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# Tesnota Closeness

A film by  
**Kantemir Balagov**

EXAMPLE OF INTENTION - ALEXANDER SOKUROV'S FUND - LENIN FILM FESTIVAL  
EMMA ZHIVNER, OLGA TRAFIMOVA, ARTEM KSYN, NASTI ZILUKI, VERA VIKI, ANASTASIA KANTEMIR BALAGOV, ANASTASIA YEMEL'YANKINA  
PRODUCED BY ANDRE YANTON, JAVIER GARCIA MURILLO, YURI ALBERT POKHLEN, DIRECTED BY KANTEMIR BALAGOV, COSTUME DESIGNER ELENA GIGURYESA  
EDITED BY ALEXANDER SOKUROV, EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS NIKOLAI YANIN, EDWARD POGOREL, ALEXANDER SOKUROV  
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EXAMPLE OF INTONATION and LENFILM present



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# TESNOTA

## CLOSENESS

A FILM BY

**KANTEMIR BALAGOV**

118 min/Russian and Kabardian/Color/5.1 PCM/1.33/Russian

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## **SYNOPSIS**

1998, Nalchik, North Caucasus, Russia.

24-year-old Ilana works in her father's garage to help him make ends meet. One evening, her extended family and friends gather to celebrate the engagement of her younger brother David. Later that night, the young couple is kidnapped, and a ransom demand delivered. In this close-knit Jewish enclave, involving the police is out of the question. How will the family raise the money to save David?

Ilana and her parents, each in their own way, will go as far as necessary, whatever the risks to themselves...

# INTERVIEW WITH KANTEMIR BALAGOV

## What led you to cinema?

I was born in Nalchik, in the North Caucasus, in 1991, and went to high school there. To be honest, cinema didn't come to me right away; I studied economics at Stavropol University, followed by a law correspondence course. But I quickly realized that wasn't for me and started looking for something else. My father had bought me a camera and I began taking photos; later I started to film things and ended up making web serials in Nalchik. I'd been doing this for about a year when a friend told me I should go and see Alexander Sokurov (I didn't know who he was at the time!). He had opened a film school in Nalchik three years earlier. We wrote to each other, spoke on the phone, he suggested that I join the school and go straight into year 3. Of course, I accepted and I don't regret it. In fact when Alexander Sokurov opened this school in the Nalchik University building, he wanted the course to last six or seven years but the university was opposed to this and the film studies course lasts five years. I joined in the autumn of 2011.

## Did you go regularly to the cinema before? What films had you seen?

I made up for lost time once I started studying. We saw many classics: French New Wave, cinema from the Khrushchev Thaw period<sup>1</sup>, war films... Of course, I'd never heard of the French New Wave before I joined the school, never heard of Renoir, Carné, Godard, etc. I had only seen mainstream films, unfortunately... In Nalchik we only have multiplex cinemas, no arthouse cinemas, as is the case in most Russian provincial cities. In short, I feel closer to the French New Wave, particularly the early Godard films, but I also love Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (for me, a perfect film), *Fists in the Pocket* by Marco Bellocchio, films from the sixties, *Mouchette* by Robert Bresson... When it comes to Russian and Soviet cinema, I'd put first Marlen Khutsiev's *I am Twenty*, *The Cranes are Flying* by Mikhaïl Kalatozov (the only Russian Palme d'Or in the history of Cannes, and largely well deserved, in my opinion) and generally speaking, the Khrushchev Thaw cinema.

## *Closeness* is your first feature-length film. What have you shot before?

I made a 40 minute film in 2013, while finishing my studies, entitled *Molodoy eschyo* (*Still Young*), and a 38 minute documentary, *Andryoukha* (about a young man affected by the early onset of schizophrenia but whose family relies on his market stall earnings), as well as 15 minute short in 2015, *Pervyy ya*, which was shown at the Short Film Corner in Cannes that year (my first time in Cannes!).

## Where did the idea for the screenplay originate?

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<sup>1</sup> From 1957 to 1964, from the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union denouncing the cult of Stalin, to the removal of Nikita Khrushchev.

