3/2026

BALTIC FILM

ALL ABOUT FILMS & FILMMAKERS!

It's the LATEST LIT



ULYA
A Latvian-Led Film Opens PÖFF

OBLIVION
Lithuania's New Voice in Competition

Beyond The Camera
Studios, Tech & Innovation

PÖFF at 30 &
25 Years of Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event

Janno Jürgens

THE BALTICS IN FOCUS

NO ME WITHOUT YOU - A STORY OF SISTERHOOD



CONTENT

Beyond Borders, Beyond Anniversaries

We like anniversaries in the film industry. They give us a reason to celebrate and reflect on how far we have come. With the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival turning 30 and Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event marking 25 years, there is plenty to look back on.

But what have we actually achieved?

Having spent much of my professional life in Baltic cinema, I have watched our film industries become internationally connected. Our countries share a long history of creative exchange, shaped by common experiences and distinct artistic voices. That combination is one of the region's strengths.

We talk a great deal about Baltic cooperation. But it takes more than a shared map or simply attending the same receptions. It requires trust, shared ambitions and a willingness to take risks together.

These connections become even more important when we look at Ukraine. For the Baltic countries, preserving cultural identity and the freedom to tell our own stories is not an abstract concept. As Ukrainian filmmakers continue to work under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, collaboration is about more than making films. It is about ensuring their voices are heard and that their film culture has a future. Solidarity means little unless it translates into action.

This year's PÖFF puts the Baltic countries in the spotlight. The Latvian-led *Ulya* opens the festival, Estonia's Janno Jürgens brings *No Me Without You* to the Official Selection, and Lithuania's *Oblivion* competes in the First Feature Competition. Different voices within a shared cinematic landscape.

This issue also explores co-productions, creative partnerships and the often-overlooked professionals behind the camera. Cinema is both an art form and a collective effort.

Thirty years of PÖFF and twenty-five years of Baltic Event deserve a celebration. But I would rather measure their success by the doors they have opened than by the candles on the cake. And, especially in times like these, by whose voices we help carry through those doors.

Eda Koppel, Editor in Chief

Photo by **Sohvi Viik-Kalluste**
MUAH by **Piret Kaljuste**



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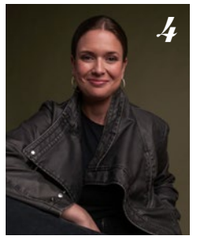
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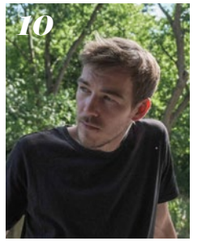
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E-mail: info@poff.ee, **I** poff.ee
Editor in Chief: Eda Koppel
Editor: Kristīne Matīsa **Contributing Editor:** Mintarė Varanavičiūtė
Contributors: Andrei Liimets, Ralf Sauter, Aurelia Aasa, Maarja Hindoalla, Uģis Olte, Dace Čaure, Zane Krūmiņa, Odeta Černiauskaitė, Neringa Kažukauskaitė, Mirell Talbre, Martina Tramberg, Jevgeni Levin, Priit Lätt, Evelin Saarmets **Linguistic Editing:** Paul Emmet
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MUAH Liisi Põllumaa **Wardrobe courtesy of** Racer Worldwide

PÖFF BLACK NIGHTS FILM FESTIVAL

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THE NEXT CHAPTER *of Black Nights*

As PÖFF turns 30, its **new Artistic Director Triin Tramberg** looks ahead. From discovering emerging talent to rethinking competition programmes and attracting audiences, she reflects on how a festival can evolve while staying true to its identity.

By **Tõnu Karjatse** Photos by **Sohvi Viik-Kalluste** MUAH by **Liisi Põllumaa** Wardrobe courtesy of **Racer Worldwide**

PÖFF has developed a strong identity over 30 years. As the festival's new Artistic Director, how do you balance that identity with the need to change?

PÖFF has definitely changed. The very first PÖFF had 25 films in the programme; today we will have around 182 full-length feature films. So, of course, times have changed very much, and I think it is super important for a festival to keep up with developments in the world, so it can follow these changes while still keeping its identity. I think within those 30 years, PÖFF has really found its identity with filmmakers, within the industry and with audiences. We have grown into a renowned quality brand, both in the world and locally.

Who are PÖFF's main competitors at this time of year?

Of course, we have competitors, given how large the festival landscape is, and it is very hard to stand out. From August to November, about 20 festivals require a world premiere, so there are many festivals competing for new films. But now that I have really gone through the submissions, having previously focused more on debuts, I do see a pattern. I do see that we are, for filmmakers, a very serious Plan B if they can't get to Venice. I really think this is completely normal within the festival landscape. The big five – Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto and Sundance – are the festivals where filmmakers want to have their premiere. We have to admit that this is also often because these are the festivals where a lot of major deals, particularly film sales deals, are made. So I understand the filmmakers' wish to go there. But I am very happy to see that they send their films to us simultaneously. And when we look at the festivals around us, I can't say that we have remarkably lost films. We are one of the last festivals of the year, so there is a significant distinction between the festivals.

One of the advantages of PÖFF is the very large film market, Industry@PÖFF and Baltic Event.

Indeed, I think this is also one of the reasons for our attractiveness, because we present all sorts of projects – new projects in development or in post-production. I think that our industry section can be compared with the one in Cannes. When it comes to panels and talks, we are quite innovative, I'd say, and we are bold in discussing certain subjects. I mean, we really do tackle the questions that the industry faces, and we also try to bring leading industry delegates here to talk about these questions and find answers. So I think that our industry section really complements the festival, and vice versa.

PÖFF now has seven competition programmes, alongside the competitions from Just Film and PÖFF Shorts. How many competition programmes does the festival need, and how often should they change?

That's a very good question, and I've started to look into it. But I've said I will not make any changes this first year, and first of all I will follow how this festival goes. I think adding the documentary competition was essential, given the volume of submissions we received. It felt unfair to ask filmmakers to pay a submission fee for films we couldn't include in our programmes. We saw documentaries of value, but there was nowhere to put them. So this was essential. When it comes to the number of films, this is what I did: I reduced the number of films across all the competition programmes, simply because otherwise it would have been impossible to navigate among the competi-

tions. And I think that when these competitions were established, the film industry was also different. There was a very clear distinction between a big arthouse film and a smaller arthouse film. Now, I would say that everybody is looking for audience-friendly films with artistic value. So the attempt to find the difference between them is definitely this year's challenge. For now, let's see if there will be changes to the competitions in the years to come.

Despite being at the end of the festival year, PÖFF still attracts a considerable number of new films. With so much being produced, should the festival become more selective?
I think there is definitely overproduction in cinema, especially here in Europe. I believe there are over 2500 film productions per year, which is definitely too much, and that's also why it is possible to choose great European titles, because not all of them can go to Berlin, Venice, Cannes or Locarno. So, first of all, we have to be really selective. And that's also one of the reasons why I decided to minimise the competitions. As a festival, we have an obligation to bring out new films that will travel around the world and to highlight the directors we want to bring into the film industry. So, we do have to be selective and think about whom we give the spotlight to.

How do you approach politically charged films?
I think the question is also about how they are politically charged. I'm not someone who usually says no to a different point of view. In general, I think film is political - it is a stage for different voices to be heard. But at the same time, the film needs to be good. That's my main prerequisite for taking a film into our programme. I have taken risks at this festival, of course. You can't deny that if someone wants to see problems, they will find them. But for me, these films are voices we have given a platform to because they needed one.

Would PÖFF show films made in present-day Russia with state or regime funding?
No. I would say that, for me, Russian and Israeli films made with state or regime support are not something we should show in that way. But at the same time, I do feel we need to look for filmmakers who may not share the same beliefs as their home country, for example, those who have escaped, and we should not punish them. And the question is again: what are their films about? I think it's always a slippery path when you make such a decision, and there will certainly be people who are strongly against supporting anyone coming from these countries.

As an end-of-year festival, does PÖFF feel obliged to present the best films from other major festivals, including those that already have distribution?
I would say that right now, with seven competition programmes and up to 182 films, 60% is the side section and 40% is new titles. And of course, as an end-of-year festival, creating a Best of the Fest programme is one of the cherries on top for a film lover to really go through all the major festivals. But I also think that our side programme is very important for our audience. It helps create context for our competition programmes and, ultimately, helps us build the box office we need as a festival. If we didn't bring these films to the screen and didn't have this relationship with the box office, which we also share with the cinemas, we simply couldn't manage. But again, I see some questions arising. Previously, maybe a couple of years ago, local distributors focused mainly on the winning titles. Now they are taking more films throughout the festivals, so it also complicates our ability to fulfil expectations. So we have to tackle the question of the festival's role for films that are coming to cinemas anyway. And, as I said previously, there is overproduction. So maybe we should change our view on covering the best of the fests. This is probably a question for me in the coming years.

Yet many PÖFF competition winners never reach Estonian cinemas afterwards. Of course, that is also a question for distributors.
I still think we have to take it step by step. First of all, we have found that films that distributors previously wouldn't have acquired are now being acquired when PÖFF really wants them, so we have to negotiate. I think the distributors are also trying to find their way. And let's see, in the coming years, as the festival's artistic director, what types of films I will take to the competitions. I can't predict that.

Hopefully that will change, so the winning films can have a life in Estonia beyond the festival.
Hopefully. And I think it would be quite a kick for the festival to be able to distribute these films, but that's a totally different business strategy.

So you haven't worked on it?
No, we've always played with the idea, but it needs a different approach. Again, I come back to the overproduction of films, and for distributors to see what works in Tallinn, maybe they will also start to take these risks. We do have a lot of sales agents who pick up films, and our films travel all over the world to different festivals and also locally.

Some of them have been quite successful. Many directors have debuted here and started their careers at PÖFF.
Indeed, their second films have already been shown at Berlin, Cannes and other festivals. That's one of the things - we are something of a discovery festival.

As the new Artistic Director of the festival, how would you define PÖFF's identity? It connects three sides - the audience, filmmakers and industry. Which of them is most important to you?
All of them are important because that's how the programme comes together. Personally, I always think of the audience, so for me this is the most important part. For me, the most fascinating thing is finding something and creating an emotion. Cinema has throughout the ages been one of the easiest and most accessible forms of entertainment. Even when times are tough, going to the cinema with your family is still an event. You go to the cinema, experience a new culture, a new point of view, a new emotion. That's the most important thing for me. I always say that no story is unique - the question is how the story is told. I think PÖFF today offers a guarantee for everyone who is searching for something new and of quality in cinema.

For filmmakers, I think Tallinn is a platform that enables them to bring daring stories to the screen. Our mission is to discover new voices, new stories and new approaches to the language of cinema. As I also see from this year's submissions, we have many debuts. In fact, we had around 400 submissions just for first feature films. So Tallinn is a place to secure your career.

And for the industry, it's a place to discover. Companies find new people to work with and develop new projects.

Restored classics are becoming increasingly prominent at film festivals. Is this something PÖFF wants to develop as well?
Yes. First of all, I'm young, so I have so much to see. There are so many films and so many references, and there's a whole generation that has not seen certain important films at all, me included. Therefore, I think it's also our mission as a film festival to bring these films back to the screen. That's why I'm very happy about the "PÖFF Celebrates" programme, which features the first films from our first festival. We would have brought so much more to Tallinn if these films had been digitised, because the main problem nowadays is that they are on 35mm prints and don't have a DCP format.

But it was fantastic to go through these films, and this is definitely something we will continue to do in the future as well.

Can you say that this is the way film festivals can adapt to the growing importance of streaming services such as Netflix and others?
Definitely. Of course, it's great watching Netflix on a rainy Sunday - we just watched *The Sixth Sense* with my daughter. A great experience. But nothing can beat watching a film on a big screen with all that heightened emotion, especially when there are guests present and a Q&A, or when you are seeing something for the very first time. You feel part of something special and unique, hearing live reactions to a scene and realising there are so many like-minded people - or, on the contrary, asking yourself, "Why are they laughing?" So I think nothing compares to the collective emotion that cinema brings. Naturally, all these platforms also have their place, but they will never match the cinema experience.

Because the cinema experience is alive.
Exactly.



You go to the cinema, experience ***a new culture, a new point of view, a new emotion.*** *That's the most important thing for me*

TOP Picks

Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event, the Nordic region's most vibrant film summit, welcomes 700 global guests to Tallinn from 9-20 November. With a packed schedule of 120+ masterclasses, panels, and workshops. This year, we asked upcoming Estonian filmmaker **Elisabeth Madisson** and an acclaimed Estonian producer **Sander Lebreht** for their top programme picks.

ELISABETH MADISSON

is a screenwriter, development coordinator, and emerging producer based in Tallinn, Estonia. She works at Nafta Films, supporting feature films from early development through production, and is currently developing her first feature as a producer. With a background in screenwriting, she is particularly drawn to character-driven and coming-of-age stories. She was also a participant in the Baltic Women in Film Mentorship Programme 2025-2026.



SMALL INDUSTRY, BIG AMBITIONS: WHAT DOES ESTONIAN FILM NEED TO THRIVE?

- **Monday, 16 November 14:15**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Arcturus**

As a filmmaker based in Estonia, I'm particularly interested in understanding in which areas our film industry is doing well and where there's still room for improvement. This discussion, based on two recent master's theses, seems like a good opportunity to hear some fresh perspectives on the challenges we face and how we could address them.

DIALOGUE ON CONTRACTS: HOT SEAT IN NEGOTIATION

- **Tuesday, 17 November 10:00**
- **Tallink Spa & Conference Hotel, Meloodia**

On a more practical note, contracts and negotiations are an unavoidable part of filmmaking, but speaking from experience, they can also bring up quite a few questions and uncertainties. One good way to better understand the process is through real-life cases, which is why this interactive workshop may help make the next negotiation go more smoothly.

SCRIPT POOL & CO-PRODUCTION MARKET PITCHING

- **Tuesday, 17 November 15:00**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Sirius**

Another event I'm particularly looking forward to is the Script Pool & Co-Production Market pitching, which offers a chance to take a look at new projects in development, from upcoming debuts and new films by experienced directors to films for young audiences. I'm also happy to add that *Shadows of Summer*, a feature film I'm producing, is among the projects being pitched this year!

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT AUDIOVISUAL LITERACY?

- **Thursday, 19 November 10:00**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Arcturus**

An important topic that I think we sometimes forget to pay enough attention to is audiovisual literacy, which involves how audiences understand, interpret, and critically engage with the content we create. It's definitely worth discussing why this should matter not only to educators, but also to filmmakers, producers, distributors, and the industry as a whole.

BALTIC COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

- **Thursday, 19 November 15:30**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Capella**

This seems like a particularly practical and useful session for filmmakers who want to learn more about the possibilities of working in the Baltic region. From funding schemes and production incentives to co-production opportunities, it could be a good chance to better understand the options available to us when planning our projects, both financially and creatively.

REACHING YOUNG AUDIENCES THROUGH CO-CREATION

- **Friday, 20 November 10:00**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Vega**

I've always believed in the importance of making films for young audiences, and I also think it's important to stay in constant dialogue with the people we're making them for. This is why I'm particularly interested in this session, as it looks at how involving young people throughout the filmmaking process, from development to distribution, can help us create more authentic and engaging films.



SANDER LEBRETH

is an Estonian film producer and cum laude graduate of Tallinn University's BFM, where he produced *My Dear Corpses*, the film that won Estonia its first Student Academy Award. He is a partner at Exitfilm, Estonia's oldest film studio, and brings innovation to the industry through Lebenrecht Films and FilmLink.

THE LABEL DECIDES: FAMILY, YOUTH OR COMING-OF-AGE?

- **Friday, 20 November 13:45**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Arcturus**

Staying on the topic of audiences, I feel that as filmmakers, we should have a clear idea of who we're making our films for already in the early stages of a project. But figuring out how to actually reach those people is another question. This discussion takes a closer look at how films are labelled, who makes those decisions, and what happens when a film is presented to the wrong audience.

INDUSTRY TALK: PAULINE HANSSON AND NINA HAUN *TRIANGLE OF SADNESS*

- **Tuesday, November 17 15:30**
- **Tallink Spa & Conference Hotel, Galaxy 2**

I loved *Triangle of Sadness* and I'm a big fan of Östlund's work. Getting to see behind the curtain of film magic and ask questions of the people behind it all is a wonderful and hopefully useful chance you cannot miss.

Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event
November 9–20

SAME STORY, DIFFERENT MEDIUM: A CREATIVE WORKSHOP FOR GAMES AND FILM

- **Wednesday, November 18 12:30**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Arcturus**

Two worlds are coming closer every year, and innovation happens where different mediums cross. This talk is definitely for the crazy ones!

FROM SOUND TO SPACE: CREATING WITH DOLBY ATMOS

- **Wednesday, November 18 9:00**
- **Studio89**

A film with a good picture and bad sound is much harder to enjoy than the other way around. Sound is what gives the motion picture its juice. This is where the magic happens.

INNOVATE THE INDUSTRY – INNOVATE YOUR LEADERS

- **Wednesday, November 18 13:00**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Capella**

This would be my number one suggestion. We live in times that change ever faster, and change is inevitable, so it is wise to learn how to embrace it.

FROM PRODUCTION TO EXHIBITION: RETHINKING THEATRICAL DISTRIBUTION

- **Friday, November 20 9:00**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Capella**

I have a feeling the room will be full of producers. Who doesn't want to sell more or get more visibility for their masterpiece?

THE NEW UNDERGROUND: FILM DISCOVERY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA RESTRICTIONS

- **Friday, November 20**
- **Nordic Hotel Forum, Arcturus**

Interesting insights into the recent social media bans and what they mean for distribution. How do we reach young audiences? What is their medium? These are some of the questions it sparked in me.



What happens when the memories that define us can no longer be trusted? In his debut feature *Oblivion* (*Užmarštis,* 2026), Lithuanian filmmaker Danielius Minkevičius turns this question into an intimate mystery. Starring Gabija Bargailaitė and Dainius Gavenonis, the film follows Marija as she confronts her relationship with her biological father and begins to question her family's past. Combining the tension of a detective story with the texture of everyday life, *Oblivion* also asks what individuals, and entire societies, choose to forget.

THE BLACK SPOTS *OF* MEMORY

Lithuanian director **Danielius Minkevičius** on his feature debut ***Oblivion***, the unreliable nature of memory, and the histories hidden in the streets of Vilnius. The film will have its world premiere in PÖFF's First Feature Competition.

By **Odeta Černiauskaitė / Vilnius Film Office** Photos by **Nikita Ševcov**

How did the idea for *Oblivion* first emerge?

There are uncertainties in all our lives. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, whether we remember a conversation correctly, or even why life exists. Somehow, we live with that uncertainty. But I began wondering what happens when it enters our memory and touches our identity. What if we started questioning the essential memories that shape who we are?

At the time, I was reading a lot about psychology and the defence mechanisms that protect us from painful experiences, but can also separate us from our feelings and understanding. I began looking for similar mechanisms in history, society and Lithuania's collective memory. I realised how much we tend to forget and forgive, even when no one has asked for forgiveness. Eventually, I wanted to approach these seemingly theoretical questions through something intimate: a father and daughter who both carry a past they do not want to confront.

You call the film a detective story about memory. Why combine mystery with such an everyday, personal relationship?

I actually wanted to combine a detective story with slice-of-life storytelling rather than psychological drama. They seem like opposites: one gradually reveals a mystery and builds tension, while the other observes ordinary people and their relationships. I wanted the film to feel intense and simple at the same time.

I wanted its form to create a sensory experience, so that viewers feel what Marija feels: an internal anxiety whose source is difficult to identify. Sometimes we suppress something so deeply that we no longer understand what is troubling us. Memory itself is unstable, constantly rewriting itself, yet we rely on it to construct our identities.

***Oblivion* is your first feature. What did the longer process teach you?**

With a short film, you can act on an idea relatively quickly. A feature is more like a marathon: you get tired and start won-

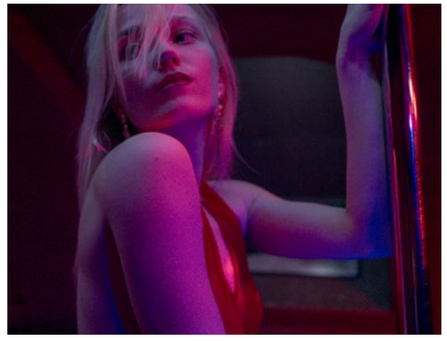


On the set of *Oblivion*.





On the set of *Oblivion*.



dering whether you will reach the finish line. I began writing Oblivion at 28 and am presenting it at 33. I am a different person now, interested in different things.

There was a period when I was changing very quickly, and the film had to change with me. It taught me how important it is to find an idea you can grow and change alongside. You need something that can keep its initial spark alive over several years.

You wrote the screenplay with Kornelijus Stučkus. How did you work together?

We used to joke that we should record our conversations because our creative dialogue was impossible to recreate. It was one of the most beautiful periods of my life. We were often a "thinker and feeler" duo. Kornelijus thinks sharply and critically; he can quickly define a situation. I work more intuitively, writing what I feel, what my gut tells me. Sometimes we switched roles. We wrote scenes, read each other's work and discussed it, eventually searching for the right way to judge whether a scene worked.

What drew you to Gabija Bargailaitė and Dainius Gavenonis for the leading roles?

For me, casting isn't a checklist of qualities. At some point, I simply saw Gabija and Dainius in those roles, and it became difficult to imagine anyone else. I don't think everything about casting needs to be rationalised. Only when you start working together do you discover how much actors bring from their own experiences. If you give an actor a very precise key to a scene, you may destroy some of that potential.

How did you and cinematographer Oskaras Abramavičius develop the film's visual language?

For both of us, the image has to create a sensory experience. Often the characters themselves suggest the visual approach. Marija is a striptease dancer, so she lives at night and sleeps during the day. That means this becomes a nocturnal film. Then we start asking: what does our night look like? What kind of light does it have? And when will dawn break for the first time?

