

MAMA, YA DOMA (MAMA, I'M HOME)

a film by Vladimir Bitokov

Venice International Film Festival 2021 | Orizzonti



Director: Vladimir Bitokov

Screenwriter: Maria Izyumova

Producers: Alexander Rodnyansky, Sergey Melkumov

Executive producer: Natalia Gorina

Director of photography: Ksenia Sereda R.G.C. (*Beanpole* by Kantemir Balagov)

Production designer: Maxim Maleev

Make-up artist: Marina Mikhnevich

Costume designer: Olesya Vavilova

Editor: Anna Mass

Sound designer: Rostislav Alimov

Original music by: Dmitry Evgrafov

Cast: Kseniya Rappoport (Tonya), Yura Borisov (Zhenya), Ekaterina Shumakova (Ksyukha), Alexander Gorchilin (Nazarov), Natalia Pavlenkova (Anya), Darren Kushkhov (Egor), Mazhit Zhanguzarov (Valera), Valeriy Balkizov (Burlookov)

Production: Non-Stop Production, AR Content

International Sales: Wild Bunch International

104 min – Russia – 2021

SYNOPSIS

Tonya is a bus-driver in a village on the outskirts of Nalchik, a modest city in the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Together with her daughter, Tonya is eagerly awaiting the return of her only son, who is fighting for a Russian private military contractor in Syria. When Tonya is told that he has been killed in action, she refuses to believe it. She is sure that there was a mistake and that her son is alive. She begins a grueling public battle with the contractor and the authorities, demanding the return of her son. When it becomes obvious that all efforts to silence Tonya are fruitless, a strange young man arrives on her doorstep...

Q&A WITH DIRECTOR VLADIMIR BITOKOV

How did your career in cinema begin?

I was born in Nalchik. My father is Kabardian and my mother is Russian. I didn't leave Nalchik until 2004, when I went to study in London for a little while, before returning to Nalchik. In 2010 I joined Alexander Sokurov's film classes, also in Nalchik. I was actively looking for somewhere to study, to get an education. I was going to enter the Faculty of Journalism at Kabardino-Balkarian State University, but then I found out that a directing department had opened and that Sokurov would be teaching, so I decided to try to get in there. It was all quite spontaneous and I knew basically no one. I was a casual acquaintance of Kira Kovalenko, but that was it. I didn't know Kantemir Balagov at all.

What was it like studying under Sokurov?

It was difficult. It was comprehensive, complex, taking up many hours every day. No days off, no holidays, no vacations. A lot of literature to read, and a huge number of films to watch. Plus, we worked for many, many hours on set, every day. We had acting classes where we studied the craft on stage, as if we were training to be actors. Turns out it's really helpful when working with actors because we understand them better, so it's easier for us to direct them, since we went through the same tuition they went through. There's one thing, I guess, that sets us apart from other film schools (besides, of course, the identity of our founder): all the teachers were personally selected by Sokurov, and they were all outstanding individuals who travel the world giving lectures. As well as professional skills, I took on board several important things from Sokurov, the main one being to avoid the aestheticization of violence, i.e. not showing violence on screen in an attractive way. My studies also taught me to refrain from blaming or mocking people in my films. I learned to show that each person has their own truth, their own inner nobility. It's important for me personally to see the reasons and understand the actions of all the characters. Then there's the filming process: Sokurov taught me never to overwork the crew on set.

Did you ever have any doubts that you wanted to be a filmmaker?

I did have difficult periods during my studies, but I realized almost immediately that this was my calling, that I wanted to be there. Of course, I had more than enough internal doubts. That's normal. It would be strange if there weren't any. I still have them. All of us who studied under Sokurov ended up there by chance, one way or another. Very few of us thought that we would be directors. We hadn't dreamed about it from childhood, we just suddenly lucked out. I still sometimes wonder whether I am worthy of being a director, and who gives me the right. But I can't help myself. I love this profession too much.

How did your film *Mama, I'm Home* come about?