This story of a kidnapping, relatively common in the nineties (this kind of problem hasn't existed since the early 2000s) I only heard from my father, when I was 17 or 18. Later, when I was studying, I thought it was good film material and started to explore the question of the Jewish diaspora - what little was left of it in Nalchik at the time. What interested me most were the feelings a family would experience when learning of the kidnapping of their son and above all, what these relatives would not be prepared to do to save their kin. It is this moral clash that I wanted to explore and talk about. Clearly one would do anything to save a loved one, but what people are *not* prepared to do is what was most interesting to explore. I wrote it with my co-writer, Anton Yarush, who is from Saint Petersburg. He wasn't familiar with this region. He intervened on my producer's request, after I had already written half of the screenplay, which he reviewed and revised. I had told him all I knew. What interested me was questioning the axiom according to which you have to sacrifice yourself to save a loved one. This is even more so in the Caucasus: it is even the primary axiom. Yet for me, this is a profound question: is it really human to oblige someone to sacrifice himself or herself to save a loved one? This is the starting point from which I explored the characters, the situations... I had some references in mind of course: Bresson's *Mouchette*, and *Rosetta*, by the Dardenne Brothers. It is a true story but of course we see on screen a collection of facts derived from different similar stories. We also made up certain things but the key scenes are true.

**Do you think there is a difference in the way the Kabardians and the Jewish people approach this situation?**

Jews and Kabardians can be as close to each other as they can be apart. Caucasian society is more patriarchal, Jewish society more matriarchal. Jews are more dynamic, more enterprising; the Caucasians are slower, more melancholic in a way. But the propensity to preserve the family, to preserve their roots, is common to both. There were many Jewish people in Kabardino-Balkaria. And during World War 2 and the invasion of the Caucasus by German troops, Jews were often hidden and protected by the Kabardians. They started to learn the Kabardian language and many of them settled after the war, creating a true Jewish community in Nalchik, with a Jewish quarter and a synagogue that is still there today. On the other hand, since Perestroika, there are unfortunately hardly any left: many emigrated to New York and Israel, and some moved to Moscow. One has to remember that at the end of the nineties, the second Chechen War began and the area became dangerous, even if no combat took place on our land, not even terrorist acts at that time. The only one took place the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2005, when terrorists tried to take over the city.

Kabardians are not very different from other people of the Caucasus. What unite them is their concern for honour and respect – even if honour and respect have become rare... I do not think there are major differences between the Kabardians, the Chechens or the Ingushetians. (I really hope I'm not upsetting anyone here). There are codes of conduct, dictated by Muslim religion or not, that you mustn't transgress. There are also some Russians left in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, the Kabardians are leaving now too. The economic situation is such that everyone wants to try their luck elsewhere, in Moscow, Saint Petersburg. Nalchik

has become a very poor city. The leaders of this autonomous republic care nothing about the wellbeing of their countrymen, whether they have jobs or not. So, it's every man for himself.

I carried this story inside me while I was still studying, and in the autumn of 2015 I went to Moscow to raise funds so I could put images to the story, Sokurov was doing the same thing for *Sofichka* (by Kira Kovalenko)<sup>2</sup> and I knew he wouldn't be able to raise funds for both. I sent my screenplay to every producer there. But those who replied told me that it wasn't commercial. In the end, Sokurov himself helped me and put the film into production, without any money from the State, or the Ministry of Culture or the cinema funds. It is Nikolay Yankin, director of the foundation Example of Intonation<sup>3</sup>, who produced it, raising the necessary funds himself. Then the studio Lenfilm became co-producer, by providing services: shooting equipment, costumes, post-production... But I have to say that the shoot took place without any problems, and the little money we had gathered was sufficient.

### **Where did you shoot the film? In Nalchik?**

No. For budgetary reasons we shot almost everything near Saint Petersburg, particularly the interiors. A minimal crew went to Nalchik to shoot the exteriors we needed, for only four days. We started shooting at the end of September 2016, finished the Saint Petersburg portion at the end of October, then went to Nalchik for four days in early November. Shooting wrapped on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016. I edited the film each evening, in parallel with the shooting, in order to know if I had to redo any shots. We filmed with an Alexa camera, of the first digital generation. My crew was very young, except for Lydia Kryukova, the costume designer, who has worked on almost all of Sokurov's films. But it was the first feature film for the DP, the sound engineer, the make-up artist... the set designer had made only made two films before.

### **How did you find your actors? Particularly the terrific Darya Zhovner?**

From the beginning I was adamant that the Jewish characters should be played by Jewish actors, and the Kabardian parts by Kabardians. It was a question of truthfulness. I had a casting director in Saint Petersburg who worked tirelessly. We found Darya Zhovner in Moscow; she had just completed her studies at MKhaT, Moscow Art Theatre. The parents are theatre actors from Saint Petersburg. The kidnapped brother is a cook, not a professional actor - even though he has appeared in a film by Aleksey German. Jr. Zalim, the Kabardian boyfriend, is a professional actor who studied at the famous Shchukin Theatre Institute in Moscow.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: *Sofichka* is the feature film debut of Kira Kovalenko, another of Alexander Sokurov's students, shot in Abkhazia – a Georgian territory occupied by Russian military forces – and the first film shot in the Abkzian language)

<sup>3</sup> This non-profit foundation was founded by Alexander Sokurov in 2013 to "support young authors taking their first steps in the art of cinema." It is named after the eponymous documentary directed by Alexander Sokurov in 1991 about Boris Eltsine.