Vilnius appears throughout the film. What role does the city play in the story?

Vilnius becomes a character in one way or another in all my films. I know "the city as a character" is a fashionable phrase, or perhaps it isn't anymore, but I felt this connection long before thinking of it as a concept. I've always wanted the surroundings to reflect my characters' inner worlds.

There is a scene where Marija walks with her aunt beside a construction fence and begins asking about her father. An excavation of memory has begun in her life, so I liked the idea that excavators had literally dug up the background. But there is another reading: places in Vilnius that once felt dangerous or unpleasant are being gentrified. New homes and playgrounds appear, while what existed before fades away. That, too, is a form of oblivion.

Some scenes take place in the former Vilnius Jewish ghetto area. We say nothing about it; the characters simply walk through those streets. Yet the city carries that history whether or not we think about it. As for what kind of Vilnius appears in the film, it is easier to show than describe. Come and see!

The film uses music sparingly. How did you approach its soundscape?

We worked on the music for a long time with composer Matas Šablauskis. At first, the score felt insufficiently subtle, and several rewrites still did not work. When sound designer Saulius Urbanavičius joined us, we found something we called "music of spaces": music so closely connected to the film's atmospheric sounds that it is not always clear where atmospheric sound ends and the score begins.

Matas practises a kind of sound alchemy. He takes sounds already present in the film, whether a car engine, a traffic light or a voice, and transforms them into music. The film also features songs by Lithuanian musician Alina Orlova, who appears in one of the scenes.

How much room do you want to leave for the audience's imagination?

As much as I think the audience can fill. I want viewers to become a kind of co-author. Think of the blind spot in our vision: there is a small area without light-sensitive receptors, but the brain automatically fills in that black spot. I want to leave a similar "black spot" in a film, something incomplete that invites the viewer's imagination to work alongside film. Our brains dislike emptiness and constantly try to fill the gaps. That connects directly to *Oblivion*.

There was a period when I was changing very quickly, ***and the film had to change with me.*** *It taught me how important it is to find an idea you can grow and change alongside.*

Has the film's meaning changed for you over those five years?

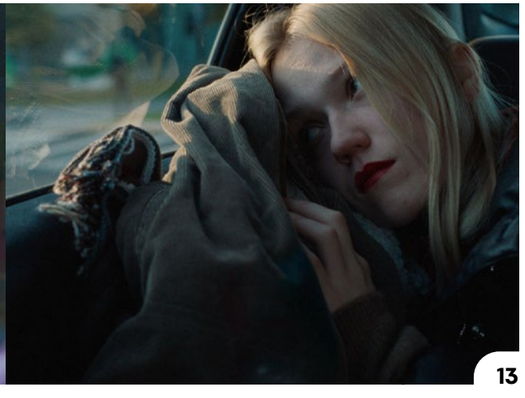
I changed, the film changed, and the world changed very quickly too. We live in an age of information warfare and an increasingly uncertain relationship with truth. Questions about memory, what we remember and what we choose to forget remain fundamental. People and cinema return to them again and again; only their meaning, and the cinematic language we use to explore them, changes with time. **BF**

OBLIVION

Fiction, 104 minutes
Director: Danielius Minkevičius
Screenwriters: Danielius Minkevičius, Kornelijus Stučkus
Cinematographer: Oskaras Abramavičius
Editor: Gabrielė Urbonaitė
Composer: Matas Šablauskis
Sound Designer: Saulius Urbanavičius
Music: Alina Orlova
Production Designer: Aurimas Akšys
Starring: Gabija Bargailaitė, Dainius Gavenonis, Aušra Pukelytė
Producer: Ieva Norvilienė
Production: Tremora







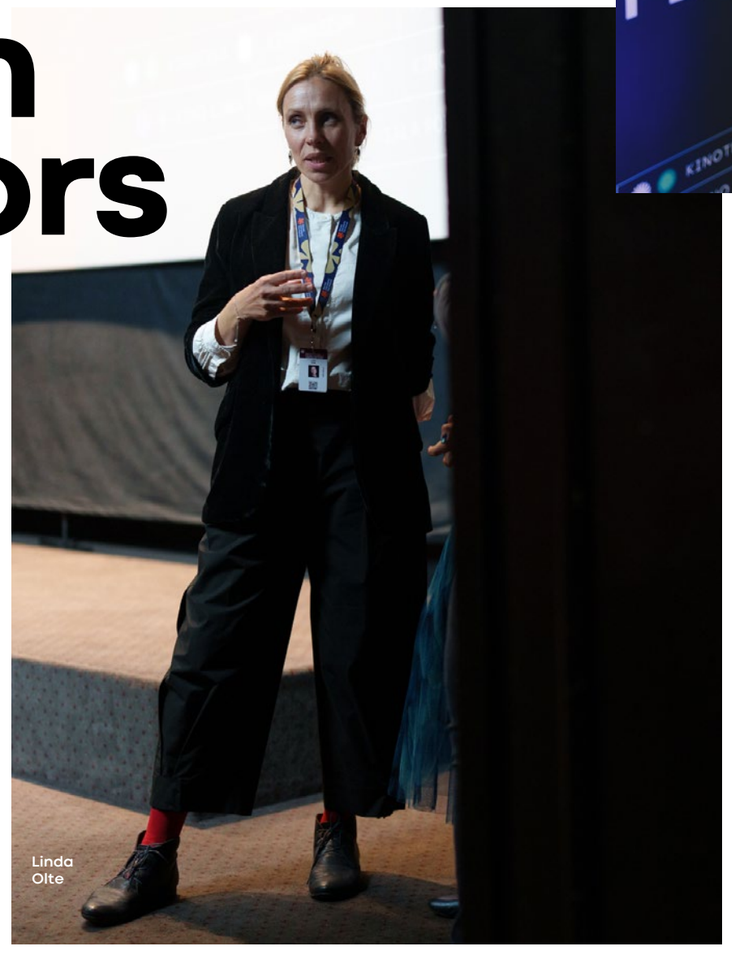

Kristiāns Riekstiņš

Latvian Directors

in the Baltic Competition: ‘Emerging’, Yet Experienced

The label **‘emerging director’** can be misleading when applied to those with substantial experience in the audiovisual arts. Yet it is often used for filmmakers releasing their first or second feature-length film, and that is the case with all three subjects of this article.

By **Dace Čaure** Photos by **Kristaps Kalns** and **Warsaw International Film festival**


Linda Olte


Reinis Kalviņš

For Linda Olte, *The Child* (2026) is her second fiction feature, but her body of work already includes several documentaries and television projects, as well as the National Film Award Lielais Kristaps for Best Director for *Sisters* (2022). Reinis Kalviņš is also releasing his second feature in 2026, *The Bog*, following his 2020 debut, *The Shift*, which won the national Best Debut, and years of work as a producer on both Latvian and international productions. Kristiāns Riekstiņš’ *Kingpins* (2026) is his first feature, yet he graduated from the National Film School of the Latvian Academy of Culture ten years ago and has since worked extensively in advertising and film editing.

Who, then, are these Latvian ‘emerging’ directors?

Linda Olte

is a television and film director whose skills also include cinematography, screenwriting and editing. Since the early 2000s, she has worked regularly with television broadcasters and film studios on a wide range of projects, primarily documentaries. For Latvian Television, Olte has directed several portrait films, sometimes featuring unusual staged sequences, including *Jānis, Elza. The Book of Love* (2015), about the poets Rainis and Aspazija; *Rozentāls. Seven* (2016), about the great Latvian painter Janis Rozentāls; and *Nora* (2018), about Nora Bumbiere, the legendary Latvian popular singer. She has also directed the television series *Project: Divorce* (2020).

Olte’s first fiction feature, *Sisters*, was originally conceived as a documentary about two children in out-of-home care. However, given the sensitivity of the subject and ethical considerations, she ultimately decided to make it a fiction film instead. That decision led to several awards at international festivals and a Lielais Kristaps for Best Director. It was not Olte’s first national film award: she had previously received one for Best Editing for the documentary *My Father the Banker* (2015, directed by Ieva Ozoliņa).

Whatever the project, Olte is most interested in the person behind the story. Since her student days, she has been fascinated by people’s destinies, life journeys, and the circumstances that have brought them to where they are today. That interest shapes both her commissioned television work and her own creative projects. Asked whether she considers herself an emerging director, she says it is flattering to be described that way. Everyone has their own path, and for many years Olte focused on realising other people’s ideas, developing as a director along the way. Now she feels the time has come to tell stories of her own.

Perhaps it is fitting that her second fiction feature, *The Child* (2026), has brought Olte back to the Warsaw Film Festival, where *Sisters* won two major awards in 2022. *The Child* had its world premiere on 12 October 2026 in the festival’s main competition. The director continues to explore socially relevant issues often regarded as taboo. While *Sisters* focused on ‘children of the system’, whose parents are unable to care for them adequately, *The Child* tells the story of a couple desperate to become parents but confronted by infertility. As the husband begins to lose hope and is ready to move on, the protagonist, Zane, becomes completely consumed by her efforts to become a mother. As with *Sisters*, extensive research went into the making of *The Child*, including interviews with fertility specialists, women affected by infertility, and couples struggling to conceive. During production, the actors and cine-


The Child (2026)


The Child (2026)



Photo by **Lauris Aizupietis**

Reinis Kalviņš on the set.

matographer also met such couples, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject and a more authentic approach to the characters' emotional states. The film is not only about the cycle of disappointment experienced by people dealing with infertility, but also about how we sometimes become consumed by what we do not have, instead of appreciating what we do.

Reinis Kalviņš

is a director who entered cinema from marketing. He studied at the Baltic Film School in Tallinn and earned his master's degree at the Sarajevo Film Academy through film.factory, the film education programme co-founded and led by Béla Tarr. Since then, he has remained highly active in the field, participating in both the TorinoFilmLab and Locarno's Match Me! programmes. He produced the historical crime drama *1906* (2019) and co-produced the Finnish coming-of-age horror film *Hatching* (2022).

Kalviņš' first feature, *The Shift* (2020), was inspired by his experiences with illegal taxis in Sarajevo and by reports of territorial disputes among taxi drivers in Riga. Drawing on real-life accounts, he crafted a tense crime drama set over a single night. The film won the National Film Award Lielais Kristaps for Best Debut.

Asked about his influences, he admits that *film noir* has strongly shaped his taste in cinema, but he does not consciously follow genre conventions when making films. He says that working to genre rules often produces predictable results. Instead, he is deeply interested in the psychological landscape of his characters and avoids simplification. He values cinema that requires viewers to participate actively in constructing meaning, and so strives for a certain transparency in both visual style and storytelling.

Kalviņš' second feature also had its world premiere at the Warsaw Film Festival. *The Bog* (2026) was first screened on 10 October 2026 in Competition 1–2, the festival's section for first and second features. The director continues to work within the crime drama genre, again looking back to Latvia in the 1990s. Whereas *The Shift* portrayed a society that, in some respects, still follows the difficult paths laid down in that decade, *The Bog* uncovers memories buried since the childhood of its protagonists – and of the director himself – from that period. The film follows police officers in a small town who respond to a report from a local drunkard, one of their own childhood contemporaries, and discover the remains of an adolescent boy in a peat bog.

At times, the label 'emerging director' may feel as arbitrary as reality+ itself; at others, it can bring greater responsibility and invite ***closer attention to a director's work****.*



The Bog (2026)







Kingpins (2026)

News of the find spreads quickly, forcing the town to confront a past it would like to forget but cannot. *The Bog* has been described as 'Baltic noir', and the director agrees that the film contains elements associated with noir, such as a fatalistic sense that past events determine the characters' future, creating a feeling of entrapment. Ultimately, though, the last word is left to the viewer.

Kristiāns Riekstiņš

is the only true debutant among the three, though he is far from a stranger to the audiovisual world. During his studies at the National Film School, he made several short films, including *Lazarus* (2015), which was screened on Latvian Television's programme for emerging directors. After graduating, he presented the medium-length film *Eva* (2018) at the Cannes Film Festival's film market. Since then, Riekstiņš has worked mainly as an editor, directing and editing commercials, making trailers for several Latvian films, working in a film archive, and serving as assistant director on the Estonian-Latvian basketball film *Kalev* (2022).

He takes a positive view of the label 'emerging director'. In his opinion, it offers opportunities to present something new and unexpected, though a great deal is also expected of emerging filmmakers, who attract more attention and scrutiny. The real problems begin once you become an 'established' director, Riekstiņš jokes, because audiences have grown used to you.

Riekstiņš recognises the influence of the National Film School in his own work and that of many directors of his generation. Teachers inevitably leave their mark on their students, but it is for each filmmaker to interpret those lessons and integrate them into their own creative practice. For him, film school's most significant legacy is a sense of responsibility towards a film's subject and characters. 'Putting yourself into a film' means approaching a subject with genuine interest and understanding; it does not necessarily require autobiographical details. You have to understand why you, specifically, are the right person to tell that story.

Riekstiņš' debut feature, *Kingpins* (2026), is a vibrant and witty heist comedy that, alongside its jokes and misunderstandings, highlights the financial and personal challenges young people face today. The protagonist, a young actress called Paula, has fallen into debt with her boyfriend Kaspars and decides to rob her workplace, a bowling alley. As the genre demands, though, the night of the robbery does not go to plan. The crime-comedy format permits a departure from realism, which the film underlines with vivid neon colours that saturate not only the bowling alley but also housing estates and a car repair garage. As the director explains, the events are so phantasmagorical that the film needed a visual code to signal from the outset that this is reality+.

At times, the label 'emerging director' may feel as arbitrary as reality+ itself; at others, it can bring greater responsibility and invite closer attention to a director's work. Either way, the label means little on its own. What counts is watching the films. **BF**



DOP of *Kingpins* Jānis Jurkovskis and Kristiāns Riekstiņš on the set.

Photo by **Gvido Mēteris**



The Nordic Epicentre for Your Next Action

Estonia has long had the locations and talent to attract international film productions, but it has lacked purpose-built sound stages. Now, one new studio is ready, while another is moving towards construction, as the Baltics and Northern Europe gain momentum as filming destinations. To explore what this means for Estonia's film industry and how the two projects will differ, we spoke with **Joonas Tartu**, head of **Tallinnfilm Studios**.

By **Martina Tramberg**
Photo by **Rauno Volmar/Delfi Meedia**

What was the primary motivation for establishing Tallinnfilm Studios, and what gap in Estonia's film production infrastructure is the project intended to address?
Developed in close collaboration with Estonian film professionals, Tallinnfilm Studios aims to strengthen the country's production infrastructure and improve working conditions for local and international filmmakers. Christopher Nolan's decision to extend his stay in Estonia from one month to six while filming *Tenet*, despite the absence of a purpose-built soundstage, demonstrated Estonia's potential and raised the question of what could be achieved with a fully equipped studio.

Beyond attracting major international productions, Tallinnfilm Studios will provide local filmmakers and international co-productions with the facilities and technical capabilities to realise projects of all scales.

What facilities will Tallinnfilm Studios offer, and how will its three sound stages support contemporary film and TV production?
We focused on smart design, functionality, and crew well-being.

Three purpose-built sound stages under one roof offer over 2,600 m² of space, ceiling heights up to 14 metres, independent operations, privacy, and excellent sound isolation. By default, each stage includes a dedicated support area for make-up, wardrobe, rest, and production offices, with a flexible layout. We also offer adaptable, multifunctional rooms that can serve as additional wardrobe or office space, depending on a project's specific needs. These features make the facility perfectly suited for high-end commercials, TV formats, and international corporate events. Add to that a screening room, SFX facilities, a reception area, and even a sauna, and it becomes a comfortable, well-thought-out working environment right in the city, close to the sea and nature trails.

How will Tallinnfilm Studios complement Estonia's film industry and the new facilities in Ida-Viru County?
We see the two developments as complementary, strengthening Estonia's film industry as a whole. IDA Hub will provide space in the country's eastern region, making it well suited to large-scale productions, extended stays and shoots that require specific regional locations.

Tallinnfilm Studios, meanwhile, will provide a base close to the capital's resources. Situated just 10 minutes from Tallinn Airport and the harbour, it will offer productions convenient access to local talent, equipment rental companies and urban infrastructure. Tallinn and its surroundings also offer a diverse range of filming locations, from the medieval Old Town to dense forests and bogs.

Together, these facilities will give international productions greater flexibility when planning their shoots. They can use Tallinnfilm Studios for soundstage work and urban interiors, then travel to Ida-Viru County for locations that suit their specific needs. By combining the strengths of both regions, Estonia can offer productions a wider range of facilities and locations within a single, compact country.

***Estonia offers competitive production costs** through our planned studio rates, energy-efficient design, and Film Estonia's 40% cash rebate.*

What makes Tallinnfilm Studios an attractive proposition for international producers, particularly those working in the Nordic and Baltic regions?
Beyond our growing studio infrastructure, Estonia's appeal lies in its efficient administrative procedures, straightforward permitting process, and a close-knit film community where bringing the necessary professionals together is quick and reliable. This is backed by the exceptional competence and high work ethic of our local crews. The country's compact size is also a major logistical advantage.

Estonia offers competitive production costs through our planned studio rates, energy-efficient design, and Film Estonia's 40% cash rebate.

How is Tallinnfilm Studios integrating sustainability and efficiency into its design and operations?
Sustainability is built into Tallinnfilm Studios from the outset. We are pursuing LEED Gold certification and integrating solar panels, geothermal energy, and smart water management to reduce environmental impact and operating costs. An energy supply analysis, prepared with support from TalTech, Estonia's leading university of technology, further informs our approach to energy efficiency. We are also collaborating with the Baltic Green Film Initiative, powered by Mureel, to help producers meet European sustainability standards with minimal additional effort and cost. Together, these measures make sustainable production more practical and affordable.

What is the current development timeline for Tallinnfilm Studios, and what are the key milestones and priorities from now until its planned opening?
We are entering the active construction phase. Public procurement for construction is ongoing, and we expect to break ground early next year (2027). Our doors will officially open in 2028. Alongside construction, the next major milestone is the launch of our official pre-booking system in Q1 2027. Our current priority is strategic conversations with international partners and producers to ensure our operational frameworks are perfectly tuned. We are building the studio around the needs of filmmakers, and we welcome conversations with producers planning projects for 2028 and beyond. **BF**

TALLINNFILM STUDIOS AT A GLANCE

Administrative building on 2600m² across five floors.
Stages, SFX prep room, offices, screening room, rooftop sauna, multifunctional rooms

Stage 1, 1290m², height 14m
Stage 2, 829m², height 14m
Stage 3, 503m², height 8m



a BURNING PARADOX

Actor **Jarmo Reha** talks about his career between theatre and film, arthouse experiments like the ***Mo*** films and mainstream spectacles such as the upcoming ***Ümera jõel***.

By **Andrei Liimets** Photos by **Virge Viertek**

Your roots are primarily in theatre. How would you describe the balance between theatre and filmmaking in your life at the moment?

For me, being an actor and working as an actor are about process and progress. I've followed my own path: first studying in theatre class at high school, then at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. I burned out at Theatre NO99, left, started directing my own work, and, by chance, ended up acting in Brussels. Throughout all of this, one thing has remained unchanged: I don't want to repeat myself.





I'm always looking for something new – new challenges, new opportunities, new directions.

Mo Amor is driven by passionate filmmakers working against the odds on a shoestring budget.

At the moment, I feel I've done certain things in theatre and have reached some limits in the field here in Estonia. Since I'm a freelancer, I also do a lot of unskilled work – I've worked in cemeteries and for moving companies. I do all this so I don't have to compromise when it comes to art. I'd rather work on projects that are close to my heart and earn nothing from them, making my living from something else.

I got involved with the *Mo* films in the first place thanks to Sten-Johan Lill (acclaimed cinematographer - AL), whom I've known for a long time. He simply invited me over, saying something like, "Let's sit down, come to the table." Eeva Mägi and the rest of the *Mo* compatriots were there. We talked, and an idea emerged. A week later, we shaved my head, I was in character, and we started making the film.

I was able to jump straight into *Mo Papa* because I was in a state of chaos and had no idea what to do next. We filmed it in my apartment. Six months later, we were already filming *Mo Amor*, which is now about to be released. A year later, we made *Mo Hunt*, which blends staged elements with documentary filmmaking.



I eventually reached a point where I realised that I simply wanted to make more films and be involved in the whole *Mo* project. At the same time, other directors started showing an interest in working with me, so filmmaking is now my main focus.

You've also had a reputation as an *enfant terrible*, a creative rebel. Now that you're in your mid-thirties, how do you feel? Are you still rebelling?

Hahaha! Over the past couple of years, I've consciously put the brakes on. I've travelled around the world, pursued my own interests, and stubbornly worked on various projects, but right now my focus is on getting my home renovation done.

I realised I don't have a safety net – no one to pick me up if I fall. So now I'm building one.

If we compare it to hockey, I've had my fights, and at the moment I'm sitting on the bench for a while. But when the whistle blows, I'll put my gloves back on and get back into the ring.

I think a lot of things could be done differently. For example, the funding round for experimental films was abolished. Many people want to work differently, rather than write a perfect screenplay and wait years for funding.

Sometimes I feel we have many good films made in Estonian, yet there's no such thing as Estonian cinema as a distinct entity. An enormous amount of effort and energy goes into making a well-made B-movie, which is then pushed beyond Estonia's borders as well. But even when it finds a niche, it still doesn't really stand out. I think we should endorse and financially support the rebels in our society. They are usually the ones who move the needle.

In theatre, I always ask myself why something needs to be done and why I'm doing it at all. I've been a rebel, observing what's happening in society and reacting to it. I bring



Photo by **Anastassia Volkova**



Photo by **Kristjan Mõru**

people together, and the final version emerges from their contributions. I try to find artistic responses to society's burning paradoxes.