After my debut film, *Deep Rivers*, I had a difficult break in my work and I just couldn't move on to my next project. As things turned out, – once again quite by chance – I went to the Kinotavr film festival, just to watch the work of my fellow students on the big screen: *Beanpole* by Kantemir Balagov and *A Russian Youth* by Sasha Zolotukhin. I just got on a bus in Nalchik and went to Kinotavr for two days, uninvited. At the festival I happened to speak to Alexander Rodnyansky, and he hinted that he might give me a start. So I came to Moscow. And while we were developing the idea for my next film, I was offered a script by Masha Izyumova to read. It was an absolutely amazing script. I really liked it. I asked Rodnyansky if I could film it.

What drew you to this script?

I really liked the story of a strong woman who fights against her circumstances, who doesn't accept things as they are and doesn't give up, but fights. I think that this is a very important story right now, especially for Russia. Plus, the theme – one's child leaving for war and not returning – is especially relevant in the North Caucasus, where one can frequently witness a world of lonely mothers. I knew many guys who died in the war on different sides. But it's the idea of a strong woman who just won't give up that's most important.

What inspired you while preparing for this film??

I watched lots of videos on YouTube of rallies by soldiers' mothers, how they behave and how they talk. I tried not to take references from cinema. Ksenia Sereda, our cinematographer, and I looked to paintings, and sometimes stills. I used Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World* as my main source of visual inspiration. It depicts a woman lying in a field with her house standing in the background. At first glance, it looks a little romantic – there's a beautiful girl lying in a field, looking into the distance. When you start looking more closely and learn the character's story, what is happening, and why she's lying there, it becomes unsettling. It's an amazing painting. For me, it was fundamentally important to make not so much an homage, but more of

a reference to this work. There's a sequence in the film where Tonya lies in front of her house just like this at the moment when she realizes that the world is becoming completely hostile to her, and that now she will be forced to exist and fight in this world just like the heroine of Wyeth's picture.

Was it important for you that the action took place specifically in Kabardino-Balkaria and not just somewhere in Russia?

Very. Firstly, because that part of the world is much more familiar to me than any other. I lived there; I know the people. I observed them all my life and lived alongside them. For example, I don't really know how people in a small village in the Rostov region live. I do have some ideas, but these are just conjecture and, as often happens, they may be stereotypes. Whereas I have reasonable knowledge of the North Caucasus. Secondly, it's because it seemed to me that it might provoke some idea of national diversity. I had no intentions of making national conflict, an unfortunate fact of life here, just like everywhere else, a sub-plot of the film. But to me it seemed that the idea of national diversity within one small town was important for this story.

Films are rarely made in Kabardino-Balkaria. How did you find places to shoot?

It wasn't very difficult, because as a local I knew most of the locations. Of course, we drove around a lot, searching and selecting. There were various options. I found some of them on my own. For example, an abandoned manor which, in line with the film's plot, requires restoration. The estate is popularly called Khrushchev's Dacha, although Khrushchev never went there as far as I know. It's in the village of Belaya Rechka, not far from Nalchik. I saw the building for the first time when I was finishing school. My class went on an outing to celebrate, and the teacher took us to the manor. When we started looking for locations, I went to Nalchik on my own and remembered this building. The most difficult building to find was the house where Tonya, the main character, lives. I wasn't sure until we drove up a hill by mistake, and saw this two-story house there, standing in the middle of a private plot, high on the hill. It was an old mudbrick house made from clay, straw, and dung. There was once a school in the building before it was converted into apartments. We found two rooms on the second floor of this house which we made into Tonya's apartment.

How difficult was it to shoot in Kabardino-Balkaria?

There's a location for everything in Kabardino-Balkaria. Anything can be filmed there except for scenes by the sea. Sometimes, these locations are so beautiful that they seem unreal. I lived in Kabardino-Balkaria for 35 years, and any time I'd go up into the mountains, it seemed too beautiful to be true. There are incredible views, just amazing. From a production point of view, of course it's difficult to shoot in Kabardino-Balkaria, because it doesn't have its own equipment facilities or film crews. Everything has to be brought in. But, in my opinion, it's worth it. We're currently filming in Moscow, and

there's a huge difference in the attitude of local residents to filming. When you shoot in Kabardino-Balkaria, everyone is interested, they want to help, and they're as friendly as possible. Here in Moscow, everyone is accustomed to filming and it's more of an annoyance. And in Kabardino-Balkaria, things can be organized with a phone call and a simple request, whereas it costs ridiculous money here. I think that Kabardino-Balkaria is the most promising region for film making, if we can just handle setting up a studio that will provide equipment, and organizing incentives for film crews through the local government. I think that if we take steps like this, a lot of Russian filmmakers will go there to shoot, because you can find anything you want there.

