



BALTIC

2/2025

FILM

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After the Oscar:

Baltic
Animation
in Full Flow

PÖFF *Goes to Cannes*

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STORIES IN MOTION
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LIT**

*Uljana Kim
& Alise Gelze*

The Baltic FORCE

BEHIND *THE TWO*
PROSECUTORS



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Ready, Visible, and Vital

As the film world gathers in Cannes, the question from Tallinn to Vilnius is the same: “Are we in the programme?” This year’s answer is a resounding yes – and on more fronts than ever. From the red carpet to industry hubs, the Baltic presence is not only visible – it’s strategic, diverse, and increasingly essential. In the **official selection**, in **the competition**, *The Two Prosecutors*, a new feature from Sergei Loznitsa, co-produced by Latvia and Lithuania, addresses the political climate with cinematic precision, reinforcing the region’s commitment to globally relevant storytelling.

Equally compelling is *Winter in March*, (Armenian, Estonian, Belgium and French co-production) a poetic Estonian-Armenian stop-motion short selected for **La Cinef**, blending textile craft and narrative intimacy into a resonant reflection on war, displacement, and human connection.

The **PÖFF Goes to Cannes** showcase brings five new Baltic works to the Marché du Film, spotlighting a bold generation of filmmakers working across genre and form. Estonian shorts presented in **Focus Work in Progress** continue to push cinematic language in playful and unexpected directions.

Baltic producers also feature prominently in key industry platforms – from **Producers on the Move** to **Cannes Docs** – where they’re not just seeking new partnerships, but helping to shape the future of European co-production and independent storytelling.

Beyond Cannes, the momentum continues. Latvia’s *Dog of God*, an animated feature that blends surrealism with allegory, is set to premiere at **Tribeca**, already drawing international attention for its audacious vision. Last year’s historic **Oscar win for Flow** remains a milestone – a powerful example of how Baltic animation is competing on a global scale.

Films from the region are also finding success at home and abroad. Lithuania’s *The Southern Chronicles* became the most-watched film in national cinema history, and has resonated with international audiences through its vivid storytelling and cultural texture. Estonia’s *Fränk*, only recently released, is already building momentum as a fresh, emotionally honest debut exploring youth, masculinity, and vulnerability.

This Cannes edition is both a showcase and a statement: Baltic cinema is not on the sidelines. It’s in the programme, in the market, and in the conversation – and it’s here to stay.



Eda Koppel
Editor in Chief

Photo by Viktor Koshkin

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Photos by Ertend Štaub, Sohvi Viik-Kalluste, Natalia Larina, Agnese Zeltiņa

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E-mail: info@poff.ee, | poff.ee
Editor in Chief: Eda Koppel
Contributing Editors: Mintarė Varanavičiūtė, Kristīne Matisa
Contributors: Tara Karajca, Andrei Liimets, Tõnu Karjatse, Ralf Sauter, Dārta Ceriņa, Gert Hermans, Aurelia Aasa, Egle Loor, Gražina Arlickaitė
Linguistic Editing: Paul Emmet
Design & Layout: Profimeedia Printed by Reflekt
Cover: Uljana Kim and Alise Çelze
Photos by Chloé Desnoyer and Reinis Hofmanis





Producer Aurelia Aasa and director Sander Joon.



Hair of Hare

Sander Joon will continue with his distinctive surrealist animation style, developed through earlier works such as *Velodrool* and refined in *Sierra*, which earned him numerous accolades on the festival circuit.

"I had the idea while over at a residency in Sweden. It all started with observations of architecture back home, but I decided to mash up the story of an architect having an existential crisis with hares and other cultural symbols," Joon opens the premise of the film, titled *Hair of Hare*.

With the Latvian hit film *Flow* winning the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature,

among many other prestigious prizes, interest in Baltic film is at a historic high.

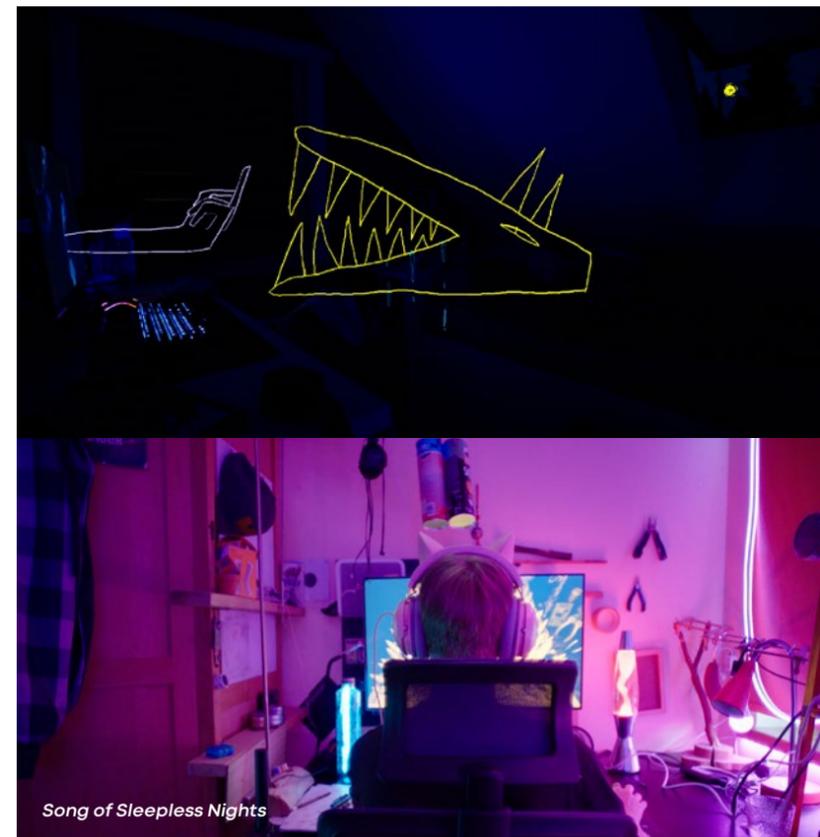
"It's such an inspiring story," marvels Aurelia Aasa, Joon's producer. "In indie animation, there are even more risks and more experimentation, though. That world has its own rhythm altogether."

Aasa also produced *Sierra*, the success of which has opened multiple doors. "I think Sander distinguishes himself as an author and stands out. He combines existential themes with generosity, warmth and humour, for which there is such a need in today's world."

Joining *Hair of Hare* will be the new project by Madli Lääne, the director of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia Annual Culture Prize-winning short fiction *Jungle Law*. The acclaimed coming-of-age film focused on teenagers, whose innocent summertime games turn into harassment and leads to sexual violence.

Lääne got the idea for her next short while casting for *Jungle Law*, which was also presented at the Focus WIP initiative in 2022. "While interviewing young people, the question of what is going on in the heads of 15–19-year-old boys stuck with me," she says about the inspiration behind her *Song of Sleepless Nights*, currently on the editing table.

Lääne describes the film as a hybrid documentary with animated elements. "It's already difficult enough to be a teenager. And I think it's even more difficult for this first generation that is growing up



Song of Sleepless Nights

Director Madli Lääne and producer Marianne Ostrat

with one foot in reality, and the other in the virtual world – always connected, and no break from the stimuli of the outside world. We are combining stories from various teenage boys into a portrait of a generation."

Marianne Ostrat produces the film, having recently guided Anna Hints' *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* all the way to documentary awards at Sundance and the European Film Awards.

"I feel that themes related to women have been at the forefront for some time now. Boys and masculinity are starting to take the torch now," she comments on the trend she perceives in the film industry. "*Adolescence* has had a huge impact. I suspect there will be many similar films coming up."

Both films will be looking for partners at Cannes, having their sights on wrapping by the end of the year, and a premiere in 2026.

"There has already been interest abroad, and I will be looking for potential co-producers," Aasa says about the focus in Cannes. "But it's not only the business side – the emotional support is also very important, helping us to believe in the project. Last year, only six projects were chosen, so the competition is fierce, and getting there is already a hugely promising sign."

Ostrat is setting the bar equally high. "We are looking for a sales agent, distributors, and festival programmers. Like everyone, we are hoping to secure the strongest possible world premiere. The 30-minute runtime might be a bit unusual, but we wanted to allow the film to unfold naturally, as it gives a voice for those in the background, looking at the more vulnerable and sensitive side of young boys." **BF**

HARES, HORMONES, AND HOPE



Two projects by acclaimed Estonian filmmakers have been chosen for the Focus Work in Progress initiative at Cannes. **Sander Joon** will present the short animated film *Hair of Hare*, and **Madli Lääne** will step up with a hybrid short film, *Song of Sleepless Nights*.

By **Andrei Liimets**



Photo by Rikke Lykkebo

DISCOVERY CAMPUS CALLS FOR EMERGING TALENTS!

By Egle Loor

Over the years, the educational programme **Discovery Campus** has welcomed hundreds of emerging talents to **the Black Nights Film Festival**.

It brings together several renowned talent initiatives: Script Pool for screenwriters, directors, and producers; Black Nights Stars for actors and actresses; Music Meets Film for film music professionals; Black Room for art department specialists; and Frame Within a Frame for cinematographers.

This five-day programme, held during the festival, inspires and educates through a hands-on approach. Participants take part in live events, workshops, and masterclasses led by ac-

claimed and award-winning film professionals.

As with every year, the programme features exciting new additions. Frame Within A Frame is expanding with fresh partnerships, including Aalto University, while Black Room shifts its focus to hair and make-up design. Just like last year, the most promising Script Pool project will receive an exclusive opportunity to attend The Writer's Retreat in Mallorca.

Not sure, if you should join? Check the testimonials from previous participants! **BF**



CÉLYNE BAUDINO,
MUSIC MEETS FILM PARTICIPANT
2024, FRANCE

"It was simply incredible. I've participated in many similar programs, but none was as amazing as the one in Tallinn. We spent an intense and exciting week with events and masterclasses that were genuinely relevant and beneficial. Interacting with international supervisors who guided us throughout the week was a true privilege for an early-career composer. The festival venues, recording studio, hotel, and ceremony locations exceeded all my expectations.

The highlight was visiting the Arvo Pärt Centre, as his work has greatly influenced my music. Equally special were the meaningful moments shared with fellow composers, with whom I connected deeply."

MÄRTEN METSAVIIR,
BLACK NIGHTS STAR 2024,
ESTONIA

"It was a fantastic opportunity to dive behind the scenes of the film industry and connect with professionals in the casting field. Through hands-on workshops and open conversations, we expanded our understanding of the craft and discovered new layers of creativity within ourselves.

What makes the experience truly special is the sense of collegial unity - an artistic solidarity that grows from the mix of different cultures, languages, and perspectives. The shared energy sparks inspiration and pushes us forward in our artistic journeys.

And of course, spending time with creative, talented, and genuinely cool people throughout the festival makes you feel special. Different. Valued."



TOMAS LIPSKY,
FRAME WITHIN A FRAME
2024, CZECH

"The programme was an intense yet friendly and open experience. Due to the relaxed atmosphere and the smaller, more down-to-earth nature of the festival - without strict rules or exclusive VIP areas - we had a rare chance to meet with leading figures in the industry.

What might feel out of reach in other contexts became very accessible. Conversations started easily and often turned into genuine exchanges full of practical advice and honest insight, shared without filters

or distance. It created a space where newcomers and professionals could meet as equals, driven by a shared passion for film and storytelling.

I would recommend this program not only to emerging professionals, but also to those who already have some experience in the industry. You never know who you might meet during networking, or through other activities connected to this program - and how those encounters might influence your path, even years down the line.

If I get the chance to attend again, I would be more than happy to return."

ERMINA APOSTOLAKI,
BLACK ROOM PARTICIPANT 2024,
GREECE

"Participating in Black Room was an intense and transformative experience. Tallinn, with its vibrant atmosphere and the festival's energy, provided the perfect backdrop for deep creative exploration. The highlight was the collaborative spirit - being surrounded by passionate filmmakers, engaging in thought-provoking discussions, and receiving guidance from inspiring mentors. The program encouraged experimentation

and reinforced my determination to pursue my career goals.

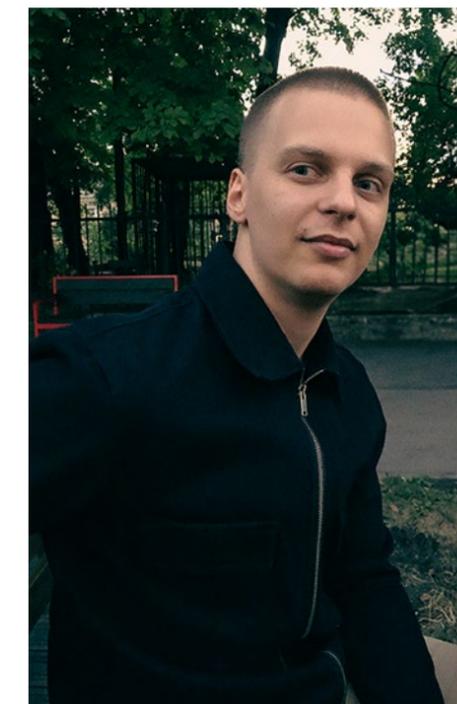
Black Room is a unique opportunity, especially for emerging art directors and production designers, who rarely get the chance to network within the framework of a film festival while working under the guidance of acclaimed mentors. Anyone looking to broaden their creative horizons and build meaningful connections in a deeply immersive setting should apply."



KRISTIANS RIEKSTIŅŠ,
DIRECTOR, SCREENWRITER FOR
KINGPINS, WINNER OF SCRIPT
POOL 2024, LATVIA

"As aspiring filmmakers, we often face self-doubt, criticism, and burnout from juggling multiple jobs. Taking part in Discovery Campus alleviates many of these struggles - if only for a few days - by allowing you to focus solely on filmmaking, connect with peers (and potential future collaborators), and receive kind, constructive feedback on your work. For these reasons alone, I believe it's well worth the effort and modest cost of admission.

Our project *Kingpins* was selected for Script Pool, and we won the main award. This gave us a much-needed confidence boost and played a key role in helping us secure funding for the project!"



THE SUBMISSION DEADLINE FOR BLACK NIGHTS STARS IS 24 MAY, AND FOR OTHER SUB-PROGRAMMES, 30 JUNE 2025!

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROGRAMME!





Producing WITH PURPOSE

Klementina Remeikaitė is a Lithuanian producer selected to participate in this year's Producers on the Move program.

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė**
Photo by **Erlend Štaub**

In 2024, her production *Drowning Dry* received two major awards at the Locarno Film Festival, further cementing her reputation as a rising voice in European cinema. She is developing a new feature-length project in collaboration with acclaimed director and longtime creative partner Laurynas Bareiša.

PRODUCER
on the
Move

First of all, congratulations on being selected for the prestigious Producers on the Move program. What does this recognition mean to you?

Thank you very much! I'm truly honoured to be part of this program – it's something I've dreamed of for quite some time. One of the criteria for applying was having completed at least one international co-production, which I was able to fulfil last year with *Drowning Dry*, a film by Laurynas Bareiša that was co-produced by Matīss Kaža from Latvia. Looking back, I feel like this opportunity came at exactly the right moment. I've accumulated enough professional experience to feel confident and equal among talented European producers. Beyond personal achievement, I also see

this as a meaningful step for Lithuanian cinema – our visibility on the international stage continues to grow.

You've collaborated with directors such as Marija Kavtaradze, Titas Laucius, and Laurynas Bareiša, who've made a name for themselves in Lithuania and internationally. What draws you to a particular project?

In truth, our creative journeys began during our studies at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. We were close friends and naturally gravitated toward working together on academic assignments and short films. These early collaborations eventually developed into long-term professional partnerships after graduation. My first feature film project was Marija Kavtaradze's debut feature, *Summer Survivors*, where I joined the team as a co-producer alongside the production company M-Films. Although I had already produced several short films by then, that project provided my first real insight into the complexities and demands of feature-length production.

You co-founded the production company afterschool with Laurynas Bareiša in 2014. How did this partnership begin?

We had been collaborating on Laurynas's student films, and after graduation, he posed a simple but pivotal question: "Do we start our own company, or do we go work for someone else?" I didn't hesitate and immediately said, "Let's start our own." In hindsight, it was a bold move that required a great deal of courage and ambition. We were still very young, un-

sure of the direction we wanted to take, and had to teach ourselves how to work effectively as a team. In the early days, it felt more like an after-hours project while juggling other jobs. But gradually, step by step, we grew – and today, afterschool has been operating successfully for over a decade. What started as a collegial partnership has grown into a deep friendship. Today, I consider Laurynas one of my closest collaborators and friends.

In 2021, you received the Orizzonti Award at the Venice Film Festival for *Pilgrims*, Laurynas Bareiša's debut feature. How did that recognition impact your work?

It was a surreal moment – we were genuinely shocked. I was already thrilled just to be included in the Orizzonti section; winning an award wasn't even something I dared to expect, especially for a purely Lithuanian production. Receiving that prize felt like confirmation that we

were on the right path. It opened doors to wider international industry recognition and made it easier to connect with new people and potential co-production partners. We started receiving more invitations to meetings, which saved us time knocking on countless doors. It also gave us a greater sense of responsibility and heightened expectations – for ourselves and for our future projects.

Let's turn to Laurynas Bareiša's second feature, *Drowning Dry*, which you co-produced with Matīss Kaža – now widely recognized for the Oscar-winning animated film *Flow*. What was your experience collaborating with him?

I first met Matīss during my first visit to the Cannes Film Festival – thanks to the fortunate proximity of the Lithuanian and Latvian stands at the Marché du Film. Following our success in Venice, there was a noticeable increase in interest



Summer Survivors



Pilgrims

Photo by Locarno Film Festival - Ti-Press



Drowning Dry team in Locarno.

from potential collaborators, but many of those initial conversations didn't lead anywhere. With Matīss, however, things were different – you could immediately sense his genuine desire to work together. We were in similar places in our careers, both managing our own production companies, and our respective industries in Lithuania and Latvia share many similarities. At the same time, we brought complementary strengths to the table. Matīss was incredibly supportive, transparent, and generous with his experience – it was truly a privilege to collaborate with him. And of course, I'm absolutely delighted by the success of *Flow*.

There's no doubt that *Drowning Dry* became one of the standout Lithuanian films of the year. It received major recognition at the Locarno Film Festival, where Laurynas Bareiša was awarded Best Director and the lead ensemble - Gelminė Glemžaitė, Agnė Kaktaitė, Paulius Markevičius, and Giedrius Kiela - were honoured with Best Performance. What do you think makes the film resonate so widely?

At its core, *Drowning Dry* is a story about human relationships and collective trauma – experiences that transcend borders. Audiences everywhere can relate to the intricacies of sibling dynamics, family ties, or unresolved emotional histories. The narrative is built in a way that draws the viewer in, inviting them to piece together the story themselves, which creates a deeply personal engagement. I also believe the chemistry between the four lead actors played a vital role. Each character stood out in their own right, offer-

ing the audience someone to relate to. That emotional accessibility, paired with the strength of their performances, is precisely why they were recognized – and rightfully so.

Following its success in Locarno, the film returned to Lithuania, where it was seen by more than 42,000 viewers and became a widely discussed topic for several months. How did you approach the release strategy?

We made the decision to handle the film's distribution ourselves and developed the entire communication campaign in partnership with the creative agency Autoriai. Up to that point, all of my films had been released through external distributors. This time, I had the unique opportunity to be involved in every step – from development through to release – ensuring that the film was presented to audiences exactly as we had envisioned. It was a real luxury to have that level of control. With no other productions on our plate at the time, we were able to fully dedicate ourselves to the release. Our collaboration with Autoriai began months ahead of the premiere, focusing on crafting a strategy that would truthfully represent the film without spoiling key elements. We were fortunate to have four lead actors who were not only outstanding on screen but also highly engaged in the promotional efforts. What followed was a kind of snowball effect – they were invited to appear on television, participate in interviews, and so on. As the film reached a wide and diverse audience, we got a broad range of responses. Some viewers were surprised by how dif-



Drowning Dry

ferent the film was from their expectations. But I believe that part of the process is helping audiences grow more open to this kind of storytelling. This project proved that even an arthouse film can attract various demographics. It's an encouraging example for other producers as well – taking a risk and trusting your instincts can lead to remarkable results.

There's been much discussion around the emergence of a new generation of Lithuanian filmmakers. What defines this creative movement in your view?

The foundation is friendship and mutual support. Many of us have collaborated in different capacities – for example, when Titas Laucius directed *Parade*, Laurynas was the cinematographer. That sense of solidarity is crucial; it fosters a creative environment where no one feels isolated. As for creative traits, I think this new generation is defined by courage. These films are remarkably sincere, and that level of honesty requires real bravery – especially when you're exposing deeply personal narratives not just to your inner circle, but to complete strangers. Each filmmaker also brings a unique worldview and distinct stylistic voice, which makes their work exciting and varied.

Which project will you be focusing on during your time with Producers on the Move?

I'm currently developing several projects, but my main focus during Producers on the Move will be Laurynas Bareiša's third feature film, *Liberations*, which is currently in the development stage. This program offers a rare opportunity to connect meaningfully with other selected producers and present your work in depth. I hope this setting will help us find the right international co-production partner to bring *Liberations* to life. **BF**

Photo by Nafta



Photo by Karolin Linamäe

Ramp up Your Festival with SUSI AI!