How much do you think about the audience throughout this process? For example, the target audience for the *Mo* films is probably quite small – mostly festival-goers.
Yes, but these films offer very good value for money. Lower-budget arthouse films can travel much further relative to their budgets, and hopefully they move audiences emotionally, too.

If someone is trying to compete at a high level in the arts, I wouldn't even ask how many people watched the work. I'd ask whether they achieved something extraordinary – something people can later point to and say, "This is where it came from."

Making films on virtually no budget is still pretty brutal. You have a group of uncompromising people who are willing to put themselves through hell because they're hungry to grow and develop in their profession.

When you mentioned that I've been called an *enfant terrible*, I think of it this way: I follow my own path to inspire others who want to do the same, rather than simply following in someone else's footsteps. That's the best way to broaden and explore the world - and ultimately to give something back, too. This is the way of the maverick.
If that means falling out with everyone along the way, then where do I sign up? Courage is especially important in all of this, in art.

You also began directing your own work at a young age. I suppose you enjoy being involved in the creative process yourself, rather than simply being an actor at someone else's mercy?
I'm happy to try different things for the sake of the experience. If I'm bringing someone else's vision to life and the project isn't really my own, I want to be compensated differently.

For example, *The Godkiller* is a major period film, and I can't invest as much of myself in it creatively, but

The Godkiller brings patriotic storytelling to the sword-and-sandal genre.

That rawness is part of who I am. *In a way, I work every day to keep it under control.*

the salary makes up for that. You have to put food on the table, after all. And I like different experiences, too.

We live in this world alongside other people, and I don't feel the need to go off on an ego trip on my own, either.

In that sense, *The Godkiller* is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the *Mo* films, although, given director Mikk Mägi's style, I suppose it might not become a conventional blockbuster.
Yes, I think Mikk Mägi is exactly the right person for a project like this. It's his first feature film and the most ambitious budget to date for an Estonian film.

He has an eccentric streak and a sense of humour, and he gives us the freedom to work out how to approach the material. At the same time, it's creatively exciting because there are some very complicated scenes and stunts.

It has the potential to become something truly distinctive. It's a patriotic film, an adventure spectacle in the sword-and-sandal tradition, but we also need films that appeal to a broader audience. I'm very happy to work on projects like this, too.

When you're making *avant-garde* work, it's easy to forget that we still need to connect with people and speak to them in a way they can relate to.

Mo Hunt blends staged elements with documentary filmmaking.



Haven't you got the itch to direct something for the screen yourself?
Never say never. I have a few ideas tucked away in a drawer. I'll get to them eventually. In Japan, a fifty-year-old director is still considered young. There's time. At the moment, I'm learning more about filmmaking by working on film sets as an actor.

As an actor, I'd describe you as raw, natural and unfiltered, in the best possible way. What's your method?
Thank you. That's what I strive for! Being real and honest. As Edward Norton's character says in *Birdman*: "Here, I lie and pretend all the time, but on stage, I'm real." When I was twenty, something clicked: a good actor isn't someone who acts well, but someone who is different. That rawness is part of who I am. In a way, I work every day to keep it under control. I'm impulsive and unpredictable, and I've been diagnosed as highly sensitive. I live by my bucket list – once I've done something, I don't want to repeat it. I'm an evolving amoeba.

Your work blends sociopolitical issues with more abstract, philosophical questions. What kinds of questions are driving your creative work at the moment?
My current approach is to make work that doesn't have to spell everything out or point the finger.

I see theatre and film differently. Theatre provides the time and space for physical bodies and minds to come together and experience something. My theatre projects have always begun with something that's wrong in society. For example, the next question I want to explore is: why don't we rebel? In my mind, the main issue in the world is the gap between the rich and the poor. Theatre is immediate. You can react straight away and change things on the spot.

Film, however, is the highest art form because it's a synthesis of all the other art forms. Even so, I don't think film can save the world – if anything can, perhaps documentary films can.

Generally speaking, I feel actors grow and learn in theatre, whereas in film you have to be precise from the outset. Denzel Washington also travelled from the premiere of *High and Low* at Cannes to New York to perform in *Othello*.

Do you have any favourite films that have particularly influenced you?
I was recently discussing with friends how to put together a top ten list of the greatest films in the world. We ended up going through around 200 of them. New titles keep coming to mind all the time.

Welcome to the world of film criticism!
It's such a difficult question. There are so many great films. Linklater's *Before Sunrise* trilogy, Kieślowski's *Three Colours* trilogy, Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* and *Wings of Desire*, and Sorrentino's films. I'm particularly drawn to philosophical and poetic works.

When we were making *Mo Papa*, we had Harmony Korine's *American Honey* and the Safdie brothers' *Good Time* in mind.

In recent years, there has been growing discussion about actors' mental health. What do you wish you had known when you were younger?
Alan Watts and Buddhism saved me. I'm a chronic overthinker, and I had to learn to quiet the voice in my head. Watts said that Buddhism is psychology – that you are here and now, in the present moment. Experience comes through all five senses.

I'm more inclined these days to simply experience things rather than constantly overthink and anticipate everything. I'm here and now, and I've grown into this way of being over the years.

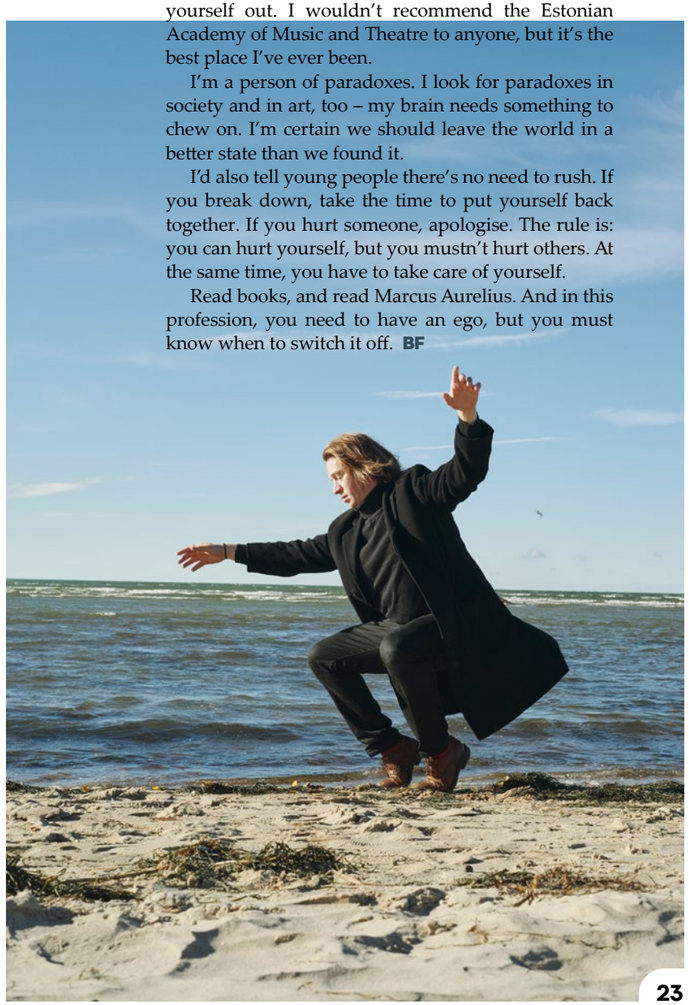
That's why, when people ask me what advice I'd give young people, I've said: put on your Icarus. Burn yourself out. I wouldn't recommend the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre to anyone, but it's the best place I've ever been.

I'm a person of paradoxes. I look for paradoxes in society and in art, too – my brain needs something to chew on. I'm certain we should leave the world in a better state than we found it.

I'd also tell young people there's no need to rush. If you break down, take the time to put yourself back together. If you hurt someone, apologise. The rule is: you can hurt yourself, but you mustn't hurt others. At the same time, you have to take care of yourself.

Read books, and read Marcus Aurelius. And in this profession, you need to have an ego, but you must know when to switch it off. **BF**

Jarmo Reha has learned to quiet his overthinking mind and embrace the present moment.





VIESTURS KAIRIŠS:

An Idea on the Edge of Madness – Very Important for a Film

Film, theatre and opera director **Viesturs Kairišs** is one of the most prominent directors of his generation in Latvia, and has also gained international recognition, receiving awards at various international festivals. With his sixth feature film, Viesturs made it into the competition programme of the Cannes Film Festival, yet nothing in his life has radically changed, he says.

By **Uģis Olte, Kino Raksti magazine**
Photos by **Agnese Zeltiņa**

He is already working on his next feature, which, once again, will be 'an extremely difficult story to tell, or perhaps, one could say, an untellable one'.

Three years ago you half-jokingly said: listen to what I have to say while you still can, because I'm about to be cancelled over my new film. What was behind that joke?

At the time, the difficulty lay precisely in the idea that, in the film *Ulya*, a man, Kārlis Arnolds Avots, would play a woman. I felt this pressure constantly: fine, make the film, but perhaps you should cast a girl in the role after all... Obviously, that could have been a different film, but it held absolutely no interest for me! I can't even explain why the film interests me only with Kārlis as Ulya. Not because Kārlis is a brilliant actor, although he is, but because the idea itself strikes me as, in a certain sense, right, and yet genuinely on the edge of madness. And I think that's very important for a film.



VIESTURS KAIRIŠS

- born in Riga, Latvia, in 1971
- studied in the legendary directing and acting class of 1993–1997 at the newly founded Latvian Academy of Culture
- theatre productions since 1997
- opera productions since 1999
- feature films since 2001
- productions abroad since 2013 (in Germany: Berlin, Cologne and Darmstadt)
- at the Latvian National Opera, directed three of the four operas in Richard Wagner's tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*
- four National Film Awards for Best Fiction Film (2000, 2001, 2016, 2022)
- Artistic Director of Latvia's largest repertory theatre Dailes teātris since 2020

Of course, it is also a question of technique: can the audience believe it, or does it end up as some kind of poor parody? People have to believe it. They shouldn't be asking themselves what gender the actor is. Because the story is, of course, about a girl, very specifically and precisely.

Do you find these kinds of complications interesting? Just another factor to take into account?
I don't spend much time thinking about such factors before they present themselves, because the idea draws me in first. And then, well, I enjoy being at the centre of a controversy, I enjoy the risk. I liked not knowing whether it would work.

At the end of the film, the first credit says that playing this role was a dream for the actor Kārlis Arnolds Avots. So it was actor's dream, not yours.
Yes, it was Kārlis's dream. The film grew solely out of his idea. If I had come up with the idea of making a film about Ulya myself, if I had then spent ages working out how to do it, and decided that the part should be played by a bloke... somehow I wouldn't have believed in it.

How does it work when an idea comes from an actor? Does he drop hints every now and then, or keep reminding you about it?
No, this was very a specific case. I had become Artistic Director of Daile Theatre and noticed this talented young bloke. I watched him in a few more productions and thought, right, we need to get this guy to Daile! We arranged our first meeting, and Kārlis immediately said it was his dream to play Ulya. He had even wanted to make a student project about it. Naturally, to get him to join Daile, I was prepared to promise him anything, so I said, fine, you'll play Ulya! And then I forgot all about it. At the time we were talking only about theatre, and I wasn't convinced it would interest me as a director. In theatre there's nothing unusual about it, after all. Men have been playing women's roles since Shakespeare's day.

Director Viesturs Kairišs on the film set of *Ulya*.

The idea stayed somewhere in the background, but then, during the shooting of *Janvāris* / *January*, I overheard Kārlis telling the story to the cinematographer Wojtek Staroń. I was listening, and suddenly it all clicked into place. Hang on, this story is something bigger, there's a film in it! And once I realised it was a film, I moved ahead immediately.

In your masterclass at the Academy of Culture, you said that you now feel you could make anything, any kind of film. What did you mean by that?
What I meant was, whether I like it or not, I've had to acknowledge, through an enormous amount of hard and demanding work, that I've reached a certain level of mastery. I now understand how to ensure that a film achieves a high standard in every respect: the acting, the directing, the cinematography. But the most important thing about a film is what it is about. If I know what I want to make, I will always find a way to do it.

Is it a matter of craft, or something else?
We shouldn't reduce craft to mere technical competence, knowing how to stage a scene and so on. I think craft is, for the most part, inseparable from the human dimension, and I know that I can bring complex, carefully constructed human stories under a directorial vision. I am a very complex person myself, and those are the kinds of stories I can make. Simple ones, I genuinely can't. I have nothing to say about the lives of young people. Plain, pleasant people, pastoral little scenes – I have no tools for that.

If I know what I want to make,
I will always find a way to do it.

I'm not boasting, nor do I wish to belittle anyone. I simply believe I've attained a certain level of skill. And now the question is: what should I make? That's why *Ulya* was such an appropriate challenge.

In fact, I consider that I've really made only four films, starting with *The Chronicles of Melanie* (2016), then *The Sign Painter* (2020), *January* (2022), and now *Ulya*. And I've developed enormously even while making them. That gives me great satisfaction, but it's also why I keep looking for challenging material. With the story of Ulya, I kept thinking: what on earth am I going to do with this? I have no idea! That sort of thing fascinates me. It isn't entirely typical of me, which means I have to overcome a great deal within myself, push myself further and dig deeper.

This quartet of films nevertheless keeps a fairly safe distance from the present day, and only one of them, at least in my view, enters the period of your own lived experience or memories. How do you explain the fact that the past, and the realm of memory, is what occupies you as a filmmaker?
Because that is precisely what I struggle with: in the present day, I don't see stories. I need a vast, archaic plot, and history, of course, is full of them. Contemporary life seems not to be, yet I search for them desperately. I simply don't see these grand stories with a great arc, if you like.

If you define *Ulya* as an archaic story, what kind of narrative is it?
In fact, it isn't an archaic story. This film is not about that particular historical period, and yet at the same time it is; it isn't about basketball, and yet at the same time it is; it isn't about Ulyana Semyonova specifically, and yet it is... The deeper I went into all those specific circumstances and that particular era, the more universal the story became. In the end, it is a story about every one of us, and absolutely about today: about that inner freak, inner giant, or inner madness that you try to destroy, suppress, I don't know, cancel, but which may in fact be exactly who you are. How do you live with it? How do you allow yourself to accept that your inner freak is you, that it is your greatest value and your identity? Nowadays, when everything is expected to be standardised, universalised and fitted into some kind of template, this is a very important story, especially for young people. Right now, people struggle to find themselves. I know very specifically how difficult it is to find your place in life, to make peace with yourself and your flaws, and to understand that your so-called 'flaws' are actually your strengths, not your weaknesses. To me, this story is about every one of us: how to live at all in this difficult and, at times, unacceptable world. Yes, the clothing is archaic and the context documentary, but fundamentally I believe it is an entirely contemporary, universal story.

And what led to the decision that the image would be black and white, and so different from the way we actually see reality? This isn't today's perfect, smooth, razor-sharp image; it's a heavily transformed visual world.
The decision to shoot in black and white came rather quickly, for various reasons, but also because it is, in a sense, a journey through time, and it seemed right for this film. Of course, it can't really be explained in simple terms. It wasn't an entirely rational decision, more an intuitive one, but we agreed on it very quickly.
Above all, I would say, we were trying to achieve a sense of poetry, a poetic way of seeing. Since we are making a film about a person who views the world in

Viesturs Kairišs on the official photo session of Cannes film festival, May 2026.



a highly subjective way – this giant girl who sees the world as perhaps slightly distorted, and in any case through a lens of intense emotion – we had to find her gaze. That was the only task. And naturally, it emerges through details rather than through any overarching formal concept.

Surely the easiest way to create poetry is through editing, by placing images side by side so that they spark against one another and generate a third meaning?

No, no, it has to be there within the frame itself. There's a theory that a film can be made in the editing room. No, it can't. You can only edit the film you've already shot, better or worse. Of course, a film is born in the edit, but if you didn't put it there during filming, you can't edit a bad film into a good one.

So how do you get that poetry into the frame?

I am, fundamentally, someone with a very strong visual way of thinking. A great many things begin for me with an image, a visual impression. In both theatre and cinema, I think first and foremost like a production designer and a cinematographer. That is essentially where I come from. These days I also know how to delve into a person, but even then, visually. Every person has their own inner landscape, and I can see it.

But I also know that this is the first stumbling block, because visual thinking must grow out of the story you want to tell. And by story I don't mean a literary story in the conventional sense, but what the film is truly about beyond the plot. You have to find the visual code for that and live your way into it. You could say that finding it is a form of living it.

I place the problem in my mind and live with it. *I search and I wait for the solution to arrive. That is my only method.*

I sometimes go fly-fishing, and in fishing, perhaps even more so in hunting, you can either go looking for the animal or wait for it to come to you. I've worked in many different ways, but now, with every idea, this is how I proceed: I place the problem in my mind and live with it. I search and I wait for the solution to arrive. That is my only method. It requires an enormous amount of work, in the sense that you have to keep thinking about it, though not mechanically. You have to identify what troubles you, what you are searching for, define the points that continue to haunt you when you think about the idea. And then you wait for the solution to emerge. **BF**









Above: *How To Divorce During the War.*
Above right: *Ulya.*
Left: *Vesna.*
Right: *The Child.*



LITHUANIAN Films @PÖFF

As part of its **Baltic focus**, this year's Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival will showcase an impressive **19 Lithuanian feature films**, including six world premieres.

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė**

Viesturs Kairišs's *Ulya* will open the festival's 30th edition. A co-production among Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland, with Ieva Norvilienė as the Lithuanian co-producer, the film tells the story of the legendary Latvian basketball player Uljana Semjonova. It had its world premiere at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

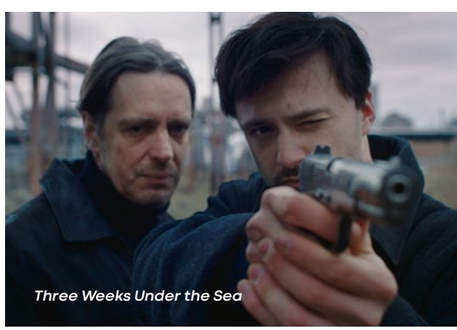
STORIES ACROSS BORDERS

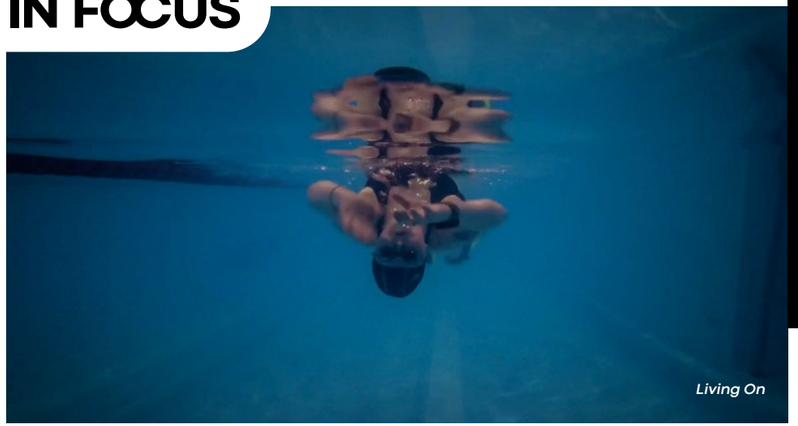
The Baltic Film Competition will feature *How to Divorce During the War* by Andrius Blaževičius, *Vesna* by Rostislav Kirpičenko, *DICE-CHING-O-MAT* by Kristijonas Vildžiūnas, and two additional titles co-produced with Lithuania: *The Child* by Latvian filmmaker Linda Olte and *Three Weeks Under the Sea* by Czech director Martin Kuba.

How to Divorce During the War had its world premiere at Sundance, where Blaževičius won the directing award. The drama centres on Marija, an ambitious department head at an advertising agency, and Vytas, a film director seeking direction in his own life. When Marija finally finds the courage to tell him she wants a divorce, she chooses the worst possible moment. Produced by Marija Razgutė, the film brings together partners from Lithuania, Luxembourg, Ireland and Czechia. It was selected as Lithuania's Oscar submission this year.

Another Cannes premiere, *Vesna*, is set in a Russian-occupied town in Southeastern Ukraine, where a priest, Andriy, is






Living On


Baltic UXO


Letters from a Silenced Country


The Shrew of Destiny

forced to guard the bodies of Ukrainian civilians before they are taken to mass graves. Risking his life, he secretly returns them to their families, but as winter freezes the ground, the danger only grows. Stasys Baltakis produced the film with French and Estonian partners.

Following its world premiere at the Warsaw International Film Festival, *DICE-CHING-O-MAT* follows Vilis, a professor of Asian studies who believes life can be understood without being felt. As he tries to reconnect with his children, the story raises universal questions about our relationships with those closest to us and whether we could do more for them. The production, led by producer Uljana Kim, spans Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.

Also arriving from Warsaw, *The Child* is a Latvian–Lithuanian drama co-produced by Klementina Remeikaitė. At 37, Zane and Kaspars seem to have everything: love, careers, a home and shared interests. Yet they have spent ten years trying to have a child. After turning to fertility clinics, diets, churches and healers, they reach a crossroads. Kaspars gradually accepts that life can be fulfilling without children, while Zane cannot let go of her dream of becoming a mother and is prepared to do whatever it takes.

Three Weeks Under the Sea will have its world premiere at the festival. A co-production by Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Lithuania, the film's Lithuanian co-producers are Justė Michailinaitė and Kęstutis Drazdauskas. It follows Misha, who returns to his Ukrainian hometown for his father's funeral, only to discover it has been staged. As he tries to uncover what really happened, he becomes entangled in the world of local mobsters – old friends of his father – and their crimes.

DOCUMENTING A CHANGING WORLD

The Doc@PÖFF Baltic Competition selection includes *Baltic UXO* by Alexander Belinski and Agnė Dovydaitytė, the world premieres of *Living On* by Nerijus Milerius, *i want to be human* by Rinaldas Tomaševičius and *Memory from the Sea* by Francesco Rufini, and the Lithuanian co-production *La Pietà* by Rafa Molés and Pepe Andreu.

