions. And I'm not scared of anything." ■



In the film *Mellow Mud*, Raya is forced to take responsibility for her brother and solve problems that would be difficult even for adults to deal with



Zane
Peneze

Kristīne
Matīsa



Agnese
Zeltiņa

From the left:
Ilona Brūvere,
Ināra Kolmane,
Dzintra Geka,
Anna Viduleja,
Roze Stiebra,
Kristīne Briede,
Kristīne Želve

The Latvian centenary in cinema and its Femmes Fatales



The cinema industry in Latvia is preparing for fireworks in 2018 – like a present for the country's 100th birthday, the National Film Centre of Latvia has established the *Latvian Films for Latvia's Centenary* programme to

create sixteen new full-length films in a variety of genres. Feature films, documentaries and animated films. Entertaining family films, significant historical studies and screen adaptations of classic literary works. Together, these films will go on to mark a certain Latvian style in filmmaking.

But one thing is already clear, even before the films have been finished – female power is a force to be reckoned with in Latvian cinema. Latvia does not need to introduce a system of quotas, such as the Scandinavian countries have done, in order to help achieve gender balance in an industry that has, from Hollywood to Bollywood, traditionally been dominated by men. But not in Latvia. Eight of the Centenary films are directed by women, some of them just making their debuts in cinema, others with considerable experience in filmmaking. ▶

DZINTRA GEKA

Documentary film
Kurts Fridrihsons

Dzintra Geka has devoted her career to commemorating the victims of the 20th-century deportations to Siberia, and in her newest film she focuses on one such deportee. It was precisely for the strength and breadth of his spirit that the artist, non-conformist and spiritual teacher Kurts Fridrihsons was imprisoned in the Gulag. He had been active in the so-called French Group, a group of artists in the 1950s who met on Monday evenings in an atmosphere not unlike the French salons to discuss art, culture and events in the “free world”. The Soviet

regime, however, considered this group dangerous and arrested many of its members. With his unique charisma, Fridrihsons served as an example and an inspiration to many who found it difficult or impossible to accept the Soviet system.

KRISTĪNE ŽELVE

Documentary film
Mērijas ceļojums
Mērija's Journey

Director Kristīne Želve is holding a crown in her hands, an ethnographic copy of a traditional bride's crown from the region of Kurzeme (Courland). The crown is one of the countless valuable cultural objects

that Mērija Grīnberga, the hero of this film, saved from destruction during the Second World War. At the time, she volunteered to accompany a shipment of valuables from Latvian museum collections to Germany. There she protected them and eventually returned to Latvia with all seven train cars full of the objects. Grīnberga received no recognition for her selfless accomplishment and her belief in the mission, only mistrust and suspicion from the authorities. In this documentary, which contains some dramatised elements, Želve attempts to solve a detective story involving risk and fearlessness that no one knowingly sought.



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KRISTĪNE BRIEDE

Documentary film
Baltijas jaunais vilnis
Baltic New Wave

With her thorough research, director Kristīne Briede hurries to meet the old masters of Baltic documentary cinema, the people who discovered a new language of cinema and a new way of thinking. Their resulting poetic documentary cinema style also became known much further afield. Some of these innovators have already passed away, some are still making films, but together they form a complete entity. And to explore this unique space, Briede and her team have used Ptolemy's Map as a guide. The map is used both in

a literal sense (documentary filmmaker and sometimes theoretician Herz Frank published a book by the same name in 1975) and figuratively, referring to the ancient Egyptian-Greek astronomer's map of the world. Frank compared his predecessor's map with the script of a documentary film – he wrote that Ptolemy did not know that the earth was round and drew the contours of the continents according to stories told by seafarers, but Columbus and other explorers nevertheless used his approximate map to travel the world.

Regarding the older generation of filmmakers, Briede reminds us that each one of her film's heroes had

a woman by his side. These women were often unknown to movie-goers, but they served as a filmmaker's closest and most important adviser, assistant, consultant and critic, all in one person.

ILONA BRŪVERE

Documentary film
Ievainotais jātnieks
The Wounded Rider

Director Ilona Brūvere holds a framed certificate of donation that was awarded to citizens who gave money in the 1930s for the construction of Latvia's most important monument, the Freedom Monument. The statue of a female figure holding three stars in her uplifted arms will no doubt



have been seen by almost every tourist who has spent the briefest of moments in central Riga. Between 1932 and 1935 the Latvian people donated two million lats to support the creation of this symbol of freedom by sculptor Kārlis Zāle, only to have that freedom taken away from them for fifty long years a very short time later. In this film about Zāle, Brūvere masterfully combines archival materials with elements of drama, leading the viewer into a different world, a world in which history comes alive.

INĀRA KOLMANE

Feature film *Bille*

In our toy-overloaded world it is difficult to imagine

what life was like for a young girl in the years before the Second World War. She is taken to a toy store with great hopes of finally getting a real doll, but she returns home with only a doll's head – her mother will sew a body for the doll from rags and remnants of cloth. This episode from Ināra Kolmane's film shows the harsh reality of her main hero's childhood. The girl is cared for but not overly loved; she is poor but not as uncultured and ill-bred as her relatives make her out to be. Bille is offended, and she wishes to break free from this cramped and frosty world. And she will succeed – this we already know, because the film is a screen adaptation of an

autobiography, the childhood memories of the well-known Latvian author and poet Vizma Belševica (1931–2005).

ROZE STIEBRA

Animated film

Saule brauca debesīs

The Sun Rides up into the Sky

Several generations of Latvian children have grown up with Roze Stiebra's animated films. She is the founder of hand-drawn animation in Latvia, and her talent has managed to hold the attention of young and old audiences alike, even into the computer age. For Latvia's centenary she is making *The Sun Rides up into the Sky*, an on-screen parable about the victory of



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light over darkness. For Stiebra, this light is symbolised by a small mirror, round as the sun. In the film, the daughter of the sun (representing Latvia) is born into light, but Selēna, the ruler of the darkness, steals the little girl. Only humans can help her. Finally, freed by the masked mummers, Latvia blossoms like a beautiful and eternal flower.

MADARA DIŠLERE

Feature film *Paradīze '89*
Paradise '89

A folding bed, flowery dresses and hushed conversations among the adults about a possible war – such are the childhood memories upon which young

director Madara Dišlere bases her film about the late 1980s, the period of reawakening for the Baltic States that was a significant time in the recent history of both Latvia and Europe as a whole. In the shadow of Latvian and world politics, the little cousins “play adults” by drinking bitter coffee, trying on their mothers’ lipstick and worrying about whether their parents will divorce. But when the situation becomes truly serious, they are ready to fight, to do everything (in a child’s understanding) to secure the freedom of Latvia.

ANNA VIDULEJA

Feature film *Homo Novus*

The palette of painter Normunds Brasliņš, given to her by Prof. Kristaps Zariņš at the Art Academy of Latvia – it is with such authentic contemporary objects that film director Anna Viduleja enriches her screen adaptation of Anšlavs Eglītis’ novel *Homo Novus*, which tells about the life of artists in 1930s Riga. It is a humorous story about bohemian life in the interwar era, illustrating the different fates of two artists: the slide of the rich, genteel heir into idleness, and the triumph of the poor, hard-working artist. The story also contemplates the power of an artist’s creative spirit, which is as relevant an issue today as it was in the past. ■



Jānis Nords. Ping pong tactics



Jānis Nords belongs to the new generation of Latvian film directors – trained in good film schools, internationally oriented, ambitious and talented



Dārta Ceriņa

Director Jānis Nords compares filmmaking to a ping pong rally in which one needs to masterfully engage with the material. He is close to finishing up on his third full-length feature

film, *Foam At The Mouth* (Ar putām uz lūpām, 2017) – all that’s left is just a few more serves and strokes, or, just a bit more filming and post-production. Nords’ second full-length feature film, *Mother, I Love You* (Mammu, es tevi mīlu), in which he finely examines the relationship between a mother and son, came out in 2013. It won the Generation Kplus international jury award at the Berlinale as well as a number of other international awards. In his newest work, he moves from the scale of two people to a broader study of familial and human fulfilment.

Foam At The Mouth tells the story of a policeman named Didzis who, after surviving a serious car accident, tries to begin a business training police dogs. In the meantime, his wife, Jana, has begun an affair with the much younger man Roberts. When Didzis’ beloved dogs run away and begin threatening the local inhabitants, he and Jana are forced to confront their past and each other in order to avert an approaching disaster. “In this film the canvas is much larger, and the layer of paint is much thicker, too,” says Nords.

Can you describe the aftertaste left by the filming of *Foam At The Mouth*?

The filming was extremely complicated because it was winter and it was difficult to

coordinate the times and possibilities for the actors. Another difficulty was the changing weather conditions – one day winter, the next day spring – which created problems with continuity.... No, let's call them challenges instead. And the third thing was that three of the characters were dogs, which naturally brought a level of unpredictability to the process – it tested our patience and also our skills. That said, I don't think the filming process is ever easy; depending on what you've "thrown into the mix", it's always a battle between the actors, time, script and yourself.

When your previous film, *Mother, I Love You*, came out, you said in an interview that the most complicated thing in making the film was precisely the microscopic study of the relationship. Have you continued studying the structure of relationships in your new film as well?