At the Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF), we're always looking for smart ways to improve what we do – especially when it comes to using new technology. Last year, we introduced SUSI AI, an advanced AI tool that helps make the festival experience smoother, more personal, and easier to navigate.

Film festivals can be overwhelming. With hundreds of films and a packed schedule, it can be a bit much, even for experienced visitors. SUSI AI was built to fix that. It gives each attendee recommendations based on their own preferences – whether it's suggesting films they might enjoy or pointing them to relevant industry events. It's like having a helpful local guide in your pocket.

But SUSI AI is more than a smart search tool. It's a multilingual, intuitive assistant, powered by the latest large language models (LLMs). That means it works in any language, helping international guests feel welcome and included.

The results at PÖFF spoke for themselves: ticket sales went up by over 10%, marketing costs dropped by 15%, and we saw a big increase in media interest. More importantly, people told us they felt more connected to the festival – like it was made for them. That matters.

Now, we want to share SUSI AI with others. This isn't just a tool for PÖFF – it's something that can help any festival create a better, more personal experience for their audience.

If you're running a festival, or planning one, and you care about giving people something memorable, SUSI AI is here to help. No hype – just smart, practical tech that works.



CREATIVE GATE CONNECTS

By Egle Loor

Have you ever wondered how to find new reliable cooperation partners for your film or series project? To make establishing connections easier, the Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF) and Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event are launching a platform - Creative Gate.

As travelling and physical networking became impossible during the pandemic, the idea of the online networking tool was born. Created to support the local film industry and ensure its visibility at an international level. Last year, the PÖFF team set up a currently free-to-use platform that provides a detailed overview of Estonia's film funds, production companies, casting agencies, actors, and other industry resources. The platform also has an AI-powered tool that allows users to conduct more precise and dynamic searches by describing the specific needs for services, actors, talents, etc.

To accelerate the platform's growth, the Creative Gate team has joined the Tehnopol Startup Incubator's Film and Multimedia Accelerator. Although originally developed with a focus on the Estonian film industry, the team is now setting its sights on a broader regional impact. "We see that there is an interest in more cooperation among the professionals in the Nordic and Baltic region, and it is not easy to find the necessary people," notes Egle Loor, project manager of Creative Gate. "It only makes sense



that Creative Gate tackles this matter. Down the line, we see great potential to highlight the companies and creative professionals from across the Baltic and Nordic region - including talents from Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, and other countries. So, I hope that film professionals will check the platform at creativegate.film and set up their professional profile to find new business opportunities," she adds. **BF**

 **Check out the platform at creativegate.film**

 **More about SUSI AI / Contact mikk@poff.ee to learn how SUSI AI can elevate your festival.**

PRO-
DUCER
*on the
Move*

Kristele Pudane

IN MOTION

"I'm half-Latvian, half-Estonian, and I entered the film industry through Denmark's largest animation company, A Film - I headed up the Latvian subsidiary of this Danish company for 10 years.

Gradually, I started working with other types of films, and eventually stayed in the film industry - once you catch the cinema bug, you can never leave."

By **Kristine Matisa**
Photo by **Petra Kleis**

Kristele Pudane has been producing films as a freelance producer for several years, working with studios linked to other directors, such as Marana and Tritone Studio, before finally founding her own company, Sunday Rebel Films, in 2023. Kristele's filmography has long since expanded beyond animation; her portfolio spans a wide range of genres, including feature films, documentaries, and animated works, and she is currently producing several series as well.

"In general, my routine is pretty crazy, because, on the one hand, I have to switch from one type of film to another very often. But on the other hand, my philosophy is that the basis of any film is always the story. If you like the story, then you explore which format it works best in - whether it's a feature or a short, live action or animation."

Another hallmark of Kristele Pudane's career is her focus on producing directorial debuts. "I really enjoy working with debutant directors. Almost all of my films have been like that - emerging

talents are what interest me. I like to help open the door for them so they can realise their projects. It's always a delicate balancing act - bringing young talents together with experienced teams, facilitating the right chemistry, and ensuring the best possible result. Of course, the responsibility is great; a debutant might not yet know many things. But I love that young directors are not yet confined by established frameworks. They are not weighed down by routine, and their ideas often soar much faster, higher, and further than those of directors who have been in the industry for years."

With debut director Dace Pūce, Kristele produced her most internationally acclaimed film to date - *The Pit* (2021), a socially relevant small-town story. The project was first selected for the Works in Progress section of Tallinn Black Nights Festival, where it won Post Production Award. It later premiered at the Nordic Film Days in Lübeck, Germany, receiving the Grand Prix for Best Feature Film. *The Pit* toured all continents, was acquired for theatrical release in Germany, and streamed on HBO and other platforms, even reaching audiences in Mexico and Brazil. The film was also Latvia's official submission for the 94th Academy Awards.

CURRENT PROJECTS

The experimental film *Dog of God*, produced by Kristele Pudane and Raitis Ābele in collaboration with co-writers and directors, brothers Raitis and Lauris Ābele, is set to have its world premiere in June in New York, selected for the Tribeca Film Festival's Tribeca Escape programme. This film uses rotoscope animation and is set in 17th-century Swedish Livonian village, teetering between religious fervour and debauched despair. *Dog of God* is a darkly comedic folk horror tale inspired by bizarre but true historical events. Developed through the European Genre Forum, the project was presented at POFF 2023 and Fantastic 7 at Cannes (2024).

In late development is the feature film *The Burlaks*, produced by Kristele Pudane and Dace Siatkovska and directed by debutant Gatis Ungurs. Drawing inspiration from Emir Kusturica, Monty Python, and silent film legends like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, *The Burlaks* promises an absurd comedy in the style of magical realism. It tells the story of a hillbilly sawmill worker, whose mundane life is upended when he becomes the subject of a wager between God and the Devil, leading him to a mystical mountain realm where he must prove his worth. The pro-

ject is currently finalising its co-production structure and is scheduled to begin filming this summer.

Kristele Pudane and Dace Siatkovska are also producing a debut documentary feature by director Madara Dišlere, who has previously directed a full-length fiction feature and several acclaimed shorts. *Dancing Void* explores the internationally recognised healing concept of Clown Care - volunteer clowns who encourage and support sick children, distressed parents, and exhausted hospital medical staff. The film will also feature footage from Ukraine, where Clown Doctors face some of the most emotionally challenging situations.

Alongside these projects, Sunday Rebel Films is developing two animated series for preschool audiences. *Urga, Jo & Po* (8 x 7 min) is already in production, following the adventures of Urga, a dog with superpowers who helps children learn about wildlife by rescuing baby animals in trouble. Also in late development is *Ucipuci* (12 x 7 min), a heart-warming story about a toy owl accidentally left behind in Italy who journeys home with the help of newfound friends. *Ucipuci* has been selected for the CEE Animation Workshop, Cartoon Next (2024), and APD (2024). **BF**





Vilnius Old Town



Socialist modernism architecture



AROUND VILNIUS

Most Cinematic Locations

Sometimes, it seems that **in Vilnius, time is fluid.** Moving through centuries, drifting between architectural styles, or finding inspiration in the rhythm of the city itself feels natural and almost inevitable.

By Vilnius Film Office Photos by Saulius Žiūra, Armands Virbulis, Kostas Kajėnas, Lukas Šalna



Vilnius University

cated history, is one of the most cinematic spots in Vilnius today. Operating for over 100 years, the prison was used during the World Wars, the Soviet era, and Lithuania's independence, preserving its original interior and exterior elements until today. The cells, porches, and offices of the former prison have remained unchanged, even after the building was transformed into a cultural venue some years ago.

Currently a popular place for concerts, live music, events, and social gatherings, the prison has also been featured in various productions - from the world-famous TV series *Stranger Things*, to *Clark, Young Wallander*, and many more.

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY: HISTORY THAT INSPIRES

Vilnius University, established in 1579, is one of the oldest universities in Central and Eastern Europe. Today, its architectural ensemble boasts 13 courtyards and 13 buildings, as well as the beautiful St. John's Church and bell tower. Together, they seamlessly blend Renaissance, Baroque, Gothic, and Classicism, attracting knowledge-hungry students from all over the world, and also filmmakers and TV series crews.

The interiors and exteriors of Vilnius University have played the Vatican, Second World War Germany, Rome, and 19th-century Austria. The latter occurred during the filming of the incredibly successful TV series *Sisi*. It seems that Vilnius University transformed into Hofburg Palace so smoothly that the film crew returned to Vilnius for each of the four seasons!

THE LITHUANIAN PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY: FROM PALACE TO HOTEL

From breathtaking palaces with horse-drawn carriages to luxurious contemporary hotels, the exterior of the Lithuanian Philharmonic Society can transform into almost anything.

It is considered one of the most impressive examples of historicism-style architecture in Vilnius. The current Philharmonic building is one of the city's main concert venues, and its history traces the most critical phases of Vilnius' urban development.

The nearby J. Basanavičius Square, Pasažo, and St.

Casimir streets are equally cinematic - having convincingly passed for streets in Oslo, Hamburg, Paris, and many other cities. The area remains one of the most popular filming spots in the Old Town, attracting filmmakers for wide angles, versatility, and cinematic views.

VILNIUS SOCIALIST MODERNISM AS THE MAIN PROTAGONIST

Although Vilnius is most often recognised for its Baroque and Classicist church spires, or the cobbled streets of the Old Town, one can also spot quite a few examples of socialist modernist architecture.

Looming shapes, monumental structures, heavy concrete frames, and clean lines reflect the essence of social modernist architecture, and often catch the eye of filmmakers. On-screen, these impressive buildings transform into ministries, offices, banks, and luxury hotel lobbies. From staircases to elevators, lobbies to corridors, the mix of order, a slight tension, and mystery pervades these cinematic spaces.

One example is the Vilnius Palace of Culture, Entertainment, and Sports, where productions like *Chernobyl* and *The Eichmann Show* were filmed. Socialist modernism buildings - such as halls, office complexes, residential buildings, and galleries - can also be found in the city centre and within residential quarters.

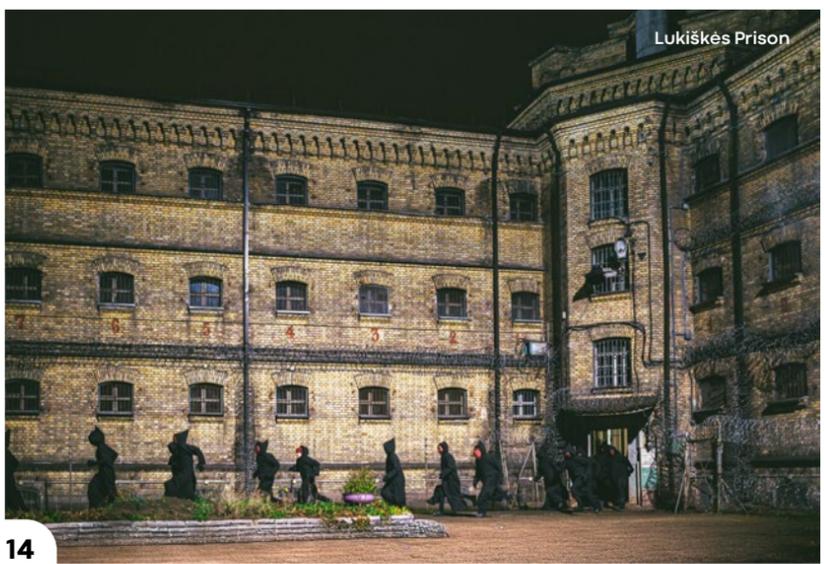
VILNIUS BUSINESS QUARTER: MODERNITY AND AMBITION

Skyscrapers highlight Vilnius' most ambitious and modern neighbourhood. At the very heart of Vilnius' commerce and business district, filmmakers find numerous opportunities to capture busy urban lifestyles, or transform the city into a bustling metropolis. Busy streets in the shadow of towering buildings often become the backdrop for various international commercials. Honda, Yamaha, Congstar, Kinder, Primark, Lego, and many other brands have chosen Vilnius as a filming location. And we have an answer as to why! **BF**

The exterior of the Lithuanian Philharmonic Society can transform into almost anything.



At the very heart of Vilnius' commerce and business district, filmmakers find numerous opportunities to capture busy urban lifestyles.



Lukiškės Prison

Hundreds of international filmmakers from HBO, Sony Pictures, Apple TV, Netflix, and the BBC have chosen Vilnius for its versatility, talent, and ever-changing spirit. Over the past decade, Vilnius has transformed into Rome, Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Malmö, Oslo and many other cities on screen.

The Vilnius Film Office invites you to wander through the city's most popular filming locations, where action films, international blockbusters, love stories, and documentaries have captivated audiences across the globe.

LUKIŠKĖS PRISON: THE MOST CINEMATIC JAIL IN THE REGION

Lukiškės Prison, a historical building with a compli-

THE WARMTH OF FABRIC THE COLD OF WAR

Winter in March follows a young couple fleeing Russia at the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Told through puppet animation and textile-based stop-motion, it marks **Natalia Mirzoyan's** first full venture into the technique. Working with Estonian producer **Kadriann Kibus**, Mirzoyan created a film that is both visually delicate and emotionally resonant - one in which technique and narrative are intricately woven together.

By **Tõnu Karjatse** Photos by **Sohvi Viik-Kalluste** MUAH **Merlin Tovstik** Stylist **Anna Viik**

In *Winter in March* textile-based puppet animation creates a sense of warmth, belonging, and intimacy – drawing on the closeness of fabric to the human body.

NM: It's nice when critics start to find some other meanings.

But why did you choose textile animation and the puppets? Was there any specific reason?

NM: Yes, there was. When I applied to Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA), and was interviewed by the head of the animation department, Ülo Pikkov, he asked about the reasons why I wanted to study in Tallinn as I had already made some films. I said that the main reason was to study puppet animation, because it was my dream, and in St. Petersburg there were no such possibilities. Although back then

I didn't have this film in my mind yet. When I later approached Ülo with the idea for this particular film, it seemed very hard to make it as a puppet film. But as I consider myself a bit crazy, I decided to do it. I prepared the puppets with the help of my EKA teacher and project supervisor Anu-Laura Tuttelberg whom I also respect a lot. And I also decided to make half of the characters and some of the set pieces flat, so it would make the whole process much easier.

As for the technique, my films are all very different, because I always try to play with the story. First, when I start with a story, I play with it, and then I try to find the appropriate technique. And for this film I had an input from a design workshop in EKA. For one week, we had a chance to work side-by-side with some fashion designers, and we were just playing with materials and working with tex-

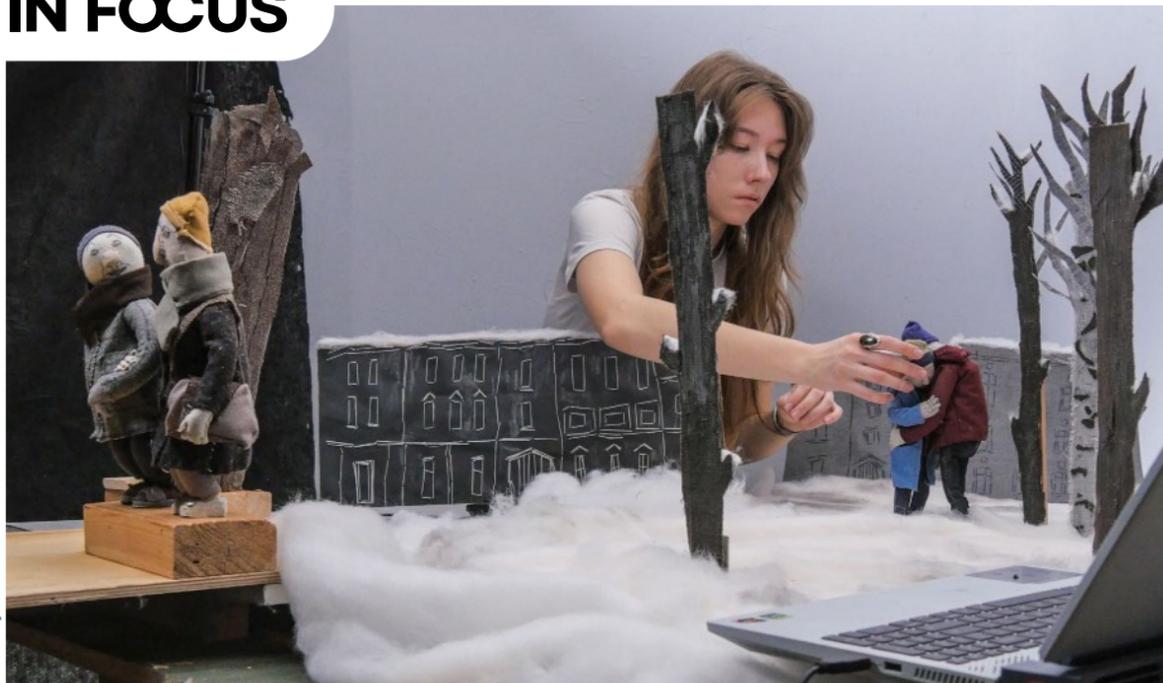
tures. It had a very easy-going flow, and I really felt that I'd like to work with textile, and it naturally started to influence the script. As you can see, there are numerous metaphors, for instance, threads coming undone, and it started to come back to the script, and I enjoyed it. So then I understood – that's it, I should make it with textile.

It's not very common, also in the context of Estonian animation. Estonian producer Kadriann Kibus (Rebel Frame), at what time did you come aboard?

KK: They had already completed the development teaser for the film, so by that time they had tested the set design, the style and the puppets. It was obviously going to be Natalia's master's graduation film, but since Natalia was already an award-winning, experienced di-



Photos by Kadriann Kibus



EKA interns building a set with Natalia.

Animator Rebeka Kruus working on a St. Petersburg scene.



Winter in March

Short animated film, stop-motion (puppet, textile manipulation, digital embroidery)

Length: 16 minutes

Logline: The film tells the story of helplessness in the face of a repressive state, an escape from which becomes a surreal nightmare.

Estonian title: "Lumi saadab meid"

Directed and written by:

Natalia Mirzoyan

DOP: Sander Põldsaar

Animators: Natalia Mirzoyan, Rebeka Kruus

Composer: Evgeny Fedorov

Sound designer: Sander Põldsaar

Narrator: Karin Lamson

Producers: Armine Harutyunyan, Kadriann Kibus

Co-producers: Valentin Leblanc, Delphine Duez

Produced by: ArtStep-studio (Armenia) and Rebel Frame (Estonia) in co-production with the Estonian Academy of Arts / Ülo Pikkov, Black Boat Pictures (France), White Boat Pictures (Belgium)

Supported by

The Cinema Foundation of Armenia
The Estonian Film Institute
The Estonian Cultural Endowment
The Estonian Academy of Arts

World premiere: Festival de Cannes, La Cinef Selection 2025

rector, the department and Ülo Pikkov especially suggested that maybe it shouldn't be just a student film. He reached out and asked us, film studio Rebel Frame – myself and my husband, Sergio Kibus, who is also an animation director – what we think about it. We took some time to think about it, and not because of Natalia, because I really like her films, and I knew *Five Minutes to Sea*, which is quite well known and has received many awards. I knew instantly that, I like this project, but, you know, unfortunately, we have to take a minute to think about it as we are dealing with a kind of a Russian topic. We understood that we might have to deal with some critical voices, especially in social media, asking why are we telling Russian stories at the time when we should maybe only tell Ukrainian stories. I took time to articulate it to myself why I personally want to make this film. I thought about my

grandfather and his whole family who were deported from Estonia at the time of the Russian occupation in the 1940s. I also thought about migration stories of Estonians leaving for Sweden or Canada to escape occupation and repression. Therefore, I understood the premise of the film – wanting to move away from violence, and the inability to change things as an individual facing huge political shifts. I strongly believe that people should not be victims of their own state. It doesn't matter what country we are talking about, people have the right to fight against the ideology and oppression they don't agree with, even if it's a silent or an impossible fight, and we should support such actions and ideas. This is a good thing that we are doing, and this film needs to be shown, and needs to be done, because we need to support the people who want to be free and live in a free world.



It's based on a true story, and these are real people that you are depicting in your film. How did you find the story? They were your friends, right?

NM: Yes, it was very accidental. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I escaped to Armenia, my homeland, and then to Georgia. Before that, I had lived many years in Saint Petersburg, and I have many Russian friends. Also, my husband is Russian, but as I am Armenian, I felt that I'm able to view Russian people a bit from a distance and tell the story about their situation. The people I know, they felt so depressed because they couldn't prevent the war, despite the protests, and also losing their own country where repression had accelerated rapidly.

In the spring of 2022 everyone's emotions were at their limit. I cried all the time reading the news. Now we all have gotten used to the war, which is also weird. But at that time it seemed to me that I was living in some kind of a nightmare from which it was impossible to wake up.