Presented at the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, *Baltic UXO* explores the legacy of the Second World War on the Baltic seabed and examines how people and nature coexist with an invisible and increasingly pressing threat. Produced by Dagnė Vildžiūnaitė in Lithuania, the film was made in collaboration with partners from Germany and Latvia.

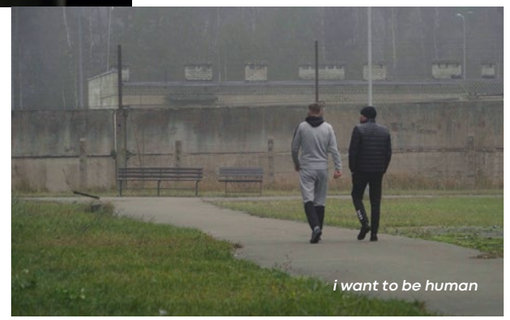
Living On, a Lithuanian–Ukrainian film produced by Stasys Baltakis, examines the countless traces left by the meat grinder of war. Some are visible on a body that has been brutally maimed; others are invisible, only implied, yet just as deep and indelible.

Produced by Lineta Lasiauskaitė and Uljana Kim, *i want to be human* is an observational documentary following the daily lives and attempts at change of men serving sentences at Pravieniškės Correctional Facility. Aged between 25 and 60, they have all been convicted more than once. Through their experiences, the film explores life on the margins of society and the challenges of reintegration.

In *Memory from the Sea*, Arūnas, an ageing fisherman and amber seeker, struggles to make a living from the sea. As fish become scarce, he spends the long winter making jewellery from amber, once a mainstay of local industry and coastal tourism. He seems suspended between the past and present, like a spider trapped in amber. The film's producers are Valdemar Albert Lovčik and Teresa Rožanovska.

Lastly, *La Pietà*, a co-production by Iceland, Lithuania and Spain (co-producer Arūnas Matelis), is a poetic, contemplative elegy in which time, memory and matter merge. The glacier becomes more than a landscape. Today, it is covered with vast white sheets in a desperate, sadly already futile, attempt to slow its melting. Here, the glacier becomes a subject, a body, an altar and a loss. The film had its world premiere at the Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival.

Another documentary in the Best of Docs programme is *Letters from a Silenced Country*, by Poland-based Belarusian filmmaker Andrei Kutsila. A Polish–German–Lithuanian co-production, with Giedrė Žickytė as the Lithuanian co-producer, the film premiered at the


i want to be human

Venice International Film Festival. It paints a portrait of contemporary Belarus through the stories of people who have experienced imprisonment, repression and forced exile – voices that the authoritarian regime seeks to silence.

NEW VOICES, TIMELESS STORIES

Danielius Minkevičius's *Oblivion*, produced by Ieva Norvilienė, will have its world premiere in the First Feature Competition. It follows Marija as she confronts her relationship with her biological father and begins to question her family's past. Blending the tension of a detective story with the texture of everyday life, the film asks what individuals and entire societies choose to forget.

Sounds of the Desert, a Lithuanian–Norwegian film by visual artist and filmmaker Emilija Škarnulytė, will premiere in the Rebels with a Cause Competition. A meditation on the bold visions and intergalactic sounds of the Sun Ra Arkestra, the film is told through the voices of two of its members: Abshalom Ben Shlomo and 101-year-old Marshall Allen. From mid-century Chicago to sweeping sand dunes, the film explores landscape, cosmic spirituality and the enduring rhythm of one of jazz's most influential and longest-running ensembles.

Polish director Marcin Wasilewski's *The Shrew of Destiny* will screen in both the Children's Competition Programme and the ECFA Competition Programme. A Polish–Lithuanian co-production, with Agnė Adomėnė as the Lithuanian co-producer, it follows a shrew living in an ancient forest who is tasked with saving it from an impending disaster.


Sounds of the Desert


Oblivion

REDISCOVERING LITHUANIAN CLASSICS

The Old Gold programme will present three Lithuanian classics: *When I Was a Child* (1969) by Algirdas Araminas, *The Devil's Bride* (1974) by Arūnas Žebriūnas and *The Eternal Light* (1987) by Algimantas Puipa.

When I Was a Child portrays the first love of Tomas and Eglė, two high school graduates whose romance begins when they skip a school visit to an exhibition. Capturing the atmosphere of its time, the film also explores the enduring uncertainties and emotions of coming of age.

In the musical *The Devil's Bride*, the imp Pinčiukas is cast out of Heaven and lands in the miller Baltaragis's pond, promising to keep his windmill turning without wind in exchange for something the miller does not yet have. Baltaragis readily agrees, but when his daughter Jurga is born, Pinčiukas returns to claim his reward.

Set in a Lithuanian coastal village, *The Eternal Light* weaves together the emotions and destinies of four central characters. Its exhausted world, where people struggle to be themselves or feel anything beyond existential emptiness, offers a stark portrait of post-war Lithuania.

Selected for the EOC Sports Film Programme, Juozapas Mikulėnas's documentary *Sandra: The Drift Queen* follows Sandra Janušauskaitė, a determined and resilient woman making her way in the male-dominated world of professional drifting. The film explores the sport's physical and technical demands, as well as its emotional and psychological toll. **BF**


Memory From the Sea


La Pietà



AN ESTONIAN TALE OF TWO SISTERS

***No Me Without You*, Janno Jürgens's** second feature film, opens with a harrowing accident on a dark road. A similar darkness lies between two adult sisters, Katrin and Mari, who start finding each other again after this unspoken tragedy.

By **Ralf Sauter** Photos by **Sohvi Viik-Kalluste** MUAH **Liisi Põllumaa**
Wardrobe courtesy of **Racer Worldwide**

Janno Jürgens

is an Estonian screenwriter and director with twelve years' experience in folk dancing. A graduate of the Baltic Film and Media School, Janno Jürgens gained international recognition for his short film *Distance* (2012), which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival. His feature debut, *Rain*, premiered in 2020. His second feature, *No Me Without You*, a psychological drama exploring the complex bond between two sisters, will premiere in the Official Competition at the 2026 Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF). He is currently working on his third feature, *The Man Who Wasn't Meant*.

"For us, what mattered was how this tragedy is dealt with and how people emerge from it together. Maybe other possibilities still exist," says Jürgens about separation and disconnection in families, which seems to have become the norm in Estonia.

Your debut feature film *Rain* focused on two estranged brothers trying to reconnect. Your second feature, *No Me Without You*, is a story of two estranged sisters. What made you return to the theme of family, specifically siblings?

Probably intuition, drifting towards what weighs on my heart. But *No Me Without You* is actually my first film that originated outside of me. The initial idea came from co-writer Anti Naulainen. After I had finished *Rain*, he told me about his concept. He already had a treatment, a page and a half long, describing the entire sequence of events that unfolds between the sisters and how it resolves. At first, it seemed very complex to me, so I didn't jump on board right away.

What made it complex for you?

When Anti shared his story over a beer, it felt like too much. I couldn't process it; it felt too dense, or perhaps I was on a different path at the time. But after *Rain*, I realised that I love watching dark psychological thrillers, so why shouldn't I make the kind of film I enjoy? Suddenly I had an intuitive urge to move into the psychological thriller genre. About a year later, Anti and I were at a screenwriters' gathering, and we found ourselves talking about the sisters again. I realised that this story could be bent quite well to the framework and direction I wanted to pursue, so we decided this would be my next film. As I started writing the script, it poured out of me like water from a broken dam.

Through the writing process, a theme began to emerge intuitively, cemented itself, and remains important in my next projects as well. Specifically, the discovery that in childhood people share an unconditional closeness, complete honesty, and sincerity, but along the way, as we grow older, we somehow lose it. Society and the structures forced upon us begin to drive us apart. My question is whether this unconditional closeness can somehow be regained. This theme began to seep more and more into the script, and Anti and I developed it back and forth, constantly trying to maintain the suspense and mystery.

In short, I found myself caught between these two sisters, but when I began to infuse their story with my own feelings, those themes came straight from my heart. I have three brothers myself, and I like the saying that the depth of the abyss between sisters is known only to them – and why shouldn't that apply to brothers as well? The same mystery surrounds both brothers and sisters, but it felt to us that with sisters, you can go further, deeper, more bitterly, more meanly.



Photo by **Manfred Vainokivi**

right now. They have been my family for ten years now. By this point, it seems like the only possible way.

Still, with every film, new people join the family - namely, the actors needed for the roles. In *No Me Without You*, these family members are Mari Abel and Eva Koldits starring as the sisters. What made them right for these roles?
What we liked about these sister characters is that they appear similar yet are so different. I had admired both Mari and Eva for a while, watching their theatre work and overall presence. Outwardly, they resemble sisters, but their personalities are so different. It was important to us that Eva Koldits's Katrin be very grounded, rational, and forceful, while the other half – Mari Abel's Mari – is more playful, creative, an artistic gust of wind. Both characteristics were already present in these actors. When we started developing the film further with them and working together, it turned out surprisingly that Eva is indeed Katrin and Mari is exactly like Mari. The intuitive feeling towards them ultimately proved correct.

I also liked the idea that all the main actors had been involved in more experimental theatre, where boundaries are constantly being pushed. They felt like brave performers with whom it's possible to take on challenges and go as far as necessary. I'm glad that turned out to be true. When I met Andres Mähar, who plays Raivo, I even said word for word: "I am Columbus. I have a bold plan with no easy solutions. We are going to grapple with the impossible, and I am looking for crew members for my ship. Will you join us?"

As a filmmaker, how much does happenstance matter to you?
More and more. The older you get and the more you do, the more you feel like letting go of all control and letting happenstance in. I've thought about this a lot, also in connection with how we will make our next film. Through happenstance, it is possible to bring vitality to a film, because you have stopped over-rationalising, over-constructing, and overthinking everything. Happenstance holds life and organic qualities, but to achieve that, you have to get rid of stiffness and create a feeling that something is being created spontaneously here and now. If you want to just film something that is already constructed on paper, then it's just a question of execution. Real emotion is born when things happen as if by themselves. In our next film, we will to let go even more and allow space so that something accidental can emerge.



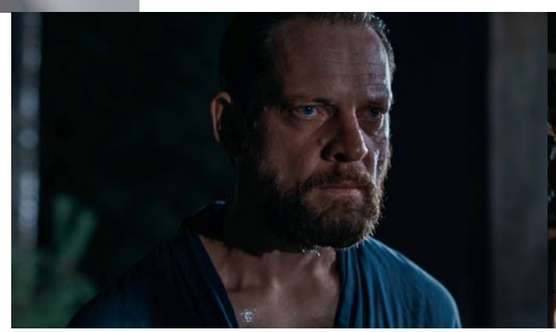
NO ME WITHOUT YOU

Thriller/ Drama ● 95 min.

Director: Janno Jürgens
Screenplay: Janno Jürgens & Anti Naulainen
Cinematography: Erik Põllumaa E.S.C
Music: Maarja Nuut
Cast: Eva Koldits, Mari Abel, Andres Mähar, Katariina Unt
Producers: Marju Lepp & Manfred Vainokivi
Produced by Filmivabrik
International Sales: Loco Films, Laurent Danielou
Estonian Distributor: Acme Film

One fatal event reunites two estranged sisters whose desires and rage reveal hidden secrets and release tensions buried deep down. Ridden with guilt and moral ambiguity, the sisters embark on a haunting emotional journey where love and revenge collide.
No Me Without You is a fascinating psychological thriller that delves into difficult life choices and the boundaries of humanity.

All the main actors had been involved in more experimental theatre, where boundaries are constantly being pushed. We could go as far as necessary.



Raivo (Andres Mähar) was written to be an unusually patient man who offers angelic support.





Sisters Katrin (Eva Koldits) and Mari (Mari Abel) are both teachers and seem alike, but they have entirely different internal worlds.

Your film very much reforms what a family can be like. What in our society, and our family structures, causes so much shame and hesitation that people are afraid of changing how they live?
Inevitably, it feels as if society has very prescribed paths laid out for us. We are expected to leave home as early as possible, become independent, and distance ourselves. Soon, each brother lives in a different corner of the world, and they get together only once a year to talk about feelings when they're drunk. Encapsulation and separation from each other are deeply ingrained. That seems bizarre because the need for closeness is so powerful, leaving certain emotional gaps. Yet it has somehow become normalised for us. Families in southern countries live huddled together well into old age, and that is considered normal, but with Estonians, separation and encapsulation are so heavily pushed that they have become the norm. But it could be different; we could at least start thinking in the direction of what we actually want or need. Maybe other possibilities still exist.

When a filmmaker begins a new project, they, in a sense, create their own family in the form of the film crew to lean on. What kind of family did you need to make this film?
We had the same creative team on *Rain*, and we are already preparing our third feature film together. We have grown together, know each other inside and out, and share close friendships. Our collaboration is deeply intertwined, and I couldn't imagine it any other way different. That safe formula hopefully starts to feel exhausting for them, and then they start looking for a certain distortion. In that sense, I am an incurable optimist who believes that the average viewer is also evolving, even to the point where *No Me Without You* could circulate widely.

One of the darkest aspects of the story is that happenstance plays a major role. The story is triggered by a sad, tragic, and above all accidental event in the middle of the night. Was that always the starting point?
That was present in Anti's idea from the start, but it was never the main focus. For us, what mattered was how this tragedy is handled and how people emerge from it together. In other words, how sisters who refuse to communicate achieve closeness once again through this event.

Many people find it hard to accept that life is often chaotic and uncontrollable. Film is often a safe, controlled, tightly structured form - good mostly triumphs over evil, and the plot unfolds according to certain rules. When a filmmaker starts breaking those conventions, there is a risk of losing the audience. How willing are you to risk your film stepping too far outside the safe boundaries the filmgoer is looking for?
I'd like to think that safe films are everywhere, and there are an immense number of them. I have a strange hope that even the average viewer, who otherwise looks for that safe cinema, ends up wanting something

When we made the film, we left no room for the idea that we needed to make the script safer because someone might misunderstand. What matters most is that I, as the filmmaker, understand it. At the same time, as a filmmaker, you obviously want the message to reach as many people as possible. Maybe the perfect balance is to make the main layer understandable to the broadest possible audience, and through that layer, you can discuss deeper, heavier issues. But a filmmaker cannot overthink that balance either. Striking that balance needs to be an intuitive process.

If given the choice between words and silence, I choose silence because ***it is more exciting.***



One specific connection between your two feature films is related to eating together. In *Rain*, there is a scene in which one brother cooks for his older brother, and the same scene repeats in *No Me Without You*. What makes the kitchen table such a magical meeting place?

My creative team has asked the same thing! The ending of my next film takes place at the dining table as well. We keep ending up in a similar place. This has already begun in my early student films. In my short film *Distance*, people also sit together around the dining table.

In my childhood, the kitchen table was a special meeting place where the family gathered every once in a while. Even when no one spoke, you could feel each other's presence. You were together in your own way, side by side. Elsewhere, people were more separated, turned inward. There are also memories of times when people occasionally let go around the kitchen table, moments of opening up and true connection. Maybe that's where it stems from, why I like taking these characters to the kitchen table. There is hope there that something can start moving. That's where people are connected.

As a filmmaker, how much do you rely on silence – in other words, scenes where characters are together quietly, just eating? How much do you trust the viewer's ability to fill in those blanks in their own minds?

I choose silence over speech, even though I haven't specifically thought of it as a filmmaking device. But if given the choice between words and silence, I choose silence because it is more exciting. I am the kind of person who has enjoyed this type of cinema my whole life, where cinematic means tell me the story, and no one explains or clarifies anything to me verbally. That's where the magic of the whole game lies for me – that communication happens through the image and everything else. Dialogue is secondary.

No one in your film gets more interpretive space than Katrin's husband, played by Andres Mähar. Throughout the film, he cannot fully grasp his wife's relationship with her sister. He doesn't know how to look into that dim abyss. How can we better understand our partner's inner world and their relationship with their siblings?

For us, what was interesting about Raivo's character was that he doesn't impose himself and knows how to create space for his wife so she can decide when to talk. He knows how to step aside, even if it's uncomfortable. We wanted to create a male character who isn't based on the Estonian male archetype, or, in a sense, on ourselves. He had to be better than we are; he had to have empathy and give her room. Then Katrin can decide for herself whether she wants to talk or not. The question was how to achieve a male character with a very long fuse and that kind of patience. We hoped that, in turn, Raivo's character would inspire





With every film, Janno Jürgens keeps returning to the dinner table, where people seem to be opening up.

us, because I think we are so much more egocentric, considerably more impatient people than Raivo is. Even with our next film, we want to create better men, who are more open, empathetic, and understanding. Raivo is a man who offers angelic support.

Looking back at recent Estonian feature films, there have been other such angels. In *Morten*, there was mysterious Emilie in the bog; in *Our Erika*, the fatherly coach. Do such angels truly exist for us, or is that just something we like to see in films?

I'd like to believe they do. I like to think that angelhood consists of being able to renounce oneself for someone else's sake. That's another interesting question: is that even truly possible? In my film, both Raivo and the detective characters are precisely in the service of someone else; they are able to consciously step into the background rather than control things.

Speaking of control, what things did you want to let go of as a filmmaker this time, after making *Rain*?

It always depends on the conditions set for each film: how much time there is, how long the shooting days are, how tightly everything is packed, and how efficiently you need to work within that timeframe. If you essentially have to hustle, it sets its own limits, and you sign off on that even before you step onto the set. If we already know that we need to shoot six scenes quickly in a single day, regardless of the weather, it sets constraining limits, and you have to start thinking more broadly about how to create some kind of freedom. I was really looking to inject breathing room and air into that tight shooting period.

More importantly, working with an actor requires the filmmaker to get to know them. I need to delve into who the actor is so that we develop a more substantive, deeper relationship before the shoot even begins. If we understand each other well, we are better able to guide each other towards a result. That's a direction I'd like to move in with my future films.

Fortunately, the shooting of *No Me Without You* was pleasant; the creative team remembers that summer very positively. Yet the conditions were still very difficult, and we had to work intensively over very few shooting days. That's the main question: how to break out of that intensity and create more space? If a scene refuses to come together on set, there is no such thing as shooting it on Wednesday instead. At the appointed moment, you are forced to get the best possible result, but why should any creative process look like that? Days aren't identical, and sometimes what is desired might not happen. Everything changes and is in constant flux. So, how to find that air to make a film as a creative process, rather than a feverish act of proving yourself?

I have a feeling that, as filmmaking conditions in Estonia become increasingly restrictive, we are sadly moving in the opposite direction. We have to make do with tighter and tighter conditions, and inevitably we have to move towards co-productions with other countries and scrape together more money from elsewhere. That seems unavoidable to me as well; otherwise you have to keep doing things the same way. When I was young, I was certain that once I reached my third full-length film, things would get a little easier. But in reality, nothing gets easier; the process actually gets harder.

Your films often deal with shame, that invisible force that affects everyone to some degree. Why do people wrestle with shame so much?

Indeed, it is a recurring theme in all my films, including *Distance* and *Rain*. How to find freedom and release the explosion that is silently inside us? Fortunately, by building Raivo's character into a different kind of man and growing ourselves in the process of making these films together with our team, we learn to express the big feelings inside us rather than holding them in.

Our shame may be that we don't dare to express our true feelings. Estonians have many feelings, but we haven't learned how to express or articulate them. The problem is finding the courage to do so. Yet it is hard to say where that lack of courage comes from. Maybe it's somehow connected to our history, because standing out has never brought us anything good. Rather, turning inward and keeping a low profile has kept us alive. Probably there are many different circumstances that have shaped our psychological profile. **BF**



Still from the TV series *Star City*

STEP INTO THE SCREEN:

Discovering Vilnius Through Film

Vilnius has played many roles on screen. Over the years, the Lithuanian capital has transformed into 1980s East Berlin, 1940s Hamburg and Trondheim, 19th-century Vienna, Kraków, south-eastern Ukraine, present-day Stockholm and Malmö, and even a futuristic Copenhagen. Its streets, neighbourhoods and buildings have served as backdrops for international productions and Lithuanian films alike.

By **Vilnius Film Office**

In 2026, the Vilnius Film Office launched seven thematic film tourism audio routes, inviting residents and visitors to discover the city through the films and television series shot here. By combining filming locations, architecture, local history, and behind-the-scenes stories, the project reveals how familiar streets can become entirely different worlds once the cameras start rolling.

Visitors can follow the imperial worlds of *Sisi* and *Catherine the Great*, discover the contributions of women in cinema, trace Lithuanian film history, explore socialist realism and brutalist architecture, revisit the haunting world of *Chernobyl* in Fabijoniškės, or search for the atmosphere of Nordic noir. Each route offers more than a collection of filming locations: together, they reveal the city's cinematic identity and the remarkable versatility of its urban landscape. They also show how filmmakers use architecture, small details and entire neighbourhoods to evoke different countries and historical periods.

Throughout summer and autumn, guided tours brought these stories to life, with residents and tourists exploring filming locations alongside professional guides. Yet discovering cinematic Vilnius does not depend on a tour schedule. All seven routes can be explored independently through free, professionally produced audio guides in Lithuanian and English. Available at vilniuskine.com, they allow visitors to listen on their phones and explore at their own pace. The routes are designed for walking, with starting points easily accessible by public transport.

Initiated by the Vilnius Film Office, the project received additional support through the City of Vilnius' cultural initiatives programme. Developed in collaboration with a professional tour guide and incorporating city-provided maps, it makes Vilnius' screen history accessible to film enthusiasts and curious travellers alike.

For film fans, the routes offer a chance to stand where a favourite scene was shot. For other visitors, they open a different perspective on the capital, leading beyond traditional landmarks to residential districts, distinctive architecture and lesser-known corners. Long after the crews have departed and the premieres are over, the stories remain embedded in the city. Film tourism gives productions a life beyond the screen, one location and one walk at a time.