No, this film is a little different. In the previous film everything was observed through a magnifying glass, following every step of the relationship between the mother and son. But in this film we've used a bigger, wider paintbrush and everything is much more abrasive – there's a lot more contrast and different scales in this story. It's also different aesthetically – instead of zooming in, so to say, with a hand-held camera, we're observing from the outside. The camera is more reserved and contemplative.

At the same time, though, this film also studies family structure. But the scale is different.

Yes, it contains two relationship models: there's a sort of triangle, but then two other heroes show up from time to time. In this film the canvas is much larger, and the layer of paint is much thicker, too. Like military tactics, where you're looking at a map from above and moving units around on it. Here I'm no longer inside the relationship between two people.

Already a year and a half ago, when reading the draft of the screenplay, the first thing that came to my mind was the dogs – how would that turn out? Because on an allegorical level the dogs play an essential role in the film, but filming with real animals can be very challenging.



Yes, it all rests on the dogs, and they're neither professional actors nor people. And the director is always working in the space between success and the time he's put into trying to film a specific scene with the dogs. If at the last moment a dog's attention isn't caught by a fly buzzing 500 metres away, then maybe one take out of fifteen is actually usable. You just have to accept it that that's the way things are going to be.

It's been some time now since the Berlinale, the European Children's Film Association Awards and the bunch of national film awards that your second film won. Has anything changed since then? Have you become more demanding of yourself?

If you're making a film and are on the set, then you don't think about those things. Of course, I'm exaggerating, but...at that point you just hate everything, you see only the mistakes, and you're grappling with your own weaknesses. I didn't realise that *Mother, I Love You* would be a successful film until much later. It was already all edited and ready and ▶



Dogs play a significant role in Nords' new film, *Foam at the Mouth* (2017), where they symbolise a primal energy and provoke people's emotions



It gets harder with every film, because you see all the opportunities and all the pitfalls. You know the tricks that inadvertently helped you before, but now they're not helping anymore.

JĀNIS NORDS

DIRECTOR:

Foam at the Mouth / Ar putām uz lūpām / 2017
 Mother, I Love You / Mammu, es tevi mīlu / 2013
 Amateur / Amatieris / 2008

WRITER:

Mother, I Love You / Mammu, es tevi mīlu / 2013
 Return of Sergeant Lapins / Seržanta Lapiņa atgriešanās / 2010
 Amateur / Amatieris / 2008

PRIZES FOR MOTHER, I LOVE YOU:

Berlinala 2013 – Best Feature Film
 Best Buster Award 2013 – Danish Writer's Guild's Best Screenplay for Children
 Los Angeles Film Festival 2013 – Best Narrative Feature
 ECFA prize for the European Best Children's Film / 2014

NATIONAL PRIZES:

Best Feature / 2014
 Best Director / 2014
 Best Actress / 2014





had travelled to a couple of festivals.... But I try concentrating on the next project, that is, on the present project.

Purposefully focussing on the present, not dwelling on previous experiences?

Well, you can't really compare projects – it's completely different material. You're out there on the set and dealing with all the challenges being thrown at you. At that moment you think you're a total loser. Paper is very forgiving, but when you've got to get what you've written up onto the screen, then all sorts of things you never thought about before come up. And you don't have time to think about whether it's going to be a success or not.

I don't so much mean success. Rather, have you become more demanding of yourself?

It gets harder with every film, because you see all the opportunities and all the pitfalls. You know the tricks that inadvertently helped you before, but now they're not helping anymore. Every stage of filming depends on a certain amount of luck, but it always depends on how well you've prepared the soil for that luck to sprout.

For your previous films you were also the screenwriter, and you've had a fair amount of experience in this regard. But for this film you chose to base it on a work by Matt Gossett that won the Amazon Studios Award in 2013. What attracted you to this screenplay?

There are a lot of directors who write the screenplays for their own films, but on the whole I think there are very few successful director-screenwriters. That's because they're different professions that demand a different type of discipline, psychology and way of thinking. The stuff that you write down on paper needs to be interpreted differently when you're talking with an actor or working with the camera. A director and screenwriter look at the same material with different eyes. ▶



Vilis Daudziņš (left), one of the best dramatic actors in Latvia, plays the main role in the new film by Nords (right)



How did you find this screenplay?

I was given this work for a completely different reason. The screenwriters offered to introduce me to Gossett and his work *Origin of Species*, which contained a lot of references to the genre, but much of it was incomplete. Of course, it was a different worldview. I was attracted to a couple of elements: there was a wonderful relationship triangle between Jana, the policeman Didzis and the young man Roberts, and that was all reflected in the dogs' behaviour. Especially the heroes' storylines and how they were developed – for example, the former policeman Didzis, who has self-esteem problems and therefore can't get back on his feet again, and, in addition, his wife has left him. That's an interesting theme when you reach the age when Cupid has run out of arrows and love's champagne has lost its bubbles. You're left with that one person and you learn to put up with the way she is, even though you're totally sick of her and don't want to see her anymore. Or maybe you seek out something fresh and new? That's a theme that interests me.

Even though it's often said that loyalty between two people is a universal thing, were there any challenges in localising the story?

The story has been changed quite a bit since I received it. There have been some tectonic changes: heroes have regrouped, accents and themes have changed. The film

is now already in the editing stage, so I don't really remember the very beginning anymore. The backdrop has changed, the heroes have been fleshed out and have become more vigorous – as happens during any creative process. I'm still too deep in the film, so I can't step back and take a look at it from the outside.

In this film you've continued your collaboration with the cameraman Tobias Datum, with whom you worked on *Mother, I Love You*.

And yet, this film's aesthetic approach and the way in which we've looked at the processes are quite different from those in *Mother*. It was an attempt to let the actors breathe and not put the camera right in their faces. The events in the film develop, and we follow them objectively, that is, we watch them from the outside. Unlike the previous films, this isn't the subjective experience of one hero. And, of course, that also changes the cinematographic choices.

And how did the script influence them?

It's much easier to make a drawing if you don't have to start from zero, if you can take some existing material and play around with it. Play some ping pong with it. It sounds banal, but a director needs people he can talk with and argue with. I usually use the analogy of my father, who built a house during the

 Nords' second full-length feature film, *Mother, I Love You* (2012), is a coming-of-age story about a boy that focuses on his relationship with his mother and the world at large

Soviet era. He designed it himself, and he built it all himself, too – the foundation, the bricks, the windows. The house turned out quite alright, but to make an architectural masterpiece you need lots of professionals, each of whom is an expert in his own special field. Making a film is no different. So, if I can give the screenwriting job to someone else, I'll do it with the greatest pleasure.

The bar is much higher for auteur cinema, because you have to talk to and grapple with yourself. Or maybe the existing system and viewing trends prove something different – that making true auteur cinema is becoming ever more difficult?

Of course, there are wonderful examples of auteur cinema, and the people making it are extraordinarily smart and able. Sometimes they write their own scripts, sometimes not. But I don't think the bar is higher for auteur cinema than it is for other kinds of cinema. Quite the opposite – auteur cinema sometimes hides the mistakes a director makes as screenwriter. But it all depends on what kind of tailor you are.

Compared with the making of the previous film, has anything changed in attracting financing?

The previous film was made as a co-production with Lithuania, and the budget was smaller. This new film was made along the same lines, but it's a larger project. The fact that I already had one film that was travelling from festival to festival and had won the Berlinale award possibly helped in attracting our Polish colleagues and to receive Eurimages financing. That's very much thanks to the producers – they determinedly pushed all the buttons in the right directions and let this become a bigger project.

This autumn you were on the jury for the Latvian National Film Festival. Where do you think Latvian cinema stands in relation to European cinema? We have lots of talented

directors, each with his or her own style: Laila Pakalniņa, Dāvis Sīmanis, Renārs Vimba and others. But does anything unite them thematically and aesthetically?

I think it's still too early to talk about auteur cinema as a trend in Latvia. We don't even have several separate branches of filmmaking; we have no studio system or financing on that level. Compared with the big European film countries, cinema happens relatively rarely here in Latvia. In that sense, everything that's created here can be considered auteur cinema. We still need a few years before we can talk about a deliberate movement, themes and characteristics.

European cinema is often referred to as a genre in and of itself, a stylistically homogeneous genre. Does Baltic cinema have special cinematographic characteristics of its own?

If we're talking about any big film system, then yes, the films will be similar. In Europe, too, where social themes are characteristic, where the external, social conditions force people to make specific choices. But a problem like that can be found in any homogeneous system.

A while back people liked to say that Latvia produced coming-of-age dramas. But I would say that directors often make coming-of-age films when they're at a certain age. Take François Truffaut, for example. And there are many other examples. I don't know whether you can draw any conclusions from something like that, like whether a movement is forming. More likely it's just a logical theme to work with.

Looking to the future, do you already have a next project in mind?

Of course, I've got all sorts of ideas running through my head, and I've started a project about corruption and civil servants. But right now I'd like to at least finish this one, *Foam At The Mouth*. The premiere is set for autumn of 2017. ■

Myth in our time



Dārta Ceriņa



NAMEJA GREDZENS

The King's Ring, 2017

Director: Aigars Grauba

Producer: Andrejs Ēķis

Screenwriters: Aigars Grauba, Max Kinnings

Camera operator: Valdis Celmiņš

Film editor: Līga Pipare

Language: Latvian/English



 From the right: cinematographer Valdis Celmiņš and director Aigars Grauba

For his 18th birthday Aigars Grauba, the director of the upcoming historical feature film *The King's Ring*, was given a traditional Latvian “Namejs” ring by his mother. The ring had been made of the silver from a melted-down five-lats coin dating to Latvia’s first period of independence, between the two world wars. He acquired a second Namejs ring when he began making this film. Grauba made this second ring himself, under the direction of Vitauts Straupe, a jewellery maker specialising in reproductions of ancient jewellery. Grauba filmed the process and used it in the film’s first trailer.