Talking to friends who, like me, had fled Russia, I thought it was important to record our conversations to document our feelings. In this exact moment - how we feel after fleeing from Russia. When I had recorded some ten interviews, I started thinking about making short films, maybe two or three minutes long. But then I met Kirill, one of the protagonists of the film, and I understood that his story is so deep, and so full of strong images, like the snow on the soldiers' helmets, and it occurred to me how cinematographic it would look. I also knew his wife Dasha, and their separation had been very strange, because for me they had been the perfect couple. Then I realized that, actually, many of my other friends had actually also separated after emigrating. When you read the awful news and feel anxious, and your partner is next to you, it's

no wonder you take your stress out on them – your closest person. So, I understood that the story is kind of universal, we need to talk about it, about relationships, how they become ruined under such pressure. Eventually, I concentrated on the interviews of Kirill and Dasha only, and it was enough, as it resonated with my own story as well. I felt a sort of similarity to them. And besides, our women are oftentimes stronger and more flexible than men, who usually get stuck in their computers and the news cycle.

There are many beautiful details in the film. What other input did you have next to the interviews? Did you take any photos or videos, how did you invent the world in this film?

NM: It was all in the interviews. Actually, there were many more details, and honestly, the script could have been made into a feature film. For example the snow – I remember when we came to Ar-

NATALIA MIRZOYAN (1982)

was born in Yerevan, Armenia. She studied Sociology at Yerevan State University (BA) and Easel Graphics at Saint-Petersburg's Applied Arts Institute. In 2025, she completed her Master's studies at the animation department of the Estonian Academy of Arts. She began working as an animator and independent animation director in 2003. Next to her auteur films, she also has experience in commercial animation, directing TV series and films for children. She has been a member of film festival juries, and her films have received multiple awards.

Selected filmography:

Merry Grandmas (2020)
Five Minutes to Sea (2018)
Chinti (2012)
My Childhood Mystery Tree (2009)



Kadriann Kibus



The snow means also the Cold War, climate change, and a freezing of emotions and relations between humans and nations.

appeared, now in Estonia we are also afraid, and I don't know where I should go, where to settle. It's awful, because it's already my third migration. And of course, my husband is suffering a lot as a Russian, and my friends are suffering, I see that they are taking antidepressants, and it's an awful situation. I'm tired of this topic, I don't want it to be in my life or anyone else's, but while I was making this film, it was a sort of an art therapy for me. It was my way of standing up against what's happening. And it was fun to make, to discover and invent new tricks how to direct the scenes. I am used to being free in my storyboards and scripts, because in drawn animation you have much more freedom. In puppet animation it was different. I want to thank Sander Põldsaar who was everything for this film – he was the cinematographer, built the sets, and also did the sound design. He created superb constructions to fulfil my fantasies. I lived two years in this sort of art therapy, and didn't go crazy in the light of what's going on in the world, so that's my answer.

Do you already have a new project coming up?

NM: I have a script, and it's about like parent-child relationship, and about the fear of not being able to protect your child. I'm a mum, and I feel it very necessary to talk about the relationship with my daughter, and the relationship with my mother. The film reflects several generations and will be set in Armenia in the late 1990s.

And will you be changing the animation technique again?

NM: I don't know, at the moment I'm writing the script, and this film seems to be suitable for puppets, because there will be only three characters and one location. But first I have to develop the script, and then think hard how to make it in terms of technique.

And will you be producing this film also?

KK: That remains to be seen. But I have enjoyed working with Natalia. **BF**

time we'll finish the film, the war is over, but as we can see, it's still going on. For me it was a question whether I should show it now while the aggression continues, but we decided that we should.

KK: The production of this short animation was quite complicated, because in order to apply for the Estonian financing, we needed to first acquire the Armenian financing. The Estonian Film Institute knew the project already and understood its potential. All the shooting was done in EKA, where we also had many interns who helped the core team. I had to get other minority co-producers on board as well, because the budget was very, very small. Luckily, our French and Belgian friends came aboard as well.

When we will have our national premiere, I hope that we can screen this film together with Natalia's previous films, because I really love them, and I think the audience should see these as well.

Natalia, do you feel that you are done with this topic?

NM: I'm very tired of this, of course, because it's not just the topic of my film, but also the topic around me. New wars have

menia in March, it started to snow heavily, and the Armenians said, the Russians had brought the snow. It became a metaphor. And the cotton I used for snow in the film is very meaningful. Cotton in Russian slang means the kind of people who support the regime, Putin, war – *vatniki*. Also, the slaves in the US who picked cotton come to mind, so it's somehow a symbol and a metaphor of repression. The snow means also the Cold War, climate change, and a freezing of emotions and relations between humans and nations.

KK: At the same time, the film has its lighter moments, which is good. There are sequences that are quite humorous, for example how a Georgian driver is coming up with cheeky solutions to help the couple, and it works. Of course, one will feel the oppression looming in this film, but what you're getting out of it, at the end, is a very human, touching story.

NM: On the script level it could have also worked as a feature film, because there was a lot I had to set aside, and now the tempo of the film is quite fast. But, to be honest, I can't dedicate my life for so long to one topic only. I was sure that by the



Life, Death, and Livestock

WHEN THE RULES DON'T FIT THE VILLAGE

Estonian director **Ove Musting's** new feature, ***O' Slaughter Day*** (working title) has wrapped filming and is now in post-production. Slated for a 2026 release, the 110-minute tragicomedy offers a sharp, darkly humorous portrait of a rural community thrown into quiet chaos just before the holidays.



The story begins when a positive swine fever test from a wild boar triggers the alarm within a veterinary board. A nervous young official is sent to a small village to investigate, quickly interpreting his task as a need to begin culling all livestock. For Ants and Minna, an elderly couple whose animals are deeply personal companions, the threat is immediate and devastating. In desperation, Ants turns to Bratoslav, a Moldovan-born local figure known not just for his steady hand but for a past as unofficial vet and pig slaughterer - or "tsuskaja."

This quietly escalating tale follows individual decisions, moral grey zones, and a community finding subtle ways to resist outside control. As word of Bratoslav's return spreads, other villagers begin seeking his help, sparking a tragicomic chain of events that unfolds with deadpan humour and emotional restraint.

Written and directed by Musting,

O' Slaughter Day is deeply rooted in Estonian rural life, yet its story - centred on dignity, tradition, and absurdity in the face of authority - resonates far beyond its setting. The film derives its tension not from spectacle but from small acts of defiance, restrained emotion, and the uneasy distance between official procedure and human reality.

Aleksandr Bražnik leads as Bratoslav, with supporting roles by Egon Nuter, Taavi Teplenkov, Hendrik Toompere Jr., Andres Mähar, Külliki Saldre, and Inga Salurand. Filming took place in Harjumaa and South Estonia across 29 days in early



Director Ove Musting on the set.

2025. The film is produced by Jaan Laugamõts (Downtown Pictures), with support from the Estonian Film Institute, Cultural Endowment of Estonia (Kulka), and Tartu Film Fund. Hea Film will handle domestic distribution.

The creative team includes cinematographer Sten-Johan Lill, production designer Anneli Arusaar, editor Moonika Raidam, and composer Mihkel Zilmer. Line producer Hannela Lippus, and 1st AD Kadri Kask complete the core crew.

O' Slaughter Day marks a new direction for Musting, whose previous works include the acclaimed feature *Kalev* - a national box office success and six-time EFTA winner in 2023 - and the political thriller series *Traitor* (Three times EFTA winner in 2025). With a background that spans music videos, live television, and punk performance art, Musting brings a singular voice to Estonian cinema: one that's sharp-edged, emotionally grounded, and not afraid to lean into absurdity.

Set for completion in early 2026, *O' Slaughter Day* makes its first international appearance as part of the PÖFF Goes to Cannes showcase - offering a first glimpse at a film that blends rural grit, wry humour, and quiet resistance into something uniquely compelling. **BF**

Photos by Heikki Leis



The Quiet Pulse OF STORYTELLING

Latvian documentary producer **Uldis Cekulis** first thought he would be a cinematographer and then make nature documentaries, but his career took a different turn. He has worked on almost 50 documentaries, animations, shorts and author-driven prime-time TV docu-series, both as a producer and sometimes as a cameraman.

By **Tara Karajica** Photos by **Agnese Zeltna**

Most of his produced films have travelled worldwide, and many have received prestigious awards. Now, he is presenting seven new projects at Cannes Docs and discusses here his approach to creative documentary producing.

Why Documentary Cinema?

I wanted to be a DOP all my life, but I happened to study physics. Then, when Latvia became independent, life became very eventful, and I returned to film-



With Lithuanian director **Audrius Stonys** in Varanasi after tutoring at DocEdge workshop.

making and began to use the knowledge I had acquired in the 1980s in amateur cinema at a new level. We created the VFS FILMS studio in 1997, which gathered my friends who were directors, writers, and composers, and we started with TV formats about nature first, but we saw that what the BBC was doing was so good that there was no reason for us to compete with them. It started with nature, but human souls brought us back to documentary filmmaking. Now, we are mainly doing creative documentary co-productions because we also understand that to make a good film,

you first need a strong story, proper funding, and an audience, and co-productions bring that to you.

What are you looking for in a project?

I'm always looking for a story. But actually, there are two things. It's the story and the filmmaker who makes the film. For me, sometimes it's even equal. If you have a great idea for a story, but you feel there is no motivation, then it won't work.

How do you see the contemporary Latvian documentary scene?

I see so many unbelievably personal stories. What's really touching is that these brave and bare stories are very closely related to the filmmakers themselves. Most authors primarily use cinematic language, which is strong in the Baltic countries. I'm pleased that Baltic Poetic Cinema is alive and well.

What do awards mean to you? Is it a way to measure success, or is it simply the closure of an entire process that helps you move on to the next project?

The main thing in the documentary, which is a collective work between the filmmaker and the protagonist, you are exploiting, in a way, the protagonist because you are coming into their homes and pretending to be a fly on the wall. But of course, for these people whose lives we intervene in, we become part of their lives. It's commercially good that your film can be seen more or travel more to festivals, but for me, awards

LEFT: Shooting *The Red Barn*.

RIGHT: Bipuljit Basu's new film *Redlight to Limelight*.

are very important because our protagonists can feel the value of all the years they opened their doors to us. So, I think awards are, first, a form of gratitude to our protagonists and the heroes of our stories. It's very good that festival premieres invite not only the directors but also the protagonists. And during the Q&As, they meet the audience, and I'm always happy when I watch these interactions. No amount of money can buy these wonderful emotional moments, which are also symbolic of gratitude to our film heroes.

How do you think documentary filmmaking has changed in recent years?

When I started in the late 90s, I dreamt about a time when we would get rid of the boom because, in the documentary, the sound man (or woman) is always the most visible person. The camera can be invisible, but to get a good sound you often need this huge microphone. So, technology doesn't help in this regard. However nowadays, you can shoot in almost total darkness. The sensitivity is a big advantage and you don't need any artificial lighting to create cinematic pictures.

What are you looking for at Cannes Docs?

This year will be very busy - we have seven premieres coming up. For example, Laila Pakalniņa's new film *Scarecrows*, a coproduction with Lithuania, will reveal the airport as a new microcosm with its own rules to keep planes and birds from crossing paths. Another unique story, *Redlight to Limelight*, by emerging director Bipuljit Basu, a coproduction with India and Finland, reflects a high-spirited group of sex workers and their families in Kalighat, Kolkata, who begin making short films to transform their own lives and inspire others. What artists can do when the world is on fire is the subject of our coproduction with Ukraine and Germany, *The Blessed Ones* by Andrii Lysetskyi. Another film that reflects both historically and personally the unpredictable world order of today is *The Red Barn* by Pēteris Krilovs, about the fate of a small nation in the millstones of authoritarianism and democracy. And finally, the absolutely unique story of the revival of the most debated Italian film director Roberto Rossellini *More Than a Life* by Raffaele Brunetti, Ilaria de Laurentis, Andrea Paola Massara. This is our second coproduction with Italy, following our very exciting collaboration on *The Rossellinis*, which was the closing film of International Film Critics' Week at the 77th Venice IFF.

I will mainly look for sales agents and festivals to help these films get more international exposure. **BF**



Laila Pakalniņa's new film *Scarecrows*.





The ART of Noticing

Rūta Adelė Jekentaitė was raised on Lithuanian poetic documentaries and, therefore, makes no distinction between fiction and documentary storytelling. But she does have a particular fondness for documentaries. Her latest titles include ***Murmuring Hearts*** (2024) and ***Roberta*** (2023).

By **Tara Karajica** Photo by **Miglė Kirklytė**

Selecting with several projects at Cannes Docs, here she discusses her work in her preferred story-telling medium, and how she is trying to alter the way we make, consume, and perceive documentaries.

How did you become a documentary producer?

I never thought that I would become a documentary producer, but one of my directors came to me with an idea for a documentary project, and I was like, "Okay, let's try to do documentary," and then I started digging into the documentary world and I was really captured by it. Now, I can really say that I watch more documentaries than fiction films. I produce both fiction films and documentaries because I'm really driven by stories and talent. I'm trying not to lock myself into a special genre, but documentaries are something that is rawer. I enjoy and I like the process of documentaries because I like developing a project, doing the research, diving deep into the topic. I also find the world, the people, and the things that are happening around us interesting enough, and there is no need to fictionalise them.

Can you talk about your production company, Baltic Productions?
Baltic Productions is an audiovisual com-

pany based in Vilnius, Lithuania. With more than 12 years of experience in delivering high-quality documentary and fictional projects ranging from short to feature-length films, multimedia performances, museum installations, and VR projects. Our team works at both a national and international level. All our non-fictional projects are intimate portraits. I think it's because of what interests our team – real human experiences. Our films usually begin with people whose personal stories offer windows into broader societal currents. We find meaning not in statements, but in reactions, small gestures, unspoken truths, lived stories. Our process is usually shaped by deep listening, patient observation, and trust in authenticity. We always try to bring a visually rich approach as aesthetics matter to us – not for beauty's sake, but because how a story is told is as important as what is told. Creative choices make the difference between showing and seeing. Documentary, for us, is a way of being curious. It's about raising questions through narratives. In a world of noise and certainty, of loud declarations, we try to make space for doubt, nuance, and emotional resonance.

So, how do you find your audiences? What are they? Where are they?

The question of where our audiences are now is huge. And this is the biggest head-

ache for the industry. We put a lot of energy into searching for our audience, and we always try to do it in the development stage. We always ask: "Who is this project for?" . It's almost never about quantity, but it's mostly always about the quality of the audience. We target the people who really need to see a particular story. You also always need to be realistic about the size of the audience you might reach, depending on the size of your country, or the community that may be interested in the topic. We work hard to give our films a traditional life – international festivals, cinema releases – and afterwards, we always go directly to the audience that was our focus from the start. With every project, it's a different audience that we engage with directly. It depends on the story, the circumstances, and the results of the test screenings we always conduct after the lock cut.

Do you think Documentary Cinema is a tool that can drive social, political or cultural change?

I personally believe that noticing is the first step toward changing something. Cinema and audiovisual art are arts of noticing, seeing, and taking a deeper look. When you see something on the screen – with distance, but with heightened perception – it creates an opportunity for dialogue with society on multiple levels. At the same time, with every film, the



Dolce Far Niente

tic Development Award at WEMW. This warm and intimate documentary explores themes of past love and life after. At its heart is Lora Guerra, who balances between cherished memories of a glamorous past and the harsh reality of everyday life in solitude – all with a gentle touch of humour. *Theories of Care*, a debut project by Rūta Kiaupaitė, captures the everyday lives of natural winemakers while exploring the deeper philosophical dimensions of their craft. Our third project, *I Keep My Eye on You*, an archive-based film by cinematographer

author creates a document for future generations – capturing a specific moment in time, social dynamics, atmosphere, and how the world functions.

How do you see the Lithuanian documentary scene today?

I remember reading in a memoir by one of our cinematographers that during the Soviet occupation, many talented cinematographers and directors shifted to documentaries, as it was easier to circumvent censorship with documentary projects than with fiction scripts. I believe this historical period shaped how the next generation perceived documentaries. Personally, I've never seen a strict distinction between fiction and documentary – I see stories. The new generation of documentary filmmakers is very brave and unique. They're stepping out, looking at the world with curiosity and from very different points of view.

How has documentary filmmaking changed in recent years?

When I talk about documentaries with people outside the field, I often begin by discussing social media. Creating an Instagram reel or a TikTok video, is a way of documenting reality, of capturing moments as they happen in real time. Documentaries are becoming braver, constantly exploring new styles, approaches, and forms of storytelling. This evolution is helping documentaries reach new audiences. There's still a long way to go, but I hope this shift will

continue, especially as we move away from rigid labels like documentary. Instead, we might embrace broader terms like unscripted, allowing more creative freedom and less expectation of what a "documentary" should be.

What are you looking for at Cannes Docs?

This year, I'm focusing on presenting new projects and looking for potential future partners – sales agents, co-producers, funds, and special programs. The past year was generous to us. We were fortunate to receive MEDIA Film Slate funding, bringing all projects directly to the Cannes! Among them is our long-term observational project *Dolce Far Niente* by Elena Kairyte. The UNION DOCS program previously recognised the project and it received the Italian-Bal-



Theories of Care

Zoe Dirse, navigates her personal and artistic journey during a time of cultural resurgence while her homeland remained under Soviet occupation.

We're also continuing work on our latest release, *Murmuring Hearts*, a co-production with Gande Ourse Films (France) and Smau Media (Norway). The film is currently in its active festival run and is ready for distribution on VOD platforms and television. **BF**



Murmuring Hearts



Oblivion

A STRIKING LITHUANIAN DEBUT

Emerging Lithuanian filmmaker **Danielius Minkevičius** steps into the international spotlight with his debut feature ***Oblivion***, one of the selections of this year's PÖFF Goes to Cannes showcase.

Atense and intimate psychological drama, *Oblivion* explores identity, trauma, and redemption through a deeply personal story, rich in emotional and visual resonance.

Set against the shadowy streets and stark interiors of Vilnius, *Oblivion* follows a young sex worker who seeks out her estranged father, entering his life under a false identity. As they grow closer, she teeters between deception and the authentic connection she's longed for. The film offers a raw meditation on the search for love in the aftermath of abandonment.

Director and screenwriter Minkevičius builds on his distinctive visual voice, already recognised on the festival circuit. His short *Dance* (2021) premiered at

Camerimage and was nominated for the Golden Tadpole, while *Crucifixion* was a nominee at the Palm Springs ShortFest.

"With *Oblivion*, I wanted to explore how the lies we tell to protect ourselves – and those we love – can quietly become the very thing that hurts us," says Minkevičius. "This film is about returning to the places we've emotionally abandoned and finally allowing ourselves to feel."

Oblivion is produced by Ieva Norvilienė – one of the leading figures in Baltic cinema and co-founder of the Vilnius-based production company Tremora. Tremora, founded in 2005, is known for launching powerful debuts and collaborating with emerging and established talents. Previous highlights include *Vanishing Waves*, *The Flood Won't Come*, and *Jumpman*.



Danielius Minkevičius

Photo by Nikita Ševcov



Ieva Norvilienė

Photo by Audrius Solominas

Norvilienė's recent success includes *Sandbag Dam*, a minority Lithuanian co-production that premiered at the 75th Berlinale in the Generation programme, underlining her commitment to bold, socially relevant storytelling with global reach.

The cast is led by Gabija Bargailaitė, with acclaimed actor Dainius Gavenonis in a key role. The creative team includes scriptwriters Danielius Minkevičius and Kornelijus Stučkus, DoP Oskaras Abramavičius, Production Designer Aurimas Akšys, Costume Designer Akvilė Klimavičiūtė, Make-up Artist Julita Brazis, and Editor Gabrielė Urbonaitė.

With a budget of €550,000, the production is supported by the Lithuanian Film Centre, Lithuanian National Radio and Television, and national tax incentives. Filming is underway in Vilnius, with completion expected in 2025.

"Our main goal in Cannes is to connect with festival programmers and secure a strong world premiere, as well as to find the right sales agent to represent the film internationally," says producer Ieva Norvilienė.

With its emotionally charged premise and a strong authorial vision, *Oblivion* exemplifies the bold, character-driven cinema emerging from the Baltic region. As it prepares for its Cannes market presentation, the film invites audiences into a raw and unforgettable portrait of intimacy, regret, and the fragile hope for reconciliation. **BF**



Estonia
Cannes
Docs

Shaping Future FILMMAKERS

Marianna Kaat is one of the most successful Estonian documentary filmmakers and an important figure in the Central and Eastern European documentary community. Her most notable works include *Ridni (Close Relations)* (2016), *The Last Relic* (2023), and *Pit No. 8* (2010) which have won national and international awards and were broadcast worldwide.

By **Tara Karajica** Photo by **Natalia Larina / BFM**

Now selected with several projects at Cannes Docs, Kaat looks back on her documentary filmmaking career and discusses the hats she is currently wearing in the film industry.

What made you want to become a (documentary) producer?

I don't know. Living in such a small country, I think there isn't any reason to work with other producers in the documentary field. You can do everything by yourself, and the bureaucratic part is quite easy to handle in Estonia. I think most of our film directors making documentaries are also producers, with a few exceptions. Usually, I'm asked why I am making documentaries, not fiction films. But I think it was quite natural in my situation. Actually, in the 90s, I was working in acquisition for Estonian television and this "virus" probably came from that period because I was watching so many programs for TV, as I was responsible for fiction, documentaries, and series. There were only two people in acquisition at that time. So, I probably realized that I could do something by myself, and in 1998, I established my company, Baltic Film Production. Also, by this time, the Estonian film industry was taking shape.