VILNIUS REMAINS A HUB FOR INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS

While visitors rediscover stories already created in Vilnius, the city continues to build its screen legacy through major international productions. One prominent example is Sony Pictures Television's *Star City*, a spin-off of *For All Mankind* for Apple TV+. Its entire first season was filmed in Vilnius, employing around 140 Lithuanian crew members alongside additional local staff and actors. Baltic Film Services provided production services, while Baltic Locations managed filming locations. The project demonstrated both the city's architectural versatility and its ability to accommodate ambitious productions.



TV series *Star City* producer Steve Oster in Vilnius

Photo by **Ieva Kaunaitė**

Producer Steve Oster praised the local film community: "Our expectations were vastly exceeded both in terms of the quality of the look and feel that the local production community delivered for *Star City*, as well as the working style of the local staff/crews." He also highlighted the professionalism, creativity and positive attitude that made filming in Lithuania a memorable experience.

The momentum continues. The Polish series *The Riot*, produced by Telemark and filmed partly in Lithuania, draws inspiration from Poland's largest prison riot in 1989. In 2026, Vilnius welcomes a major British production to be announced soon, a large-scale German historical drama, a British detective series, Danish TV productions and international thrillers. Nordic filmmakers continue to return, while Vilnius remains a popular destination for Baltic filmmakers.

Step into the stories filmed in Vilnius. Explore unique film tourism audio routes at ***vilniuskine.com***.



Photo by **Vilnius Film Office**

Such projects reflect an ecosystem supported by diverse locations, experienced crews and financial incentives. Lithuania's Film Tax Incentive helps attract investment: in 2025, it generated €25.6 million in private investment in film production, while foreign productions spent nearly €56 million in Lithuania, according to Lithuanian Film Centre data.

Through the Vilnius Film Fund, the city also supports international co-productions and collaboration between Lithuanian and foreign filmmakers. Together, these initiatives reinforce Vilnius' position as a place where stories are created, while its film tourism routes invite audiences to discover the city behind them. **BF**

CASTING **A NEW VISION**

After more than a decade in casting, **Ronja Kissa** is taking her experience global with **IRIS**, a new digital casting platform launching in 2027. "I'm driven by the belief that there is always a way to make things work," says Kissa, whose ambition is to simplify the casting process and bring creativity back to its heart.

By **Aurelia Aasa** Photos by **Stina Kase**

You founded the casting company Agency Icon more than a decade ago, with offices in Helsinki and Tallinn. You are now ready to launch the casting start-up IRIS. How did you end up in casting?
Film entered my life early, but my first real glimpse into casting came just after high school, when I was cast in the feature film *The Revolution of Pigs* alongside hundreds of young people from across Estonia. I became fascinated by how such diverse characters were found and brought together. Later, through film school and my first casting projects, I began to understand how fascinating and creative casting work can be – understanding the director's vision, searching for the right characters, and discovering people who can bring that world to life.

Do you feel you have that creative space as a casting director?
Not always. Since COVID, casting has become much more digital. Self-tapes have made the process more accessible, but they have also led to a significant increase in material and administration.

And I think something else has been lost along the way. In a casting studio, you could work with an actor in real time: answer questions, give direction, try different approaches, and help them deliver their best performance. With self-tapes, we often only see the finished result.

Creative casting also means having the time and tools to discover people you do not already know – new actors, unexpected characters, hidden gems – and to test different possibilities rather than always opting for the safest option.

But today the process is often disconnected, with communication and materials scattered across multiple channels and tools. Casting teams spend more time managing the process and less time exploring, experimenting and discovering, leaving less space for the creative side of casting.

As I understand it, the mission of IRIS is to reduce the administrative workload and refocus on creativity?
Exactly, but there is another layer. IRIS grew out of our own frustration, but we quickly realised these were not just our problems. When we spoke with actors, directors, producers and other casting professionals, the same issues kept coming up.

Actors now carry much more of the workload themselves. A self-tape can involve preparing the material, setting up lighting and sound, finding someone to read with, filming, and choosing the right takes – often without ever knowing what happened afterwards.

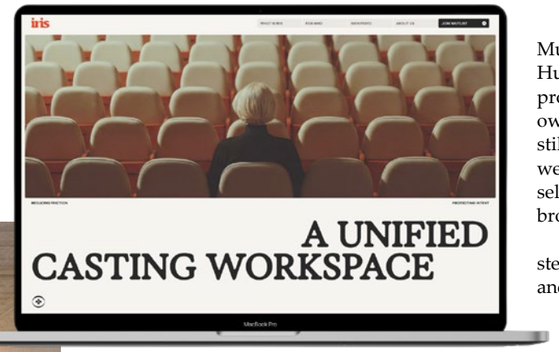
That can create frustration and weaken trust among actors, casting directors and productions. With IRIS, we want the whole process to work better for everyone: less unnecessary work, better communication and greater value from the time people invest in casting.

Let's say I'm an actor auditioning for a role. How can IRIS help me?
Essentially, we want to recreate digitally as much as possible of what used to happen naturally in a casting studio, with IRIS acting almost like a casting assistant. An actor receives all the information about the role in one place, including notes or video instructions from the director and casting director, and can record the audition directly in IRIS, with support for framing, lighting, background, teleprompting and sound. IRIS helps organise the takes, although the creative decision about what to submit always rests with the actor.

After submitting, the actor can see whether the audition has been viewed, passed on to the director, or shortlisted. But there is another layer too: even if an actor does not get that particular role, a strong self-tape should still add value for their future. It can put them on casting directors' radar, help them be remembered for upcoming projects, and open doors to roles they might otherwise never have been considered for. Our vision is that every minute spent creating a self-tape is an investment in future opportunities. Casting teams receive stronger, better-prepared auditions, while actors gain lasting value from the time and effort they put in.

Our vision is that every minute spent creating a self-tape is ***an investment in future opportunities.***

Is there a risk that IRIS mimics the mechanisms of social media?
No, that is a deliberate choice. IRIS is a professional tool, not a feed. There are no likes or follower



We want to recreate digitally as much as possible of what used to happen naturally in a casting studio, with IRIS acting almost like a casting assistant.



counts, and actors will never have to pay to be featured or promoted.

We have been told that paid visibility could be a business opportunity, but for me that is an absolute no. Everyone should have the same opportunity to be discovered. Some actors will naturally stand out more, but that should come from the quality of their work, not from how much they pay or how large their reach is.

A strong audition should help an actor not only in that one casting, but also as part of building their career.

The more they practise, take the time to make a good self-tape, and really work through the scene, the more the process serves them, not just for one job but as part of their career.

Tell us about your collaboration with your co-founder and long-term business partner, Mika Pajunen.

Mika has worked as a film and television producer for more than twenty years, so between us we have experienced the casting process from different perspectives: I know it from the casting director's and actors' point of view, and he knows it from production. That understanding of the different people involved is built into IRIS.

Mika is also a visionary. He is always thinking a couple of steps ahead, while I'm more of a driving force who says, "Okay, let's make it happen." That makes us a good duo: he has a strong sense of where the industry is heading and where IRIS could go in the long term, and I'm usually the one pushing things into motion.

How long have you been working on IRIS?

We have been actively developing the technology for about a year, although the idea itself is older. A major turning point was joining the Tehnopol Film and Multimedia Accelerator IDA Hub. We knew the casting problem very deeply from our own experience, but we were still figuring out whether we were building a tool for ourselves or something with much broader potential.



The accelerator pushed us to step outside our assumptions and view IRIS from a business and product perspective. It helped us validate that the problems were shared internationally, define who we were really building for, and think much more clearly about the business model, scalability and the wider casting ecosystem.

That was the point at which IRIS started developing from an industry idea into a proper technology company.

In previous interviews, you have said that everything is solvable, but that when inner belief and momentum fade, it's game over. You seem like a person with a lot of drive. What drives you?

My driving force is the belief that there is always a way to make things work. Casting has been my passion for a long time, and I want to help make the industry better and more sustainable for those in it.

Casting will probably always be a little unpredictable and chaotic – after all, it is a people business. Plans change, schedules shift, and that is part of the work. But the unnecessary chaos around it does not have to persist.

I want IRIS to become an industry standard – so that when someone says, "I sent you a casting," people know exactly where to go. And I want the technology to feel almost invisible: highly automated and AI-supported, yet intuitive and creative. The dream is that one day teams will say, "How did we ever work without this?"

Does IRIS have a set release date?

Several of our pilot projects are now underway. After a few months of testing and bug fixes, we expect to launch IRIS officially in the first half of 2027. **BF**



Photo by **Maila Meidre**

IDA Hub's Film Industry Incubation Programme helps local talent develop the skills and connections needed to work in film production.

IDA-VIRU COUNTY Nurtures Future Film Industry Professionals

The film industry in Ida-Viru County is gaining momentum. On 15 October, the Duubel 3 film conference and the opening of the Jõhvi Film Campus brought Estonian audiovisual leaders and international guests to Jõhvi, highlighting the region's potential as an international film production centre.

By **Evelin Saarmets**

Film production creates opportunities far beyond the set, supporting jobs across construction, logistics, accommodation, catering, technology and creative services. To help local businesses meet this demand, the IDA Hub Film Industry Incubation Programme was launched in 2024. Participants receive mentoring, business training, industry contacts and practical experience on film sets.

One success story is Rakvere Theatre make-up artist Maret Kongi, who attended wig-making training in the United States through the programme and worked on the feature film The *Godkiller*, shot in Aidu this August. The production also provided hands-on experience for make-up artist Leelo Annuk and costume team member Irena Kustova, both applicants to the programme's new intake.

The third intake began on 3 October with 18 participants. Industry mentors Heiko Sikka, Merlit Veldi, Liina Särkinen and Neoon Must help tailor services for film production, while Gert Zavatski provides marketing mentorship. The aim is to prepare participants to join film crews or to offer services independently.

The programme is part of IDA Hub, which brings together the largest film studios in the Baltic and Nordic countries and an innovative film and multimedia accelerator. IDA Hub brings together Ida-Viru Enterprise Centre, Ida-Viru Investment Agency and Tehnopol.

"We want filmmakers to find not only exciting locations but also skilled local professionals and reliable partners. Every production creates opportunities for our entrepreneurs, and the incubation programme helps them prepare," says Evelin Saarmets, Head of the Viru Film Fund and Coordinator of the Incubation Programme.

Funding is equally important. Established in 2013 by four municipalities as Estonia's first regional film fund, the Viru Film Fund is coordinated by the Ida-Viru Enterprise Centre Foundation (IVEK). Since 2019, it has been supported by the state through the Ida-Viru Programme. It has an annual budget of €200,000 and offers a 30% cash rebate on eligible regional expenditure. Applications are accepted year-round and assessed in two rounds, with deadlines on 1 March and 1 October.

The fund also brings cinema to local audiences through outdoor screenings across the county and special indoor screenings where audiences can meet filmmakers.

Together, the film campus, incubation programme and fund help Ida-Viru County develop the people, services and infrastructure required for a thriving film industry. **BF**



Photo by **Evelin Saarmets**

BALTIC CINEMA
A Shared Story

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have a long history of cinematic connections. These ties have helped shape **a distinctive Baltic identity**, highlighting qualities that have gradually become recognisable to audiences around the world. This shared identity helps Baltic cinema reach international audiences and establish its place on the European and global film map.

By **Neringa Kažukauskaitė** Photo by **Audrius Solominas**



Cooperation among the three countries produces compelling films rooted in our shared geopolitical and cultural experiences. It takes many forms, from filmmakers and actors contributing to one another's productions to co-productions and industry events that showcase Baltic cinema as a closely interconnected whole. The Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival is a key event celebrating these connections.

SAME ROOTS, DIFFERENT PATHS

Although cinema developed differently in each country, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia all sought to build their own national film cultures after declaring independence in 1918. Each recognised the role of cinema in shaping a sense of cultural identity. In those early years, connections between the three countries were mainly limited to film screenings and distribution, as well as professional and cultural contacts.

Under Soviet rule, all aspects of filmmaking were brought under a centralised system. A film studio was established in each of the three Baltic countries. Despite censorship and ideological restrictions, filmmakers developed distinctive artistic voices that helped shape their countries' national film identities.

TALENT ACROSS BORDERS

From the 1960s, Lithuanian actors began appearing in Latvian and Estonian films. They were valued for their thorough preparation, their ability to convey a character's thoughts and emotions, and the psychological depth of their performances. Eugenija Pleškytė, Juozas Budraitis, Regimantas Adomaitis, Donatas Banionis, Bronius Babkauskas, Stasys Petronaitis, Algimantas Masiulis, Vytautas Tomkus, Saulius Balandis, Antanas Barčas, Antanas Gabrėnas and many others delivered memorable performances in films made by their Baltic neighbours.

Lithuanian cinematographers were also highly regarded. Two Estonian features shot by Algimantas Mockus, *Ice Run* (1962, directed by Kaljo Kiisk) and *Werewolf* (1968, directed by Leida Laius), won prizes at film festivals across the Soviet Union.

Lithuanian talent also made an important contribution to Estonian director Grigori Kromanov's *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* (1979), based on a novel by the Strugatsky brothers. His wife, the distinguished theatre critic and public intellectual Irena Veisaitė, served as second director. Lithuanian actresses Irena Kriauzaitė and Nijolė Oželytė joined a cast drawn from Estonian theatre, film and ballet. The film combines a detective story with science fiction and a philosophical tale exploring moral responsibility and the consequences of our choices.

Latvian director Aloizs Brenčs' hugely popular television series *Long Road in the Dunes* (1982) traces a love story set against the backdrop of the historical upheavals across all Baltic countries, from the pre-war years and the Second World War to Soviet occupation and deportations to Siberia. Its Lithuanian leads, Romualdas Ramanauskas and Juozas Kisielius, became audience favourites and gained fame far beyond the region.

Latvian and Estonian artists have likewise left their mark on Lithuanian cinema. Often regarded by critics as one of the best Lithuanian films, *Feelings* (1968, directed by Almantas Grikevičius and Algirdas Dausa) was based on the Latvian writer Egons Līvs' novel *Velnakaula dvīņi*. The film explores the power of human feeling to endure even the harsh realities of the post-war years. The screenplay was written by Vytautas Žalakevičius, one of the leading figures in Lithuanian cinema at the time. His own film *Nobody Wanted to Die* (1965), which depicts the dramatic conflicts in rural Lithuania after the war, featured Latvian actress Vija Artmane and Estonian actor Bruno O'Ya in two important roles. Today, a scholarship bearing O'Ya's name is awarded to young Estonian acting talent at the Black Nights Film Festival. For both actors, working with the accomplished Lithuanian director was a significant creative experience, and their performances remain among the highlights of their careers. In Latvia, Brenčs explored a related subject – the fight against members of national resistance movements – in *When the Rain and Wind Knock at the Window* (1967).

Estonian actor Einari Koppel played a commander of the Teutonic Order in *Northern Crusades* (1972, directed by Marijonas Giedrys), a historical film about the leader of the 13th-century Prussian uprising against the Order. The cast also included Latvian actor Juris Strenga, who later delivered a memorable performance as Pastor Wilhelm Hopke in Arūnas Žebriūnas' *Journey to Paradise* (1980). Based on a short story by Hermann Sudermann, the film is set in the historical region of Lithuania Minor.



Werewolf



Nijolė Oželytė in *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel.*



Vija Artmane in *Nobody Wanted to Die* (on the left).

A SHARED POETIC VISION

From the 1960s onwards, a distinctive approach to documentary filmmaking emerged in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia: poetic documentary. The Soviet "Thaw" and the arrival of a new generation of young directors and cinematographers made this possible. Their films emphasised visual storytelling, poetic metaphor and philosophical associations. Among those who developed this approach were Latvian filmmakers Herz Frank, Uldis Brauns, Ivars Seleckis and Aivars Freimanis; Estonians Mark Soosaar and Andres Sööt; and Lithuanians Robertas Verba, Henrikas Šablevičius and Almantas Grikevičius.



Feelings


Andres Sõõt in *Bridges of Time*.


Renovation

This unique chapter in Baltic film history is explored in *Bridges of Time* (2018), directed by Lithuania's Audrius Stonys and Latvia's Kristīne Briede. The film reflects on the artistic and humanistic value of poetic documentary, revealing the close ties and strong traditions shared by Baltic filmmakers. It is a tribute to the directors' mentors and the generations who came before them. Bringing past and present together, *Bridges of Time* captures the sense of community that connects filmmakers across the region.

A NEW ERA OF COLLABORATION

When the Baltic countries restored their independence in 1990 – 1991, film financing, distribution and production changed fundamentally once again. New institutions had to be established, and new ways of working developed. Yet the connections between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia remained strong and evolved into more organised and effective forms of cooperation. Since then, the three countries have made more than fifty fiction, documentary and animated films together through bilateral and trilateral co-productions.


Tõru Kannimäe in *Fränk* (on the left).

Today, these connections continue to shape Baltic cinema. Latvian director Armands Začs' debut fiction feature, *Youth Eternal* (2025), examines a generation of thirty-somethings grappling with maturity and responsibility. Similar questions run through Lithuanian director Gabrielė Urbonaitė's *Renovation*, released the same year. Začs edited the film, earning a nomination for Best Editing at Lithuania's Silver Crane national film awards. He also edited two films by Latvian director Viesturs Kairišs, co-produced with Lithuania: *January* (2022) and *Ulya* (2026). Both films reflect the countries' historical and cultural ties and their cooperation in film production. *Ulya* tells the story of legendary basketball player Uljana Semjonova, who was born in Zarasai, Lithuania. *January* revisits the events of 1991 in Riga and Vilnius, when both countries fought to defend their independence. An important figure in the film is Latvian documentary filmmaker Juris Podnieks, who recorded those events in both Lithuania and Latvia.

One of the most notable Estonian films of recent years, Tõnis Pill's debut feature *Fränk* (2025), has drawn audiences and won several awards. While handling violence, bullying and social pressure with sensitivity, Pill finds room for humour and hope within a dark story. Young actor Tõru Kannimäe, who played one of its leading roles, returns to the screen this year in the Estonian-Lithuanian co-production *Morten*. Directed by Ivan Pavljutškov and based on a novel by Reeli Reinaus, the film explores adolescence, loneliness and first romantic feelings. Its Lithuanian collaborators include editor Ričardas Matačius, composer Titas Petrikis and sound designer Jonas Jocys.

In 2025, *Lotus*, a Latvian historical fantasy directed by Signe Birkova and co-produced with Lithuania, won the Silver Crane for Best Minority Co-production. Severija Janušauskaitė played Alice, a woman discovering the power of cinema, and received nominations at both the Lithuanian and Latvian national film awards. Darius Meškauskas won Latvia's Best Supporting Actor award for his performance in Ilze Kunga-Melgaile's *My Freedom* (2023). Lithuanian composers Paulius Kilbauskas and Vygintas Kisevičius, documentary filmmakers Audrius Stonys and Ramunė Rakauskaitė, and other Lithuanian artists have also been honoured at the Latvian national film awards over the years.

Baltic film history cannot be told as three separate national stories that only occasionally overlap. It is a history of continuous creative exchange. Through these connections, Baltic cinema continues to rediscover and strengthen its identity, gaining recognition and appreciation around the world. **BF**


Ulya


Severija Janušauskaitė *in Lotus* (in the front).


Hõbe Ilus


The Perfect


Laura Liventaal

ON FRAGILITY AND PERSEVERANCE

Two documentaries produced by **Hõbe Ilus** screening in this year's Doc@PÖFF Baltic Competition - **Laura Liventaal's *The Perfect*** and **Mihkel Oksmann's *Ice, Men and a Starling*** - seem quite different at first glance. Yet both are driven by human perseverance and fragility, and the desire to pass something of ourselves on to others.

By **Maarja Hindoalla** Photos by **Mihkel Oksmann, Karoliina Kreintaal** and **Taavi Talve**


Ice, Men and a Starling


Mihkel Oksmann


The Perfect


Ice, Men and a Starling

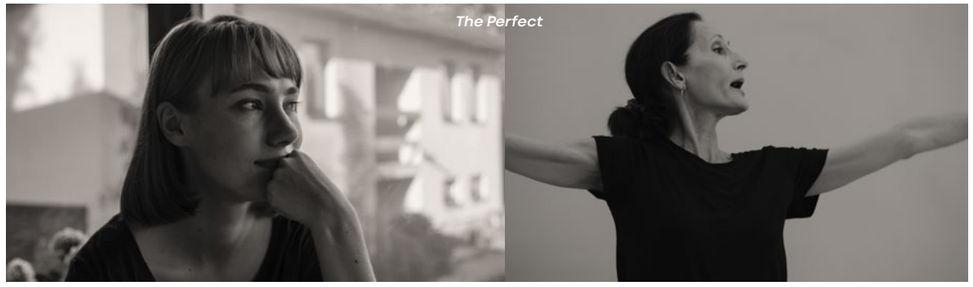

Ice, Men and a Starling

In *The Perfect*, three ballerinas strive for perfection; in *Ice, Men and a Starling*, an 87-year-old ice sailor builds his last iceboat. "Elite sport is elite sport. Sacrifices are inevitable, in sailing as in ballet, but what matters is being able to tell what is important from what isn't," says Ilus. Both the dancers and the ice sailor are sustained by a passion that has become almost inseparable from life itself. It gives meaning to what they do, but asks something in return.

THE PRICE OF PERFECTION

The Perfect came to Ilus nearly three years ago. Laura Liventaal, then living in Paris, was looking for a new lead producer for her feature film debut. Their collaboration began with a sense of mutual recognition. "I like being actively involved as a film takes shape: looking for solutions together, sometimes disagreeing, but always respecting the director's vision," she says. Although Ilus was not involved from the beginning, over the long process of making it, the story has become a part of her too. As she puts it, filmmaking is never separate from life: the processes are long, and those travelling alongside you become close.