A Namejs ring is characterised by the special three-part pattern in which the thick silver wires are twisted, and these three wires are said to symbolise the unity of the Latvian nation. In his newest film, Grauba has engaged also in a certain melting-down of history, merging history with a contemporary viewpoint. It is an ambitious tale of the ancient Semigallian leader Namejs and the battles

In this ambitious historical epic, the duo of director Grauba and producer Andrejs Ēķis continue to address themes of national identity and the values that solidify such cohesion. Their long-standing collaboration has resulted in several patriotic and heroic feature films that have attracted large audiences and become some of the most watched films in recent Latvian history. In



he led against the Crusaders and Pope. *The King's Ring* tells about events in 13th-century Semigallia (Zemgale in Latvian), where the young Namejs (played by Edvin Endre) becomes king after the death of the Baltic tribes' previous leader, Viesturs. But someone else has his eyes set on the throne as well....

Grauba insists that he has not tried to idealise the fabled characters. "We show the heroes as they might have been – with a contemporary outlook and understanding," he says. Grauba, who is also the screenwriter for the film, believes that the most important thing when creating a screenplay and characters is a sense of responsibility and its generalisation. In a democratic society, he says, individuals are responsible for themselves, their family and their nation, and therefore an individual cannot allow others to make decisions regarding your freedom.

previous works they also focussed on deciding moments of Latvian history, such as the Soviet occupation in *Dangerous Summer* (2000), the War of Independence and the new Latvian nation in *Defenders of Riga* (2007) and the perseverance and determination of Latvian athletes in the basketball drama *Dream Team 1935* (2012).

According to Grauba and Ēķis, it is precisely this historical foundation that allows them to universalise a story and turn viewers' attention to the meaning of freedom.

Digging still deeper into history increases the potential for strength and abstraction from the detritus of society. "We always talk about fundamental values. Loyalty, love, friendship. That's the only thing we can tell about his time period, because everything else is just background and decoration," says cinematographer Valdis Celmiņš. ▶

Grauba stresses that the Semigallians' story in *The King's Ring* also relates to choices a modern person might make. "In this film Semigallia is a place where each person is free, and the society has its own leader. Namejs takes this to a new level, but it's still a free land," he says. The Semigallians were also the last nation on present-day Latvian soil to be Christianised. This process happened in the

homestead built especially for the film. The memorable Edvin Endre, a promising young Swedish actor known best as Erlendur from the *Vikings* series, portrays Namejs. "I envisioned Namejs as a very young man who breaks preconceptions," says Grauba about the concept for the main hero of the film. Interestingly, in early September of last year Minister of Defence of Latvia Raimonds



late 13th century, which is also when the action in the film takes place.

The screenwriters for *The King's Ring* – Grauba and British screenwriter and author Max Kinnings – have called their work a "legend film". They say it's a historical action movie with good fight scenes, vivid heroes, dynamic action, ancient Latvian traditions and a touch of mystery as well. The film's creative team hopes that international audiences will also relate easily to the story. They have therefore created both a Latvian and English version of the film to help it reach far beyond Latvia's borders. The premiere of *The King's Ring* is planned for late 2017.

For the making of this film, Grauba and Ēķis collaborated with colleagues from neighbouring countries. They invited not only Latvian and Lithuanian actors but also Swedish and British actors to participate in the action on the stylised Semigallian

Bergmanis presented Endre with a custom-made sword forged from Damascus steel by the Latvian bladesmith John Neeman.

Namejs' antagonist is Makss, played by the English actor James Bloor, who has also worked under directors Giuseppe Tornatore and Paul McGuigan. The talented Lithuanian actress Aistė Diržiūtė, known for her role as Austė in the internationally acclaimed coming-of-age drama *The Summer of Sangailė*, plays a strong-willed young Semigallian woman. Other roles feature Latvian actors Gints Andžāns, Egons Dombrovskis, Lauris Dzelzītis, Dainis Grūbe, Andris Keišs, Ivo Martinsons, Artūrs Skrastiņš, Elīna Vāne and others. When an actor notices and develops something in his or her character that you did not write into the script and that never even crossed your mind – Grauba says those are moments of pure joy.

The film's creative team felt immense

satisfaction after the filming process. But late summer and autumn of this past year was nevertheless a very intense time for them, because they wrapped up filming the big crowd scenes. The first round of filming had already ended in autumn 2014, during which they focussed particularly on the battle scenes and the scenes using Lithuanian stunt professionals. Most of the filming took place at

our story for them,” says Grauba.

Celmiņš, for his part, acknowledges Grauba’s ability to attract the right people for a project. “It’s just inconceivable. I don’t know whether he gets it from rock music (Grauba has played in the rock band Jumprava for more than 30 years. – Ed.), but it’s the reason he’s been able to unite and motive such a large group of people to participate in something as



the Cinevilla Studio near the town of Slampe in western Latvia. There, an impressive set recreating a 13th-century Semigallian town, fort, harbour and ships were built. Indoor scenes were filmed in separate pavilions. The film is currently being edited, although supplemental scenes will be filmed in the summer of 2017.

Grauba says every author has free choice in how he or she approaches historical cinema: “Some believe that every button and sugar cube is important for a film’s visual image, but there will always be someone who says he doesn’t care whether a character is wearing an authentic hat or a baseball cap.” *The King’s Ring* does not follow a strict ethnographic route, but it does feature vivid details that transport the viewer into the past. “We are not making a film about the 13th century, and we are not addressing a 13th-century viewer. Instead, it’s a story for the people of today –

absurd as making a movie – not just once, but several times,” he says.

The actors, too, appreciate the excitement they experience when working with Grauba during the intense filming process. “Confident and steadfast – he pulls everyone along with his belief in the work,” says Elīna Vāne, who plays the role of Queen Rāma.

But Grauba does not dismiss his rock music roots when talking about films. Just like each person in a band needs to focus on what he or she does best, so too when making a film – Grauba says the responsibilities somehow get divided up instinctually and according to each team member’s ability. The cinema consists of many purposeful movements. Just like in a music group.

The King’s Ring was made with support from the National Film Centre of Latvia and in cooperation with Kaleidoscope Film Distribution and the Kaunas Film Studio. ■



With their upcoming film *The King’s Ring*, Grauba and producer Andrejs Ēķis continue their collaboration and explore historical themes

Roberts Vinovskis.

With irony and nostalgia



Ilze Auzāne

Roberts Vinovskis is the director of the Latvian film production company Studija Lokomotive, which begins the new year with two new films: Aik Karapetian's psychological thriller *Firstborn* (Pirmdzimtais) and Nils Skapāns' 26-minute plasticine animation *Our Granny Rocks* (*Mūsu ome rullē*). Last year the company produced two films together with its partners Studio Uljana Kim in Lithuania and Amrion in Estonia: *Seneca's Day* (Senekas diena) and *Pretenders* (Lomu spēles) and restored two classical feature films.

What is *Firstborn* about?

It's a story about a 40-year-old architect named Francis who is returning home after a party with his wife, Katrīna. A motorcycle rider named Armands accosts them, insults Katrīna and then robs the couple. Following this incident, problems begin in Francis and Katrīna's relationship, which eventually lead to a murder. Kaspars Znotiņš, Maija Doveika and Kaspars Zāle – three talented Latvian actors – play the main roles in the film.

We did the filming in two stages: the summer before last, and last winter. In January we needed lots of snow and a frozen lake with a hole in the ice, but at Christmas the grass

was still green and the temperatures were well above freezing. In the end, though, we had very good luck with weather conditions, because the new year began with freezing temperatures and snow.

This is your third project together with the director Aik Karapetian.

People Out There (Cilvēki tur, 2012) was his debut as a director of a full-length feature film, and it was also my debut as a producer of a full-length feature film. Up until then I had only worked on documentary films. After that came *The Man in the Orange Jacket* (M.O.Ž., 2014), a horror film that was long and difficult in the making. And now *Firstborn* (2017).

You made *The Man in the Orange Jacket* on a very small budget.

Just like Ivars Tontegode's full-length feature film *Mushroomers* (Sēņotāji), this film was also financed by the studio itself. I think it was necessary for us to have that experience in order to feel the difference between filming without any money and filming with money. But such a practice cannot be repeated indefinitely.

The film earned recognition at the most prestigious film festivals in its genre. How do you explain that?

I think the key to *The Man in the Orange*

Jacket's success was that it wasn't a typical slasher movie, in which a psychopath runs around with a bloody axe and chops people to pieces one after the other. We included the issue of social inequality, which gave it extra meaning.

This was the first horror movie in Latvian cinema for more than twenty years.

Latvia doesn't have a tradition of horror as such – not only films, but also not in literature, which usually influences the cinema quite a bit. We only have a few spooky folk tales.

Is *Firstborn* also a genre film?

It's a psychological thriller with elements from drama and horror films as well as a small dose of irony.

You've also become an active figure in the field of animation film in Latvia.