Before that, we didn't have independent producers.

Can you delve more into your production company, Baltic Film Production?

Well, I never built a strategy because we still live from project to project, and most of the time I am the only person working there. As I was born in the Soviet Union – Estonia was part of the Soviet Union then – and I graduated from the University of Saint-Petersburg and speak Russian, it just happened that my first projects dealt with these territories. I made films in Russia. I made films in Ukraine. I made films in Belarus. I made films in Georgia. So, more or less, the former Soviet Union, where I have quite a lot of friends, contacts, and I understand what's happening in these countries, because we as Estonians went through the same process of independence as well. I was also interested in this kind of theme, plus people, of course. I think these territories have very interesting and strong characters.

What are you looking for in a project?

My last film, *The Last Relic*, which I filmed in Yekaterinburg, Russia, was not about the characters at the beginning. It was more about the place that I thought could be interesting as a metaphor for contem-

porary Russia, although it's far away from Moscow. But again, it was my interest in these territories, the political, social environment of what's happening there, and how people feel in this situation. The characters came later on.

Can you talk about your role as Associate Professor at the Baltic Film and Media School in Tallinn?

I'm teaching Audiovisual Media to first-year students. One semester it's Documentary History and the other, it's Documentary Production. So, by the end of the first year, they have to make a 10-minute documentary film. They are very young, and young people are usually not so keen on documentaries. They come to Film School to make fiction films. So, my first aim is always to get them interested in discovering something new. For example, Dziga Vertov really blows their minds. For assignments, I ask them to make a film in the style of, for example, Dziga Vertov, or Cinéma Vérité. We start from zero. They first have to find an idea, and then we go through the various stages of documentary production during the entire semester, and probably at the end, when they graduate, there will be one person who will make a documentary as a graduation film. Through this practice, they understand that making a docu-



We Will Not Fade Away

making more accessible today, with smaller cameras bringing deeper, more intimate stories. Would you agree with this assumption?

The camera is much smaller and cheaper as well. If you are interested in making a documentary, you can do it on your own, which also means that there are a lot more personal stories. It's much more accessible. You can film your family or some mystery from your family's past without permission or access, and you can be there with your small camera all the time.

What do you think of the Estonian documentary scene today?

We produce many documentaries if we consider how small a country we are and

mentary is sometimes harder than making fiction.

You are a curator of the newly established Doc@ PÖFF Competition program at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival. Can you expand on this new role? How has being an Acquisition Manager for Estonian Television informed it?

Being in acquisition has helped me a lot. This was after the collapse of the Soviet Union and we were raised on intellectual art-house films. And we didn't think much about the audience because nobody cared about the audience. And then, when we stepped into capitalism, you suddenly had to think about the audience. When we decided to take one program or the other, I had to be sure, or at least believe, that my Estonian audience would want to watch this series or this film or this documentary.



God is Tango

Now, when we watch and select films for the Competition program – it's only 11 films, so it's really a hand-picked program – we are looking for a high artistic level, but at the same time, we are always thinking about how our audience will respond to a certain film. The Estonian audience is quite qualified. We have a long tradition of showing documentaries. You have to surprise them and not disappoint them at the same time.

The evolution of technology in recent years has made documentary film-



Alaman: The Price of Glory

that we only have 1.3 million inhabitants. Considering this number, it's still a miracle that we have opera, ballet, drama theatre, literature, poetry... And we also have fiction and documentaries. Quite a lot of documentaries. So, the competition is fierce to get attention outside of Estonia, but we still have documentaries that are shown at international film festivals, and not so much commercially. Of course, we have good examples of success, such as *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* (by Anna Hints). I think we are in good shape, but we face the same challenges as other countries regarding documentaries.

What are you looking for at Cannes Docs?

I have several co-production projects as a co-producer. I have two very strong projects, one in co-production with France and Georgia. Its working title is *El Dorado*, and it has a very talented Georgian director. The other is a Finnish project called *God is Tango*, which is also a very ambitious, big project. I also have a project *Alaman: the Price of Glory* from Kyrgyzstan and *We Will Not Fade Away* from Ukraine. I will be trying to find more financing for them during Cannes Docs. I'm also going to advertise the DOC@ PÖFF Competition because not many people have heard about it. **BF**



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Baltic Backbone

OF TWO PROSECUTORS



Uljana Kim



Alise Ģelze

As Sergei Loznitsa's latest feature ***Two Prosecutors*** heads into the Cannes Official Competition, we spoke with its Latvian and Lithuanian co-producers - **Alise Ģelze** (White Picture) and **Uljana Kim** (Studio Uljana Kim) - about their creative and logistical roles in the film, Baltic collaboration, and what it means to bring a chilling Soviet-era story to a contemporary global audience.

By **Eda Koppel** Photos by **Chloé Desnoyers** and **Kristaps Kalns**

How did each of you come on board this project? Was it the script, the director, or the historical relevance that first drew you in?

AĢ: I was approached through my colleague, line producer Mārtiņš Eihe, with whom I've successfully collaborated on several previous projects. Mārtiņš had worked as the line producer on Sergei Loznitsa's recent films and knew that Sergei had expressed interest in shooting his next project in Latvia; already having some knowledge of locations and potential filming areas. This wasn't Loznitsa's first time working in Latvia or with a Latvian crew - there's a history of collaboration that made the idea of returning here a natural choice.

I've long admired Sergei's work, so I was honoured to be considered. Soon after, I was contacted by the delegate producer, Kevin Chneiweiss from SBS Productions (France), and we began exploring potential financing options from Latvia. It took two years to bring everything together and reach the start of production.

Two Prosecutors brings to life a chilling moment from Soviet history. What drew you personally, as producers from Latvia and Lithuania, to this story, how do you think it resonates with Baltic and international audiences today?

UK: All of Sergei's films are thought-provoking. *Two Prosecutors* is especially relevant now, during Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. The film exposes the hellish scale of the totalitarian system built in the name of communism - a system that, though seemingly a relic of the past, continues to shape Russia's present. This is evident in today's war, a double-edged sword aimed not only at bringing Ukraine to its knees but also at further subjugating the Russian people. Time-tested repressive tools remain frighteningly effective, as a society traumatised by the Gulag obediently accepts a fratricidal war. We believe the film will resonate not only with Baltic audiences,

who have directly experienced such oppression, but also with international viewers.

AĢ: The theme of the film feels especially timely, not only for me as a person who comes from a small country neighbouring Russia, but also because it explores a vital and urgent question: what matters more, the truth or the perception of truth? That's a conversation that resonates strongly in today's world.

The film was shot in just 18 days, entirely on location in Riga. What were the biggest creative or logistical challenges?

AĢ: One of the biggest challenges we faced was the logistics of managing an international team - our crew included members from at least eight different countries, which always brings a layer of complexity in terms of coordination and adaptation. Additionally, the main location was a real prison, presenting its specific constraints and unique atmosphere. Nevertheless, in many ways, the production ran quite smoothly. A key reason for this was the strong collaboration within the creative team.

This is a rare co-production between Latvia and Lithuania on a high-profile international project. What was the collaboration between your two production companies like?

UK: Thanks to the successfully operating Baltic co-production platform, we collaborated closely with the Latvians, and the entire organisational process went quite smoothly, especially considering that the project's production manager, Mārtiņš Eihe, a skilled professional from Latvia, had already worked with Sergei on several of his feature films.

AĢ: The collaboration between Latvia and Lithuania is always very natural. Although I hadn't worked with Uljana Kim before, we've known each other for many years, and this was a fantastic opportunity to finally join forces - even if both of us were involved as minority co-producers. As for me, some of the Lithuanian actors involved were already familiar faces -

like Lithuanian actor Valentin Novopolskij, who played the lead in *Oleg*, a film by Juris Kursietis that I also produced.

The creative team features top Baltic talents - from production designers Jurij Grigorovič and Aldis Meinerts to editor Danielius Kokanauskis. How did the Baltic creative perspective shape the film's visual and emotional tone?

UK: On almost all of his fiction and documentary films, Sergei has worked with editor Danielius Kokanauskis and sound designer Vladimir Golovnitski. They know and understand each other exceptionally well. In this project, the Lithuanian creative contribution grew even further. Experienced production designer Jurij Grigorovič joined the team, and strong performances were delivered by Lithuanian actors such as Vytautas Kaniušonis, Valentin Novopolskij, Nerijus Gadliauskas, and Dmitrij Denisiuk, among others.

Sergei Loznitsa is a director with a strong authorial voice. What was it like collaborating with him from a producing standpoint, and how much creative dialogue did you have throughout?

UK: We studied together, and I began co-producing his films ten years ago, making *Two Prosecutors* a natural continuation of our collaboration. We worked together on the films *A Gentle Creature*, *State Funeral*, *The Natural History of Destruction*, and *Mr. Landsbergis*, so we know each other quite well. He is an auteur who knows precisely what he needs to make a film, but at the same time, he is very flexible, allowing us to easily find solutions even in unexpected situations.

As producers from small countries whose voices are often underrepresented on the global stage, what does it mean to you to have *Two Prosecutors* selected for the Cannes Official Competition?

AĢ: Coming from a small country, it's not always easy to have your voice heard on such a big international stage like



Two Prosecutors

Stories from smaller countries can still speak to people everywhere. It also proves how powerful international collaboration can be.

TWO PROSECUTORS

Soviet Union, 1937. Thousands of letters from detainees falsely accused by the regime are burned in a prison cell. Against all odds, one of them reaches its destination, upon the desk of the newly appointed local prosecutor, Alexander Kornev.

Kornev does his utmost to meet the prisoner, a victim of corrupt agents of the secret police, the NKVD. A dedicated Bolshevik of integrity, the young prosecutor suspects foul play. His quest for justice will take him all the way to the office of the Attorney General in Moscow.

In the age of the great Stalinist purges, this is the plunge of a man into the corridors of a totalitarian regime that does not bear said name.

Director: Sergei Loznitsa

Based on the novel of the same name by Georgy Demidov.

Director of Photography: Oleg Mutu
Cast: Aleksandr Kuznetsov, Alexander Filippenko, Anatoli Belyi, Vytautas Kaniušonis, Valentin Novopolskij, Dmitrij Denisiuk

Producer: Kevin Chneiweiss

Co-producers: Regina Bouchehri, Gunnar Dedio, Birgit Rasch, Sergei Loznitsa, Maria Choustova, Alise Çelze, Vlad Rădulescu, Uljana Kim, Viola Fügen, Michael Weber, Cecile Tollu-Polonowski

Produced by: SBS Productions (FR), Looksfilm (DE), Atoms & Void (NL), White Picture (LV), Avanpost Media (RO), Studio Uljana Kim (LT), The Match Factory (DE)

Cannes. So having *Two Prosecutors* selected for the Official Competition is a huge honour. It shows that stories from smaller countries can still speak to people everywhere. It also proves how powerful international collaboration can be. At the same time, it shines a spotlight on Latvia as a great place to shoot films – especially because most of the locations in this film were real, not built sets. That authenticity adds so much to the atmosphere, and we're proud to show what Latvia has to offer to filmmakers from around the world.

UK: The recent period for the Baltic countries has been truly significant: European Film Academy awards went to Estonian and Lithuanian films, an Oscar to Latvian filmmakers, and prizes at Locarno and Sundance to Lithuanian directors and actors. We are now visible on the international stage – it is important to maintain this visibility and not lose momentum. Many well-established directors did not make it into this year's Cannes Official Selection, so the inclusion of *Two Prosecutors* in the Main Competition programme is something I value greatly.

What kinds of stories are you each interested in producing next?

AG: This autumn, we're starting production on *Tabita*, Juris Kursietis's latest feature (*Oleg, Modris*), a Latvian-Dutch co-production with The Film Kitchen. It's a deeply personal story about a girl with Down syndrome and her parents'

quiet struggle for love, identity, and belonging. I'm also excited about *Summer Blues*, the debut feature from Anna Ansonne – our first three-country co-production for a debut, involving Latvia, Germany (filmfaust), and Lithuania (Akis Bado). It's a poignant tale of estranged sisters reconnecting, will be shot on 16mm this summer in Latvia and Germany to capture its emotional and nostalgic tone.

UK: We're currently working on a diverse slate of projects, many of which continue our strong focus on Baltic and regional co-productions while exploring new creative directions.

In post-production, we have *Biodestructors*, a poetic documentary about microfungi and transformation; *Renovation*, a debut feature exploring a woman's inner upheaval triggered by her building's renovation; *Our Erika*, a drama centred on Olympic cyclist Erika Salumäe; and *Dice-ching-o-mat*, a sci-fitted family drama set during the pandemic. These projects involve partners from France, Latvia, Estonia, Belgium, and Luxembourg. In production, we are developing *Retrospective*, a personal documentary by Gabrielė Urbonaitė, and *Dog Owners*, a feature exploring urban loneliness through stories connected by dogs, co-produced with Germany and Latvia.

So yes, regional collaboration remains essential, but we're also expanding our thematic and stylistic range. **BF**



Photo by Nikita Ševcov



Dovilė Gasiūnaitė

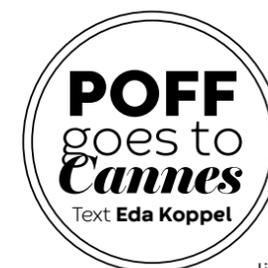
They Call Her Danka

A new Lithuanian feature film, *They Call Me Danka*, is preparing for its international debut this year. It offers a powerful and emotionally grounded story about a teenage girl who must take on adult responsibilities long before she is ready.

Directed and written by Dovilė Gasiūnaitė, this 102-minute drama follows Danutė, a young girl who becomes the only "adult" figure in her household. Surrounded by emotional absence and challenging family circumstances, she is forced to carry a burden no child should. "It is so damn hard to be an adult," begins the synopsis – and that frustration runs throughout the story.

Filming took place in Lithuania, with locations in Vilnius and its surroundings. The production was completed in two stages between December 2023 and March 2024. The film is currently in post-production, with sound and music work being finalised for delivery in June.

This is the second feature film by Dovilė Gasiūnaitė, whose debut, *Narcissus* (2012), received multiple nominations at the Lithuanian Film Academy's Silver Crane Awards. "I wanted to understand why we say that losing childhood is a kind of grief," the director explains. "The main character, Danutė, is still a child, but she must act like an adult in a world



Artūras Dvinelis



Juliana Miliūt

that offers her little protection.

The visual approach reflects this – many scenes are filmed in one take, which shows her emotional state without cutting away."

The film is produced by Artūras Dvinelis of Filmai LT, with associate producer Juliana Miliūt. Dvinelis, an experienced producer with more than 20 years working in international, Baltic and Nordic productions, says the story stood out for its emotional honesty. "It's a very timely subject. Many young people grow up in environments where emotional support is missing. This film gives voice to that experience," he says. Miliūt has a background in UK-based film production and supports new creative voices. The team is currently seeking sales and distribution

partners to help the film find its audience outside Lithuania.

The film's budget is €710,000, and is supported by the Lithuanian Film Centre, the Lithuanian tax incentive scheme, private equity, and the Lithuanian National Radio and Television. Filmai LT, the production company, is known for its feature films, as well as its work in international co-productions and service production in the Baltic region.

The main role is played by Ula Liagaite, supported by renowned Lithuanian actors Salvijus Trepulis, Lina Rastokaitė, Kęstutis Cicėnas, and Vaidotas Martinaitis, with Silvestras Samuolis making his acting debut in one of the leading roles. The cinematography is by Zbigniew Bartośević, with production design by Donatas Piršteliš, costumes by Rasa Taujanskienė, and music by Giedrius Puskunigis.

They Call Me Danka tells a quiet but urgent story that asks how children can survive when the world expects too much of them too early. With its simple honesty and strong artistic team, the film is a notable new voice from Lithuania that will speak to many across borders. **BF**



Photo by Nikita Ševcov



Mo Amor

CONCLUDES THE MO TRILOGY

Estonia's new feature, **Mo Amor**, is set to make its first international appearance as part of a curated showcase, "PÖFF Goes to Cannes". Directed by **Eeva Mägi** and co-produced by Mägi, and cinematographer Sten-Johan Lill, Mo Amor is the final instalment of the daring *Mo Trilogy*, following *Mo Mamma* and *Mo Papa*.

The trilogy has become a signature expression of Mägi's instinctive and emotionally honest filmmaking style. With *Mo Amor*, the creative duo delivers a poetic and unflinching portrait of identity, queerness, and healing.

Currently in post-production, *Mo Amor* tells the story of a photographer who narrates a modern fairytale about Princess Niina - a character lost in her own quest for identity despite the affections of three devoted suitors. The narrative shifts when Niina embraces his true self as Kaur, and invites his former lovers to a remote summer home - his "castle" - to reveal the truth and seek forgiveness. What follows is an intimate and lyrical journey of self-discovery, queerness, and healing love. The film explores themes of LGBTQ identity and inner transformation through a whimsical yet grounded narrative, affirming Mägi's talent for genre-blending storytelling.



Filmed over 17 days in August 2024 on Estonia's windswept Vilsandi island, *Mo Amor* exemplifies the independent filmmaking spirit. The production was mounted on a modest €85,000 budget, with support from the Estonian Film Institute, the Culture Endowment of Estonia, and a €10,000 cash rebate from the Film Fund of Estonian Islands.

Despite the modest funding, *Mo Amor* features an accomplished creative team. Alongside co-producer and DoP Sten-Johan Lill's striking cinematography, the

Her feature debut, *Mo Mamma* (2023), received a jury special mention at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, signalling the arrival of a filmmaker willing to push emotional and formal boundaries.

The *Mo Trilogy* is a testament to independent cinema's ability to move, provoke, and resonate without conventional storytelling arcs. As Mägi puts it, "With its selection for PÖFF Goes to Cannes, *Mo Amor* is set to bring this spirit to an international audience, continuing the Mo Movement's mission to celebrate raw, real, and radically human stories." **BF**



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The Ābele brothers drew inspiration from old folktales, ancient rituals, anthropology, and history.

As the Latvian film *Flow* emerged as the most acclaimed animated film of last year, something much darker and weirder was brewing in Latvian animation. Finding inspiration from the most meaningful werewolf trial of Northern Europe, filmmaking brothers Raitis and Lauris Ābele conjured a bizarre fantastical horror film about a village in 17th century Livonia, deeply rooted in old folktales, ancient rituals and shamanism, but also anthropological truths and historical fact. Coincidentally, like in *Flow*, there is also a cat in *Dog of God*, but in a much more bizarre scene. "Lauris spent a whole week just researching old sex toys," laughs Raitis Ābele about the historical fact-finding they needed to do for *Dog of God* before the film's world premiere at the Tribeca Festival in June.

Before the filmmakers started with the complex work of shooting real actors and then having to animate them, the Ābele brothers studied the fascinating history of werewolves in Europe, becoming especially interested in the many similarities between seemingly fantastical tales from different cultures. Their main subject of interest was Old Thiess, a peasant who claimed to be a werewolf, whose story still causes debate among anthropologists, and for a good reason.

"There are two anthropologists, one Italian and one American, who have had different debates regarding this werewolf trial," says Lauris, referring to the book *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective* by Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln that ended up laying the groundwork for their own film. Carlo Ginzburg holds the belief that the Old



Thiess's werewolf trial was in fact a powerful example of ancient shamanic tradition that had not been eradicated by Christianity.

According to Lauris, this is why Livonia remains popular among anthropologists: these werewolf stories are connected with a pre-Christian shamanic view that could be pan-European. "Typically the werewolves fight with sticks and whips, and the witches might be butterflies. There are many cases from Livo-

A HOWL

FROM THE BALTIC WOODS

A powerful historical werewolf story from Livonia is brought to life through evocative animation in *Dog of God*, a Latvian genre film that opens the gates of hell, brews mystical potions, and summons ancient spirits.

By **Ralf Sauter** Photos by **Oskars Upenieks**





nia, even in Riga, when the people say exactly the same thing: for example, a boy killed a cow because a witch was a butterfly hiding under the cow's belly," explains Lauris.

"Yet, similar stuff appears in Italy under the term *benandanti*. They are not werewolves, but they would partake in these midnight fights against witches. In the book, the anthropologists were faced with the question: was some old guy really just making stuff up? One of these two anthropologists claims that the possibility that he knew so much that correlates with other traditions would be too weird. It must be some leftover knowledge from more ancient times."

In addition, *Dog of God* allowed the Ābele brothers to connect with the struggles Baltic people have faced under different rulers. "Throughout the Baltics, especially Latvia and Estonia, the ruling class was German, and the German priests were writing our history. Someone was telling us how things should be, while Estonians and Latvians were peasants. It's in our collective memory."