Liventaal portrays three ballerinas from different generations whose experiences reflect one another. Through Pärli, Maarja and Irina, a portrait of womanhood across three generations emerges, where beauty, pain, discipline, other people's expectations and one's own desires become entangled. Each strives for perfection in her own way. Ballet has become more than art or a profession to them. It is a way of life, shaping their relationships with their own bodies and with other people.


The Perfect

The youngest, Pärli, loves nature and animals. In their company she seems to find comfort that people might not always offer. In Maarja's story, the relationship between mother and daughter comes to the fore. Her ever-cheerful mother proudly says her daughter has everything she herself has always dreamed of. Maarja smiles, but there seems to be some sort of sorrow beneath her smile. One cannot help but wonder how much room remains for the daughter's own wishes and dreams, and how much was passed on to her. Irina is the most experienced of the three, in both the joys and sorrows of life. Her remark that joy is always bearable, while beauty can be unbearably painful, seems to say something about all three women's pursuits.

Rather than giving us three clearly defined portraits, *The Perfect* presents fragments woven together like a kaleidoscope. It is remarkable that the women never speak straight into the camera, but rather look past it or are often filmed from the side as they share their innermost thoughts and feelings. The framing and monochrome images create closeness and distance at the same time, leaving space for the women as well as the viewer and, above all, for honesty on both sides. Sander Mölder's evocative score helps to blur the fragile boundary between the inner and outer worlds.

THE LAST WINTER ON ICE

Ice, Men and a Starling is an even more personal film for Ilus. She met her partner Mihkel Oksmann nearly a decade ago while both were studying documentary film at the Baltic Film and Media School. The film's roots go back to their student days, when Oksmann made a short film about his grandfather as part of a third-semester assignment, which would later become the starting point for his first feature film. The idea to develop it into a feature gained momentum during the pandemic, when Oksmann and Ilus watched Jyri Pitkänen's graduation film about an elderly ski jumper. "Afterwards, we both knew, all at once and without a doubt: it was time to make Mihkel's film," Ilus recalls. Vello and Urve are her children's great-grandparents. "On a personal level, this story is very close to my heart and deeply meaningful to me; professionally, it is a cornerstone of my career as a producer."

Oksmann's 87-year-old grandfather Vello is a legendary ice sailor. As winter approaches, he sets about building his last iceboat. While everyone else, including his wife Urve, longs for spring, the cold seems to awaken new energy in Vello. Ice is not just a place to practise his sport; it is a chance to be, once again, the man he used to be. His iceboats, among them Jäälind (Icebird) and Elukas (The Beast), carefully under wraps in the shed as if waiting for another chance, represent decades of devotion that the next generations have never quite inherited. Now the grandson, camera in hand, becomes his companion in this final attempt. Although winters are not what they used to be and his body no longer quite obeys him, Vello keeps building, as though persistence might buy him a little more time.

Urve, a multiple sailing champion herself, urges visibly frail Vello to take it easy, but her words of caution fall on deaf ears. As she bluntly points out, the responsibility for keeping the home and family running has largely fallen on her. In one of the film's most revealing scenes, Vello taps away at his boat in the yard while Urve mashes potatoes in the kitchen. This small but telling juxtaposition exposes gender roles still remarkably resistant to change. When Vello tries to persuade Oksmann to take up ice-sailing, Urve reminds him that times have changed and their grandson has a family of his own to care for. Oksmann observes these tensions with tenderness and a touch of humour, allowing affection and irritation to coexist without smoothing away the contradictions. In close-up, faces and gestures often speak louder than words. The colour images of the present are interwoven with black-and-white newsreels from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, while Tõnis Jürgens's haunting score draws these layers of time together.

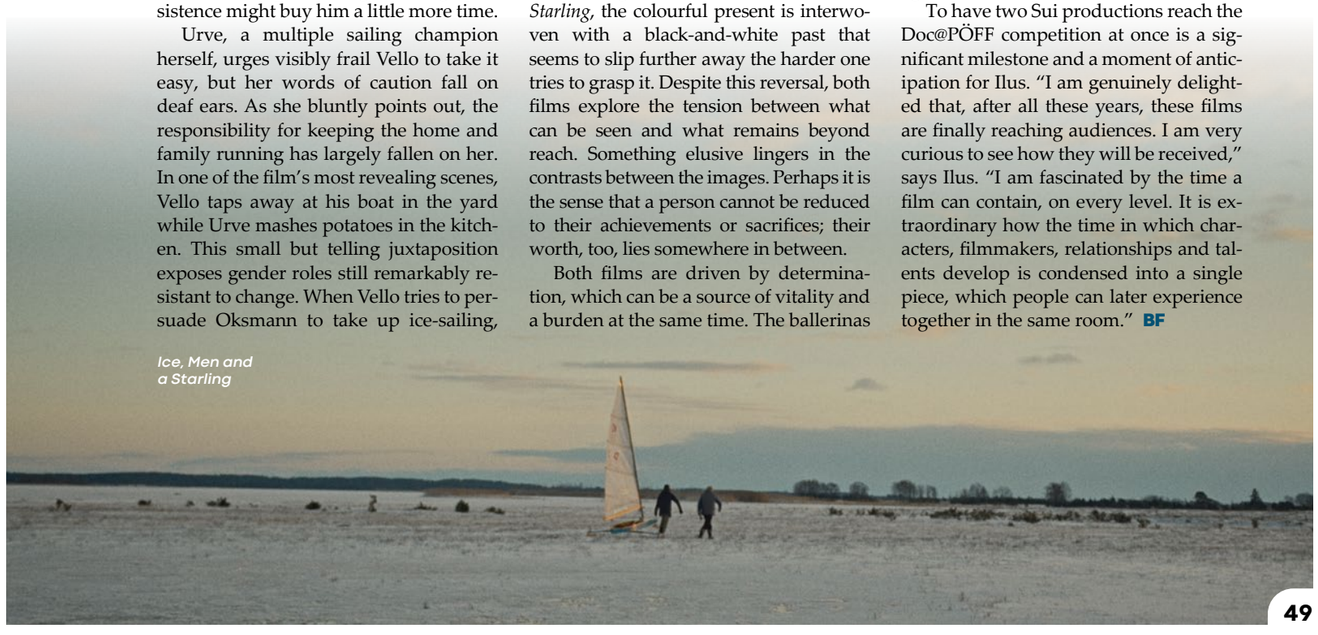
WHAT REMAINS?

"I am interested in the fact that everything has a reason, and everyone has their own truth," says Ilus. This seems more important to the two films than their obvious differences. In *The Perfect*, monochrome everyday life alternates with dreamlike colour images of nature; in *Ice, Men and a Starling*, the colourful present is interwoven with a black-and-white past that seems to slip further away the harder one tries to grasp it. Despite this reversal, both films explore the tension between what can be seen and what remains beyond reach. Something elusive lingers in the contrasts between the images. Perhaps it is the sense that a person cannot be reduced to their achievements or sacrifices; their worth, too, lies somewhere in between.

Both films are driven by determination, which can be a source of vitality and a burden at the same time. The ballerinas continually push the limits of their bodies; Vello defies old age and winters too mild for ice. Ilus believes the same perseverance, fragility and wish to pass something on are present in the filmmakers as well. "As someone looking on, I know these are films that Laura and Mihkel had to make."

Making a film takes time. But time is not merely a cost on a budget line; it also allows to grow and mature. "Over the years, we have developed and presented the projects at international workshops and film markets, from Latvia to Canada, from Zagreb to New York. On the one hand, this has given us a strong international network; on the other, an invaluable film education. The subjects may be different, but filmmakers often face much the same problems. Thinking things through together gives you the encouragement to carry on."

To have two Sui productions reach the Doc@PÖFF competition at once is a significant milestone and a moment of anticipation for Ilus. "I am genuinely delighted that, after all these years, these films are finally reaching audiences. I am very curious to see how they will be received," says Ilus. "I am fascinated by the time a film can contain, on every level. It is extraordinary how the time in which characters, filmmakers, relationships and talents develop is condensed into a single piece, which people can later experience together in the same room." **BF**


Ice, Men and a Starling

IVARS SELECKIS: One Second Ahead

Ivars Seleckis holds a special place in Baltic documentary cinema. He is a director and cinematographer with an attentive, deeply humane interest in the people around him and their fates, and a public advocate for documentary filmmaking who cares about the field's development.

By **Zane Krūmiņa** Photo by **Agnese Zeltiņa** and **Latvian Film Museum**



He has been involved in documentary cinema since the late 1950s, and his latest film premiered on his 90th birthday in 2024. This year, in PÖFF's Old but Gold section, Seleckis' internationally best-known film, *Crossroad Street* (*Šķērsiela*, 1988), is included. It was awarded Best Documentary by the European Film Academy.

LIFE IN CINEMA

Seleckis has been involved in filmmaking since 1958, when he began as a camera assistant at the Riga Film Studio. He was part of the young generation of documentary makers whose work in the 1960s became known as the Riga School, or the Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema. At the end of that decade, he began directing and has since made more than 30 films, usually serving as cinematographer as well. The collapse of the Soviet film production system in the early 1990s did not prevent him from adapting to a very different financial landscape, and his filmography shows no break. Together with his colleagues, he secured funding from local and foreign foundations, pitched his projects at industry forums as early as the second half of the 1990s, attracted sponsors, and obtained state funding. His films are regularly shown at festivals on many continents and have won both local and international awards. These include Europe's highest honour, the Felix for Best European Documentary, awarded for *Crossroad Street* (1988). Throughout his creative life, Seleckis has worked in tandem with his wife, the film editor Maija Selecka, and has often collaborated with trusted scriptwriter Tālivaldis Margēvičs.



Making of *Crossroad Street* in 1988.

APPROACH TO DOCUMENTARY

Speaking about his approach to documentary, Seleckis has said he feels closer to Robert Flaherty than to Dziga Vertov: "Life caught in the moment, dizzying editing, subordinating the document to the director's concept – no, that is not my approach!" His practice of patient observation began in the 1960s, when he was still working as a cinematographer. With director Aivars Freimanis, he made several films built on observation and poetic imagery: *The Shore* (1963), *Kuldīga Frescoes* (1966) and *The Catch* (1969).

Looking back on his work, Seleckis divided it into three circles. The first covers the 1960s, when the poetic and analytical outlooks converged. The second, in the 1970s, focuses on socially oriented subjects. The third began with *Crossroad Street*, an emblematic work in his directing that belongs to the classics of European cinema. In addition to the Felix, the film won the Joris Ivens Award at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), the Robert and Frances Flaherty Prize at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, and many other awards.

CROSSROAD STREET

On several levels, *Crossroad Street* can be seen as a symbol of a time of change. The time and events it portrays speak of the Awakening, the end of one era and the beginning of another. Seleckis wanted to make a film about ordinary people and was genuinely interested in who these people were, rarely talked about yet forming the foundation of a country? Since the filmmakers were city people themselves, they decided to begin in the city. Screenwriter Tālivaldis Margēvičs had once lived on Šķērsiela, an 800-metre-long street on the outskirts of Riga, so they chose to explore it. The initial proposal submitted to the Riga Film Studio was for a film about a working-class suburb, with a factory and other typical elements. Gorbachev's perestroika had begun, and the working title of the film was *In Search of a Prophet*. Life was no longer as it had been in the strictest Soviet years, when everything was clear and regulated and people were told what was good and what was bad. Now everyone had to look for their own answers – in business, in religion, in humane values, in whatever they chose.

The film portrays a number of characters with different destinies. Aunt Oliņa lives alone and tries to make ends meet. Osis has poor health and does his best to help his mum with daily chores. Horseradish Pēteris prepares horseradish sauce and sells it at the market. Daiga is expecting a child while her boyfriend visits less and less. Aldis runs a gravestone business that irritates his neighbours. Ilga lives with her son Toļiks, who has health problems from growing up in the harsh conditions of Siberia. Conflicts arise from time to time among neighbours. Despite their differences, the residents celebrate festivities together, like Midsummer. Through small details, the filmmakers introduce the atmosphere of the moment – when Stalin's repressions were beginning to be addressed openly, and aspirations for freedom were growing. There is a meteorological probe launched above *Crossroad Street*, and the readings it takes directly above the street are used to forecast the weather. The balloon becomes a symbol: the weather detected over this one street stands for the changing conditions of the time itself. The film's popularity has resulted in two subsequent installments – *New Times at Crossroad Street* (1999) and *Capitalism at Crossroad Street* (2013), again looking at this place in different historical moments.

"We documentary makers meet real life at every moment. We have to be able to understand what is happening on the spot, instantly, and to make the right decisions, not after the event but before it, anticipating what it will be like and pressing the camera switch one second in advance," Seleckis once said in an interview. The cinematographer's trained attentiveness and the director's empathy run through Ivars Seleckis' films, in which the camera switch is always ready, a crucial second ahead. **BF**



Ivars Seleckis in 1960's

Baltic Event 25 YEARS OF CONNECTING CINEMA



What began in 2002 as an ambitious effort to bring Baltic cinema to international attention has grown into one of the region's most significant platforms for the film industry. **As Baltic Event celebrates its 25th edition**, founder **Riina Sildos** reflects on the early days, the evolving landscape of European cinema, and the importance of bringing people together.

By **Eda Koppel** Photo by **Annika Haas**

OPENING DOORS TO THE WORLD

In the early 2000s, the Baltic film industry was in a very different state. The three countries were still rebuilding their film sectors after regaining independence. Production resources were insufficient, and international visibility was limited. In Estonia, there were even periods when no new domestic feature film was released in cinemas.

"The financing system was fragmented, and there was very little money available," recalls Riina, who was leading the Estonian Film Foundation at the time. Drawing on Scandinavian funding models, the Foundation was working to establish a more structured system, thereby bringing greater stability and clearer responsibilities for decision-makers and producers.

But financing was only part of the challenge. There were compelling scripts, emerging talent and a growing determination to make films. What was missing was access to international partners, festivals, sales agents and distributors.

Riina found inspiration at CinéMart in Rotterdam, one of the world's oldest co-production markets. She recognised the potential to bring international film professionals directly to Tallinn to discover a region still largely unfamiliar to the global film industry.

"At the time, the Baltic countries were considered exotic. Very few people knew anything about our cinema," she recalls. A handful of filmmakers, including Peeter Simm, Šarūnas Bartas and Laila Pakalniņa, had gained international recognition, yet the region had much more to offer.

The first Baltic Event took place in 2002, attracting approximately 25 international guests to Tallinn. Rather than focusing on projects in development, the initial concept was to showcase completed films to festival programmers, sales agents and distributors, helping them reach audiences beyond their home countries. It was a modest yet pioneering start. Regional film markets were still relatively rare in Europe, and Baltic Event was among the early initiatives to recognise their potential.

WHERE BUSINESS MET PLEASURE

What made the first editions special was the personal approach. With a small number of guests, the organisers could devote extraordinary attention to each participant. "We were available almost 24 hours a day. We wanted everyone who came to Tallinn to make the most of their time here," Riina remembers.

The working day did not end when the official programme finished. Evenings were an essential part of the market, with carefully arranged dinners that brought together people whose professional interests might intersect. The organisers studied the preferences of producers, distributors and sales agents, then devised seating plans to foster meaningful conversations and potential collaborations. "It was quite a puzzle, but it worked remarkably well. We tried to ensure that business and pleasure went hand in hand."

There was also room for more unconventional networking. Bowling competitions, with guests divided into teams, became a memorable feature of the early editions. Excursions to unusual Tallinn locations, including the historic Dominican Monastery, introduced visitors to the city and highlighted its potential as a filming destination.

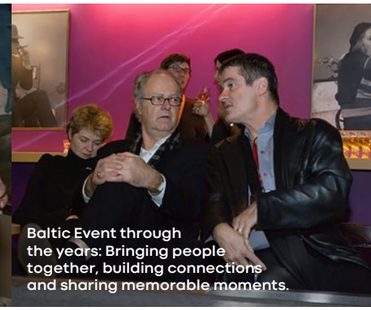
Riina believes this personal attention remained one of Baltic Event's defining











Baltic Event through the years: Bringing people together, building connections and sharing memorable moments.

Photos from **PÖFF and Baltic Event archives**









Then and now, personal encounters and lively conversations remain at the heart of Baltic Event.

Photos from PÖFF and Baltic Event archives

characteristics for almost a decade. Inevitably, growth brought change. As attendance grew, the carefully orchestrated dinners became increasingly difficult to manage. Today, with nearly nine hundred professionals from more than 50 countries attending Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event (ITBE), such an individual approach would be practically impossible.

Yet the underlying philosophy has endured: the value of a film market lies not merely in attendance, but in the connections people make.

MORE THAN A CO-PRODUCTION MARKET

Over the following two decades, Baltic Event evolved alongside the international film industry. What began as a showcase for completed Baltic films gradually expanded into a platform for developing projects, securing co-production partners, and exchanging professional knowledge.

Riina views this transformation as part of a broader shift across European film markets. Traditional markets, originally designed to facilitate sales and distribution, have increasingly become centres for professional development, training and industry discussion. "Today, a film market is much more than a place to present projects. It is also a place where people learn, exchange information and discover new ways of working."

ITBE now brings together film and series co-production, works-in-progress presentations, specialised initiatives, training programmes, and panels and discussions. Its activities extend beyond the Baltic countries, attracting international projects and professionals. Cooperation with established European training organisations, including EAVE, has also contributed to its development.

"It is an enormous melting pot of ideas and energy," Riina says, describing the intensity of today's industry programme. Creative Europe MEDIA funding has played a crucial role in this development, supporting the event for more than two decades. The EURIMAGES Co-Production Development Award for film projects and the EURIMAGES Series Co-Development Award have further strengthened the market, attracting higher-quality project submissions.

THE STRENGTH OF A REGIONAL PLATFORM

With film markets now taking place across Europe and beyond, what makes a more regional event such as ITBE relevant?

Riina distinguishes between major global markets, which attract projects and professionals from around the world, and regional platforms that offer more focused opportunities. In a large international market, the range of potential partners may be broader. However, for producers who already know which territories or collaborators they are seeking, a regional market can be more effective. "People come with a specific interest in the region. It is easier to reach the right people, make contacts and build relationships." These encounters offer something that cannot be obtained from funding guidelines or online databases: a first-hand understanding of how film industries operate, how decisions are made, and how potential partners work.

This is particularly significant for the Baltic countries. With relatively small domestic audiences and limited national funding, international collaboration is essential for producing more ambitious films. "If we want to be internationally competitive, we cannot rely solely on our domestic resources. We have to co-produce," Riina emphasises.

She believes Baltic Event has helped establish a recognisable international identity for Baltic cinema and has substantially contributed to the region's film industries. A dedicated meeting place where filmmakers can exchange ideas, secure financing and build partnerships has enabled producers to pursue projects with greater artistic ambition and higher production values. Baltic cinema is no longer an unfamiliar curiosity but an established and increasingly confident presence in international filmmaking.

ALWAYS EVOLVING

Looking back, Riina remembers the early years with particular fondness. The small gatherings, carefully planned dinners and playful networking activities fostered a sense of community that is difficult to reproduce on a much larger scale.

But nostalgia doesn't stop her from appreciating how Baltic Event has evolved. She is particularly pleased with its adaptability. Both the co-production market and Works in Progress have expanded beyond Baltic productions to include international projects, while new industry initiatives and specialised programmes continue to respond to changing needs. "What I particularly like is the ability to adapt quickly. The platform is well established, but it is also constantly evolving."

And there is another constant in Baltic Event's history: girl power. From the very beginning, the event has been led by women, and women have also made up the majority of its organising team. Their dedication, enthusiasm and collaborative spirit have helped transform a small gathering into the international industry platform it is today.

After 25 editions, Baltic Event has travelled a remarkable distance from the small gathering that first welcomed international guests to a largely undiscovered film region. Its original mission, however, remains relevant: connecting filmmakers with the people, knowledge and opportunities needed to bring their stories to the world. **BF**



PUTTING CREATIVITY FIRST

Dhanushka Gunathilake has always been driven by a passion for discovery. Now at the helm of Discovery Campus at Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event, he hopes to spark the same curiosity in a new generation of filmmakers.

By **Mirell Talbre** Photo by **Mia Tohver**

In the following interview, he reflects on his journey from the Sri Lankan film industry to Estonia, the opportunities and challenges of AI in filmmaking, and his ambitions to bring emerging talent closer to the international film industry.

In addition to leading Discovery Campus, you are also a cinematographer. How did you first discover cinematography for yourself?

I come from an artistic family – my father is a painter and my mother was an art teacher. But growing up, I was more interested in snakes and reptiles than in filmmaking, and wanted to become a herpetologist. I was always curious about cameras though, and I once completely dismantled my father's camera to see what was inside. That curiosity eventually led me into cinematography. Since Sri Lanka had no film schools, I moved to India, where I spent seven years studying and working on mostly wildlife documentaries. I later returned to Sri Lanka at the government's invitation to help establish a film school, while continuing my work as a cinematographer.

There must be a significant difference between the Indian and European film industries. What would you say are the biggest differences?

The biggest difference between South Asian and European filmmaking is the working culture. In India and Sri Lanka, productions can involve crews of 250 people, and rented equipment comes with assistants and technicians. On my first shoot in Estonia, I was surprised to realise I had to assemble my own crew. But I prefer this smaller, more personal approach, which gives greater creative freedom. Estonia is also wonderful and peaceful for filming. In India, a camera and a film crew can attract hundreds of spectators, whereas in Tallinn, people actively avoid disturbing your shoot.

When it comes to cinematography, I want to touch on a controversial subject - AI in filmmaking. What do you think - is it an opportunity or a threat?

I think AI is all about how you use it. If you see filmmaking as purely technical, AI might replace your job. But artistic vision and creativity cannot be replaced. Look at painters, for example. Commercial painters who once created huge billboards were replaced by printing and digital technology, yet the value of fine art has only grown.