Yes, we also just finished Nils Skapāns' 26-minute-long plasticine animation film *Glasses*, in which we see the return of the female hero from his previous films *The Witch's Button* (Raganas poga, 2006) and *Wonderful Day* (Burvīga diena, 2010). The latter was included in the "Generation" section programme at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Tell us about your experience co-producing films with the Lithuanians and Estonians.

Our first collaboration was *The Gambler* (Spēlmanis, 2013, a co-production with Studio Uljana Kim – I. A.) with the Lithuanian director Ignas Jonynas. That film was very successful following its premiere at the San Sebastian Film Festival. Almost 90,000 people saw the film in Lithuania, and it was also shown in Spain, Italy, Croatia and elsewhere in Europe. It won six statuettes at the Nights of the Silver Crane film and television festival and was also selected for the Academy Awards (Oscars) in the foreign film category. And at the Warsaw Film Festival we as producers received the

Special Jury Award for creating a competitive story in spite of limited financial resources.

What was the budget for *The Gambler*?

Just under a million euros, which, in the context of Latvia, is still a considerable amount and a fairly hard-to-reach level. ▶



ROBERTS VINOVSIS

Producer on the Move, Cannes 2016

PRODUCER (FEATURES SELECTED):

Exiled / Pelnu sanatorija / 2016
Pretenders / Lomu spēles / 2016
Seneca's Day / Senekas diena / 2016
The Man in the Orange Jacket / M.O.Ž. / 2015
Rocks In My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās / 2014
The Gambler / Spēlmanis / 2013
People Out There / Cilvēki tur / 2012

IN PRODUCTION:

Firstborn / Pirmdzimtais / 2017
Our Granny Rocks / Mūsu ome rullē / 2017
The Sun Rides Up Into The Sky / Saule brauca debesīs / 2018
My Love Affair With Marriage / Laulību projekts
Motherland / Dzimtene
Peter the Painter / Pēteris Mālderis



In January we needed lots of snow and a frozen lake with a hole in the ice, but at Christmas the grass was still green and the temperatures were well above freezing. In the end, though, we had very good luck with weather conditions, because the new year began with freezing temperatures and snow.





A scene from *Firstborn*, the upcoming film from director Aik Karapetian. The premiere is set for autumn 2017

Apparently, the collaboration was successful, seeing as it's continuing....

After that we had *Exiled* (Pelnu sanatorija, 2016) by Latvian director Dāvis Sīmanis and *Seneca's Day* (2016) by Lithuanian director Kristijonas Vildžiūnas, which was the first co-production by all three Baltic States. It's the story of the events of 1989, one of the most significant of which was the Baltic Way (On the evening of August 23 approximately two



million people joined hands to form a human chain about 600 kilometres long across all three Baltic States. – I. A.). A joke developed as they were filming the movie that all of the studios involved ought to establish a company together and name it Baltic Chain Productions. And our newest co-production is the Estonian-directed *Pretenders* (2016).

Why did it take so long for the Baltic States to unite in a co-production?

One would imagine that it might have happened sooner, but several factors held it back. Five and ten years ago all of Europe, not just the Baltics, were struggling with the question of how such co-productions should be made. Often the arguments were about how to construct storylines in which elements of all the countries were included. If we used a formula like that, then we'd have to write

stories in which the father is Lithuanian, the mother is Estonian and the children are Latvian, or some such combination.

But it looks like you've found the right formula, because both *The Gambler* and *Seneca's Day* were selected for the Oscars in the best foreign film category. What exactly is this formula?

All of the Baltic co-productions are local stories to which the other partners have added their own creative contributions – camera operators, a film editor or some other professional – but do not interfere with the storyline. Our common goal is to make a good film. If the film is good, it will be understood not only by local viewers but also far beyond the borders of the Baltic States.

What are your plans for the near future in regards to Baltic co-productions?

Right now we're working on a full-length feature film project called *Motherland* (Dzimtene). It will be directed by American-born Lithuanian director Tomas Vengris, who has made several short films and worked as a professional film editor. He has also worked with such masters as Terrence Malick. The *Motherland* project has already won the Eurimages Co-Production Development Award, worth 20,000 euros.

What's the story about?

It'll be an autobiographical story about the early 1990s, when Vengris and his mother arrived in a land that he had heard and learned about during his entire childhood. This time of change and chaos in Lithuania's recent history will be shown through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy.

It's an opportunity to discuss issues that concern all of us.

This big and broad theme about countrymen living in the United States and Europe returning to Latvia after it regained its independence has never been addressed in a

 Producer Roberts Vinovskis and young actor Dmitrijs Jaldovs at a press conference for Dāvis Sīmanis' film *Exiled*

full-length Latvian feature film. But there was a lot of tragicomedy in this relationship between local Latvians and Latvians from abroad, because there were significant differences between the two groups due to their different upbringings and life experiences.

The Lithuanian producer Uljana Kim enjoyed the communal trust and ease of communication while working together with you. What other advantages are there of making co-productions between the Baltic States?

We all have very similar levels of filmmaking costs.

Why is it advantageous to have Latvia as a minority co-producer?

We have lots of good locations for filming, lots of high-class cinema professionals and low costs compared to Western Europe and the Nordic countries.

What other projects does Studija Lokomotive have in the works right now?

Dāvis Šimanis' full-length feature film *1905* is in the beginning stages. That'll be a fictional account about a real, historical figure, the evasive Latvian anarchist Peter the Painter (Pēteris Mālderis). It'll be the filmmakers' fantasy about what might have happened, considering the actual events and contexts of the year 1905. Mālderis was linked with the legendary Sidney Street Siege of 1911, in which London's police force and British army units battled against Latvian revolutionaries. This operation was led by Winston Churchill, then the home secretary of Great Britain (The event was also used by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1934 film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. – I. A.)

We've also got Signe Baumanes' full-length animation film *My Love Affair With Marriage* (Laulību projekts) in the works, which will feature a high-spirited young woman with a wild imagination. Latvia was a minority co-producer for Baumanes' previous work, *Rocks In*

My Pockets (Akmeņi manās kabatās, 2014), but this time we want to shift the accents around.

And, for Latvia's centennial on November 18, 2018, we'll have the premiere of the full-length animation film *The Sun Rides Up Into The Sky* (Saule brauca debesīs) by Roze Stiebra, a Latvian master of hand-drawn animation. That will be one of the projects for "Latvian Centenary Films", a programme of the National Film Centre of Latvia.

What has this film programme provided?

A certain stimulus can be felt in the Latvian film industry, because, in addition to the annual state support, financial support for sixteen more full-length, documentary and animation films has been provided (seven of which have received half a million euros each – I. A.). The main thing is to try to retain this level of activity and not return to doing only one or two films a year – only then will we be able to speak about the comprehensive development of the Latvian film industry.

Your film studio also works with the preservation and restoration of classic works of Latvian cinema.

Over the years we've amassed both experience and the technical resources to work with the digitalisation and restoration of films, which is a complicated and expensive process. Right now, we've achieved the same level as you'll find in the leading Western European restoration labs. We recently restored the full-length feature films *My Frivolous Friend* (Mans draugs – nenopietns cilvēks, 1975) and *Strange Passions* (Svešās kaislības, 1983) by the classic Latvian director Jānis Streičs. And soon we'll be restoring *The Kiln Affair* (Ceplis, 1972), a film adaptation by Rolands Kalniņš, another classic Latvian film director, in honour of his 95th birthday.

Some people predict that watching films from the 1970s and 1980s is going to be the next fad in Latvia. What do you think?

Yes, people often tend to be nostalgic. ■

Why film in Latvia?

We have money and professionals for your film here – come and get it!



Zane Peneze

From its location in the middle of the Baltic States, Latvia leads the region in state and local government support for international film productions. Latvia has two funding schemes, one run by the National Film Centre and the other, the Riga Film Fund, specifically for productions shooting on location in the capital city of Latvia. Since 2016 both schemes have operated an open deadline for submissions, for 2017 the amount of available funding exceeds half 1.5 million euros.

“It’s not that we can point to one singular advantage here, but it’s rather the entire set of services,” explains producer Jānis Kalējs – Head of Film Service Producers Association of Latvia and representative of Film Angels Studio. For several years already, production companies have had access to and experience with co-funding from state and local government resources in Latvia, the first country in the region to provide such support for foreign filmmaking.

Naturally, the first reason to choose Latvia as a location is the visual factor – there are no mountains or jungles to be found here, but it certainly is possible to travel back in time without arranging for elaborate set decorations. “Our advantage is that, unlike elsewhere in Europe, many of our old

buildings have not yet been renovated. So it’s easy to find locations, whether in the capital city or at some countryside manor, that haven’t yet been transformed into modern guesthouses and can serve filmmakers for historical scenes from past centuries,” says Kalējs, outlining the benefits to be seen through the camera lens. “There are still streets in Riga that can be made to look like a post-war German city just by slightly ‘improving’ the scene with an extra layer of sand,” he says.

Throughout history Riga has always been a crossroads between East and West, and this matchmaking and bridge-building function is still part of Latvian know-how today. Upon receiving a screenplay, a co-producer on the Latvian side will begin their budgeting calculations of local costs. Need stunt performers? Of course, we have the connections and know that the required experts can be found in Kazakhstan. A Russian company needs special equipment from Western Europe but cannot access it directly? No problem, we know where to find it. Latvia’s capital, Riga, is also an advantageous transport hub – two hours at most by plane from any European city and served by dozens of direct flights, including New York City.