Critics sometimes group you, Kira Kovalenko, and Kantemir Balagov together as the “Caucasian New Wave.” Do you think you have something in common in terms of style or artistic language?

I think we are united by our desire to bring our world, which we are familiar with, to Russia and to the planet. We share a desire to show others our life. It's our inner aspiration, rather than something that was imposed on us. We're really set on it. But it still came from Sokurov, who, for that very reason, held his classes in Nalchik rather than anywhere else. When he first joined, Kantemir and I became very close friends. We are still pretty close. We were both Manchester United fans. I have a great relationship with Kira too. We use a lot of common themes and conversations. We are all from Nalchik and we all saw the same thing in one way or another. I have a lot in common with Kantemir. He also has a Kabardian father and Russian mother. He doesn't speak the Kabardian language either, and we both exist there and here at the same time. Nevertheless, there's no kind of internal manifesto of “this is how we'll show things”. We all work on our ideas independently. We simply hang out as friends rather than discussing creative stuff.

In addition to locations, you actively involved local residents and non-professional actors in the film. What was it like working with them?

The main thing that distinguishes a non-professional performer from a professional one is the number of times you repeat things. Professional actors are trained to be able to repeat the same thing many, many times and to do lots of takes. Non-professionals aren't up to constant repetition. They think that if the director says that they're doing another take, then everything they're doing is wrong and it means that they've failed, so they do each take differently. And, for example, when you need to shoot a scene from one angle and then the same thing from another angle, when you need to repeat the movements in exactly the same way, a non-professional actor cannot do this, because they don't have the inner discipline. This is where difficulty sometimes arises in the work. On the other hand, non-professional actors don't act, they simply behave naturally, and this sometimes makes cool things happen in the shot.

The main roles are played by Rappoport and Borisov. How did you choose them?

What happened was, while preparing for it, Rodnyansky and I were discussing the main character. And as part of this discussion, we met with Kseniya Rappoport. We talked about the script in broad terms and then I invited her to take a walk. We walked around Moscow for an hour and a half, and I told her everything I wanted to do. She told me how she visualized it. After that I simply had no doubts.

I met Yura Borisov at a festival in Prague. I was there with *Deep Rivers*. And I just walked and talked with him. I liked his character so much and his personality that I thought I would really like to work with him. We had many different open calls and tried many actors for this role, but I fought hard for Yura, because various doubts were raised. But in the end everything turned out the way I wanted. It was a hole-in-one.

What was it like working with your cinematographer Ksenia Sereda?

Ksenia is brilliant, just brilliant. I talked with the producers, and they asked me who I would like as my cinematographer. And of course, after the success of *Beanpole*, I didn't even dare to suggest her. There wasn't much time to prepare, and it was clear that Ksenia had a lot of other projects on. And I said honestly that I didn't know who I would like, and I would need to think and see. And they said to me: "Why don't you ask Ksenia?" So said: "Sure, let's do it." I didn't even know her at the time. We met, talked, and discussed it; she liked the script, and we started working. I learned a lot from her during filming.

How would you describe the visual approach that you and Ksenia took to the film?

We decided that in terms of the color scheme, Andrew Wyeth would resonate in this story, with the restrained, cold colors he uses. Tonya's story was filmed with long shots and a hand-held camera, to give it a dynamic feel, whereas the parallel story focusing on the officials from the local administration is more static and uses more montage. At some point it was important for us to create an aesthetical clash between the moving camera and this static imagery. For example, when Tonya actually begins to strongly influence their circumstances, hand-held camera work appears in their story. When Tonya depends on them, a static camera is used in her scenes. We came up with all of this in pre-production. It wasn't a case of me reading the script, and saying that's it – it's all set in stone. It was all part of a process. Some ideas that first came to mind and seemed great then turned out to be absolutely terrible in the end. That's a lengthy working process for you.