At Discovery Campus this year, we're exploring how AI can streamline production processes and give filmmakers more time to focus on creativity. The key is to embrace new technologies while developing your artistic identity. Let AI handle the technical work so you can focus on the art.

Starting this year, you are the head of Discovery Campus. What motivated you to take on this challenge and lead the DC programme?

I was very happy to accept this offer because it aligns with work I've been involved in for decades. I have helped establish a film school, taught at universities, and worked with talent development programmes



DHANUSHKA GUNATHILAKE is a Sri Lankan cinematographer and film educator with over 20 years' experience in the film industry. He is an alumnus of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). His cinematography credits include *Dark in the White Light* (2015), which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival; *Suparna* (2020), which premiered at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival; *The Frozen Fire* (2018); and many more. His work has received several national and international cinematography awards, including the OCIC-SIGNIS Jury Award in 2024 and the SARASVI National Award in 2023.



and international film schools. I felt my experience would be valuable to Discovery Campus. What particularly interests me is building a bridge between film education and the film industry. Film schools focus primarily on the art of filmmaking, while students should also learn about the market, sustainability and profitability. Art and industry don't always go hand in hand. I see Discovery Campus as a space where academia and industry can meet, and where filmmakers can exchange ideas and learn from each other.

Would you say there's something special about Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event? Does Tallinn offer something different that filmmakers won't find elsewhere?

I would say the atmosphere makes it special. At major festivals such as Cannes, Berlin or Venice, everything is spread across vast venues, and unless you have meetings arranged in advance, it can be difficult to connect with other filmmakers.

Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event is different, though. Despite being an A-list festival with hundreds of screenings and events, it still feels intimate and boutique. You can simply walk into Nordic Hotel Forum or Apollo Plaza and meet filmmakers from all over the world. There's a real sense of openness, and conversations happen naturally. Many international filmmakers recognise this too, and it's one of the reasons they keep coming back.

In Cannes, for example, you have paparazzi everywhere, constantly taking pictures. But here, you might see a famous actor or director casually walking into a kiosk to buy cigarettes or grabbing a burger. That's beauty.

Which Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event programme are you most excited about this year?

This year, Discovery Campus will open with a discussion featuring Sir Christopher Hampton. We're also welcoming international casting directors and, through our new collaboration with the American Society of Cinematographers, bringing renowned cinematographers together with emerging talent. What makes the programme special is the personal connections. Last year, young filmmakers were amazed to sit down for breakfast with major industry figures, discuss their work and exchange ideas.

I also greatly admire Just Film for introducing children to filmmaking at an early age. I never had that opportunity growing up, and I think it's a truly valuable and unique aspect of Just Film Industry.

What is your vision for Discovery Campus?

Our goal is to develop Discovery Campus into an international talent hub where filmmakers and producers can discover emerging talent. We already have a strong alumni network of successful film professionals. We're now expanding our partnerships with international organisations such as IMAGO and leading industry brands, including ARRI and Leitz Cine. These collaborations also enable us to offer valuable opportunities, including awards such as this year's Leitz Cine prize, which provides a cinematographer with a lens package for their next film. We want Discovery Campus to become the go-to place for discovering and supporting the next generation of filmmakers.





Dhanushka Gunathilake connecting emerging talent with international film professionals at Discovery Campus.

As a cinematographer, is there anything you want to tell these young filmmakers? What would you like to say to them?

My advice to young filmmakers is to never stop experimenting and challenging themselves. Ask yourself: Am I excited about what I'm creating? Is it something new, something I haven't seen before? If your work doesn't excite you, how can you expect it to excite others?

Your greatest friend and your greatest enemy is yourself. Technology can always be learned, but the real challenge is pushing your creativity beyond what you already know. **BF**

DISCOVERY CAMPUS

The Black Nights Discovery Campus is an international continuing education programme organised by the Black Nights Film Festival and Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event (ITBE) in collaboration with leading international partners. It offers emerging film professionals the opportunity to expand their skills, complement their studies and take the next steps in their careers. During the Black Nights Film Festival, participants can take part in hands-on workshops, live events and masterclasses led by talented, award-winning film professionals.



OPPORTUNITY IS CALLING

The World Congress of Science & Factual Producers brings together the global factual community to exchange ideas, forge connections and explore new opportunities.



Just after the opening weekend, the Black Nights Film Festival is proud to welcome **the World Congress of Science & Factual Producers in Tallinn during 9-12 November**. The event brings the global factual community together for four days of fresh thinking, new connections and unexpected opportunities.

By **Egle Loor** Photos by **Akalbi Prod**

Let's face it: the industry is changing fast. Budgets are tight, AI is rewriting the rules, and audiences are tuning in across YouTube, podcasts and social platforms as well as broadcast. So how do we keep making brilliant work, find the audiences for it and make the business stack up? At WCSFP, the people tackling these challenges come together to share what's working, what's changing and what comes next.

Meet the digital heavyweights building audiences at scale. Tony Pastor, co-founder of Goalhanger, Ian Shepherd of Electrify and Julie Walsh Smith of Complexly will share insights from businesses reaching millions through podcasts and online video. Tom McDonald of National Geographic brings the broadcast perspective, while Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim explores her journey from YouTube science sensation to television, and BBC presenter Jim Al-Khalili discusses his move onto YouTube.

And there's plenty more to get stuck into, from the neuroscience behind big tech and the spread of misinformation to AI and what kids are watching. Expect fresh ideas, unexpected perspectives and plenty to take back to your own work.

Estonia's own scientists and audiences are part of the conversation too. Neuroscientist Professor Jaan Aru joins CBC's Anthony Morgan to explore what technology is doing to our brains. And where better to ask what kids are watching than a country known for its strong performance in science and maths? A session exploring Estonian children's viewing habits asks what these science-savvy young audiences can teach us about making content that connects. You can also meet Estonian researchers at Ideas Salon and discover screen-worthy scientific breakthroughs, or explore opportunities for collaboration in a dedicated session on international factual filmmaking.

WCSFP brings together producers, broadcasters, commissioners, distributors, streamers, scientists and digital creators from more than 30 countries. With decision makers from organisations including National Geographic, BBC Studios, Discovery, ITV Studios, PBS, NHK, France Télévisions, CBC, ARTE, ZDF, ABC, Netflix, CuriosityStream, TikTok, YouTube and Ubisoft, it's a chance to connect with colleagues new and old, and get in front of the people who can help take your work further.

WCSFP is where the global factual community gets together to exchange ideas, do business and work out what's next, and where a chance meeting can turn into something much bigger.

Your next opportunity could be one conversation away. **BF**




Vesna


How to Divorce During the War


A Poem for Little People

THE ECHOES OF UKRAINE IN THE BALTIC CINEMA

The war in Ukraine continues to resonate across the Baltics, finding expression not only in co-productions but increasingly in the stories told by Baltic filmmakers. In recent years, the Baltic states have supported dozens of films centred on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with more projects in the pipeline.

By **Aurelia Aasa** Photos by **Agnese Zeltiņa, Irmantas Gelūnas** and **Virge Viertek**

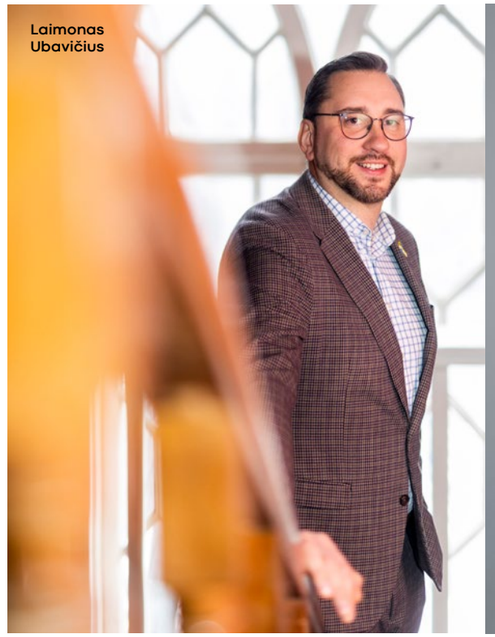

Uldis Cekulis

"What keeps me going is my belief in cinema's power to bring us closer to another person's life," says Latvian producer Uldis Cekulis, who has worked on several Ukrainian co-productions. "Especially now, with the war having lasted so long, we cannot allow ourselves to stop feeling."

Viola Salu, head of the production department at the Estonian Film Institute, shares a similar conviction, seeing film as one of the most powerful ways to bring people's experiences to life. "For us, it's important to support compelling Ukrainian stories that have the potential to reach international audiences."

BALTIC CO-PRODUCTION IN CANNES

One example is *Vesna*, the debut fiction feature by Rostislav Kirpičenko, who was born in Lithuania, moved to Ukraine as a child, and later settled in France. The


Laimonas Ubavičius


Viola Salu


Blessed

What can art do when the world around you ***is burning?***

Lithuanian-French-Estonian co-production premiered in the Special Screenings section of this year's Cannes Film Festival. Viola Salu recalls that the project's potential was clear from the start.

Set in occupied Ukraine, *Vesna* follows a young priest whose church is repurposed as a morgue. As an act of resistance, he secretly returns victims' bodies to their families rather than burying them in mass graves. With *Vesna*, Kirpičenko seeks to convey the experiences of Ukrainians, arguing in an earlier interview with Baltic Film that the scale of the violence is still often overlooked.

As Kirpičenko noted, he didn't set out to make a film about faith, yet by centring the story on a priest, he was able to explore the moral dilemmas people face during the war. "Ideally, the figure of the priest is supposed to do good even when everything is going very badly. Morally or spiritually speaking, there should be fewer excuses for this person to stop resisting."

DIFFERENT FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Resistance can take many forms, as Ivan Sautkin's poetic documentary *A Poem for Little People* (2023) brilliantly illustrates. This Lithuanian, Ukrainian and United Kingdom co-production zooms in on elderly friends Zinaida and Taisia, who, like many of their generation, have refused to leave. While Anton leads a team of volunteers trying to evacuate residents from areas near the frontline, Zinaida and Taisia practise their own quieter form of resistance, such as reporting enemy tank movements to the Ukrainian military.

While frontline horrors remain at the core of many films, the focus is shifting towards metaphorical battlefields, exploring the impact of war on everyday life. In Andrius Blaževičius' Sundance-winning and Lithuania's Oscar entry *How to Divorce During the War*, the war unfolds alongside a family crisis. A similar tension between war and everyday life appears in the Estonian animated short *Kyiv Cake*, where Ukrainian director Mykyta Lyskov observes the life of a typical Ukrainian family through clever, often self-ironic symbolism.

While *How to Divorce During the War* observes personal responsibilities against the backdrop of international catastrophe, Andrii Lysetskyi's documentary *The Blessed Ones* explores similar ground by following Ukrainian artists as they seek their response to war: from drawing in a Mariupol basement to joining the National Guard. The documentary is a collaboration between Ukraine, Germany, and Latvia. According to Latvian producer Uldis Cekulis, the artists are grappling with a question that feels very close to filmmakers: what can art do when the world around you is burning? "For me, the film speaks about culture as something essential to our survival, giving form to experiences that news reports can hardly reach."

WITH UKRAINE


To Die to Live

DOCUMENTARY WAVE

Earlier this year, Cekulis also released Yuliia Hontaruk's *To Die to Live*, a Ukrainian, Latvian and Slovak co-production that premiered in the special screenings section at Karlovy Vary. Over the course of twelve years, Hontaruk followed three Ukrainian volunteers from the frontline in 2014 through their attempts to rebuild ordinary lives, before the full-scale invasion called them back to war again. "I was deeply touched by the extraordinary trust between Yuliia and these men. Through her eyes, we see their vulnerability, invisible wounds and their stubborn determination to live," shares Cekulis.

"The war in Ukraine is taking place close to us, and it has inevitably affected our daily lives and the stories Lithuanian filmmakers choose to tell. While fiction films explore how war changes relationships, challenges moral convictions and shapes our sense of responsibility towards others, documentary filmmakers have felt an urgency to bear witness," says Laimonas Ubavičius, Director of the Lithuanian Film Centre.

The risks of documenting war are brought into sharp focus by the work of Mantas Kvedaravičius, the late Lithuanian filmmaker and academic, who was killed in Mariupol in 2022 while filming *Mariupolis 2*, a follow-up to his 2016 documentary *Mariupolis*. "The loss of Mantas Kvedaravičius brought the reality of this war painfully close to the Lithuanian film community," says Ubavičius, noting that the film offers an extraordinary record of civilians trying to sustain life and preserve their humanity under siege. *Mariupolis 2* was completed by Kvedaravičius' producers and collaborators and later awarded at the 35th European Film Awards.

MORE STORIES TO TELL

The Director of the Lithuanian Film Centre emphasises the need for practical support for Ukrainian filmmakers, noting that after the full-scale invasion the Lithuanian Film Centre joined France's CNC and other European partners to establish the European Solidarity Fund for Ukrainian Films, launched in 2023. One of the projects supported by the ESFUF is the Estonian minority co-production *Under the Yellow Sky* by Maryna Nazarenko, which is currently in development.

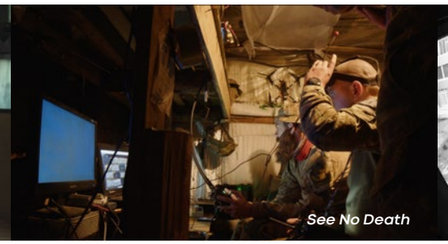
Estonians are also collaborating with Lithuanians on *Somewhere in the World*, directed by Šarūnas Bartas, who has chronicled the complexities of Eastern Europe


Mariupolis 2

throughout his career. *Somewhere in the World* will mark the third film by Šarūnas Bartas to be shot in Ukraine, this time observing the war-torn country through the eyes of Irina, who fled Ukraine after her husband's death but must return to look for her mother.

Similar themes of identity and the guilt will be explored in *My Shadows Grow Faster Than Me*, yet another title developed by Cekulis and directed by former creative collaborators Roman Bondarchuk and Darya Averchenko. "Here in Latvia, we know how precious our freedom is and how much Ukraine is defending for all of us," shares Cekulis. "For me, films begin with filmmakers whose vision I believe in. And as a producer, I try to bring the right people together, find or invest my own resources, and help these voices reach audiences." Laimonas Ubavičius agrees that this collective effort and collaboration among producers has helped bring Ukrainian-led productions to the screen, and highlights that more projects are coming from the Baltics. "For us, this support means helping Ukrainian filmmakers continue working and ensuring that they can tell their own stories." **BF**


To the Victory!


See No Death



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PÄRNU COUNTY FILM FUND

SUPPORT INTENSITY IS UP TO 25%

SUPPORT OF THE PRODUCTION OF FEATURE FILMS, ANIMATIONS, DOCUMENTARIES AND SHORT FILMS

PARTICIPATION OF AN ESTONIAN PRODUCTION COMPANY IS NECESSARY

NO DEADLINES

PARNUMAA.EE/EN/FILM-FUND

CONTACT:
pol@pol.parnumaa.ee

PÄRNUMAA OMAVALITSUSTE LIIT
ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES OF PÄRNU COUNTY



Photo by **Iarkko Pukki**

Etude of Life

History enters the lives of women through the bonds they hold closest. Set in Estonia between 1924 and 1994, ***Etude of Life*** is a romantic historical drama whose emotional center lies in 1944, in the shadow of the Second World War. Through mothers and daughters, sisters and friends, it explores love, betrayal and family secrets — and the impossible choices that arise when protecting one person may mean failing another.

By **Nora Vaher**





Eha Urbsalu and Saskia Slaaf in *Etude of Life*.

Photo by **Aleksander Soin**



Eha Urbsalu directing Kristiin Sõõrumaa in *Etude of Life*.



Crispian Belfrage

Photos by **Anni Hallik**



For Estonian-born screenwriter, co-director, executive producer and actress Eha Urbsalu, this first feature grew from her own family's memories. Her mother, Milja Urbsalu, now 95, sheltered Forest Brothers resistance fighters and helped people escape to Sweden as a young girl on the island of Hiiumaa. Her recollections of fear, silence, fight and survival became the film's inspiration. Conceived for an international audience, the story remains rooted in Estonia and in memories that war and occupation have left within its families.

In *Etude of Life*, the women's story begins in 1924 with Elsa, her sister and their mother, Selma. Played by Dutch actress Saskia Slaaf in both 1924 and 1944, Selma initially appears harsh. Yet her severity conceals the weight of responsibility: children to raise, animals to tend, a household to sustain and work to undertake in the absence of men. Through her, the film recognizes women whose labor carried families through economic hardship and war. Slaaf drew on method acting to inhabit the role, giving Selma such a formidable presence that, Urbsalu recalls, even her fellow actors and members of the crew found themselves intimidated.

Beyond the family, the film turns to a friendship altered by desire. In 1924, Elsa leaves her Communist boyfriend Vaino and her friend Brigitte takes the opportunity. However, fate brings the three together again twenty years later, in 1944, when Elsa needs help to find her daughter Marta. Brigitte, who has waited twenty years for Vaino's return, regards Elsa as an intrusion upon a life she believes is finally hers.

Two Estonian actresses portray Brigitte across the decades: Ingrid Margus in 1924 and Merle Palmiste in 1944. Through this shared role, youthful longing acquires the weight of time. The war has transformed their world, yet an old rivalry retains its power. "Taking part in *Etude of Life* felt like stepping into a moment in history when every choice carried the weight of a whole life," says Margus. "Eha brought so much courage and care to this story. On set, I felt we were all serving something greater than ourselves: the memory of those women and men whose quiet, impossible decisions have shaped who we are today." Lithuanian actress Dovilė Kundrotaitė brings a further Baltic connection to the international cast, portraying Marta's closest friend, Astrid, in a role of considerable dramatic intensity. The male lead, Vaino, is played by British actor Crispian Belfrage, whose screen credits include the series *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and the forthcoming feature Pedro Pan, whose cast also includes Andy Garcia.

For Urbsalu, the path to this first feature began long before its screenplay. At six, she entered a specialist film and music school in Estonia, where she studied for eleven years. Acting studies later took her to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles and eventually she finished her B.A. in Film and Media Arts, summa cum laude, from State University of New York. Urbsalu directed several music videos, ads and two award winning short films, *Perceptions* (2018) and *A Thorn* (2019), before this feature debut. With *Etude of Life*, Urbsalu's journey returns to its source: Estonia, her mother's memories, and the women whose lives first gave her a story to tell.

Co-directed by Eha Urbsalu and Mart Sander, with cinematography by Jaan Kalmus Jr., *Etude of Life* features an international cast including Eha Urbsalu, Crispian Belfrage, Mart Sander, Jasmin Selberg, Triin Lellep, Saskia Slaaf, Dovile Kundrotaite, Roman Schomburg, Merle Palmiste and Ingrid Margus. **BF**

Conceived for an international audience, ***the story remains rooted in Estonia*** *and in memories that war and occupation have left within its families.*

Baltic Talent

CONQUERING THE WORLD

With the visibility of the Baltics in the film world at an all-time high, collaboration between the three countries is also growing. **Three talents** who usually remain in the background share how new horizons are shaping their work.

By **Andrei Liimets**



Photo by **Edgars Aizpurs**



On the set of *Dirt in Your Face.*



On the set of *Whispers in Basement.*

Photos by **Katrina Kalamesa**



On the set of *Ulya.*

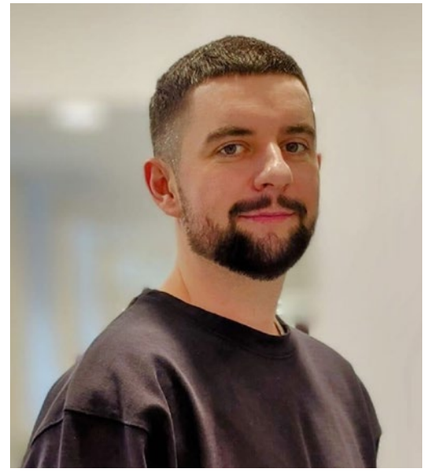


Photo by **Laila Pakalnina**

A privilege to work on what you love

GUNITA GROŠA, CASTING DIRECTOR

Gunita Groša jokingly calls herself an expert in sports films. Over the past two years, she has worked on the Latvian box-office hit *Escape Net*, the portrait of Estonian Olympic hero *Our Erika*, and *Ulya*, which premiered at Cannes this year.

In fact, her range spans contemporary dramas and major historical films, as well as several South Korean thrillers filmed in Latvia. Gunita stumbled into the film industry by chance when an acquaintance – whom she calls her film godmother – invited her in the summer of 2005 on the set of the blockbuster *Defenders of Riga* (2007).

As fate would have it, something went wrong with the art department's plans, and they needed help too. Gunita ended up working on set decoration and was subsequently invited to work on casting for another project. Having studied playwriting herself, she had found her calling.



On the set of South Korean movie *Hero* in 2019 in Cinevilla.

"Heart!" she exclaims when asked what a good casting director needs. Of course, you need to know people and have an extensive personal address book, but she says communication is the foundation of everything.

Gunita has made it her mission to find non-professional actors who might otherwise never find their way into films, yet who ultimately make a production special precisely because of who they are.

"I'm interested in people you won't find on Instagram, people who aren't visible in everyday life," she says.

She is always keeping an eye out for such people. She recalls once going to a concert with her son, her mind still on work because she had not found a suitable blond young man for a wedding scene. While standing in line and chatting with friends, Gunita suddenly turned around and spotted a stranger by the entrance who was absolutely perfect for the role. She and her son approached the young man, and he ended up appearing in the Jaak Kilmi's film *Dirt in Your Face.*

This is one of the reasons she is especially delighted to have worked with Sergei Loznitsa on *Two Prosecutors*.

"He specifically looks for non-professional actors and interesting faces. He wants to meet everyone, prints out photographs, and fills an entire wall with them. Directors such as Loznitsa and Andrei Zvyagintsev are very interested in the stories of the people who play their characters, and my job is to know those stories."