After a location to match a film’s artistic mission has been found, Latvia also offers great benefits in the local services available. “For instance, the Koreans filming a reenactment



Latvian forest in Sergey Loznitca’s feature *In The Fog* (2012)

» ***I would like thank the talented and professional film crew provided for me in Latvia – their efficiency made it possible to shoot the film in a very short period of time. We understood each other perfectly.***

SERGEY LOZNITSA,
DIRECTOR, UKRAINE

of the Battle of Normandy were looking for sites all over Europe, comparing costs,” recalls Kalējs. “Of course, filming in Normandy itself would have been several times more expensive, so it was far more cost-effective to film here, on the shores of the Baltic Sea.”

Latvia boasts a developed infrastructure and network of qualified specialists both inside the country and across the region. “As producers we’re used to working with combined international teams – a camera operator from Latvia, a focus puller from Estonia, a lighting technician from Lithuania. Likewise, we know where to find specific units of equipment – if there are four of them for all of Europe, we can arrange to get them,” says Kalējs.

Shorter distances between locations are another cost-reducing benefit, saving time and keeping schedules well within budgets. If you’re filming a scene early in the morning in the Old Town, you can still squeeze in another scene by the seaside that same evening – first of all, it’s just an hour’s drive away, and, secondly, the daylight at these latitudes lasts much longer.

Kalējs adds that support services for the filming process, such as catering and transportation, are easier to arrange in Latvia than in other Western countries, where the chain of activity for a particular type of service can be much longer and fussier, and therefore more expensive.

Latvian Co-Financing Fund (by National Film centre of Latvia)

Support Programme for
International Film Productions

In operation since 2013

www.nkc.gov.lv
www.filmlatvia.lv
nkc@nkc.gov.lv

Riga Film Fund

Riga City Council Co-Financing
Programme for International
Film Productions in Riga

In operation since 2010

www.filmriga.lv
dace.lesinska@riga.lv

Eligibility Criteria:

- Costs incurred through a Latvian production company
- At least 50% of all financing confirmed
- All films intended for theatrical or TV release (incl. animation and documentaries)
- Total minimum budget of the production EUR 700 000 (EUR 140 000 for documentaries)

Eligible expenses:

- Local goods and services for pre-production, production and post-production of the project

Combined cash rebate of **25%**

Annual support **2 million euro**

Open Deadline

**25 international productions from
10 countries completed with the
support of both rebate schemes**



» ***In Latvia, there are very interesting and impressive locations. The craftsmen and technicians as well as local talents are equals of any in the world.***

WERNER HERZOG,
DIRECTOR, GERMANY

Marianne Slot

Slot Machine production company (France)

The experienced French production company Slot Machine was established in 1993. Its founder, Marianne Slot, has produced many well-known European films and been a co-producer for Danish director Lars von Trier's films *Nymphomaniac: Vol. I, II* (2013), *Melancholia* (2011), *Antichrist* (2009), *Dogville* (2003), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Breaking the Waves* (1996).

In 2016 Slot chose Latvia as the filming location for Sergei Loznitsa's feature film *A Gentle Creature* (to be released in 2017), thereby taking advantage of Latvia's cash rebate system. Services



were provided by the Film Angels studio.

Why did you, as the producer, decide to shoot in Latvia and use the cash rebate system? What was the process like?

My most important priority as a producer is, of course,

to help the director make the best film possible. So when we start structuring a film, it's vital to try to accommodate all the artistic choices and goals the director has within the limits and parameters of the production.

Sergei Loznitsa has previously shot in Latvia (*In*

 Russo-Japanese War recreated in Latvia for NHK's history series *Clouds Above the Slope* (2010)

»» ***It'd be absolutely thrilled to return to Riga and I'm sure that many other film crews will be visiting soon. I shall certainly be telling people what a fantastic time we had there.***

KENNETH BRANAGH,
ACTOR, UK

the Fog, 2012, which won the FIPRESCI award at Cannes) and knew that he could find the locations he wished for the film. So, Latvia was first and foremost an artistic choice. From that starting point, I looked into the rebate system and worked closely with Film Angels, whom we engaged for the service production.

Sergei was very keen on shooting the film in 2016, which gave me a very short window to finance the film, as the script was ready with very little time to spare.

It's naturally a challenge to complete the financing puzzle when you have such a large number of co-production countries and institutions, as was the case for this film. All of these countries have requirements and conditions that have to match and line up and fit each of their prospective calendars and timing on when the decision is made.

It was a very easy and pleasant experience to work

with the National Film Centre of Latvia. They made the process extremely smooth, and they made it their priority to understand our needs and specific challenges.

What was your biggest (positive) surprise in the collaboration with the technical crew/service providers?

We had an international team with more than 20 nationalities, and the collaboration with Janis Kalejs from Film Angels and his crew of great Latvian professionals matched our expectations.

What will you say to your colleagues, other producers, when encouraging them to choose Latvia as the location for their upcoming projects?

Go have a look – there are endless possibilities. We have a big new European production in development, and our company is seriously considering coming back to shoot in Latvia in the autumn

of 2017. Knowing the system, the people and the crew gives us a natural advantage and head start on the next project.

What should the National Film Centre and local film service providers do to make Latvia more attractive as a place for international film productions?

Increasing the size of the tax rebate from 25%, which is the average for most countries, would be very important and give Latvia a real competitive edge. When you have to make this very important choice as a producer, having a streamlined process and a short waiting period between the request for the rebate and the answer is very helpful. We had a good experience with Film Angels, and their quick work of getting the accounts finalised and the tax rebate payments from the National Film Centre in the shortest time possible was incredibly valuable. ■



Riga Harbour in BBC's drama series *Wallander* with Kenneth Branagh (2011)

Animation 2017



leva Viese

2017 has kicked off with unprecedented activity for Latvian animated films. The year begins with the premiere in the Generation KPlus section at the Berlinale of *Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures*, a film by the Rija Films and director Reinis Kalnaellis. And the year is set to continue with intensive filmmaking and many more premieres. Five feature-length films are currently in development for audiences ranging from the very young (Kalnaellis' *Applecake Lullaby*) and early school-age children (Edmunds Jansons' adventure film *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs*) to adults prepared to laugh at themselves (Signe Baumanes' *My Love Affair With Marriage*). The filmmakers bring to life globally acclaimed heroes (Janno Pöldma and Heiki Ernits' *Lotte and*

the Lost Dragons) as well as the mythic pantheon of Latvian folklore (Roze Stiebra's *The Sun Rides up into the Sky*). The creative styles of the directors and artists are sufficiently different to say that there are some very distinct films in the making here, yet all are equally significant for the Latvian cinematic arts.

Younger audiences will be delighted with the premieres of several short films of various length and technique. The original short works in progress keep the language of animation alive and consistently continue to develop in their quality – Vladimir Leschiov unveils surreal facets to mundane events, Edmunds Jansons brings a painterly modernism to his films, while experimental film director Signe Birkova explores new directions for puppet cinema.



***Singing Hugo
and his Incredible
Adventures***

RIJA FILMS

The Rija Films studio is working on several films during 2017, including two co-produced features set for completion in 2018. Collaboration also continues with *20th Century Fox*, *Warner Bros.* and *DreamWorks* on voice-overs for children's animated films. Producer Vilnis Kalnaellis notes that right now the studio's "main activity is film distribution – both for Latvian films abroad and for European films in Latvia." The studio houses a multi-functional workshop called the *Kino māja* (Cinema House), available for educational seminars, lectures, sound-mixing workshops, special effects filming and post-production work.

Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures

■ This comedy by Reinis Kalnaellis has its world premiere at the Berlinale festival and is presented by the director as "a positive, encouraging and energetic story for the little viewers". The main character in Kaspars Rogā's screenplay is

Hugo, a chick who lives at the edge of the world. He wants to sing and, as it turns out, is indeed not meant to stay in the coop for long. He comes into the hands of thieves in the night and thus begins his crazy adventure. Featuring light colours and a minimalist style, the film is made in the hand-drawn animation



technique with music composed by Renārs Kaupers.

Lotte and the Lost Dragons

■ Not only children from Estonia and Latvia are familiar with the stories about the girl-dog Lotte from Gadgetville by Estonian director Janno Põldma and Heiki Ernits – these films have been screened in around fifty countries. The cartoon character has become a recognised trademark for various products, and in 2014 a Lotte theme park was opened in Estonia. A third full-length feature is currently

being made jointly by Eesti Joonisfilm and Rija Films, with a screenplay by Põldma and Andris Akmentiņš and music by Renārs Kaupers. Background artist Laima Puntule and sound editor Andris Barons are also on the creative team from the Latvian side.

In the new film, Lotte's entire family is preoccupied with little sister Rozija. Meanwhile, two scientists arrive in Gadgetville – Karl the Raccoon and Victor the Vetch (who lives in the water poured into Karl's pouch).



They collect folksongs and are seeking the oldest song of all, the legendary refrain of the fire-breathing dragons. Will the ancient song still be heard?