According to Lauris, they also found local historical sources about Christian fears of mind control and possession. "There's one book by a Latvian theologian - a dean at a university - who collected werewolf folktales. As a Christian, he was deeply interested in werewolves," Lauris explains. "He said Christians are the sheep, and the werewolf might symbolically represent ancient knowledge still lurking in the forest. But when



Photo by Jānis Škapars

Raitis (right) and Lauris (left) directed *Dog of God*, with their youngest brother Marcis (centre) on camera duty as the DoP.

The entire film was first shot on a blue screen with the actors, then fully edited before being turned into animation.

the sheep wander into the forest, it might be dangerous for them. What's also interesting in these Latvian, or even perhaps Estonian folktales, still told to this day, is that it's less about shapeshifting or sheep-killing, it's more about this dark shadowlike entity in the woods that puts dark thoughts in your head."

As they were bringing their own shadowlike entities to life, the Ābele brothers at one point considered doing a live-action film interspersed with some animated sequences, but they ended up entirely using an old and proven technique, called rotoscoping, that requires drawing over scenes that have been shot with actors. This is famously what legendary animator Ralph Bakshi used for several of his films including his *The Lord of the Rings* in the 70s.

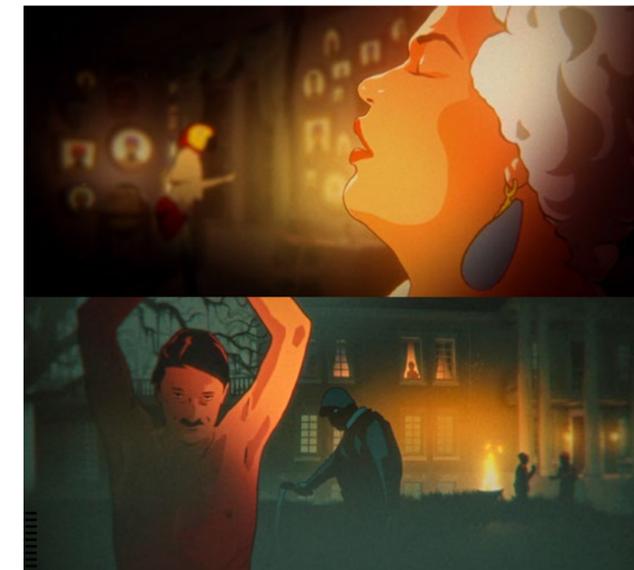
Showing true appreciation for historical detail, Lauris Ābele even spent a week just studying old pleasure devices that were used centuries ago. "It's quite funny what they used. Some sex toys were even made from bone. We recreated some of these devices and they can be seen in the film," describes Lauris. But those were just odd details - the real challenge was dressing actors in costumes and filming them before animating. Luckily, for a scene in *Dog of God* where a cat's butt hole is licked, a real actor didn't have to really do this in front of a camera - Lauris insists that a mop was used and the cat was later animated - but the make-up still presented a challenge.

"We figured out a system how to do it. When a character was supposed to have big ears, we put plasters on the actor. But it became especially hard when the make-up artists added hairs that were moving in a lot of directions," remarks Raitis Ābele about the many visual layers of *Dog of God*. Lauris adds that be-

THE ĀBELE BROTHERS

The Ābele Brothers - Raitis, Lauris, and Mārcis - are a Latvian filmmaking trio that blends arthouse, genre, and dark Baltic mysticism. Raitis and Lauris direct, produce, and write, while Mārcis often serves as the cinematographer. They began with DIY skate videos and gained international attention when *Castratus the Boar* won Tampere's Grand Prix in 2015. Their later works include *Baltic Tribes* and *Troubled Minds*. Lauris holds a Master's in Film Directing, while Raitis studied at NYFA and pursues a Ph.D. in psychology. They also perform in rock bands, Soundarcade and Sonntags Legion. Their animated film *Dog of God* continues their eerie, genre-bending cinematic style.

at *Fantastic 7* in Cannes, filmmakers are already highlighted," recalls Raitis. "At that point we didn't even know, but Matt Barrone from Tribeca was there. Later he wrote to us and asked for a screener, when we were still working on the sound. I honestly even forgot about it, because Tribeca wasn't even part of our plan, we were looking at genre festivals. But probably he followed us on social media, saw we were late in post-production, and wrote again to us. We caught his mind somehow at that pitch. He wrote that this could be the most wild and unique film in the program." **BF**



Dog of God

Genre: Animation, Mystery, Black Comedy

Technique: Rotoscope / 92 min

Synopsis: In a 17th-century Swedish Livonian village, constant rain and drunkenness prevail. When a stolen relic sparks witchcraft accusations, an 80-year-old self-proclaimed werewolf named the Dog of God arrives with a mysterious gift: The Devil's Balls. This triggers a chain of unexpected events that climaxes in a wild sexual rave party, transforming the village into a frenzy of unleashed desires.

Directed by Raitis Ābele, Lauris Ābele

Based on screenplay by Ivo Briedis written by Raitis Ābele, Lauris Ābele, Harijs Grundmanis

Starring: Regnārs Vaivars, Jūrgis Spuleniņš, Einars Repše, Agate Krista, Kristians Kareļins, Armands Berģis

Cinematographer: Mārcis Ābele

Lead Artst: Harijs Grundmanis

Lead Animator: Aigars Gercans

Music by: Lauris Ābele

Producers: Raitis Ābele, Kristele Pudane

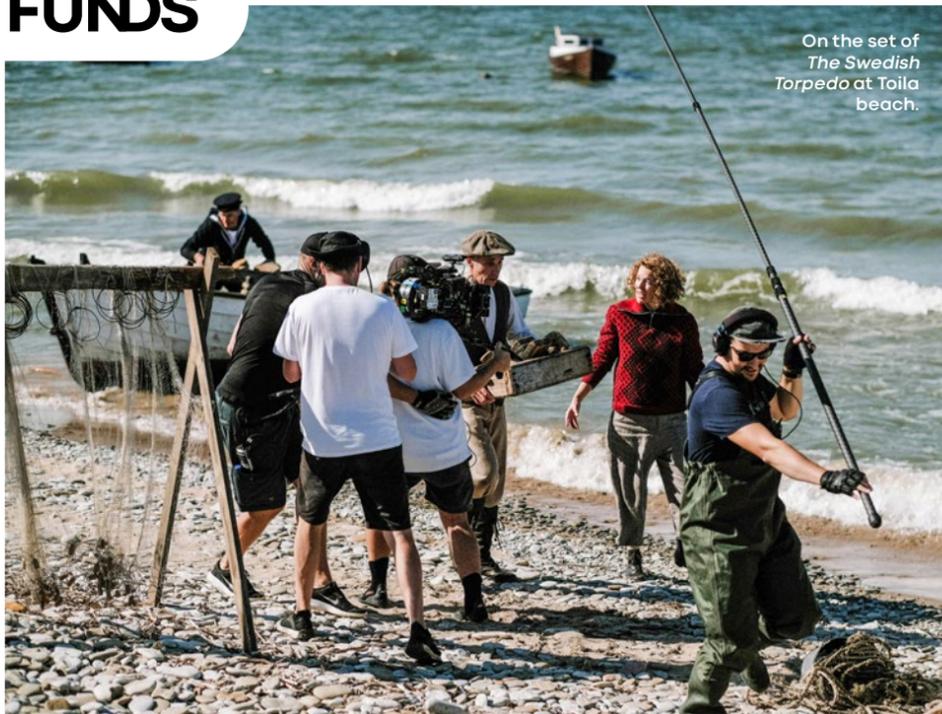
Co-producer: Giovanni Labadessa

Produced by: Tritone Studio (Latvia), Lumiere Lab (USA)



All actors wore full costumes and makeup to save time during rotoscoping.





On the set of *The Swedish Torpedo* at Toila beach.



Kreenholm factory in Narva



An underground tunnel of the Mining Museum in Kohtla-Nõmme.



The promenade of the once closed town Sillamäe.

multimedia accelerator, powered by Tehnopol, fosters innovation through tech-driven programmes for creative startups. Complementing this is the IDA Hub film industry incubation programme, run by the Ida-Viru Enterprise Centre (IVEK), which focuses on essential behind-the-scenes roles – ranging from logistics and catering to photography and coordination.

Together, these partners are building Ida-Viru into a full-spectrum creative ecosystem, turning it into one of the most exciting new regions in the Baltics for storytelling and media innovation.

VIRU FILM FUND: FAST, FLEXIBLE, AND TRANSFORMATIVE

The Viru Film Fund offers up to 40% cash rebates for feature films, documentaries, series, and music videos filmed in the region. With no artistic restrictions and no minimum spending threshold, it's one of the most filmmaker-friendly programmes in the Baltics. As Piia Tamm from IVEK puts it, the fund was designed "to work for filmmakers, not against them."

This simple yet effective approach has already attracted international attention.

Productions like *The Agency* and *The Swedish Torpedo* have utilised the fund while employing local crews and promoting the region's cinematic appeal.

Support for Estonian productions is equally important. In 2025, Taska Film will produce *Mud on Your Face*, a gritty drama infused with subculture. Stellar Film will bring *At Your Service* to life, exploring identity and personal transformation themes.

These stories focus on local people, landscapes, and perspectives, highlighting the region's growing role in shaping Estonia's national narrative through cinema.

STUDIO COMPLEX: BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CREATIVITY

To support this creative momentum, Ida-Viru is building a modern studio complex, with completion set for 2026. The facility will include two large sound stages (1,200 m² and 2,000 m²), post-production suites, office space, workshops, and on-site support services for film crews.

Teet Kuusmik from IVIA describes the vision clearly: "It's not just about

walls and lights – it's about giving creators everything they need, right here."

The complex is tailored to meet the demands of both international and domestic productions, offering cost-effective European solutions for filmmakers while giving Estonian creatives infrastructure to match their ambitions.

With the construction already underway, the studio is positioned to become a cornerstone of the region's creative economy.

IDA HUB: TECH INNOVATION DRIVING NEW NARRATIVES

Beyond traditional filmmaking, Ida-Viru is carving out a space for digital innovation. The IDA Hub Film and Multimedia Accelerator, powered by Tehnopol, supports startups building tools and platforms for the film and media industries – from XR and animation tech to AI tools and automated content creation.

Estonia has long been a leader in the startup world, topping Europe in unicorns and capital raised per capita. Tehnopol has helped drive this growth for over 15 years, with a 60% startup survival rate and more than €25 million raised in 2024 alone.

"Filmmaking is getting more expensive," says Olga Kurdovskaja, the accelerator's programme manager. "Without technology, it's hard to stay competitive. That's why collaboration between creatives and coders is key to transforming how stories are told."

The accelerator offers access to expert mentorship, training, investor introductions, and industry networking – creating fertile ground for future storytelling innovation.

TRAINING LOCAL TALENT FOR A CREATIVE FUTURE

To develop the local talent base, IVEK also runs the Film Industry Incubation Programme, a hands-on training initia-

tive for professionals and entrepreneurs looking to move into the audiovisual sector. The programme focuses on essential behind-the-scenes roles: from logistics and catering to photography and coordination.

"Many people don't realise their everyday skills are exactly what productions need," says programme manager Britta Merirand. "We're helping them transfer those skills into a new, creative industry."

Participants receive practical guidance, business support, and mentorship, enabling them to join the growing production ecosystem. The programme has made a meaningful impact on diversifying the region's economy and creating new career paths.

Together, these incubation and acceleration efforts – spanning film, multimedia, gaming, and immersive content – ensure that Ida-Viru doesn't just host productions; it helps start them.

A REGION IN MOTION

With flexible funding, cutting-edge facilities, and forward-thinking innovation, Ida-Viru is emerging as one of Estonia's most exciting creative destinations. Whether scouting locations, co-producing your next feature, or launching a startup that reimagines storytelling, Ida-Viru offers the blend of authenticity, affordability, and ambition that today's creators are looking for.

Backed by the EU Just Transition Fund, these efforts are not only helping filmmakers – they're building a more resilient, diversified regional economy.

Meet us at the Marché du Film or connect at idahub.ee. **BF**

IDA-VIRU

RISING STAR IN FILM AND MULTIMEDIA

In northeastern Estonia, **Ida-Viru County** is quietly transforming from its post-industrial roots into a rapidly rising creative hub. Long admired for its dramatic landscapes and cultural depth, the region is now gaining recognition for its emerging role in film and multimedia production.

By **Eda Koppel** Photos by **Anastassia Volkova**

Two key pillars support this transformation: the Viru Film Fund and the IDA Hub Film and Multimedia Innovation Centre. The Viru Film Fund, managed by the Ida-Viru Enterprise Centre (IVEK), offers filmmakers accessible financial incentives.

There's three foundational forces to the IDA Hub Film and Multimedia Innovation Centre. The studio complex, developed by the Ida-Viru Investment Agency (IVIA), aims to deliver top-tier production infrastructure by 2026. In addition to physical infrastructure, IDA Hub also drives innovation and talent development. The IDA Hub film and



On the set of *The Swedish Torpedo*.



CHOOSING THERAPY OVER TATE

Fränk, a story about growing up in a small town surrounded by violence instead of role models, has become a surprise box office success in Estonia. Debutant director **Tõnis Pill** talks about the background of his semi-autobiographical film.

By **Andrei Liimets** Photos by **Teddy Puusepp**

How did you end up in filmmaking?

I was a storyteller as a child, in the sense that I loved writing short stories, drawing comics, as well as watching films. I never thought I could become a filmmaker myself until I finished school and started going through different university degrees. I randomly came to a Baltic Film School advertisement and figured I could give it a try. I didn't even know what the courses were. I just went by exclusion first – I

had never held a camera in my hand, so I didn't want to become a cinematographer, I didn't even know what a sound engineer was, so I ended up directing.

I didn't get in on the first try, but I succeeded the second time around. I didn't become a filmmaker then and there, but hopefully I am one by now.

Do you remember if there was a piece of filmmaking or culture that influenced you the most?

I don't really remember the films of my



earlier youth that much. I did love *In Bruges* by Martin McDonagh, which came out around the time of me pondering film school.

What about Estonian film at the moment – where are you placing yourself and what are you looking to add?

I'm not really focused on standing out for the sake of it. I just want to tell the stories that are of interest to me such as "Fränk". Looking into the future, I know I'd really love to do a proper crime film. Something along the lines of "Memories of Murder", which I really liked.

How much did you think about genre when making *Fränk*?

Since the film has gone through stages of development, the genre has also changed quite a lot. It was a murder mystery-drama when we started out, which developed into more of a children's film with some darker themes, somewhat reminiscent of *The Hunt* by Thomas Vinterberg. We finally settled on a psychological drama, without too much of a high concept, so we could focus on the characters.

Who is the target group?

We didn't think about that too much, be-

cause we mainly wanted to tell this story. I didn't want to call it a youth film, since there are many subjects that go far beyond youth.

Development of a film takes time. Did you ever feel you're getting away from your own youth too much to remain believable?

That's definitely a risk. On the other hand, while my face becomes hairier and more serious and I might seem like an adult, I still feel like a 16-year-old inside. I did need to become more acquainted with the youth culture of to-



.....
You don't have to be strong all the time, you can be fragile at times, you can ask for help.

day though, to also speak with the youth of today.

The film takes place in your childhood in the beginning of 2000s. Was that always the plan?

Yes, I always saw the story as taking place somewhere at the end of the 90s or the beginning of the 2000s. That's where I took much of the inspiration from, so in a way I wanted it to be a period piece.

Did that make life more difficult for you to get the details right?

Of course. At times it seems to me we have more photos of World War II than from the beginning of the 21st century! I mean, together with production designer Kaia Tungal we had a difficult time finding photos of what people's homes, shops, and railway stations looked like. You kind of have it in your memory, but once you end up with a photo, it might be a bit different. At the end of the 2000s so much was renovated that the smaller towns are unrecognizable by now. We

filmed most of *Fränk* in Kehra, my hometown, but it had changed so much we really had to consider which way to point the camera.

There's been a couple of recent Estonian films made by young directors telling stories about young people which haven't performed too well at the box office. You, on the other hand, have become the most watched local movie of the year so far. What does it come down to?

We keep a close eye on TikTok. Something they often ask is when the film lands on Netflix. Estonian films very rarely do! There is so much content and so many choices to contend with, especially with a small film by an independent author. You really have to stand out or get your message through. It seems we have succeeded due to the fact our characters are teenagers who have been on the screen quite rarely. I think we found a demographic that had been underrepresented.

Fränk is semi-autobiographical. How long did you know that's the story you wanted to turn into your first film?

I was sure we would finish the film four years earlier than we did. It was planned for release in 2021! During my studies I discovered myself repeatedly telling others my idea for the story. Their eyes lit up which spurred me on, and gave me self-belief in the idea. After graduating I decided it was the time to get it made.

Was it difficult to get your first feature funded?

I think I was kind of an exception. I have fortunately received funding every time I applied for it. That doesn't mean I was born with a lucky charm; I've worked a lot for it. That means being very self-critical, knowing what you want to do, inspiring and convincing others to join the mission. I was all in with this story.

Coming back to Netflix, where do you see cinemas moving to, and do you want your work to be seen on the big screen?

The future is a bit frightening, but probably less so for me than for people who have been making films for the big screen for decades; now witnessing the screens becoming smaller and smaller. Having said that, I sincerely hope that faith in cinema remains, because all my friends and I still think of the big screen when making films. That's an experience you can't really compare with anything you can have at home.

Fränk premiered in the same week as the Netflix hit series *Adolescence* ...

Yes, everyone keeps comparing the two!



And although the stories are two decades apart, the themes of masculinity and toxic relationships are similar. Where does this male aggressiveness, even at an early age, stem from?

It's not a modern issue. Going way back, for practical reasons, men were there to protect their families. It was necessary, but now we ended up, in our age, in an altogether different world. You don't have to be strong all the time, you can be fragile at times, you can show your vulnerability, you can ask for help, and you can earn less than your partner. All these things are okay, but for some people they are not. And then we have fuckwits like Andrew Tate who prey on young, confused boys. We probably always had such kinds of influencers, but not with the kind of platforms that are available to them today. We can't really fight with that baldhead, but we can present better role models, who are able to lessen the confusion and provide young people with a better purpose. Tell them that you don't have to be strong all the time, you don't always have to win, you can cope with failure, you may fail much of the time, and you can learn something from every failure.

So young men should turn to therapy instead of Tate.

Yes. I had trouble with anxiety around five years ago and I didn't know what to do with it at first. I kept postponing going to a psychologist, especially as it costs quite a bit – just for talking with a stranger! –, but in reality, it was simple, and health is more important than money.

Fränk deals with the absence of father figures and good role models. As an artist, how much do you think you can intervene in such issues? Can a film have any societal impact?

I think films have a large impact. I hope that this film will be seen by fathers with their sons. Even if the sons are too young, fathers should go and see it on their own. I think if you make a film on societal issues such as these, you do have a moral obligation not to preach, but at least give some food for thought for the viewer, and raise some questions. For example, does working a lot and providing material security outweigh not being there emotionally, not saying "I love you" out loud. These are things too few men do.

Based on your experience so far, what do you recommend for young directors?

Don't take yourself too seriously, and don't be afraid to make mistakes. You will make them anyway, and there is a high chance your first film might not turn

out too well, as might your second, but that's how you learn. We made a lot of short films in school, and of course I was proud of them, but I can't even watch them now. But then there was a moment where I felt a breakthrough – that I finally have the tools for making a good film! So never give up. If you really want to do something, do it. No one will just give it to you easily, you have to sweat for it, bleed from your nose for it, feel that you want to cry for it. Go and cry, but then keep going.

Baltic films have been doing well, *Flow* recently won an Oscar, *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* was a success all over the world. How much do you think about an international audience?

When making *Fränk*, we didn't really think about if it's an Estonian film or an international story. We just focused on the story. However, I think this story should resonate everywhere. So many of the themes are universal. We are currently working towards a festival premiere. **BF**





Inside the World

of Lithuanian Shorts

Rimantė Daugėlaitė-Cegelskienė, the founder of the Lithuanian short film agency Lithuanian Shorts and a member of the European Film Academy, delves into the agency's mission and the evolving Baltic short film landscape.

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė** Photo by **Marija Mireckaitė**

Let's start from the beginning - how did the idea of establishing Lithuanian Shorts in 2012 come about?

Before 2012, my colleague Marija Razgutė and I were involved in organising the international short film festival Vilnius Film Shorts (now known as the Vilnius Short Film Festival). Through our work there, we recognized a clear need to support Lithuanian filmmakers in bringing their short films to international festivals and distributors, and to increase visibility of Lithuanian cinema within the European and international film community. Inspired by the work of the Polish Shorts agency, we decided to adopt a similar model for Lithuania.

Rimantė Daugėlaitė-Cegelskienė, the founder of the Lithuanian short film agency Lithuanian Shorts.

Lithuanian Shorts at the Silver Crane National Film Awards



Last year, Lithuanian Shorts was honoured with a prestigious national award at the National Film Awards for its contribution to film culture. How has the agency evolved over the past 13 years?