Gunita describes *Dawn* by Laila Pakalnina, completed in 2015, as her most challenging project. Hundreds of extras were required on set day after day.

"That was when I seriously thought about quitting. But then I took a couple of months off, and afterwards I thought again about what a privilege it is to do work you love," she recalls.

She believes Latvian cinema is in a good place at the moment.

"Our favourite thing is criticising everything – including ourselves. We're constantly thinking Lithuanians and Estonians do everything better. It's in our blood," she laughs, adding that fortunately, a promising new generation is now emerging.

As for her own ambitions, she says that after two decades in film, it is increasingly difficult to find anything that surprises her. Fortunately, closer cooperation between the Baltic countries is opening up new horizons.

"It is offering casting directors the opportunity to discover faces for audiences in their home countries, and I'm always on the lookout for new faces," she says.

It's all about working with people

VYTAUTAS RIABOVAS, LOCATION MANAGER

Vytautas Riabovas's CV reads like a list of spectacular hit series: British historical drama *Catherine the Great*, the critical darling *Chernobyl*, and the science-fiction superhit *Stranger Things*.

A series of coincidences led him to the path towards all these major projects. Fifteen years ago, he was looking for a summer job when, on the recommendation of a friend of his brother's friend, he found himself helping out on a commercial shoot. From there, he worked with various companies before embarking on a freelance career.

Vytautas recalls that everything happened so quickly that he barely had time to think about it. "Ironically, the first film I worked on was called *Unexperienced*," he laughs. "I was lucky that, although I had to work an incredible amount – 14- to 16-hour days – I was able to start major projects right away."

According to Vytautas, a location manager's job is primarily about working with people and requires a great deal of responsibility and meticulous attention to detail.

"You work with people, and people change their minds. In production, something new happens every day," he says, recalling filming *Catherine the Great* at a manor house that was also undergoing renovations. "The renovation was indeed underway and fully coordinated, and we were in constant communication with the manor's administration. However, that morning we realised that the construction company had carried out work around the manor (a dug trench, mounds of soil, and other obstacles) unilaterally, without the knowledge of either us or the manor's administration. We had only one day to clear everything and prepare the proper conditions for our lighting department to conduct prelight operations."

Photo from **Private collection**

This level of diligence and precision has also attracted the attention of international productions, which is why all the projects mentioned above have chosen to film in Lithuania. Vytautas adds that it also helps that English is widely spoken in Lithuania and that its filmmaking model is similar to the American one. At the same time, working on such productions entails enormous responsibility.

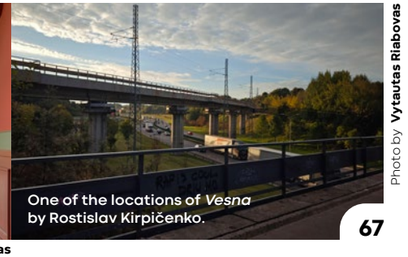
"If you mess up even one of them, people will conclude that a small country like ours simply can't handle projects of this scale," he says.

Vytautas is pleased with the current state of the Lithuanian film industry, praising both its funding system and the quality of its films. However, he identifies the lack of film studios as the primary challenge.

"In that context, the opening of Ida Hub in Estonia is fantastic news. It will attract major projects that will bring im-



Catherine the Great was shot in Traku Voke Manor.



One of the locations of *Vesna* by Rostislav Kirpičenko.

Photo by **Vytautas Riabovas**

Photo by **Martynas Kundrotas**

mense value to both Estonia and the entire region," he says, having just returned from the studio complex's opening.

Looking ahead, he hopes to see greater cooperation among the film institutes of the three Baltic countries, as this would help them secure funding collectively and promote the region more effectively to international audiences.

Vytautas says he doesn't have a particular dream project in mind. Instead, his focus has recently shifted towards production management. Having successfully completed three projects in this role – one short and two feature films – he is now working on a major international production. He sees this as a natural next step in his career, building on the experience he has gained over the years.

"It's not the scale but the people you work with," he says, summing up what matters most to him.

The art of being invisible

LIISI PÕLLUMAA, MAKEUP DESIGNER AND ARTIST

Liisi Põllumaa inherited her creative spark from her architect parents, but it took a long journey of self-discovery to find her way into filmmaking. She travelled to different countries, initially trained as a beautician, and in the process discovered she had a natural talent for make-up.



Photo by **Malgorzata Mikolajczyk**

Liisi on the set of *Ulya*.



Liisi Põllumaa transforming her Latvian colleague Aivars Dambis into a Soviet militiaman on the set of *Ulya*.



On the set of *Truth and Justice*.

Photos from **Private collection**

One day, she found herself helping on the set of *December Heat*. "I absolutely loved life on set – everything seemed mysterious and exciting," she recalls. After that, Liisi began seeking opportunities to gain practical experience in film and has since worked on many of Estonia's biggest productions, including *Truth and Justice* and *Kalev*.

"*Truth and Justice* was an enormous challenge – it was the first time silicone prosthetics had been used in Estonia. Making a character look older takes a month of preparation, and if something goes wrong, you have to start all over again," she explains.

The original plan was to outsource the work, but when that proved too expensive, everything was handled in-house. "You really learn through experience, and that gave me a lot of confidence to take on new projects."

According to Liisi, most people think good make-up means using a lot of make-up, but in reality, painstaking work often goes unnoticed. "It's almost unfair that something can take over two hours of work and the viewer doesn't even notice it," she laughs.

For example, the name character in her latest film, *Ulya*, required a host of hair extensions and a wig, and the actors facial features were slightly modelled for additional femininity. For this kind of work, she considers it the greatest compliment when nobody notices the enhancements.

Alongside technical skills, she believes communication, adaptability and patience are essential to her profession. "Some people want to talk a lot while they're in the make-up chair, while others don't want to talk at all. You have to be able to read the room – you have to send the actor out of the chair in the state they need to be in, feeling comfortable."

The work done on set accounts for only a small part of a Make-up Designers job. Before filming begins, there are meetings with the director and actors, the development of a visual concept, the creation of characters, research in archives for historical films, and the design of wigs and prosthetics. All this can take months.

"The most important thing for me is that the screenplay has to be compelling, and I love a challenge – creating interesting characters and personalities," she says, explaining what drew her to films such as *Fränk*, *8 Views of Lake Biwa*, and *The Black Hole*.

Liisi also worked in the make-up department on *Tenet*, the Christopher Nolan thriller filmed in Tallinn, where she witnessed the scale of a Hollywood production first-hand.

"Budgets like that can make you envious because they allow you to make even bigger transformations and conduct more experimentation and testing. But overall, Estonia now has the capacity and skills to do all of this, too. In terms of technical expertise I believe our capabilities are at a very high level," she says.

Following her experience working on both *Tenet* and *Ulya*, Liisi believes it is crucial for filmmakers across the Baltic countries to simply get to know one another.

"So, when the next big international production like *Tenet* comes along, I can just call to my talented make-up artists from neighbouring Latvia and Lithuania, rather than having to bring people in from further abroad. This is making collaboration easier, more practical and cost-effective." **BF**



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BEHIND the Screen

Introduct has grown from a five-person Estonian technology company into an international software development group with more than 150 specialists across Estonia, Ukraine, the UAE and Oman.

By **Jevgeni Levin**



The Introduct team: Viktor Larionov, Svitlana Shandruk and Jevgeni Levin.

As PÖFF prepares for its 30th anniversary, Introduct is stepping in as the festival's Official Technical Partner and Grand Partner – bringing its expertise in building and maintaining complex digital systems to one of Northern Europe's major film events.

TECHNOLOGY BUILT TO LAST

The work Introduct delivers is straightforward to describe but notoriously difficult to execute well: building digital systems that remain reliable in everyday use and under pressure.. The company develops and maintains custom software and enterprise applications, AI solutions and legacy system modernisation, supported by its own Tier 2 data center in Tallinn and a 24/7 in-house technical support center. A key part of Introduct's approach is long-term cooperation. Rather than focusing on standalone projects, the company builds and maintains systems designed to support its clients over time.



This long-term approach is also at the heart of Introduct's new partnership with the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF).

KEEPING PÖFF RUNNING

PÖFF is one of only 17 A-list film festivals globally. Last year, the festival reached 43 billion potential media contacts, received 10,300 mentions across 97 countries, and welcomed approximately 2,700 international guests. Furthermore, over two million people interact with the festival's digital platforms each year. Operating at that scale requires infrastructure that performs reliably without exception—not just infrastructure that usually works.

To meet these demands, Introduct serves as the Official Technical Partner and Grand Partner for PÖFF's upcoming 30th-anniversary edition in November 2026. The partnership covers the full technical lifecycle of PÖFF's online presence, ensuring backend stability, frontend performance, system resilience during peak traffic, and a scalable architecture for the years ahead.

TWO TALLINN STORIES

The partnership also connects two organisations with roots in Tallinn and increasingly international reach. PÖFF has spent 30 years building a cultural institution that matters to audiences worldwide. At the same time, Introduct has spent 10 years building digital systems that allow organisations to operate reliably at scale. For PÖFF, that means having a dedicated technical team that understands the festival's systems and keeps them running – allowing the festival itself to focus on cinema. **BF**



PROTECTING
Creators in the Age of AI

What happens when an actor's voice is used without permission, or a filmmaker's work trains an AI system? Recent European court rulings offer creative professionals some hope. But protecting your rights as a creator isn't only about dragging tech giants to court, says **Priit Lätt**, attorney-at-law and partner at **TEGOS**.

By **Tegos** Photo by **Getter Raiend**

Imagine recording your voice for a project, only to find out later it's been used commercially without your consent. Or discovering your music or screenplay helped train an AI system without your consent. Who actually gets to decide what happens to your work?

EUROPEAN COURTS ARE OPENING DOORS, YET QUESTIONS REMAIN

In Germany, music rights management organisation GEMA secured two major court victories against AI companies: first against OpenAI in November 2025, then against Suno in July 2026. Both cases concerned the unauthorised use of copyrighted music or lyrics.

"Although the judgments are being challenged and the disputes could ultimately reach the Court of Justice of the European Union, they already demonstrate that creators can successfully challenge major technology companies under existing copyright law," says Priit Lätt.

These judgments don't automatically set legal precedent in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, but copyright law in all three countries is based on EU legislation. "That suggests authors and performers in the Baltics could also defend their rights against American tech giants in their national courts. The judgments aren't binding here, but they're paving the way," Lätt explains.

But winning individual court cases doesn't resolve all the uncertainty around AI and copyright. Current EU rules allow copyrighted material to be used in certain cases for text and data mining – essentially, analysing huge volumes of information by computer.

LEARN MORE AT INDUSTRY@TALLINN & BALTIC EVENT

Priit Lätt will also share practical legal advice at this year's Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event. Together with producer Helen Lõhmus, he'll lead Dialogue on Contracts: Hot Seat in Negotiation, an interactive Music Meets Film workshop digging into real-life cases, copyright and negotiation tactics. He'll also speak about performers' rights at Discovery Campus, giving film professionals a chance to better understand and protect their interests.

For certain commercial uses, creators must opt out if they don't want their work used under this exception. "In practice, it's up to the author to tell the whole world their work is off-limits. I think that's a serious weakness in the legislation," Lätt says.

The European Commission is reviewing copyright rules and gathering feedback on potential changes. However, rewriting legislation and resolving court disputes can take years. This raises the real question: what can creators do to protect themselves in the meantime?

ESTONIA SHOWS WHAT CAN ALREADY BE DONE

According to Lätt, these European court cases are just one part of protecting creators' rights. In October 2024, the Estonian Actors' Union and the Estonian Film Industry Cluster signed a good practice agreement covering working conditions and performers' rights, including the creation of digital copies of actors. Another important step came in June 2026, when the Estonian Actors' Union and the Institute of the Estonian Language reached an agreement on actors' recorded and synthetic voices.

"Not every problem involves a major AI company. Sometimes it's just an everyday situation in which someone's voice or performance is used well beyond what was originally agreed," Lätt explains.

Even after an actor discovers their voice has been used without permission, negotiating with the company responsible or taking legal action can consume significant time and resources. "You've got two options: fight for your rights on your own or do it through an organisation that represents you. In the age of AI, collective representation is usually the easier and more effective route," he says. **BF**

In the age of AI, collective representation is usually the easier and more effective route.

WHAT CAN FILM PROFESSIONALS DO?

Know your rights. Understand what others can and can't do with your work, voice or performance. Consider joining a professional collective management organisation that can help represent your interests.

Pay attention to how your work is used. If you spot an unexpected use of your performance or recording, speak up. Raising the issue can lead to broader change.

Put agreements in writing. Whether you're signing an acting contract or licensing music for a film, make sure the permitted uses are clearly spelled out, including anything AI-related.

Keep learning. You don't need to become a lawyer, but understanding your basic rights is a professional skill worth having today. Lätt finds it encouraging that more young actors and film students are taking an interest in these questions.

How to **Find Money** in Estonia

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

ESTONIAN FILM INSTITUTE PROGRAMMES FOR FILM PRODUCTION

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION
Budget 2026: € 600,000

- For producers from all over the world. Participation of an Estonian co-producer is necessary. Bilateral treaty not necessary.
- Subsidy of up to 70% of the Estonian part of the budget.
- 100% of the subsidy must be spent in Estonia.
- Estonian creative and production related participation in a project should meet the requirements of minority co-production grading table.
- Four application deadlines: February 3 and October 13 for feature fiction and documentary. February 17 and September 8 for animation.
- Decision in 50 days.

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

FILM ESTONIA CASH REBATE

Budget 2026: € 9,200,000
Film Estonia cash rebate is a production incentive supporting the incoming production of feature films, feature documentaries, animation films, animation series, scripted series and the post-production of all previously mentioned works. An application can be made for international production service or co-production to receive a cash rebate up to 40% on eligible production costs.

- Support intensity – 30%-40% of eligible costs
- Deadlines – open call
- Applicant – company registered in Estonia
- Recipient – foreign company
- Decision – in 40 days
- Auditing and payment – in 40 days

The scheme is open for:

- Feature films with a budget of at least € 1 million; minimum local spend € 200,000
- Feature documentary with a budget of at least € 200,000; minimum local spend € 50,000
- Animation with a budget of at least € 150,000; minimum local spend € 50,000
- Animation series with a budget of at least € 500,000; minimum local spend € 50,000 per series
- Scripted series with a budget of at least € 100,000 per single episode; minimum local spend € 50,000 per series
- Post-production; minimum local spend € 30,000

CONTACT:
Nele Paves, Film Commissioner
commissioner@filmi.ee / filmestonia.eu

THE CULTURAL ENDOWMENT OF ESTONIA

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

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION
In case of minority co-production, the amount of the benefit is up to half of the maximum rate.

- Participation of Estonian co-producer is necessary.
- There are four application deadlines: February 20, May 20, August 20 and November 20

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

REGIONAL FILM FUNDS

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate

TARTU FILM FUND

- Budget 2026: € 150,000
- Support intensity: up to 35%
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, TV-series, documentaries, short films.
- One application deadline: March 31

CONTACT:
fund@tartufilmfund.ee
tartufilmfund.ee

PÄRNU COUNTY FILM FUND

- Budget 2026: € 100,000
- Support intensity: up to 25%
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, documentaries, short films.
- No deadlines.

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

VIRU FILM FUND

- Budget 2026: € 200,000
- Support intensity: up to 30%
- Support for the production of feature films, documentaries, TV-series, short films, music videos.
- Two application deadlines: March 1 and October 1.

CONTACT:
Evelin Saarmets /
Viru Film Fund Coordinator
info@vff.ee / vff.ee

FILM FUND OF ESTONIAN ISLANDS

- Budget 2026: € 16,000
- Support intensity: up to 40%
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, TV-series, documentaries, short films and film education.
- No deadlines.

CONTACT:
filmifond@sasak.ee / saartefilmifond.ee

How to **Find Money** in Latvia

THE KEY FUNDING BODIES

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

Annual State Support for film industry 2025
(from all 4 key funding bodies) -
€ 1 2 904 296
Number of film productions supported by the National Film Centre of Latvia
in 2025 - 27 films

NATIONAL FILM CENTRE OF LATVIA
Minority co-production scheme

- Total budget 2026: € 500,000.
- Call twice a year, application time, deadline: 1st call - April, 2nd call September/October
- Supported films: fiction, documentaries and animationfilms of any length.
- 80% of the subsidy must be spent in Latvia.

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

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

- Supports documentaries of any length, fiction shorts and animation films.
- Funding for audiovisual sector in 2025: € 1 324 143 (no specific amounts indicated for film productions, depends on the competition and available funding).
- Three application deadlines: January, May, September.
- Decision: 1 month.

CONTACT
Film curator Gita Krātiņa,
gita@kkf.lv

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

- Support intensity: 30% of eligible costs.
- Deadlines: open call twice a year.

CONTACT:
jautajumi@liaa.gov.lv
www.liaa.gov.lv

THE RIGA FILM FUND OF THE COUNCIL OF RIGA
Cash rebate scheme Riga Film Fund co-financing programme
The programme is a production incentive supporting the incoming productions of full-length fiction features, documentaries, and TV films. An application can be made for international production service or co-production to receive a cash rebate of 20 – 25% on eligible production costs. The support can be combined with Latvian co-Financing programme's funding.

CONTACT:
Aiga Piķe,
aiga.pike@riga.lv
www.filmriga.lv

PUBLIC BROADCASTER
Latvian Television (LTV) is the stateowned public service television company in Latvia. LTV operates two linear channels, LTV1 and LTV7. LTV is part of Public Broadcasting of Latvia, consisting of LTV and radio (6 stations), joint news content and digital access is provided on the broadcaster's site www.lsm.lv. LTV acquires Free TV and Free VOD rights to drama series, fiction features, documentaries, children's content, live events, etc. LTV mainly acquires completed films but is also open to considering projects in production if LOC is needed.

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

Basic facts: Latvia is the member of the EU and NATO. Currency EUR. Latvia covers an area of 64,589 km2, with a population of 1.9 million. Access to high-speed internet in Latvia is among the best in the EU.
Accessibility: Riga, the capital of Latvia, has the largest airport of the Baltics just 20 min drive from the city center. There are more than 100 direct flight destinations. Locations. Latvia and its capital Riga offer a wide variety of locations. Riga city has Northern charm, Medieval, Art Nouveau and industrial architecture, as well as Soviet modernism heritage. The most beautiful Art Nouveau buildings in Riga were built by Mikhail Eizenstein, the father of the iconic filmmaker Sergei Eizenstein. Throughout Latvia there is wide range of castles, palaces, ancient fortresses and manor houses. The most popular shooting location is Rundale - a baroque palace built in 18th century, 100 km from Riga
Pristine nature: There are four distinct seasons in Latvia. Over 500 km long white sand beaches - the coastline of the Baltic sea. Abundancy of rivers and forests, lakes and swamps.
Advantages of filming in Latvia: Internationally experienced technical crews, strong art department and construction teams, competitive costs, stages and backlots, wide range of extras.

How to **Find Money** in Lithuania

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

LITHUANIAN FILM TAX INCENTIVE

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

Key information

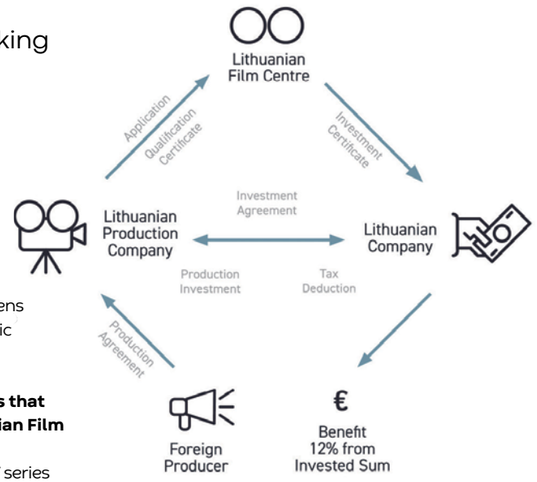
- Save up to 30% of your film production budget.
- Available for the production of feature films, TV dramas, documentaries, and animated films, including domestically produced, co-produced, or service-based films.

How It Works

As a foreign filmmaker, you must cooperate with one of the local production companies that submit the application. The local company takes the responsibility of finding a local business company willing to support up to 30% of your production budget in exchange for reduced corporate income tax.

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

- The total amount of eligible spending in Lithuania has to be no less than € 43,000.
- At least three days of shooting take place in Lithuania in the course of the production (except for animation projects).
- At least 30% of an animated film's production costs in Lithuania must be incurred for producing two of the elements: shooting (if it is required by the script); characters and/or backgrounds design; layouts and/or storyboards; visual effects; 2D, 3D, stop-motion and other forms of animation production.



- At least 51% of the crew hired by the Lithuanian production company are citizens of Lithuania or citizens of other European Economic Area (EEA) countries.

The biggest foreign projects that benefited from the Lithuanian Film Incentive in 2025:

- *For All Mankind* spin-off, TV series *Star City* (season 1) (USA - SPTV Limited) received € 6,912,264.
- Historical TV series *Mozart* (Germany - Story House Pictures GmbH) received € 1,517,865.
- Netflix production TV series based on true story *Bunt* (PL) / *Riot* (EN) (Poland - Telemark Sp. z o.o.) received € 1,135,470.

LITHUANIAN FILM CENTRE SUPPORT FOR MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION

Requirements to be considered a minority co-production:

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

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

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

CONTACT:
Deimantas Saladžius
d.saladzius@lkc.lt
Gabija Trakimavičiūtė
g.trakimaviciute@lkc.lt

VILNIUS FILM FUND

- Budget 2026: € 150,000
- Maximum investment per project: € 30,000
- Supports documentary, animated, and feature-length film co-productions
- One application deadline: in Spring

CONTACT:
Jūratė Pazikaitė, film@vilnius.lt

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