Applecake Lullaby

■ Reinis Kalnaellis' *Applecake Lullaby* is being made in conjunction with the Paul Thiltges Distributions film studio. The pastel-toned film, made digitally and with colour pencils is simultaneously full of action yet also possesses a

calming sense of warmth. It tells the tale of the penguin girl Thelma and her worries on the eve of her fifth birthday – what if her happy day fails to find her? Anything is possible in the dream world of artist Andrejs Prigičevs – secrets are inscribed in coconut shells, while a giant snail's shell



turns out to be a fantastic ship.

ATOM ART

In 2017 the Atom Art studio is focussing its attentions on two of Edmunds Jansons' biggest projects for the children's and family audiences – final animation work is proceeding on the 26-minute-long Christmas story *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness* (artist Reinis Pētersons) and the full-length feature film *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* (artist Elīna Brasliņa), supported by the Latvian Films for Latvia's Centennial programme. Both new films are being made using the digital application technique, but they will differ markedly not only in format but also in artistic style.

Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs



■ Known internationally for his shorts (*Choir Tour*, *International Fathers' Day* and others), this is director Edmunds Jansons' first full-length feature. "We didn't set out to make a

full-length movie. Before we began I was pretty categorically certain that this wasn't a field that interested me," he says. "It's a whole new language and different set of rules. But the circumstances came together, the opportunity presented itself, and we took advantage of it."

Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs is a cinematic adaptation of the award-winning children's book *The Story of Maskachka* by Luīze Pastore. Although the book was illustrated by Reinis Pētersons, the film's artist is Elīna Brasliņa, who visually researched

the Maskachka neighbourhood by crisscrossing this historic Riga district on foot. The framing and part of the background were complete at the beginning of the year, and all eighty of the film's characters have been developed and are ready for the animation process. The three primary animators (Mārtiņš Dūmiņš, Līga Skirmāne-Leščova and Kristīne Zvirbule) are currently at work in the studio together with more than ten assistants from the Latvian Academy of Art. Part of the animation work is also being done in Poland.

Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness



■ *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness* is intended as a Christmas TV special, with work on it scheduled for completion in February. Producer Sabine Andersone says the idea for the

film came from screenwriter Lote Eglīte: "It's a childhood experience of Lote's – about how, after long being an only child, a baby brother came into her family. The film tells of her feelings – the powerful emotional experience and the desire to get rid of the little one." The main heroes of the film are a preteen girl named Pigtail and her imaginary friend Sleeplessness, who appears during moments when she faces her inner demons. Of course, there's also Dad, Mom and the undesired surprise – Baby Brother. Reinis

Pētersons provides the visual appearance for the original screenplay, while the music and sound design is the work of Ģirts Bišs.

This year Jansons also intends to resume work on his postponed experimental works *Honour Guard* and *Weekend*, in which a skier's ride down a mountain appears through the symbols of abstract modern painting.

LOCOMOTIVE PRODUCTIONS

So far the Locomotive Productions film studio has produced award-winning full-length feature and documentary films, but it is currently working on two hand-drawn films by seminal Latvian directors: master of drawn and applied animation Roze Stiebra and the bold, internationally awarded New-York-based Signe Baumanė.

My Love Affair with Marriage

■ The leading theme of Signe Baumanė's films is nakedness, both in the sense of psychological openness and vulnerability as well as physical nudity and sex. Following her award-winning autobiographical film *Rocks in my Pockets* (2014) about depression along her ancestral line of female relatives, Baumanė has turned to relationships, supplemented by the dystopian story elements so characteristic of her imaginary world.

The film is made using a technique developed by Baumanė herself, combining drawn images against papier-mâché backgrounds, and tells of how the Sirens teach a young woman "how to strive for the Ideal Marriage. But the preconception of the Ideal Marriage is irreversibly ruined when a woman's Biology, with its hormonal and neural signals, affects her behaviour and emotions, shaking the foundations of the marriage." The film is a co-production between Locomotive



Productions on the Latvian side, and Sturgis Warner and Signe Baumanė's own partner company, *The Marriage Project LLC* from the United States.

The Sun Rides up into the Sky

■ The film *The Sun Rides up into the Sky*, currently in development in line with director Roze Stiebra's original screenplay, is the myth of the battle of light against dark, in which some curious children earn an unexpected role. The story begins at a jolly masquerade ball, but it soon turns into a thrilling ride between the visible world

and the other world beyond it. Ilze Vitolina, the film's artist, has already proven her ability to create a saturated and secretive world for Stiebra's short films in the series *Little Tales*.

Another title of Locomotive Productions – the plasticine animation film for children *Our Granny Rocks* by Nils Skapāns – is a story about how wonderful it is when your grandmother is also somewhat of a good witch.



LUNOHOD

Internationally acclaimed (Hiroshima, Clermont-Ferrand etc.) animation film director



Vladimir Leschiov is continuing work on his film *The Electrician's Day*, which he plans to finish in early 2018. Leschiov's style reveals the surreal facets of mundane life and the involuntary connections that surround us. The film in progress tells of an electrician who, after a short circuit on the job, "finds himself on the opposite

side of the wall – in a place where he experiences anew the process of the world's creation."

The renowned director is also continuing to develop his screenplay for an animated short intended as a co-production with the National Film Board of Canada.

CAMERA OBSCURA

Experimental film director Signe Birkova



has begun work on the animated project *The Red Phantom*. Previously she has been known for her abstract films and object animations, but in 2017 she hopes to work on a narrative film in conjunction with the Estonian film studio Nukufilm. The puppet film's scenario takes place in

1990s Latvia, and its main character is a special-case detective, an American-Latvian woman. It's to be a half-hour-long stylistically eclectic detective story with elements of mysticism and will be filmed in vintage 16 mm format.

ANIMĀCIJAS BRIGĀDE

The Animācijas Brigāde film studio is finishing work this year on several short-length films for children



and satire-loving grown-ups: *The Mole and the Bull* by Ēvalds Lācis, *Waikiki* by Māris Brinkmanis, the latest instalment (titled *Secrets of Paris*) in the Jānis Cimermanis' series *Emergency Brigade in Europe*, Dace Rīdūze's *Dustspeck's Adventure* and Reinis Ūbelis' black comedy *The Sled*. The last two of these films promise

to deliver unusual visual styles – Rīdūze (together with character artist Ilze Kiršteine and environmental artist Māris Putniņš) will tackle the ultimate animator's challenge of combining drawn frames with filmed ones, while Ūbelis, according to Putniņš, is using very atypical puppets in his production.



Zanda Dūdiņa

Baltic Sea Docs

The first documentary film to win the Felix award for Best European Documentary Film (1989) was *Crossroad Street* (Šķērsiela, 1988) by Ivars Seleckis. This achievement confirmed the skills of Latvian documentary filmmakers and also acknowledged the special style cultivated by them since the 1960s, called the Riga School of Poetic Documentary, but which was little known outside Latvia, a country then still isolated from the rest of the world by the Iron Curtain.

When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, its filmmakers and those from the other Baltic States were finally able to acquaint the rest of Europe and the broader international scene with their work. But it soon became clear that filmmakers in the former Eastern Bloc lacked knowledge about many of the prevailing principles used in documentary filmmaking in Western Europe, such as what it means to write a film project and how to sell a film to television. For this reason, with the goal of helping to integrate their neighbours into Europe, the first Baltic Sea Forum for Documentaries (Baltic Sea Docs, BSD) was held in 1997 on the Danish island of Bornholm.

The event was organised by the Baltic Media Centre and depended on the enthusiasm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and funding from the European Council. Since then, documentary filmmakers from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, Poland and later also Belarus, Ukraine and Germany continued to meet once a year and pitch their projects to commissioning editors from neighbouring countries, beforehand having learned the necessary skills and professional

tricks from experienced specialists. One of the most important conclusions was to add an extra zero to the bottom line of a film's budget so that international partners would take them seriously.



At first, BSD took place in Bornholm and also travelled to the Baltic States, thereby involving local film organisations in the coordinating of the event. Bornholm continues to play a special role in the networking between the forum participants – in order to arrive on the island, the organisers rented a small airplane from the local ▶



In the early years of BSD, filmmakers regularly travelled to the island of Bornholm (Denmark) in a small airplane

parachute club, and none of the participants will ever forget that flight! The airplane was so small that the toilet consisted of a single, simple bucket in the back. The bonds of friendship that were forged during that time were thus very close and remain so to this day.

The European Documentary Network later replaced the Baltic Media Centre at the forum's helm. A big change happened in 2006, when the event – which had by then become quite well known in the Baltic region and internationally – moved its location permanently to Riga and the National Film Centre of Latvia became the forum's main organiser.

BSD celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2016, and in early September of that year Riga became the capital of documentary film for the eleventh time. Over time, BSD has opened its doors wider to include filmmakers from other countries in the former Eastern Bloc and elsewhere in Europe, although it continues to focus on the Baltic Sea region.

What's so special about the Baltic Sea Forum for Documentaries?

First of all, this is a documentary film

market that unites Eastern and Western European countries. Riga is a place where film producers from Georgia and Germany, Ukraine and Poland, Latvia and France, and so on can all meet. And it is in Riga where they often find co-producers for their existing film projects as well as projects that have yet to begin in earnest.

BSD is a great platform and springboard for less-experienced film producers and directors because it also offers a three-day preparatory workshop in which projects are analysed by a team of seven tutors. The team includes film producers and directors as well as distributors and theoreticians. Special attention is paid to the visual presentation of a film, and a professional editing director is on hand to help with that task. The preparatory workshop is also helpful for experienced professionals in that it gives them the opportunity to test their ideas in the context of other cultures and experiences and receive feedback and questions from the other participants, who represent 15 to 17 different countries.