Tell us about the Rappoport dance scene, when the viewer only sees her shadow. How did that come about?

It was a very difficult element to film. It came about either just on the eve of the shoot, or when we were already underway. We knew that the heroine needed an emotional outburst. And this is the only moment when Tonya sees her son, and when we see him, albeit indirectly: we see his room and his things. And it was very difficult and took ages to choose the song, the son's song. We spent a very long time thinking about how to show this emotional outburst with the music so that it wouldn't look too artificial. Then came the idea of shooting the shadow. The shadow without the heroine. Her shadow in the cage formed by the blinds, her shadow that rages against her circumstances. But this dance and this final release of hers is what gives her strength for further struggle and for further action. Before that, Tonya is still a little dependent. She is still rushing about looking for options. She asks for help. But after that, she has the strength to take matters into her own hands. I think it's a very important scene for the whole film, and I insisted that we didn't cut it down during editing, but left it intact.

How free were you in your creative decisions? How did you work with the producers?

They give me a lot of freedom, and I really like it. Rodnyansky is a companion and a comrade, in a good way. You can talk to him about anything and he is able to offer you something new, there's no totalitarianism in him. He always listens. And given that he has an incredible wealth of knowledge, experience in cinema, and understanding of modern processes, he always has useful things to say. But he still gives you freedom to work, which is very important. He never says: "This is the way things are going to be." We had a rather difficult moment during post-production for this film, and still I did it the way I wanted. I had to show him and prove to him what I wanted to do, but he accepted it. That was really cool.

Let's wrap up by talking about some other people's films. What has impressed you lately?

I watch the same films as everyone else, but most of all I love films when I have no idea how they've been made. Not technically, but in terms of screenwriting. In that vein I'm going to be boring and name Bergman. I don't get how he worked with the actors and how he had to direct them for them to act like that. But in general, I admire anyone who treats cinema honestly. It's always obvious when a film is being made insincerely. You can always see when the director is messing around and being self-indulgent. But when a director does their work honestly, even if something doesn't work out, I'm always very happy and enjoy watching.

Recently, the films that have made the strongest impression on me are *A Hidden Life* by Terrence Malick and *Nomadland* by Chloe Zhao. I watched that film four times. I think it's something really incredible. Frances McDormand was absolutely outstanding, the script was terrific, very measured and very poignant at the same time.

CREW

DIRECTOR VLADIMIR BITOKOV | BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY

Vladimir Bitokov was born in Nalchik, Russia, in 1985.

He graduated from Alexander Sokurov's directing workshop at Kabardino-Balkarian State University. *Mama, I'm home* marks his second feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

2018 | Deep Rivers

2021 | Mama, I'm Home

ALEXANDER RODNYANSKY | A STATEMENT FROM THE PRODUCER

I was deeply impressed by Vladimir Bitokov's debut feature *Deep Rivers*. I saw tremendous internal energy in his film, a striving for authenticity and a deep desire to depict human relations most realistically. It was no coincidence that *Deep Rivers* won the prize for Best Debut at Kinotavr Film Festival. It also meant a lot to me that Vladimir studied under Alexander Sokurov. By that time, I already realized what kind of education this great master gives to his students and how he imbues them with a deep desire to tell their own stories and not repeat the stories of others.

It was obvious to me that to Vladimir it would be much more comfortable working on the script with another writer. He comes up with a premise and a concept but requires a skilled writer to flesh out the story - this happens sometimes with good directors. Almost as if a miracle happened: we got the script of VGIK graduate Mariya Izyumova. It was an amazing script, which was doubly amazing because it was a debut for Mariya - this almost never happens. We bought it right away, even without knowing for sure who would direct this story.

I sent the script to Vladimir Bitokov who fell in love with the idea. Originally the story took place in Krasnodar region - an area very well known to Mariya. But we decided to change the location to North Caucasus, to a small town near Nalchik - a place more familiar to the director. Thus the real work on the script begun. Bitokov and Izyumova changed a lot in the original script to fit the story better to the realities of the region. They also worked to make the dialogues reflect the ethnic diversity of the region.