**How do you work with actors? Do you allow them to improvise at all?**

It matters to me that there is some improvisation, otherwise the actors get bored. We rehearsed, of course; only the key scenes, the family scenes, so that during the shoot, the actors would be able to add something. We didn't rehearse a huge amount because I didn't want the characters to become blunted. We modified some of the dialogue that seemed fine at the writing stage but which became banal once spoken by the actors who have been able to develop their characters.

**You show videos of executions - how did you choose them?**

The longest one is a video that my friends and I got a hold of when we were about twelve, thirteen years old, on tape or DVD – I don't remember – that we used to watch together. I remember it very clearly because it was the first time that I was confronted with death, that I saw someone die slowly. We were as if spellbound, glued to these images shot at that time, in 1998, in a village in Daghestan. We weren't filled with anti-Russian feelings, we didn't take any pleasure in these images but we just couldn't take our eyes off them... The characters' reactions when they watch this tape are modeled on the reactions of my friends and me, all very different from one another.

**It is rare to see extremely personal cards on film, as we see at the beginning and end of *Closeness*?**

It came after a screening I had organized; a couple of Russian critics told me that they lacked a context to help them understand the story better. Alexander Sokurov suggested the idea of inserts so I could put the story in context: time, geography, nationality... I also loved the idea because I saw an opportunity to show a moment of true sincerity to the audience.

**Your choices of frame and sound are sometimes unsettling. Can you tell us more about your work with the DP and sound engineer?**

There was a keyword I insisted on while directing them: "constriction"<sup>4</sup>.

I wanted the audience to feel it, as much in the composition and framing as in the light and colors, as well as the sound. I wanted a development in the colors as the film progresses; I wanted the camera to jerk at times, as if it was having a fit, without my having to wonder if it was going to be beautiful or not. As for the sound, I was, for this film, a fierce advocate of direct sound.

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<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: The film's title in Russian is *Tesnota*, which commonly translates as narrowness, constriction, confinement.

## **NOTES**

The Kabardians, people from North Caucasus who speak Kabardian (not a Slavic language), have been subjected to Russian domination since 1825. With the Balkars (a Turkish-speaking and ethnically Turkish people), they have since 1936 formed the autonomous Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, included in the Russian Republic. The territory was occupied by German troops for five months during the winter of 1942-1943. The autonomous republic occupies 13,000km<sup>2</sup> of territory (it borders the Karachay-Cherkessia Republic to the West, the district of Stavropol to the North and North Ossetia to the East – all three included in the Russian Republic – and Georgia to the South) and has a little over 800,000 inhabitants (57% are Kabardians, 23% Balkars and 13% Russians). Nalchik is the capital (pop. 240, 000). On this territory stands the highest European mountain, Mount Elbrus, 5642 metres high.



## KANTEMIR BALAGOV

Kantemir Balagov was born on July 28, 1991 in Nalchik. In 2015, he completed his studies at the Director's course of Alexander Sokurov in Kabardino-Balkar State University.

2013 – **STILL YOUNG** (Molodoi echtchio), 40 min

2014 – **ANDYUKHA**, 38 min (documentary)

2015 – **FIRST I** (Pervyj ja), 15 min

2017 – **TESNOTA** *aka Closness*. (feature film) 118 min

## DARYA ZHOVNER

Born on September 20, 1992 in St. Petersburg, in 2016 she graduated from Viktor Ryzhakov's course at the Moscow Art Theater School.

TESNOTA aka Closeness marks her feature debut.

## CAST

Ilana	DARYA ZHOVNER
Adina	OLGA DRAGUNOVA
Avi	ARTEM TSYPIN
Zalim	NAZIR ZHUKOV
David	VENIAMIN KATS

## CREW

Directed by	KANTEMIR BALAGOV
Screenplay	ANTON YARUSH KANTEMIR BALAGOV
D.P.	ARTEM YEMELYANOV
Sound	ANDREY NIKITIN
Color Grading	YEVGENY MIRONENKO
Production Designer	ALEXEY PADERIN
Editor	KANTEMIR BALAGOV
Costume Designer	LYDIA KRYUKOVA
Make-up	ELENA GRIGORYEVA
Artistic Advisor	ALEXANDER SOKUROV
Producers	NIKOLAY YANKIN (EXAMPLE OF INTONATION - ALEXANDER SOKUROV'S FUND) EDWARD PICHUGIN (LENFILM) ALEXANDER SOKUROV
Production	EXAMPLE OF INTONATION - ALEXANDER SOKUROV'S FUND LENFILM
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