I would say that since its founding, the agency has grown steadily and with purpose. One of our initial milestones was participation in the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Market; where we became the first ones from the Baltic region to set up a national stand. Our first original initiative was the Lithuanian Shorts Catalogue, featuring the latest short films from Lithuania – a project we continue to publish annually. Today, the agency runs over ten recurring projects each year. We regularly screen 1–2 Lithuanian short film programs in cinemas. And in the last few years, we've partnered with Lithuanian National Radio and Television to bring short films to broader audiences via TV. We host the Baltic region's key short film industry event – the Baltic Pitching Forum – and continue to grow the Vilnius Short Film Festival. Which in the last year has become a qualifying festival for both Oscars and European Film Awards. Our international recognition is reflected in major initiatives. Including country-in-focus programs at prominent short film festivals in Oberhausen, Busan, Copenhagen, Uppsala, Winterthur, Tampere, and beyond. Since day one, we've focused on building a strong network of partnerships. This has helped us become one of the leading NGOs dedicated to film culture in Lithuania and on the international stage.

As you mentioned, the Vilnius Short Film Festival was recently granted both Oscar-qualifying and European Film Awards-qualifying status. What does this recognition mean for your team, and why is it important for the participating filmmakers?

This truly means a lot – not just for the festival but for Lithuanian cinema and culture as a whole. We're incredibly proud of our team, which has worked tirelessly over the years to bring the most compelling and relevant short films from around the world to audiences in Lithuania. Now that it holds Oscar-qualifying status, the recipient of the Vilnius Short Film Festival's main award – the Grand Prix – will be eligible for consideration in the Oscar race. This recognition places the festival among an elite group of around 180 festivals worldwide, including Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Locarno, and Clermont-Ferrand. Additionally, the European Film Awards-qualifying status means that one of the films from our competition programs will be eligible for candidacy in the European Short Film category of the European Film Awards. We are thrilled that, for the first time, Lithuania has its own voice in these prestigious recognitions.

Are you noticing a shift toward more universal themes in Lithuanian and Baltic short films? Which areas still feel underrepresented?

Yes, the move toward universal storytelling is a clear



Lithuanian Shorts Mentorship participants.



Scene from the short *Ootid*.

and growing trend – not just in Lithuania and the Baltic region, but across the global short film scene. Many films explore themes of familial or romantic relationships, or delve into the historical events of the recent past. Interestingly, many up-and-coming filmmakers from our region are choosing to address the Soviet era, even though they didn't experience it firsthand. At the same time, more global political, social, or cultural issues are still underrepresented in Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian short films. It would also be refreshing to see more genre-based storytelling and a greater diversity of cinematic forms, including hybrid or experimental formats that push traditional boundaries.

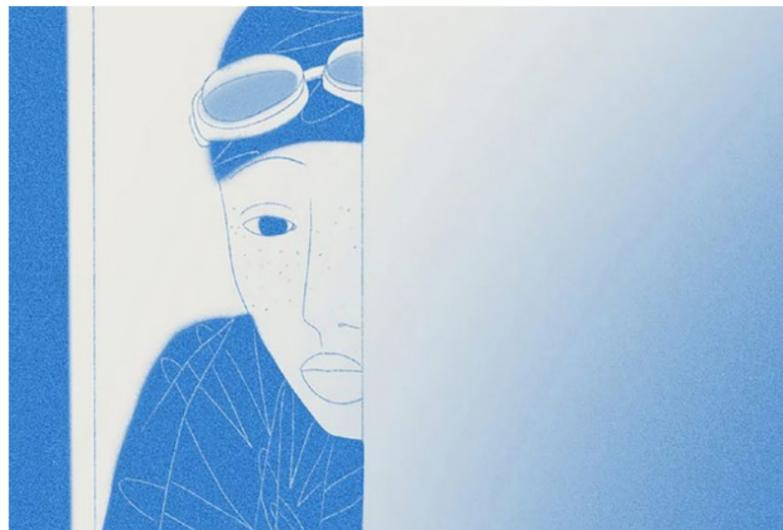
What have been the most significant international achievements of Lithuanian short filmmakers in recent years?

Without a doubt, our filmmakers' recent presence at the Cannes Film Festival stands out as a major highlight. In 2019, Vytautas Katkus's *Community Gardens* was screened in the prestigious Semaine de la Critique section. We've also entered the main short film competition twice – first in 2022 with Katkus's *Cherries*, and again in 2024 with *Ootid*, directed by Eglė Razumaitė. Also in 2024, Eglė Davidavičė's *The One Who Knows* was nominated for the Unifrance Short Film Awards at Cannes. For the first time in the history of Lithuanian cinema, Laurynas Bareiša's short film *Dummy* had its world premiere in the Competition Programme of the Berlin International Film Festival in 2020. Last year, Adas Burkšaitis's *Left-handed Pen* was included in the longlist for the European Film Awards in the European Short Film category. Meanwhile, *Hoofs on Skates*, an animated film by Ignas Meilūnas, has already screened at over 100 international festivals – and its journey is far from over.

In addition to promoting films internationally, Lithuanian Shorts runs several initiatives to support talent development, including the Lithuanian Shorts Mentorship and Shorts Critics programs. Why are these efforts important?

These programs are unique in their structure and intention. They provide emerging talent with hands-on experience, access to professional mentorship, and op-

Still from the short *Left-Handed Pen*.



portunities to build valuable connections in the industry. A great example is animator Eglė Davidavičė, who teamed up with her mentor, producer Agnė Adomėnė, through the 2019 mentorship program. Together, they created *The One Who Knows*, which won the Best Animation award at last year's National Film Awards, and continues to be shown internationally. Another success story is actress Elžbieta Latėnaitė, who developed her first short film script during the 2023 edition with guidance from mentor Gintarė Parulytė. Her project was presented at the Baltic Pitching Forum in October 2024 and secured a spot at the 2025 Euro Connection co-production forum taking place at the Short Film Market in Clermont-Ferrand. Additionally, the Shorts Critics initiative was launched in response to a lack of thoughtful writing about short films. We created a dedicated training program for emerging critics, rooted in our belief that informed criticism helps filmmakers better understand how their work is perceived and interpreted. It also fosters meaningful dialogue between creators and audiences, encourages critical thinking, and contributes to the development of film culture in Lithuania.

What's next for Lithuanian Shorts in 2025?

2025 is shaping up to be an exciting year. With the Vilnius Short Film Festival now being an Oscar and European Film Award qualifying festival, we're entering a dynamic new phase of growth. We're also launching Up!, a brand-new training program aimed at emerging film producers. During the autumn, Lithuania will be the country-in-focus at the ShorTO Film Market in Italy. And of course, we'll continue expanding and strengthening our core annual initiatives.

If someone from abroad were discovering Lithuanian short films for the first time, which three would you recommend as a starting point?

I'd recommend *Cherries* by Vytautas Katkus, *Caucasus* by Laurynas Bareiša, and *The One Who Knows* by Eglė Davidavičė. I feel like these three films beautifully capture the essence and diversity of Lithuanian short cinema today. **BF**



Photo by Zane Rupenheite

Red Code Blue

ARRIVES WITH GRIT AND STYLE

Set in the chaotic aftermath of Latvia's regained independence, *Red Code Blue* dives into the murky world of 1990s law enforcement. Directed by **Oskars Rupenheits** and produced by KEF Studio, the upcoming feature follows rookie cop Romāns Skulte - played by Raitis Stūrmanis - as he enters a precinct where good and evil aren't so clearly defined.

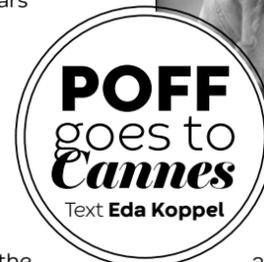
Arriving full of energy and moral clarity, Skulte quickly realizes that his ideals won't take him far. In a city grappling with corruption, post-Soviet instability, and shifting allegiances, he must decide what kind of officer - and man - he wants to become. As idealism clashes with brutal reality, *Red Code Blue* emerges as a powerful character study wrapped in a stylish, gritty crime thriller.

Shot over two and a half years in Riga, the production used locations that still carried the visual language of the 1990s - including the former KGB building and a disused rubber factory. Many of these structures have since been renovated, giving the film an archival edge and preserving the textures of a disappearing world.

Director Oskars Rupenheits brings a sharp, unflinching eye to the world of *Red Code Blue*, drawing on years of research to create the film's layered realism. Through extensive interviews with both rookie and veteran police officers from the 1990s, he uncovered a tapestry of stories - some absurd, while others are deeply unsettling. "Some stories were funny, and some were disturbing. But what struck me was how people remembered the same era so differently. That duality shaped the entire tone of the film," the director shared.



Photo by Armands Andže



Authenticity extended to the casting process as well. Around 7500 people auditioned, many of them non-professional actors. Some arrived in full costume, others sent photos of garden gnomes or pets. The final cast includes Armands Guļāns and Viesturs Berkmanis, with several actors having personal ties to law enforcement.

The film's production team includes producers Sintiija Andersone, Juris Pīlēns, and Rupenheits, who have crafted a visually and emotionally rich cinematic experience. Andersone, who joined KEF Studio in 2015, brings international experience to the project, while Pīlēns also serves as the film's cinematographer. The creative team is rounded out



Photo by Lauris Vīkane

by production designer Tom Jansson, costume designer Ance Beinaroviča, and composer Kaspars Kurdeko.

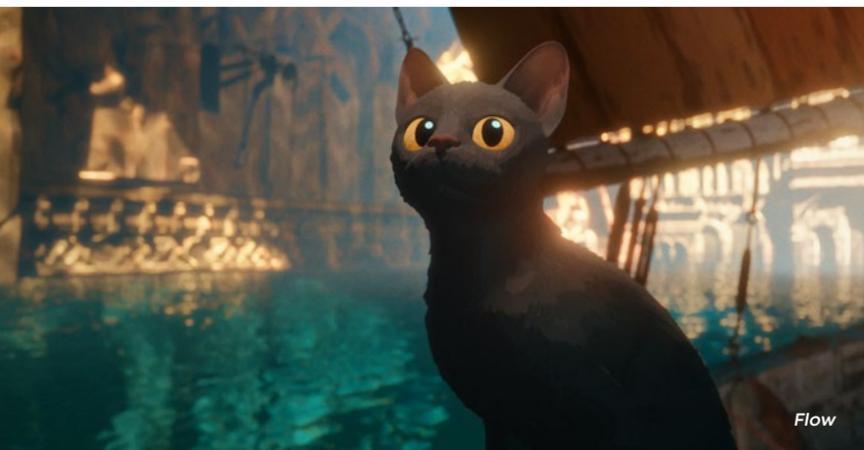
Now in post-production, *Red Code Blue* has been selected for PÖFF Goes to Cannes, a showcase of promising works-in-progress presented during the Marché du Film.

Backed by KEF Studio and co-produced by Vīno Films, Jura Podnieka Studija, and Fon Films, the film also received support from DEPO DIY, Latvijas Mobilais Telefons, and the Latvian State Radio and Television Centre. Baltic Content Media will handle distribution in Latvia.

With its blend of noir atmosphere, complex characters, and sharp social commentary, *Red Code Blue* stands out as one of the Baltic region's most anticipated cinematic offerings. **BF**



CATapulated



Flow

A little black Latvian cat from **Flow** is stealing all the attention. When meeting **Dita Rietuma**, head of the National Film Centre of Latvia, at CEEA's GO! 2025 Conference in Nova Gorica / Gorizia, she proudly wears a sweater of the four-legged friend - from every angle in the room, his yellow eyes keep staring at you.

By **Gert Hermans** for **CEE Animation** Photo by **Agnese Zeltiņa**

If we want to find out about all the Film Centre's merits over the years, wouldn't it be better to ignore that animal for a while...?

Dita Rietuma: I disagree! That cat deserves all the attention in the world. *Flow* is a phenomenon; the film has made a huge impact, not only on Latvian cinema, but on European and global independent animation in general. Made on a small €3,5 million budget, it won an Academy Award and is commercially and artistically successful. We might make this distinction too often, but *Flow* is the ultimate proof that both are possible. The film speaks on a metaphorical level, uses a modern open source programme like Blender, and makes big numbers in global distribution. Up to this day, the film made more than 40 million box office gross worldwide, and it's still running. It's huge on streaming platforms. At the National Film Centre –

being the main national financier of the project - we're proud that *Flow* became the most popular film in Latvia since the restoration of independence in 1991.

All of that is true. But Flow is not the only reason why I want to know more about the National Film Centre of Latvia, the work you have been doing and the ideas behind it. Like the intriguing tagline going around: "We don't have the money but we have a strong strategy."

We're not hopping from panel to panel, and we're not the kings of PowerPoint presentations. I think there's too many PowerPoints in this world, too much buzz and talk, but in the end, actions speak louder than words.

And you have tradition on your side.

Our animation tradition goes back to Soviet times, the first Latvian animation studios started their work in mid 60s. And since the 90s, we have always had studios working on an international level. Rija Studios was involved in the French Oscar-nominated *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003, by Sylvain Chomet); back then Latvia didn't have the status to officially profile itself as co-producer of such a big European title, and the work of Rija Studio remained underexposed, even though they were responsible for substantial parts of the animation. Fortunately, the centre's budget grew slowly over the years. It's still the smallest among all Baltic countries, but during the last decade, we were able to fulfil our ambition: to consequently support feature-length animation films.

When it comes to animation, features are your core business, indeed.

Before the beginning of the streaming era, short animations often seemed to quickly disappear from the market. Nobody wanted to screen shorts in the cinemas. If



The Triplets of Belleville



Before the Day Breaks





you were lucky, your film had a nice festival career around Europe, and that was it. We felt more like supporting animated features, made on a bigger budget. A push forward came with the programme celebrating Latvia's 100th anniversary in 2018, for which additional support was distributed, resulting in two feature length animations. There was *Before the Day Breaks* by Roze Stiebra, the grand lady of Latvian animation who started her career in the early 70s. Unfortunately, she passed away last year, after having finished her last feature *Rule of the Heart* in 2024. It didn't travel well because - just like most of her work - it's based on verbal expression, folklore, songs and stories. This gave her films a rather local appeal.

The other anniversary animation was *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* (2019), a successful international co-production by Atom Art, directed by Edmunds Jansons. Those titles gave a boost to the production of feature animations.

There's also the remarkable works of Signe Baumane.

Living in New York, she was born and raised in Latvia. We supported many of her works, like her feature animations *Rocks in My Pockets* (2014) and *My Love Affair with Marriage* (2022). We're currently financing her new film *Karmic Knot*, estimated for 2028.

And all this is exclusively about feature animations. That is remarkable!

This is what I realise when going abroad. The amount of animated features we've supported makes us quite unique. This we can only do by dividing our total budget - which is around €800,000 - over several



LEFT: *My Favourite War*

RIGHT: *Rule of the Heart*

.....
The amount of animated features we've supported makes us quite unique.

longer periods. For example, the financing of *Flow* was spread over four years, with approx. €250,000 per year. The total amount of €1 million may seem like peanuts to some European countries, for us it was huge. It must be that we genuinely believed in what these guys were doing. Giving them a substantial share, allows our production companies to find international co-producers, while still safeguarding a Latvian majority in their projects.

Like Matiss Kaža (Dream Well Studio) did with *Flow*.

With a €3,5 million budget, it was a delicate challenge for him to secure a Latvian majority. He managed through our financing, the input from streamers and broadcasters, and a Eurimages grant. The film almost became a majoritarian French production, but he just managed to get by.

Is there a permanent representation from the animation industry in the Film Centre?

The industry is represented by the Latvian Animation

LEFT: *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs*

RIGHT: *Awaj*



My Love Affair With Marriage.

Association, with producer Sabine Andersone as Head of the Board. They're not directly involved with the work of the Film Centre, but we are partners, we communicate regularly, and we support their activities. For instance, the Latvian Focus in Cartoon Movie 2025 is organised with our support.

How will *Flow's* success have an impact on your work?

We ramped up our investments. This year, the government will invest one million euros extra in animated projects. The authors of *Flow* will present a new project; their budget will be huge, and we don't want other projects to suffer from that. An Oscar campaign required extra investments, which were partly provided by the National Film Centre of Latvia. Also the Investment & Development Agency for business activities, resorting under the Ministry of Economics, supported the campaign with a substantial budget.

What does it mean for Latvians?

It's huge. The Oscar, the Golden Globe and the Euro-

pean Film Award were on display in the National Museum for a week, and was followed by a tour of four other cities; thousands of people got to see them with their own eyes. Upon their return from Los Angeles, the filmmakers were welcomed like heroes, with a status similar to stars in the national hockey team. This never happened to a Latvian film before. The popularity of Latvian cinema has been going up and down over the years, with the changing taste and preferences of the audience. But now a cultural product has been produced that applies to every possible taste. I admire this young team - Gints Zilbalodis and Matiss Kaža are both brilliant in their own domain; Gints is a creative genius, but he would be nowhere without a competent producer.

You're not yet fed up answering questions about *Flow* all the time?

Not at all! This will probably be the first and last Oscar in my career, and a great success for the entire national industry. Now I'm especially curious about the final box office numbers... **BF**

LEFT: *Rocks in My Pocket*

RIGHT: *Karmic Knot*

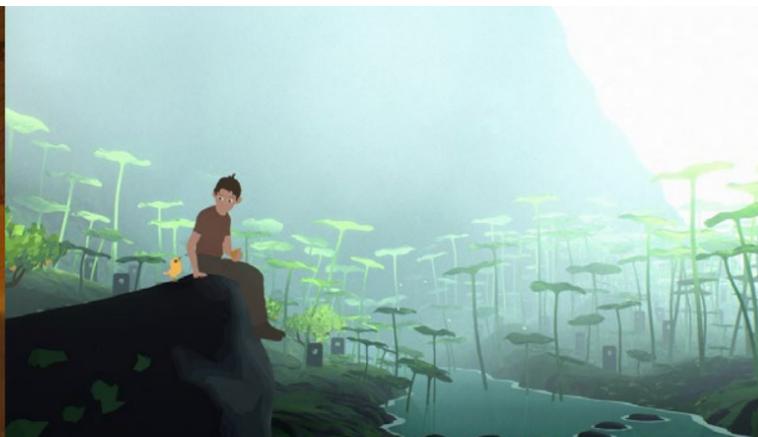




Photo by Gints Ivuškāns



Photo by Oskars Artūrs Upeniņš

Photo by © A.M.P.A.S. Provider Richard Harbaugh / The Academy

FLOW

FCATS FOR A CASE STUDY

The animated feature film ***Straume / Flow*** (2024), directed by **Gints Zilbalodis** and produced by **Matīss Kaža**, has swiftly become the most celebrated Latvian film of all time. In under a year, it has scaled the highest peaks of the global film industry while winning the hearts of audiences worldwide.

By **Kristīne Matīsa**



Flow had its world premiere in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival on 22 May 2024, where it received the Prix De La Meilleure Création Sonore. Just weeks later, it competed in the main competition at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival – one of the most prestigious events in global animation – and swept four major awards: the Jury Award, Gan Foundation Award for Distribution, Audience Award, and Best Original Music for a Feature Film. This marked the beginning of *Flow's* extraordinary journey through the international festival circuit.

By spring 2025, *Flow* had won more than 80 international awards across nearly every continent – the Oscar being its 77th – and had been screened at close to 200 festivals. Among its most notable accolades are the European Film Award for Best Animated Feature, the Golden Globe

from the US film industry, over ten awards from various American film critics' associations, France's César Award, and Latvia's own national honour, the Lielais Kristaps.

During March and April 2025, the three most coveted prizes – the EFA statuette, the Golden Globe, and the Oscar – were put on public display at the Latvian National Museum of Art. They then toured Latvia's major towns for a month, drawing more than 50,000 visitors. The public outpouring of affection for the film culminated in a celebratory evening on 5 March, when director Gints Zilbalodis and the *Flow* team returned home following their Oscar win. A plane painted in the Latvian flag's colours was assigned for their flight, and upon landing, the media welcomed them on a red carpet at the airfield. That same night, a jubilant crowd gathered at the Freedom Monument in the heart of Riga, where over 1,000 fans celebrated the filmmakers and the historic Oscar win.

Notably, *Flow's* festival triumphs have been matched by exceptional box office success. Since its Latvian premiere at the

end of August 2024, the film has remained in cinemas for over six months, consistently topping the national box office. More than 360,000 Latvians – out of a population of just under two million – have seen the film in theatres, making it the most-watched release in Latvia in over 30 years. The film's national popularity is visible in many forms: the iconic grey cat protagonist has appeared in graffiti across city walls, and even on a commemorative postage stamp issued by Latvijas Pasts in February.

In autumn 2024, *Flow* rolled out internationally, starting on 30 October in France, where it soon drew more than half a million cinemagoers. In early November, it launched in US cinemas, opening first in New York and Los Angeles, where it delivered the highest-ever opening weekend for its distributor, Sideshow/Janus Films. The film later expanded to hundreds of theatres across North America. Perhaps the biggest surprise

was its resounding success in Mexico, where it attracted one million viewers within just two weeks of release at the end of 2024.

Flow is now screening – or scheduled to screen – in cinemas across 45 countries. It has already been seen by more than six million viewers globally, with international box office revenues exceeding €33 million – a remarkable feat for a film from a small country, made on a modest €3.5 million budget using open-source software Blender.