As a seasoned producer I realized that Bitokov is a director who strives to tell relevant and at times controversial stories using genre. By doing that he is able to significantly widen the potential audience of his films. I believe in this respect he is unique among contemporary Russian directors. He is one of the very few people who really understands elevated genre and he is able to do genre films with powerful substance. His films are intricate and complex, but they have a potential to appeal even to the audience that traditionally shies away from festival fare and independent films.

Vladimir wanted to cast an unknown, maybe even an amateur actress in the lead role, but I convinced him to cast a well-known actress instead. I respect his desire to work with non-professional actors but this role asked for incredible performance range, nuance, understanding of the profession and professionalism in every sense of the word. I asked Vladimir to think about Xenia Rappaport and he instantly realized her potential. He changed Rappaport in this role and I don't mean with makeup but rather with his direction and her work. This role is unique and doesn't look like any of Xenia's previous roles. In the end the film shows an unexpected and complex mix of unprofessional and well-known actors.

I believe that in the end Vladimir's film is very powerful and very contemporary. It speaks candidly about the world we live in, but this is not journalism through film. Rather the film becomes relevant and even edgy because of the drama of the main heroine and her complicated and complex relationships with the character of Yura Borisov. The visual language that Vladimir chose accentuates this without ever being manipulative. No one is trying to squeeze a tear from the audience and yet the audience weeps. I am sure that this film will find its viewers everywhere and will touch the hearts of the audiences around the world.

PRODUCER ALEXANDER RODNYANSKY | BIOGRAPHY

One of Russia's most prolific producers, Alexander Rodnyansky is the founder of AR Content, a Los Angeles based development and production banner designed to deliver premium quality content for film and television on an international scale. AR Content is a hub for filmmakers and screenwriters to develop their passion projects and partner with producers and distributors, in order to foster a cohesive creative vision.

This year in Cannes, his latest film *Unclenching the Fists* from emerging Russian filmmaker Kira Kovalenko received the Grand Prix in Un Certain Regard. Also in development are Kevin Macdonald's Untitled World War II refugee documentary; the Ziad Doueiri-directed *Debriefing the President*; and Kornel Mondruzco's series *Everybody's Woman*.

With over 30 television series and 40 feature films under his belt, including key works by some of the most renowned filmmakers in Russian history, Rodnyansky continues to produce a blend of acclaimed Russian arthouse cinema and global blockbusters. Under his AR Films and Non-Stop Production banners, Rodnyansky is behind such renowned films as: *Beanpole* by Kantemir Balagov (Best Directing Award at Un Certain Regard in Cannes in 2019), Academy Award® nominee *Loveless*; Golden Globe® winner and Academy Award® nominee *Leviathan*; Venice Film Festival's award winner *The Man Who Surprised Everyone*; Fedor Bondarchuk's Russian blockbuster *Stalingrad*; *Elena*, which won the Special Jury Prize in Un Certain Regard

at the Cannes Film Festival. Academy Award® and Golden Globe® nominee *East/West*; and Nana Dzhordzhadze's Academy Award® nominee *A Chef in Love*.

Past American producing credits include Robert Rodriguez' *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*; Robert Rodriguez's *Machete Kills*, starring Danny Trejo and Mel Gibson; *Cloud Atlas* by Lana and Lilly Wachowski and Tom Tykwer; and *Jayne Mansfield's Car* with director Billy Bob Thornton.

NON-STOP PRODUCTION

Non-Stop Production was established in 2005 and is jointly owned by producers Alexander Rodnyansky and Sergey Melkumov. It is one of the leaders and major studios in the Russian film market whose projects enjoy state support. Non-Stop Production produces a wide range of film and TV content, from quality indies and auteur cinema to high budget mainstream movies, as well as TV mini-series. The company's projects include: *Elena* (Un Certain Regard prize winner at the Cannes Film Festival), *Leviathan* (Best Script at Cannes Film Festival, Golden Globe™ and the Academy Award® nomination for Best Foreign Language Film) and *Loveless* (Jury Prize at Cannes Film Festival, Golden Globe™ and the Academy Award® nomination for Best Foreign Language Film) by internationally acclaimed director Andrey Zvyagintsev.