BSD tries to maintain a special approach in its work with each participant, and this



An important part of BSD is the opportunity to network with others. This activity is even more pleasant against the backdrop of beautiful Riga



is possible by concentrating its energy on a relatively small number of events at one time and putting together a compact but well thought-out programme. 23 to 25 film projects are selected to take part in the forum every year. During the project market, the producers can present their projects to commissioning editors from Scandinavia, the Baltic States and other European countries as well as sales agents. 15 to 18 buyers attend the market, including YLE, DR, SVT, ARD/MDR, ARTE, ERR, LTV, Taskovski Films, Cat&Docs, Wide, Rise and Shine, Outlook Filmsales, Deckert Distribution and Ventec-CBA/WIP-Sales.

For many years now, BSD's wonderful moderators – Mikael Opstrup (also the preparatory course team leader) and Tue Steen Müller (who has been with the forum since its inception) – see to it that each project is asked the right questions and receives the most helpful feedback. Their special approach to each and every project and their superb sense of humour are a very valuable and integral part of the forum.

The forum's venue, the *Albert Hotel*, also helps to create the special atmosphere. Every year the participants gather on the hotel's 11th floor to gaze at the panorama of Riga, at its combination of medieval churches, Art Nouveau buildings, Soviet architecture and ferries on the Daugava River. The hotel is named in honour of Albert Einstein, and his quotes inspire the forum's organisers and participants in all that they do.

This laudatory description could continue, with comments about the forum's accessibility (there are direct flights to Riga from many European cities and, thanks to long-standing financial support from the Creative Europe/Media programme, participation in BSD is still free of charge), the beauty of early autumn in Riga (in the past eleven years it has rained only once during the forum) and Riga's much-praised restaurants. Instead, we will mention just a few of the projects that have been at BSD in recent years:

LIBERATION DAY

Dir. Morten Traavik, VFS Films/Norsk Fjernsyn, Latvia/Norway

CLOSE RELATIONS

Dir. Vitaly Mansky, Vertov Studio/Saxonia Entertainment/Ego Media/Baltic Film Production, Russia/Germany/Latvia/Estonia

FIVE: TALES FROM KGB

Dir. Maximilien Dejoie, Just a Moment/Industria Film, Lithuania/Italy

BEYOND THE FEAR

Dir. Herz Frank, Maria Kravchenko, Ego Media/Vertov Studio, Latvia/Russia

HOW I SAVED AFRICA

Dir. Kullar Viimne, Rühm Pluss Null/Missing Pictures, Estonia

BIBLIOTEKA

Dir. Ana Tsimintia, Matchhouse Film/Anaben, Georgia/Lithuania

OLYA'S LOVE

Dir. Kirill Sakharnov, SugarDocs/Ethnofund/Soleil Film, Russia/Austria

DANCE FOR ME!

Dir. Katrine Philp, Klasse Film, Denmark

CHUCK NORRIS VS COMMUNISM

Dir. Ilinca Calugareanu, Vernon Films/Passion Pictures/Kloos & Co. Medien, UK/Romania/Germany

THE TERM

Dir. Pavel Kostomarov, Alexey Pivovarov, Aviator Production/Marx Film, Russia/Estonia

PIT NO. 8

Dir. Marianna Kaat, Baltic Film Productions/Interfilm Production, Estonia/Ukraine



Ivars Seleckis, a veteran of Latvian documentary film, pitches his newest film at the BSD project market. His film *Crossroad Street* (1988) won three of the world's most prestigious awards for documentary films

And, as Einstein said, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." In our case this means: check the balticseadocs.lv website at the beginning of May, fill out the application form by June 5, and come to Riga to take part in the 21st edition of Baltic Sea Docs! Make sure there's nothing else on your schedule for September 6–10, and keep your fingers crossed for the selection results. ■

Riga International Film Festival

7-17/09/2017

2017 will be the fourth year of the Riga International Film Festival. Riga IFF annually features a programme of the most daring and important European cinema today as well as a selection of Latvian films to be viewed within a larger context. The festival's film programme is structured into eight specific sections ranging from features to documentaries to shorts to animation and even events for the whole family.

Part of the festival's infrastructure is the legendary Splendid Palace cinema house. It hosts most of the programme, and its entire premises – two screening halls and restaurants – are used for both public and industry-specific events. The festival features several international competition programmes, headed by a multi-genre feature film competition within which an

international jury chooses a title for the Riga IFF Award each year.

The festival's film market – the Riga IFF Forum – was held for the first time in 2016. Various events for industry professionals and students have also been launched: the Riga IFF Critics Meeting was set off to debate and develop criticism in Latvia, the launch of the Baltic Film Talent Lab evolved the festival's educational event programme, and the Riga IFF Zip-Meeting started a networking event series that focuses on a different group of the film professionals circle each year. The festival has been developing a steadily growing audience and in 2017 is set to widen its international context by strengthening its partnerships and friendships in the Baltic Sea region and work on a more dynamic relationship between the film industry and the public.

Film Programme:

RIGA IFF COMPETITION PROGRAMME

Feature-length films from the Baltic Sea region with no restrictions of genre or style, evaluated by the festival's international jury (the Riga IFF Award) as well as a youth jury (#Youth_Matters Award). One of the competition films is also awarded the Splendid Palace People's Choice Award.

SHORT RIGA

International competition programme – various short-format films from Europe and the rest of the world programmed into accessible screenings that bear certain common themes and stylistics. The programme is evaluated by an international jury.

Baltic student competition programme – student shorts from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia evaluated and analysed by an international jury in discussion with the students.

Baltic music video competition programme, or simply #BMV – music videos from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in an experimental screening that turns into a discussion with the video makers, the musicians and the international jury that then turns into a party.

HOME MADE

A selection of the latest films produced in Latvia curated by the festival's team for both international and local audiences, some of which bear the potential of being nominated



The Riga IFF Award, created by artist Ervīns Broks, is an 8-part sculpture symbolising the city and the team effort of film

for or awarded the Latvian national award – Lielais Kristaps.

RIGA IFF SELECTION

The biggest titles of the year in European and world cinema, carefully curated for the local public.

IN KINO VERITAS

The festival's retrospective and research programme focusing each year on a different aspect of the universal language of cinema.

NORDIC HIGHLIGHTS

A Nordic film panorama in collaboration with the Nordic embassies as well as the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Latvia and the Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia,

Latvia and Lithuania.

ARTDOCFEST/RIGA

The festival's documentary film programme in collaboration with Artdocfest and its founder, director and producer Vitaly Mansky.

KIDS WEEKEND

Feature films for children of various ages as well as an animated shorts programme for preschool-aged children. The programme is shown on the first weekend of the festival and also includes off-screen activities for the whole family. The programme's films are also evaluated by the festival's children's jury, who present the Riga IFF Kids Jury Award at the Closing Event.

Events Programme:

RIGA IFF FORUM

This work-in-progress and coming-soon film project market was launched in 2016 in cooperation with the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia and the National Film Centre of Latvia, when it featured project presentations from Latvia and the neighbouring region with a special focus on projects for children's audiences. In 2017 the FORUM is planned to again include both local projects and co-productions of diverse genres as well as a selection of international projects for children's audiences. The FORUM will also include industry workshops and talks.

BALTIC FILM TALENT LAB

In 2016 this new pan-Baltic educational platform launched with a focus on delving into the relationship between the actor and the director and on how to develop one's skills of working on set. In 2017 the preliminary focus is intended on voice-over artistry and the relationship between the film director and the music composer. The series of workshops and lectures will welcome participants from the Baltic countries and international lecturers and educators.

EUROPEAN SCRIPT MEETING

2017 will be the fourth year of this networking event at which screenwriters meet their potential collaborators – directors and producers. New relationships are struck, projects are launched and developed.

RIGA IFF CRITICS MEETING

A meet-up and discussion platform for Latvian film criticism professionals as well as students and enthusiasts featuring international lecturers and guests.

RIGA IFF ZIP-MEETING

A networking event with a focus on a specific group in the industry. At the event's launch in 2016 these were producers. In 2017 it is planned to bring together Baltic animation studios.

RIGA IFF EXPO

In 2017 the festival also plans to continue the tradition of the Riga IFF Expo – a part exhibition, part research activity available for all attendants of the festival for the duration of the festival. ■

Find information on the festival as it develops its programme this year on the website rigaiff.lv as well as on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Honouring director Jānis Streičs



Zane Balčus

Last year was the first time Latvia declared a whole year in honour of a single director – Jānis Streičs, who celebrated his 80th birthday in 2016. Thanks to his film *A Limousine the Colour of a Midsummer's Eve* (1981), considered an absolute classic of Latvian cinema, Streičs' name is known in practically every household in Latvia. The characters and situations in the film perfectly characterise the atmosphere of Soviet Latvia in the early 1980s, and lines of dialogue have become folklore.

Many different events took place last year in celebration of Streičs: masterclasses, meetings with director, a book, a travelling exhibition and a conference all devoted to him. In addition, two of his films were

restored, *My Frivolous Friend* (1975) and *Strange Passions* (1983). Each highlights a different side of the director's filmography, from domestic comedy characterising a specific era to dense drama set during the Second World War.