Producer Matīss Kaža led the production as a three-country co-production between Dream Well Studio (Latvia), Sacrebleu Productions (France), and Take Five (Belgium), with Latvia as the main producing country. The project was financed by the National Film Centre of Latvia, the State Cultural Capital Fund, Eurimages, the French National Film Centre, Arte, Canal+, and several regional funding programmes in France and Belgium. **BF**



Photo by Andrejs Strokins



Matīss Kaža & THE FIRST OSCAR FOR LATVIA

Matīss Kaža (1995) is a film professional whose contribution to the triumphant journey of *Flow* is as significant as that of its director and artist, Gints Zilbalodis.

By **Dārta Ceriņa** (film critic, magazine *SestDiena*) Photos by **Agnese Zeltiņa**

Matīss meticulously constructed the production and execution framework that enabled the flight of imagination and creative vision of this talented filmmaker – securing international co-producers, ensuring the best possible conditions for the birth of a cinematic miracle, and later overseeing its distribution and global promotion.

The *Flow* phenomenon is a true David-versus-Goliath victory – where independent animation, bold artistic vision, and the creative determination of a small country triumphed over the dominance of major studios.

I remember you weren't sure that *Flow* would win an Oscar.

Yes. We were one of the biggest surprises of the ceremony with the award for *Flow*.

What went through your mind when you heard the first letter of *Flow*'s title from Andrew Garfield and Goldie Hawn at the ceremony?

I think we all felt a wave of excitement that's hard to put into words. Of course, there was immense joy and a moment of

trying to process the situation we had suddenly found ourselves in. I would have liked to linger in that moment a little longer.

Do you remember what happened when you got off the stage?

Everyone congratulates each other, but there aren't any long conversations. At the Oscars and other award ceremonies, there's little time for in-depth discussions. If you have an Oscar in your hands, people congratulate you even if they don't know exactly what you won it for. Just like at the (Golden) Globes, at the Oscars, there's a brief backstage procedure after receiving the award, and then you return to your seat to watch the rest of the ceremony. Our category, Best Animated Feature, was the second to be announced, so when we got back to our seats, the ceremony wasn't even halfway through.

There has already been a lot of discussion about what this award means, but what do you think would be the right directions for developing the local industry?

I see three key areas. From an artistic perspective, we need bold, innovative pro-



Dita Rietuma, the head of the National Film Centre of Latvia, meets at the airport producer Matīss Kaža arriving from USA with Golden Globe award for *Flow*.

MATĪSS KAŽA

has been involved in film projects since his teenage years, beginning with a role as the protagonist's friend in the family film *Kur pazudis Elvis? / Finding Elvis* (2008), directed by his mother, Una Celma, an experienced filmmaker who remains active in the industry. He earned his BFA in Film & TV from Tisch School of the Arts in New York, and later obtained an MA in Audiovisual & Performing Arts from the Latvian Academy of Culture. He has directed, written, and produced two full-length documentaries and four feature films, undertaken several international co-productions, and leads the production company Trickster Pictures, while also serving as a lead producer at the animation studio Dream Well Studio. Beyond film, Matīss also writes and directs for theatre and works as a lecturer at the Latvian Academy of Culture.

While many of his works carry strong social themes, the defining feature of his projects is a distinct sense of authorship and cinematic vision that transcends national boundaries. This is exemplified by Gints Zilbalodis' full-length animated film *Flow* (2024), which Matīss co-wrote and produced. Its debut in competition at the Cannes Film Festival and the subsequent wave of international acclaim, fuelled by months of national and global support, culminated in a historic moment at the 97th Academy Awards in Los Angeles. And not only for *Flow's* creative team. It was the first Oscar for Latvia!

film and other projects, but these things don't happen overnight. Gints and I are working on his new film, and we'll be submitting the project application soon. So first, I have to go home and write the project.

How are you feeling right now?

Honestly, I don't think I have anything new to say about *Flow* anymore. I should probably just start talking about something else. (Laughs.) **BF**

jects. In terms of education, if we want to focus on animation, we need professionals — not just auteurs, but animators and technical artists with hands-on experience in new technologies and 3D animation. And from a production standpoint, we need strong producers who can successfully bring future projects to the international stage. Right now, producer education is a weak point in Latvia. We train production managers, but we rarely see new-generation producers who can operate at a global level.

So would you say that revising educational programmes should be the first step?

It's something that definitely needs attention. But of course, so does funding — both for industry infrastructure and for film production.

Do you think that this kind of breakthrough creates more opportunities for other projects by Latvian or Baltic filmmakers?

I don't think it works quite like that. Right now, Gints has carte blanche — complete creative freedom — but that doesn't automatically grant the same access to others from the same country or region. It's not as if Gints and I can just hand out Hollywood contacts on a silver platter. However, other producers can use this moment to draw attention to their projects. There are many other talented filmmakers with distinct voices and styles, along with producers who will push their films forward in the market. But it's up to the producers themselves to do this effectively.

A year has passed since *Flow* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. How have your interests evolved in that time? I mean, in terms of the messages you want to convey and the people you want to collaborate with.

I'm not sure. *Flow* has opened up many new directions and possibilities, but it's not as if I instantly figured out how to take advantage of them, or where to go next. It takes time to process everything and understand the best way forward. Right now, my focus is on Gints' next



The ceremony's host, comedian Conan O'Brien, was quick to highlight the Baltic context, joking that "the ball is now in Estonia's court." Meanwhile, Matīss humorously noted that he has become an internet meme — a clip of him, caught in the excitement of the moment with his jacket buttoned incorrectly while standing on the most prestigious stage in the film industry, has gone viral. With his trademark irony, he remarked that this honour may even surpass the Oscar itself.





EXPLORING THE ESTONIAN ISLANDS AND PÄRNUMAA

Estonia's natural beauty and cultural richness have long inspired creative work. Now, with the support of two regional film funds – **the Estonian Islands Film Fund and the Pärnumaa Film Fund** – the country is taking deliberate steps to turn its diverse landscapes into active film production hubs.

By **Eda Koppel** Photos by **Viktor Tund**

PÄRNUMAA FILM FUND - NEW ENERGY ON WEST COAST

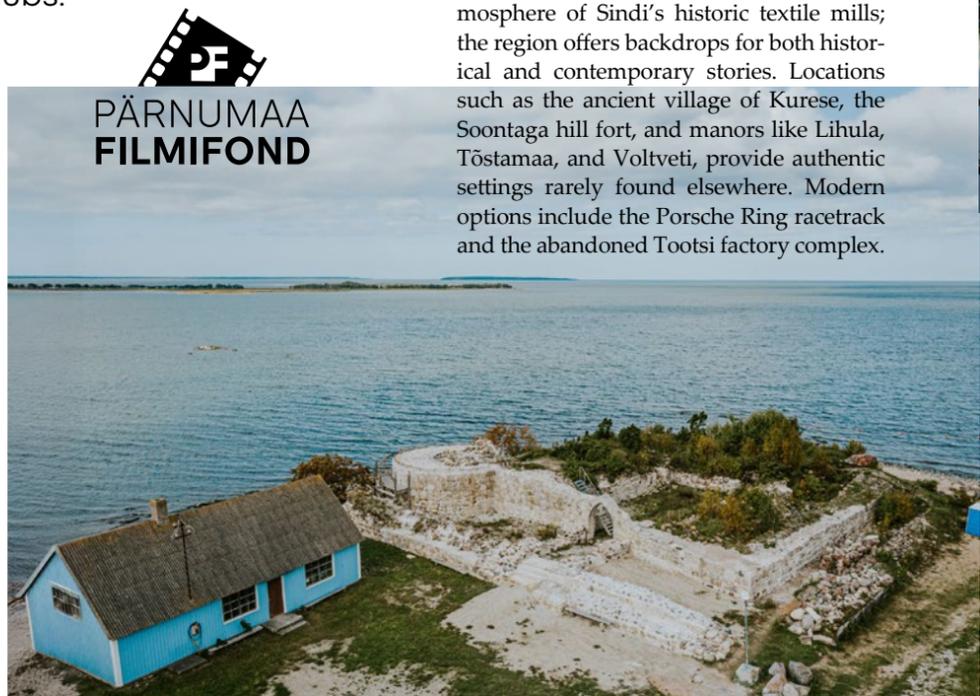
Launched in 2023, the Pärnumaa Film Fund is the newest of Estonia's regional film initiatives. Fully financed by the municipalities of Pärnumaa, the fund supports professional audiovisual productions, from feature films and documentaries, to animations and short films.

Interest is growing rapidly. Pärnu City, the region's cultural centre, is also in the process of joining the initiative, reflecting the fund's rising importance.

"Naturally, the local municipalities of Pärnumaa are interested in supporting filmmaking through the film fund to showcase our magnificent landscapes

and unique locations to the world. At the same time, the economic aspect is also important to us – productions supported through the film fund contribute to local entrepreneurship. And help foster the development of our communities and living environment," says Erik Reinhold, a Member of the Board of the Association of Local Authorities of Pärnu County.

What makes Pärnumaa especially attractive is its remarkable visual variety. From the bogs and forests of Soomaa and Matsalu National Parks, to the nostalgic atmosphere of Sindi's historic textile mills; the region offers backdrops for both historical and contemporary stories. Locations such as the ancient village of Kurese, the Soontaga hill fort, and manors like Lihula, Tõstamaa, and Voltveti, provide authentic settings rarely found elsewhere. Modern options include the Porsche Ring racetrack and the abandoned Tootsi factory complex.



PÄRNUMAA FILMIFOND

Pärnumaa has already been a filming location. The historical drama *The Poll Diaries*, co-produced with Estonia and starring Tambet Tuisk – who hails from Pärnu – was partly filmed in Varbla and Matsiranna. The area's long, untouched coastline – which is rare in Europe – provided a significant advantage. "This became a decisive factor specifically for our film production," says producer Riina Sildos.

Besides its landscapes, Pärnumaa provides a film-friendly infrastructure, including good accommodation, catering, and transport, along with locals who are open and supportive of film crews.

Although the fund is new, the region already has a place in Estonia's film history. In 2009, Pärnumaa hosted one of Estonia's first major international co-productions, *The Poll Diaries*, and was also the setting for one of Estonia's earliest films, *Bear Hunt in Pärnu County* (1914).



ESTONIAN ISLANDS FILM FUND - INTO THE STORY

Across the sea in Saare County, the Estonian Islands Film Fund has been operating since 2019. With a €26,000 budget for 2025, it offers up to a 40% cash rebate on eligible production costs. Despite its small size, the fund has had a noticeable impact. It has supported productions such as the Melchior the Apothecary trilogy and the Swedish-Finnish-Estonian co-production

The Swedish Torpedo, directed by Frida Kempff.

"Shooting in Estonia was great, also at Saaremaa, as it delivers very diverse shooting opportunities. We always felt welcome wherever we came and problems that naturally always arise were easily solved. The story of *The Swedish Torpedo* is set in Sweden, Denmark and the UK, and we could find external location alternatives for all of this. Also, the crew was extraordinary. Everything was top-level and exceeded our expectations," says producer Erik Andersson.

The islands combine isolation and accessibility. Saaremaa and Muhu are easy to reach by ferry or plane, yet offer a wide range of shooting environments: medieval castles, beaches, bogs, spa hotels, forests, and quiet small towns. This contrast allows for a variety of genres and periods to be filmed in a single area.

Production services are well developed, and local businesses – especially the well-regarded spa hotels – are experienced in hosting film crews.

"The Film Fund of Estonian Islands showcases Saaremaa's unique nature and

culture to filmmakers, inspiring them to discover new, previously unexplored filming locations and connecting them with local businesses and boosting the regional economy. Our support encourages film crews to choose Saaremaa, turning it into a stage for unforgettable stories," says Rainer Paenurk, founder of the fund.

TWO REGIONS, ONE VISION

The Pärnumaa and Estonian Islands Film Funds represent a national effort to decentralise film production beyond Tallinn. These funds aren't just funding mechanisms – they support regional development and local economies, and help introduce Estonia's lesser-known landscapes to the world.

They also open up new storytelling possibilities for international filmmakers in Northern Europe, offering authentic, accessible, and largely undiscovered cinematic locations. **BF**

FILM FUND OF ESTONIAN ISLANDS



Photo by Iris Kivisaalu

Photo by Pritidu Saart

RIDE TO THE '90s

Lukas Trimonis, producer of *The Southern Chronicles*, shares insights about the film that captivated audiences with its nostalgic trip to the '90s. It ultimately became the highest-grossing and most-watched film in Lithuanian cinema history.

By **Mintarė Varanavičiūtė** Photo by **Lukas Juzėnas**

At the end of January 2025, Lithuania welcomed the long-awaited film *The Southern Chronicles*, based on the novel of the same name by Rimantas Kmita. At the centre of the story is a young man named Rimantas (Džiugas Grinys), navigating life in the city of Šiauliai, Lithuania, as he tries to find his place in a society reshaped by the country's recent independence. Most of his days are spent playing rugby or chasing side hustles with his friend Mindė (Robertas Petraitis). But everything changes when he meets a wealthier, upper-middle-class teenager Monika (Digna Kulionytė).

The roots of the project go back to 2016, when Rimantas Kmita released his debut novel *The Southern Chronicles*, which soon became a bestseller. You were introduced to the book by director and screenwriter Eglė Vertelytė (*Miracle, Tasty*). How did your journey with *The Southern Chronicles* begin?

Yes, when Eglė first introduced me to the book, I read it right away. It was a quick and relatable read – everything felt so familiar, and it instantly brought me back to the '90s. Eglė and I co-founded In Script back in 2013 and have been working together ever since. We were both struck by the story, so it felt natural to start thinking about turning it into a film. We agreed

that Eglė would write the script first, and only after that we would begin assembling the director and the other key team members.

How did director Ignas Miškinis (*Easily and Sweetly, Low Lights, Kings' Shift*) join the project?

At first, we even considered the possibility of Eglė directing the film herself. Later on, we discussed various directors, but inviting Ignas on board felt like the perfect match for our team. He quickly became our top choice. I got his contact information and gave him a call. We connected right away, and the rest, as they say, is history.

How would you describe the creative process of working with Eglė and Ignas?

Our collaboration with Eglė has always been rooted in mutual trust and open feedback. She's incredibly creative, collaborative, and professional. Even in the first draft of the script, you could already see a strong foundation for the entire project. With Ignas, we needed to share the same vision – and we did. We were all committed to authentically capturing the mood of the book, staying true to its tone without making anything feel forced or artificial. And when it came time to execute specific tasks, we had full confidence in one another's decisions.

Naturally, no film is made without challenges.

What were the main challenges for you and how did you overcome them?

Like many filmmakers from smaller countries, we faced our share of financial challenges. While we received support from the Lithuanian Film Centre, we still had to seek additional investors. That's when the Estonian production company Nafta Films stepped in and helped us bring the film across the finish line. The shoot itself was also quite tough – we had just 28 shooting days, even though the script ideally called for 32 to 35. I clearly remember those first nine days being especially intense; we switched between as





many as eight locations in a single day. I'm incredibly thankful to the whole team – their dedication to the project was truly remarkable. Another major hurdle came when our lead actor, Džiugas Grinys, injured his knee and needed surgery, all while portraying a character who plays real rugby. And toward the final stages of production, clearing the music rights turned into the biggest challenge. We received the final agreements just in time for the film's first festival screenings – not due to a lack of planning or budgeting, but simply because the process itself is so painstakingly slow.

The actors who had to master the Šiauliai dialect significantly enhanced the film's authenticity. What were your criteria during casting?

Casting was in Ignas's hands. Some have noted that the lead actors appear older than typical high school seniors. However, if you look at old school photos, young people looked quite different back then. We aimed to find actors who not only resembled individuals from that era but could also embody very specific characters. It's hard to define that look exactly, but Ignas paid great attention to casting, and it really shows. We've received many comments from the audience about how close they feel to the characters, because they remind them of their childhood friends or relatives.

One of the film's most interesting elements is blending filmed footage with archival clips, edited by Danielius Kokanauskis. How long did it take to find those archival clips?

We began searching for archival footage during the film's development phase. Ignas personally reviewed countless VHS tapes, and we obtained a lot of material

Director Ignas Miškinis aimed to find actors who not only resembled individuals from the '90s but could also embody very specific characters.

from Šiauliai city TV and other broadcasters' archives. Historian Vytautas Starikovičius also collaborated with us, reviewing the entire Lithuanian National Radio and Television archives. He even went to the National Archives of Latvia to find more footage; some clips of Riga appear at the very beginning of the film.

The soundtrack by Vytis Purnas combines global hits and Lithuanian pop from that time with his own compositions. You mentioned the challenges in securing the rights. Why was it important to invest so much time and resources into that?

From the outset, this was one of our non-negotiables. Music plays a huge role in Kmita's novel – it's constantly referenced, and when you're reading the book, you hear a nostalgic soundtrack in your head. We felt that the adaptation wouldn't work without the right music. Sometimes films try to create music that sounds like well-known hits, but that wouldn't have sufficed for us. Vytis joined the project early on and created a 10-track wish list together. We worked with music su-

Even during development, when we were still writing the script, distributors, TV stations, and VOD platforms started reaching out to me with offers.



pervisor Sarah Chanderia (Hacate Entertainment Group), who operates in Norway and the U.S., and she helped us with cost estimates and acquiring the tracks. We had to drop some due to high costs or complex copyright issues, but we secured the main songs we wanted.

The film garnered attention long before its release. A year prior to its Lithuanian premiere, Džiugas Grinys won the European Shooting Star award at the Berlin Film Festival. Its international premiere was in Cottbus, followed by screenings at the Lithuanian Film Festival in Berlin. In November, the film was screened at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, where another actor, Robertas Petraitis, received the Black Night Star award, and the film itself was named Best Film in the Baltic Film Competition. How did such international recognition made you feel before the film's Lithuanian release?

Our strategy was to create a film for Lithuanian audiences, with festival invitations and everything else being a pleasant bonus. After the Tallinn Film Festival, we saw positive reviews from both professionals and viewers. Despite all those accolades, we were still very nervous before the Lithuanian release. Until it hits theatres, you never know how it will be received. We certainly didn't anticipate the level of success it achieved. In fact, the distributors had projected results that were already met during the first week of screening.

Upon release, the film broke two major records – it became both the highest-grossing and the most-watched film in Lithuanian cinema history. During production, what signalled such success?

We absolutely didn't expect this, and it would be unfair to attribute it to a single formula – luck also plays a role. However, I believe many factors came together. First, we were working with a bestselling book that already had a fanbase. Even during development, when we were still writing the script, distributors, TV stations, and VOD platforms started reaching out to me with offers. That had never happened before – I usually had to approach them. That was the first sign that we were creating something in demand. Of course, Ignas's involvement brought fresh, vibrant energy to the project. Most of the film was publicly fund-

The film's soundtrack combines global hits and Lithuanian pop from that time, which was essential in creating the right atmosphere.

ed, without an obligation to repay, giving the director more freedom to experiment, such as casting relatively unknown actors in lead roles. Once the film hit Lithuanian screens, *The Southern Chronicles* became a buzzword on social media, used by audiences aged 16 to 65. That shows that the film resonated for various reasons: for some, it felt like a nostalgic trip to their youth; others were intrigued by its distinct aesthetics, music, or something else that caught their attention.

The film has now earned €3 million in Lithuania and is approaching 400,000 viewers. How is it performing abroad? Where is it heading next?

After its screening at the Tallinn Film Festival, we began collaborating with sales agents Baltic Crime, who specialise in Baltic films. Internationally, *The Southern Chronicles* is arguably the most successful Lithuanian film among the diasporas – foreign exhibitors have informed us that it's been a long time since a Lithuanian film received this much diaspora attention. It has already been shown in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the UK, Ireland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the U.S., attracting approximately 14,000 viewers. We are currently awaiting results from Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands, where another 2,000 viewers are anticipated. Of course, we are also curious about how a wider international audience will respond to it. By the way, it's worth noting that the film is returning to Estonia – it will hit theatres there starting May 27. **BF**

The team of *The Southern Chronicles* at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival.



How to Find Money in Lithuania

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

The key funding body: Lithuanian Film Centre

LITHUANIAN FILM TAX INCENTIVE

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

KEY INFORMATION

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

HOW IT WORKS

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

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

PRODUCTION CRITERIA

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

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

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

citizens of Lithuania or citizens of other European Economic Area (EEA) countries.

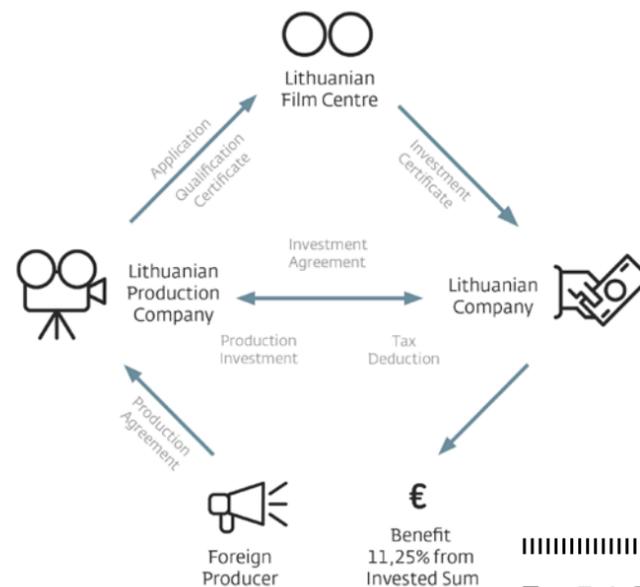
FACTS AND FIGURES

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

- Foreign projects received € 10,854,586.
 - Co-production projects received € 1,604,252.
 - National projects received € 5,650,795.
- In 2024, the Lithuanian Film Incentive was used by 67 national, 10 co-production, and 12 foreign (production service-based) film projects.