Together producers Rodnyansky and Melkumov are responsible for most of the highest-grossing Russian films of the last decade, including such smash-hits as *The 9th Company*, *The Inhabited Island* and *Stalingrad* by Fedor Bondarchuk, which was the highest grossing Russian film of the decade and the first ever Russian film in IMAX 3D bringing in over \$70 million internationally. Their subsequent joint project, adventure film *The Duelist*, was the third Russian film in IMAX format, transporting audiences to the unexpected and intriguing world of 19th century St Petersburg.

Both producers' involvement in Russian auteur cinema is extensive. In addition to the projects mentioned above, Rodnyansky and Melkumov produced respectively: *The Sun* directed by Alexander Sokurov (Official Selection - Berlin International Film Festival) and *Tulpan* by Sergey Dvortsevov (Main Prize at Un Certain Regard at Cannes Film Festival).

AR CONTENT

Launched in May 2018, AR Content is Academy-Award © nominated producer Alexander Rodnyansky's Los Angeles based development and production banner, designed to deliver premium quality content for film and television on an international scale. With a focus on true stories, around global events or spotlighting relevant and diverse cultural situations, the company will also delve into fictional drama and genre

films. AR Content is a hub for filmmakers and screenwriters to develop their passion projects and partner with producers and distributors, in order to foster a cohesive creative vision. Rodnyansky has produced prestigious films such as Academy Award® nominee *Loveless* and Golden Globe® winner *Leviathan*. In Cannes 2021, AR debuted *Unclenching the Fists* from emerging Russian filmmaker Kira Kovalenko as part of the official festival line-up, where it won the Un Certain Regard Grand Prix. AR Content's nascent slate includes Kevin Macdonald's Untitled World War II refugee documentary; the Ziad Doueiri-directed *Debriefing the President*; and Kornel Mondruzco's series *Everybody's Woman*.

CAST

KSENIYA RAPPOPORT

Kseniya Rappoport is a Russian actress. She graduated in 2000 from St Petersburg Academy of Theatrical Arts and was immediately invited to join the Maly Drama Theatre. She has played Nina Zarechnaya in *The Seagull*, Elena in *Uncle Vanya*, and Sonia in *La doppia ora*.

She starred in the Italian films *La sconosciuta* (The Unknown Woman; 2006), *L'uomo che ama* (2008) and in *The Double Hour* for which she won the Volpi Cup for Best Actress at the 66th Venice Film Festival.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2006 | *The Unknown Woman* by Giuseppe Tornatore

2008 | *Yuri's Day* by Kirill Serebrennikov

2009 | *The Double Hour* by Giuseppe Capotondi

2016 | *The Queen of Spades* by Pavel Lungin

2021 | *Mama, I'm Home* by Vladimir Bitokov (Orizzonti, Venice Film Festival)

YURA BORISOV

Yura Borisov was born on December 8, 1992 in Reutov, Moscow Oblast near Moscow. In 2013 he graduated from the Shchepkin Higher Theater School (course of Vladimir Mikhailovich Beilis and Vitaly Nikolayevich Ivanov), and won the Golden Leaf award in the Best Actor category for the role of Alexander Tarasovich Ametistov in the play *Zoykina's Apartment*.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2019 | *The Bull* by Boris Akopov

2020 | The Silver Skates by Michael Lockshin

2021 | Compartment #6 by Juho Kuosmanen (Grand Prix, Cannes Film Festival)

2021 | Petrov's Flu by Kirill Serebrennikov (Official Competition, Cannes Film Festival)

2021 | Gerda by Natalya Kudryashova (Best Actress Award at Locarno Film Festival)

2021 | Mama, I'm Home by Vladimir Bitokov (Orizzonti, Venice Film Festival)

2021 | Captain Volkonogov Escaped by Natasha Merkulova and Alexey Chupov (Official Competition, Venice Film Festival)