Streičs had been working with cinema for quite some time before he directed his first film, *Captain Enrico's Watch* (1967, with director Ēriks Lācis). Having completed an education in pedagogy, he felt called to the world of theatre and studied theatre directing from 1959 to 1963. His teacher, the theatre and film director Aleksandrs Leimanis, introduced Streičs to cinema and invited him to participate in the creation of his own films. Soon enough, Streičs was also working on films by other directors. And inevitably, he eventually decided to direct a film himself. Streičs made two films together with Lācis,



another young director. In 1970 he directed his first film by himself, titled *Shoot Instead of Me*.

Jezups, the main character in *Shoot Instead of Me*, is a film projectionist. The time is the Revolution of 1917, but Jezups is not interested in taking sides and fighting – he only wants to make films. So he continues showing films, and the audiences watch the action on screen with great interest. Such an inclusion of another work of art within his own film is a feature of Streičs' style. An instructional animation film (in *Captain Enrico's Watch*), the watching of films (*Shoot Instead of Me*, *Strange Passions*, *Carmen Horrendum* [1989]), a play in a theatre (*To Remember or Forget*, 1981), a television show (*My Frivolous Friend*) – these and other such scenes expand the working environment for his characters.

In some of Streičs' work the entire film is linked with the art world, for example, the television film *Theatre* (1978), which is based on W. Somerset Maugham's novel of the same name and is one of his best-known works as a director. Alongside the main character, Julia Lambert (played by Vija Artmane), Streičs added a new character that does not exist in the novel, namely, the Author. The Author carries on a dialogue with Julia and comments on the action in the film. In fact, the Author is



 The Riga Film Museum's travelling exhibition about one of Latvia's most beloved film directors opened at a shopping mall in central Riga, where it caught the eye of thousands of people

played by Streičs himself. He has also played roles in other films, such as one of the main characters in *Shoot Instead of Me*, a smaller role in *The Unfinished Dinner* (1979) and parts in films by other directors. Streičs' film *The Mysteries of the Old Parish House* (2000) is the quintessence of an artwork-within-an-artwork and brings to light both the positive and difficult sides of working in the field of cinema. The main hero is a film director who faces various artistic and financial challenges while making his film.

Streičs' films are like signs of their times – they reveal the nuances of their era and also ►





the era in which the film is set. Daily life in the Soviet Union, the time of change in the early 1990s when Latvia regained its independence, the early 20th century, the Second World War... Another characteristic aspect of Streičs' films is a retreat from the main action into a kind of dreamlike vision or reverie. This can be found in *The Child of Man* (1991), a film Streičs dedicated to Latgale, the eastern region of Latvia where he was born, and which became the first film in the Latgalian language. It is also a part of *Rudolf's Gold* (2010) and other films, where, like the artwork-within-an-artwork technique, it provides an additional dimension to both the film's heroes and the artistic expression of the director himself.

These artistic elements are one of the lines permeating through *Jānis Streičs: Films, People, Era*, a travelling exhibition created by the Riga Film Museum (curator Zane Balčus, artist Dace Džeriņa). The exhibition accents the filmmaking process, showing photos of the director working on film sets, his own sketches

for the *Rudolf's Gold* set constructions and so on. It has also prepared albums for actors who have played in several Streičs' films or at least very memorable roles, such as Vija Artmane, Jānis Paukštello, Ivars Kalniņš, Lilita Bērziņa and others. And, of course, Streičs himself as an actor, too.

Seeing as Streičs' films stand out with their clever dialogue, quotes from several of them have been selected and printed out on sheets of paper for visitors to take home. The exhibition is in three languages (Latvian, English and Russian) and has so far been shown in Riga and Minsk (Belarus). In early 2017 it will travel to Streičs' birthplace of Preiļi and then to Vilnius (Lithuania). For information about how to host the exhibition in your own country, write to zane.balcus@kinomuzejs.lv. Witness with your own eyes how dynamic Jānis Streičs is. Responsive to and interested in cultural and artistic processes as well as whole eras, he is one of Latvia's most important film directors. ■

 Jānis Paukštello, one of Streičs' favourite actors, sings songs from the director's films at the opening of the exhibition

World Media on Latvian Films

MELLOW MUD



■ This evocatively shot realist tale benefits from a spare yet credible script and a knockout performance from big-screen debutant Elina Vaska, who conveys her character's feelings of anger, abandonment, responsibility and first love with conviction and authenticity.

Alissa Simon | *Variety*

■ Proving himself a director of sensitivity and a refined visual style (and definitely a talent to watch in the future), Vimba presents the action through Raya's eyes, using sparse dialogue and expressive images.

Alissa Simon | *Variety*

■ Though this is only his debut feature, Vimba already has a mature visual grammar, often moving the story on with graceful, wordless vignettes. His two young stars are also terrific, especially Vaska, who successfully suggests brittle depths masked by too-cool-for-school insolence.

Stephen Dalton | *The Hollywood Reporter*

■ There is a spare beauty to this picture. It is lean, economic storytelling with no wasted scenes, and yet, largely thanks to a bravura performance from impressive newcomer Vaska, there is a real emotional depth here [...]. The film shares both thematic and stylistic themes with the work of the Dardennes brothers, and could connect with the same arthouse audience.

Wendy Ide | *Screen*

LIBERATION DAY



■ Billed as a “documentary musical”, this potential crowd-pleaser gets considerable comic mileage out of the friction between two very different brands of cultural eccentricity – but it succeeds as more than a diverting novelty, packed as it is with pointed observations on diplomacy and censorship in a country that's still a mystery to many.

Guy Lodge | *Variety*

■ Most documentaries or studies of North Korea conclude that it is forever sealed in its own tyranny. For all the absurdity, for all the questionable semi-satire, Laibach actually made contact with North Korea and caused a crack in the wall. In its ridiculous way, Laibach's 1980s art-rocker doom version of *The Sound of Music* was a kind of peace process, and, like any peace process, it involved the fudging of principles.

Peter Bradshaw | *The Guardian*

CHRONICLES OF MELANIE



■ The distorted sound creates a sense of delirium; the painfully slow movements of the malnourished women gives the film a nightmarish quality. Time slows down, both for the exiled Latvian women and also, at times, for the audience. It all amounts to a challenging viewing experience.

Wendy Ide | *Screen*

DAWN



■ Cinematographer Staron makes extensive use of elegantly extended tracking shots, poised overhead views and extreme close-ups of tiny animals, including snails and dragonflies. This combination of ravishing monochrome with painterly, stylised, dreamlike tableaux inevitably invites comparison with Russian masters like Andrei Tarkovsky and Alexei German.

Stephen Dalton | *The Hollywood Reporter*

UNDER THE SUN



■ One of the most fascinating things about "Under the Sun" is the contradictory thoughts it inspires. On the one hand, there is the lure of seeing this singular place, where citizens salute an enormous bronze statue of Kim Il Sung and loudspeaker-equipped trucks drive the streets spewing propaganda about "building the best Communist country in the world."

Yet "Under The Sun" also reminds us that, their dissimilar society notwithstanding, the North Koreans are not some alien race but people like us, trying to get by the best they can. The last image we see is a small tear on the face of a young girl, and nothing is more universally human than that.

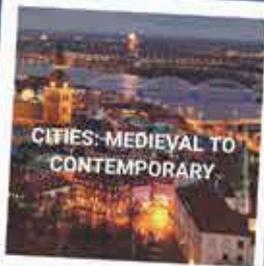
Kenneth Turan | *Los Angeles Times*

■ [...] she has constructed an arrestingly beautiful and original work from the collective folklore of her nation's troubled history. A sumptuous orchestral score by Vestards Simkus and the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra only adds to the film's luxuriant sensory layers, by turns dark and discordant, joyful and triumphant.

Stephen Dalton | *The Hollywood Reporter*

■ The widescreen black-and-white photography is nothing if not striking. There is a monstrous beauty to the film at times. Director Pakalnina has a taste for the absurd and surreal in her symbolic imagery.

Wendy Ide | *Screen*



CITIES: MEDIEVAL TO CONTEMPORARY



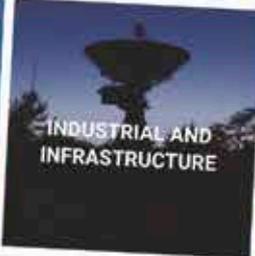
ART NOUVEAU



WOODEN ARCHITECTURE



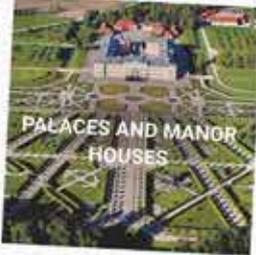
SOVIET HERITAGE



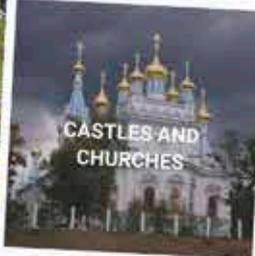
INDUSTRIAL AND INFRASTRUCTURE



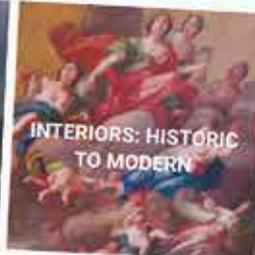
RURAL AND LANDSCAPE



PALACES AND MANOR HOUSES



CASTLES AND CHURCHES



INTERIORS: HISTORIC TO MODERN

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National Film Centre of Latvia