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

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



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

CONTACT:

Deimantas Saladžius
+370 6586 8822
d.saladzius@lkc.lt

Audrius Kuprevičius
+370 6506 6873
a.kuprevicius@lkc.lt



lkc.lt/en

BASIC FACTS

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

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

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

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

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

How to Find Money in Latvia



THE KEY FUNDING BODIES

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

Annual State Support for film industry 2024

(from all 4 key funding bodies) - € 11,349,382

Number of film productions supported by the National Film Centre of Latvia in 2025 - 39 films

NATIONAL FILM CENTRE OF LATVIA Minority co-production scheme

- Budget 2024: € 400,000
- For producers from all over the world (except for projects whose delegate producer is a company registered in Russian Federation or Belorussian Republic or who has received or has planned to have funding from the public sources in either country). The participation of Latvian co-producer is necessary. The bilateral treaty is not required.

- Supported films: fiction features (over 65 min), documentaries and animation films of any length. The film must comply with the terms and conditions for a Latvian film (according to the Film Law, a Latvian film is a film, which is produced by a Latvian film producer registered in the National Film Centre producer's register, and in the key creative team at least one member (director, scriptwriter, composer, set designer, animation artist or cinematographer) is a citizen of Latvia.
- The project can only be submitted by a production company registered in the producers' register in Latvia and the

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

• The film's delegate producer must be able to prove at least 50% of financing in place from his/her own country.

• 80% of the subsidy must be spent in Latvia.

• Call once a year, application time, deadline: March / April.

• Decision: 1 month.

CONTACT:

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

STATE CULTURE CAPITAL FOUNDATION

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

• Supports documentaries of any length, fiction shorts and animation films.

• Applicant for film projects - Latvian producer.

• Funding for audiovisual sector in 2024: € 1,391,806 (no specific amounts indicated for film productions, depends on the competition and available funding).

• Three application deadlines: January, May, September.

• Decision: 1 month.

CONTACT

Film curator Gita Krātiņa, gita@kkf.lv

INVESTMENT AND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF LATVIA

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

Photo by Armands Virbulis / Nordisk Film



- Support intensity: 30% of eligible costs.
- Selection rounds: The selection is open for at least 1 month. If funding is available after a closed selection, the Agency announces the next selection round.
- Decision: 1 month.
- Applicant: a company registered in Latvia.

Main Eligibility Criteria for Foreign Film Project:

- An agreement with a local production company is required,
- The film must be fully or partially filmed in Latvia ,
- The project must be a new foreign film, which can include a new season, episode, or part of a film ,
- The project must use the services of individuals or legal entities established in Latvia ,
- The total production costs must be at least: 711,436 EUR for feature and animation films , 142,287 EUR for documentaries,
- VAT contributions to the State budget must be at least 50% of the co-financing,
- The foreign producer must have at least 50% of the total filming costs available,
- Foreign funding must be at least equal to the eligible costs of the film project in Latvia,
- Filming must not have started before the project application submission date .

Estimated total available co-financing from 2025 to 2027 - 15.2 million EUR 2025 - 4,85 million EUR, 2026 - 5,07 million EUR, 2027 - 5,29 million EUR

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

CONTACT:

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

THE RIGA FILM FUND OF THE COUNCIL OF RIGA Cash rebate scheme Riga Film Fund co-financing programme

The programme is a production incentive

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

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

• Deadlines: open call until 30 September on first come first serve basis until the budget is depleted.

• Shooting must be finished and reports submitted by 30 November.

• Applicant: a company registered in Latvia.

• Annual budget: € 800,000.

• Decision: 1 month.

• The film's delegate producer must confirm that at least 50% of financing is in place at the time of submission of the application.

The scheme is open for:

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

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

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

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

palace built in 18th century, 100 km from Riga **Pristine nature:** There are four distinct seasons in Latvia. Over 500 km long white sand beaches - the coastline of the Baltic sea. Abundance of rivers and forests, lakes and swamps. **Advantages of filming in Latvia:** Internationally experienced technical crews, strong art department and construction teams, competitive costs, stages and backlots, wide range of extras.

CONTACT:

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

PUBLIC BROADCASTER

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

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

CONTACT:

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

OTHER IMPORTANT CONTACTS:

• Baltic Sea Forum for Documentaries: balticseadocs.lv

• Riga International Film Festival: rigaiff.lv/en/

• Documentary Film Festival Artdocfest/ Riga: artdocfest.com/en/

Danish feature fiction *Boundless*

How to Find Money in Estonia

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

By **EFI**

ESTONIAN FILM INSTITUTE PROGRAMMES FOR FILM PRODUCTION

MAJORITY CO-PRODUCTION

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

FEATURE FICTION:

- Budget 2025: € 4,182,000
- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 900,000.
 - Two application deadlines: May 6 and December 9.

FEATURE DOCUMENTARY:

- Budget 2025: € 990,000
- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 150,000.
 - Two application deadlines: March 18 and September 2.

ANIMATION (all lengths):

- Budget 2025: € 1,065,000
- Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is € 900,000 for feature animation & € 300,000 for short animation.
 - Two application deadlines: February 18 and September 9.

MINORITY CO-PRODUCTION

- Budget 2025: € 600,000
- For producers from all over the world. Participation of an Estonian co-producer is necessary. Bilateral treaty not necessary.
 - Subsidy of up to 70% of the Estonian part of the budget.
 - 100% of the subsidy must be spent in Estonia.

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

CONTACT:

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

FILM ESTONIA CASH REBATE

Budget 2025: € 6,000,000
Film Estonia cash rebate is a production incentive supporting the incoming production of feature films, feature documentaries, animation films, animation series, high-end TV-drama and the post-production of all previously mentioned works. An application can be made for international production service or co-production to receive a cash rebate up to 30% on eligible production costs.
• Support intensity - 20%-30% of eligible costs

- Deadlines - open call
 - Applicant - company registered in Estonia
 - Recipient - foreign company
 - Decision - in 30 days
 - Auditing and payment - in 40 days
- The scheme is open for:
- Feature films with a budget of at least € 1 million; minimum local spend € 200,000.
 - Feature documentary with a budget of at least € 200,000; minimum local spend € 70,000.
 - Animation with a budget of at least € 250,000; minimum local spend € 70,000.
 - Animation series with a budget of at least € 500,000; minimum local spend € 70,000 per series.
 - High-end TV-drama with a budget of at least € 200,000 per single episode; minimum local spend € 70,000 per series.
 - Post-production; minimum local spend € 30,000

Supported projects include:

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

CONTACT:

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

THE CULTURAL ENDOWMENT OF ESTONIA

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

MAJORITY CO-PRODUCTION

Financing for an Estonian co-producer the maximum subsidy is:

- FEATURE FICTION: € 200,000
- FEATURE DOCUMENTARY: € 50,000
- ANIMATION (all lengths): up to € 4,000 per minute, but no more than € 150,000 as a total subsidy..

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

TARTU FILM FUND

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate
Budget 2025: € 150,000

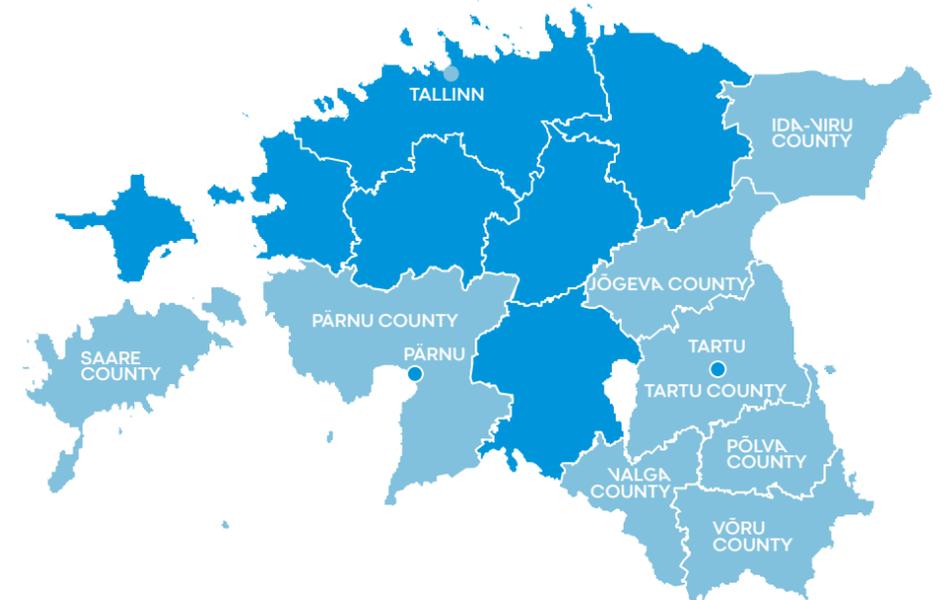
- Support intensity: up to 35%
- Objective: production of an audiovisual work in Tartu and the region of South-Estonia
- Support for the production of feature films, animations, TV-series, documentaries, short films.
- Participation of an Estonian production company is necessary.
- Two application deadlines: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

Recently supported projects:

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

CONTACT:

fund@tartufilmfund.ee
tartufilmfund.ee



PÄRNU COUNTY FILM FUND

Type of fund: regional incentive / cash rebate
Budget 2025: € 100,000

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

CONTACT:

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

VIRU FILM FUND

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate
Budget 2025: € 200,000

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

Recently supported projects:

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

CONTACT:

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

FILM FUND OF ESTONIAN ISLANDS

Type of fund: regional, incentive / cash rebate
Budget 2025: € 26,005

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

Recently supported projects:

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

CONTACT:

filmifond@sasak.ee
saartefilmifond.ee



Dr. Gražina Arlickaitė, Founder and Director of the European Film Festival SCANORAMA. Photo by Justinas Auskellius

SCANORAMA

FROM NORDIC ROOTS TO EUROPEAN SCREENS



Scanorama's artistic direction was inspired by changes in the film and cultural world - during 1995, several Nordic filmmakers kickstarted the DOGMA 95 movement, calling for the return to the very essence of cinematic art.

By **Dr. Gražina Arlickaitė, Founder and Director of the European Film Festival SCANORAMA**

In developing our festival, we decided that a combination of the highest standards, long-standing traditions and innovations, boldness and originality would be our starting point; and a guiding light in terms of values.

SPOTLIGHTING NORDIC TALENT

I had always been convinced that Nordic cinema and its auteurs would become a prominent voice in the choir of global

cinema over the next decade. I wanted to establish tongue-twisting Scandinavian names and introduce Lithuanian audiences to the works of Lars von Trier, Mads Mikkelsen, Aki Kaurismaki, and other budding filmmakers. Today, these figures are global film stars, winners of the Cannes Palme d'Or, Berlin Golden and Silver Bears, Venice Golden Lions, European Film Academy Prizes and other prestigious awards.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

Times and opinions started to change in Scanorama's favour. Over the years, we expanded the festival's geographical boundaries, and reinforced the new Scandinavian experience with the traditions of the Old Continent. In 2009, Scanorama went from a Nordic to a European Film Festival.

European Film Festival Scanorama is the cultural highlight of the Lithuanian autumn, and 2025 marks its 23rd edition. The festival spans all of Lithuania, and connects with the broader European cultural landscape, offering a high-quality alternative to consumerist approaches to cinema. It highlights the role of cultural and political context in artistic expression, and fosters dialogue between filmmakers, audiences, and critics. The programme, known for its

artistic quality and diversity, reflects current trends in European cinema, balancing content and form while showcasing originality and relevance. It explores new cinematic languages and storytelling methods, while honouring the rich traditions of European film through curated retrospectives.

NEW VOICES AND BOLD STORIES

At the heart of the festival are two thoughtfully curated competition programmes. The main competition showcases bold, original films by emerging European directors (those with no more than three feature films to their names) whose distinctive styles often remain under the radar outside of their home countries. These ten selected works highlight the richness of new European cinema in theme, form, and storytelling. An independent international jury awards the best film with a cash prize, while the showcase helps these voices reach wider audiences and secure a place in the cultural landscape.

The Short Film Competition programme outlines the future of the miniature forms in European cinema. Launched in 2008, it was aimed at emerging Baltic filmmakers who had not yet made their debut with a feature film. In 2019, the rest

SCANORAMA
NOVEMBER 6-16,
2025, IN VILNIUS

of the Baltic Sea Region was added to the competition. From 2022, the geography of the programme has been expanded to the whole of Europe. The competition reflects the trends, themes, and issues in young cinema and focuses on the search for new talent. An independent international jury selects the winners, awarding two cash prizes: one for the best film in the programme and another for the best Lithuanian short film.

BEYOND THE SCREEN

Since its inception, the festival has gone beyond screenings to explore the nuances of film production. Its annual industry event, SCA Directions, blends theoretical discussions with hands-on workshops, fostering both creative insight and practical skills.

In 2017, Scanorama, together with six other European film festivals, established the Moving Images - Open Borders network. Partners of this network include Crossing Europe Film Festival Linz (Austria), European Film Festival Palić (Serbia), Trieste Film Festival (Italy), Film Festival Cottbus (Germany), Les Arcs European Film Festival (France), Seville European Film Festival (Spain), sharing festival organisation experience, potential programme entries, valuable contacts, and looking for other areas of synergy. Scanorama is entrusted with the coordination of the network's activities and the management of the MEDIA budget.

In its more than twenty years of existence, Scanorama has gained the support of major national institutions, the European Film Institutes, and the European Commission's MEDIA programme and its sub-programme. **BF**



The opening ceremony of Scanorama's 20th anniversary festival.



2024 Main Competition jury members: Matthijs Wouter Knol (jury president), Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurðsson, Marta Balaga and Cédric Succivalli, and Scanorama director Gražina Arlickaitė.



Smoke Sauna Sisterhood was screened at Boston Baltic Film Festival in 2024.

Photo by Boston BFF



Celebrating Flow's success.



The panel introducing Baltic filmmakers in Boston.



Flow T-shirts have become very popular.

More Than Just FILM

BALTIC FILM FESTIVALS AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

According to the folks behind **Baltic film festivals**, these events don't only highlight cinematic gems but serve as trendsetters and symbols of trust. Aurelia Aasa observes how from New York to Paris, a growing network of festivals dedicated to Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian cinema is building cultural bridges and attracting diverse audiences worldwide.

By **Aurelia Aasa**

Baltic cinema is booming, and so is the film festival scene focusing on Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian cinema. Baltic film festivals serve obvious purposes such as connecting with audiences and showcasing regional talent, but according to Kyle Reinhart from New York Baltic Film Festival, they also function as cultural ambassadors in a larger context. "Due to the success of the film festival, Scandinavia House has now been able to regularly present more Baltic cultural programs including literary talks, music, and design events, in addition to a range of other Baltic film screenings and talks," shares Reinhart, manager of educational and cultural programs at Scandinavia House, and programmer at NYBFF, one of the oldest of its kind.

THE FESTIVAL BOOM

Baltic film festivals in New York and Boston both date back to 2018, their newer counterparts are Baltic film festivals in Paris and London. Why this sudden boom? "The idea was that Baltic films should be celebrated in other great cities and capitals around the world. It didn't happen overnight but has taken years to shape into a successful programme. Sym-



Boston Film Festival is held in the Paramount Cinema.

bolically, it all began with the global centenary celebrations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania," shares the head of the Estonian Film Institute Edith Sepp, who recently returned from the Baltic Film festival in Boston, which she describes as "an incredible event". The desire to take Baltic cinema to the world unites all festival organizers. "Boston BFF has been built into a successful celebration by Baltic people with little or no direct connection to the film industry - just a deep love for Baltic cinema," Sepp adds about Boston BFF, an event held annually at Boston's Paramount Cinema. This passion for cultural sharing is also echoed in London. According to Marika Goldman, Estonian Cultural Attaché to the United Kingdom, it's important to tell the story of Baltic culture through films. She elaborates: "We started organising the London Baltic Film Festival together with our Baltic colleagues because we saw the great potential of our films, and wanted to share them with London audiences." Renhart nods that despite the amount of work that it entails, it has been a pleasure bringing Baltic filmmaking to the New York audiences.

CINÉBALTIQUE IN PARIS

Newest of its kind is CinéBaltique, a Baltic Film festival held on the left bank of Paris, near the historical Luxembourg Gardens. According to Eike Eller, Estonian Cultural Attaché in France and one of the main organizers behind CinéBaltique, the inspiration came from similar festivals, and like with other events, the primary driving force was a wish to make

Baltic film more visible in France. "Our films have impressive festival selections and they are also winning awards, but they rarely reach cinema distribution here in France. There is a well-functioning long-term cooperation with our Baltic neighbours in the film sector, and choosing a slightly broader geographical focus seems attractive for film enthusiasts," explains Eller.

New York Baltic Film Festival

balticfilmfestival.com
November 5-16, 2025

London Baltic Film Festival

www.londonbalticff.com
November 27-30, 2025

CinéBaltique / Baltic Film Festival in Paris

www.cinebaltique.fr
February 2026

Boston Baltic Film Festival

www.bostonbalticfilm.org
February-March 2026



Baltic delegation in Boston.



Jaanika Peerna, Daris Dēliņš, and Gražina Michnevičiūtė

Kyle Reinhart, the programmer of the New York Baltic Film Festival

Photo by NYBFF

Photo by Matteo Zavadaskis



The director of *Toxic*, Saulė Bliuvaite, Lithuanian Cultural Attaché in France Austė Zdančiūtė and Estonian Cultural Attaché Eike Eller.



Actress Ester Kuntu presented *The Invisible Fight* at London Baltic Film Festival in 2024.

Photo by Marika Goldman

It's a logical step for the Baltics to work together, but are there any creative similarities? Thibaut Bracq, the programmer at CinéBaltique thinks, yes. "Every country has its own specificity, and inside each country, there are many differences between filmmakers and films, depending on cinema genre, films, directors, topics, directing language... But of course, if we have a general overview, we could say that Baltic films have some similarities." Bracq brings out that Baltic films deal with a specific remoteness - remote nature, edges. "They have a special sense of humour dealing with absurd and existential issues," he observes.

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

So, whom are these festivals for? Recently in Paris, I was surprised to bump into

friends at the cinema L'arlequin - there to visit the screening of *Lioness*, one of the features playing at CinéBaltique. For Estonians living abroad it's a chance to see recent films on a big screen. But is it only the Baltic diaspora, or can Baltic film festivals also serve as bridges between Baltic producers and the international film industry? Both Reinhart and Goldman mention that in addition to the Baltic diaspora, the festival attracts local visitors, some industry representatives amongst them. Attracting industry players is a definite milestone for CinéBaltique. "We wanted to be more visible with our films among French film industry professionals to generate more cooperation, co-productions, and to help films from our region find distributors," reveals Eller.

Regardless of who attends or where

they're held, Baltic film festivals both build and are built on communities. Madli-Liis Parts, Estonian cultural attaché to the US, explains: "Festivals showcasing Baltic films around the world have become important meeting points for Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian communities, as well as for a broader audience of cultural enthusiasts." She adds about NYCBBFF, "For Baltic communities in New York, it serves as a meaningful cultural gathering that strengthens identity and connection to home. Its thoughtful programming makes it a valuable bridge between the Baltics and North America. Thanks to strong local partners, particularly the dedication of Scandinavia House, the festival has become a symbol of trust, which is essential in bringing people together."

LOOKING AHEAD

Today we have NY, Boston, London, Paris, but according to Sepp, there are also cities like Rome, Madrid, or Barcelona in line, as well as locations in Germany. "Much depends on our visibility in these countries, and the need to make our presence seen and our films known. The goal of these festivals is clear: to make Baltic films as visible as possible. Our guiding principle has been stronger together, and as small counties, it has truly paid off," she summarises. **BF**



From left: Lithuanian Cultural Attaché in the UK Ūla Tornau, director and screenwriter Titas Laucius, Jana Mikulevič from Lithuanian Film Centre and Oskars Killo, organizer of the Baltic FF in London.



PÖFF 29

BLACK NIGHTS FILM FESTIVAL
TALLINN 7-23 NOV 2025



SUBMISSIONS ARE OPEN



Doc@PÖFF – Now in its second year among PÖFF's competition programmes



Youth and Children's Film Festival



Animated and Short films

FINAL DEADLINE
AUGUST 25

poff.ee/en/news/submissions-are-open-for-poff-29/



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& BALTIC EVENT**

14-21 NOV 2025

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BALTIC EVENT CO-PRODUCTION MARKET

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DISCOVERY CAMPUS

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KEEP AN EYE ON
SUBMISSIONS:
industry.poff.ee



*deadline for **BLACK NIGHTS STARS** is 24 MAY



Nordic Hotel Forum