

A film by Kira Kovalenko

UNCLENCHING THE FISTS

NON-STOP PRODUCTION

ALEXANDER RODNYANSKY AND SERGEY MELKUMOV PRESENT UNCLENCHING THE FISTS

A FILM BY KIRA KOVALENKO

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UNCLENCHING THE FISTS

a film by **KIRA KOVALENKO**

97 min - Russia – 2021 – Color - 2,35 - 5.1

INTL PR:

DDA

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INTL SALES:

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SYNOPSIS

In a former mining town in North Ossetia, a young woman struggles to escape the stifling hold of the family she loves as much as she rejects.



THE FILM

The small mining town of Mizur lies high in the mountains of North Ossetia between steep cliffs. Zaur has settled his family here. He keeps his sons and daughter on a short leash, blind to the line that separates fatherly concern from overprotectiveness. His eldest, Akim, has already run off to the nearest city, Rostov, to find work. Meanwhile, his youngest, Dakko, isn't entirely sure yet what he wants out of life, while middle child, Ada, is actively planning her own escape. Although she's already a young woman, her father still insists on treating her like a defenseless little girl. Freeing herself from his strong paternal embrace to finally embark on an independent adult life of her own is proving tougher than she anticipated. But just what is this father trying to protect his daughter from?

Kira Kovalenko: The initial inspiration for the story came from a line in Faulkner's Intruder in the Dust about how, while some people can endure slavery, nobody can stand freedom. The idea of freedom as a burden was the single most important theme for me while I was working on the film. Inevitably, the same idea led me to reflect on the burden of memory, and on the link between the two. Is it possible to endure freedom from memory? I turned to my own burden of memory, which included an event that was transformative and traumatic for me and many other people as well. The result was a tale of people who lived through this event, and who, many years later, are trying to come to terms with the trauma it caused. The world around them is still scarred by it, and they're broken themselves, in a way that dictates all of this family's relationships with each other. The attempt to forget and to preserve entails an act of violence against human will, which, paradoxically enough, is also an act of love.

The North Caucasus

The North Caucasus is a region of the Russian Federation that comprises seven republics: Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania (where *Unclenching the Fists* is set), Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. The region is located between Russia and the countries of the South Caucasus, whose incorporation into the Russian Empire led to the conquest of the North Caucasus in the Caucasian War (1817–1864). It may have ended 150 years ago, but the effects of this war are still making themselves felt: the echo of two Chechen wars lasting from 1994 to 2009 has reverberated throughout the Caucasus and indeed all of Russia. The small town of Mizur is separated from the Chechen capital, Grozny, by just 178 kilometers (around 110 miles).

Kira Kovalenko: It feels strange to me to say that young people in the Caucasus have particularly dramatic experiences. Would that mean young people in other places don't? In Chechnya, though, they definitely do. Malika Musaeva studied with us, but she didn't have very much to tell: she left Chechnya when she was very little. She was only able to describe one scene: waiting in the basement with her family for her dad to come home. That was it. The rest of us had no direct experience [of war]. The most I remember is that when I was five years old, we were living right by the train station and there was a terrorist attack there. Mom got scared, there was a big explosion, she ran outside, and then we simply went to take a look. I remember it all very well: I was wondering whether there would be people there, around that bus. But then, later, after I completed the filmmaking workshop, I read the diary of a Russian girl who lived in Chechnya, Polina Zhrebtsova. It changed everything for me. There's a part in it where she writes about how, during wartime, she'd mix up packets of a powdered fruit drink

called Yupi and sell glasses of it at the market. That triggered a memory: I was a kid, we were down by the river, our big family was all having a great time, and we were also mixing up some Yupi in a bucket – and it starts hitting me that I don't know anything at that point about what's happening just sixty or so miles away from us. For some reason I have no memory at all of anybody around me telling me about it, or of having any understanding or thoughts about it; that just never happened.

The workshop

In fall 2011, at the invitation of Barasbi Karamurzov, Rector of the Kabardino-Balkarian State University in Nalchik, Russian director Aleksandr Sokurov organized the first ever filmmaking workshop in the North Caucasus. The workshop's primary objective was to create something unprecedented: despite its rich culture and history, the region remained *terra incognita* for filmmakers (with the partial exception of Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, which had a small documentary film studio in the Soviet period), and its inhabitants, the victims of imperial conquest, had never before had a space for independent expression in the language of cinema. In July 2015, twelve people graduated from the workshop. Among them were Kantemir Balagov (*Closeness, Beanpole*), Vladimir Bitokov (*Deep Rivers, Mama, I'm home*), Alexander Zolotukhin (*A Russian Youth*), and Kira Kovalenko (*Sofichka, Unclenching the Fists*). The participants' coursework and graduation projects were featured in the short film lineups at the Locarno, Cannes, and Kinotavr film festivals.

Kira Kovalenko: I ended up attending the workshop by chance – most of us did, in fact. I didn't watch films at all, and had no interest in becoming a director. I just had a sort of hunch that I wanted to get a good education, and that was it. But what happened once I joined the workshop really did change me. I discovered a lot of new things, and now I can't do anything else. Sokurov would always say that he really wanted to see what our family lives were like, what our love lives were like, what our relationships were like, all these everyday things. He kept saying: "We don't know anything about you guys, we want to know about you – how you live your lives, what you get up to." The only taboo [during the workshop] was depicting violence.

Fists

The name of the film, *Unclenching the Fists*, is a reference to Marco Bellocchio's debut, *Fists in the Pocket* (1965), which explores the lives of several generations of a single family living in an enclosed space from the point of view of its young protagonist, played by Lou Castel. Kira Kovalenko also mentions earlier Italian neorealist films, such as the work of Vittorio de Sica, among her favorites.

Kira Kovalenko: I really love Bellocchio and that film. But here I'm dealing with the opposite situation: his film is about clenching, about pressure, while I wanted [to create] something like an image of unclenching. Of unclenching, on the one hand, and of not having to fight anymore, on the other. Kantemir [Balagov] calls [the films by graduates of the Sokurov workshop] "Caucasian neorealism." We really are all located very close to each other, and this really is what life is like for us. So many different things get mixed up together: immaturity, and turbulence, and all this energy in people that they have no outlet for, so it ends up being directed in on itself.



The location

Mizur is a small North Ossetian town on the banks of the River Ardon. Founded in the late nineteenth century by a Belgian company, as part of an operation to extract silver-lead ore, the town stands on the Transcaucasian Highway that connects Russia with the Southern Caucasus. It's on this road, not far from the Roki Tunnel, that the store where Ada works is located. These days, Mizur is home to around 3,000 people.

Kira Kovalenko: Mizur used to be a mining town. It's practically on the border with South Ossetia, on the only route leading into Georgia. Time stopped there a long time ago and nothing's changed since – you get the feeling that even the air doesn't move. Once, I was just passing through – I was going a little further, to the [Zaramagsk] Hydropower Plant. Then I remembered it, and I went there. I walked through this little town and I thought about what kind of story might take place there. It looks like a little box that it would be easy to hide somebody in – to conceal them, protect them. It's a castle. Taking this as my starting point, I knew straight away that there could be this family, and that the idea of hiding, concealing, protecting had to be the father's. Naturally the other family members want to get out of this box, but the box is an external one, and I made the female protagonist another box [inside the town].

Color

The world of *Unclenching the Fists* is not defined by road dust, gray cliffs, and crumbling buildings. Instead, this is a world full of light and vivid patches of color created by the characters themselves, both those whose wardrobes were chosen by Kovalenko and costume designer Asya Belova, and those who were filmed in their own clothes.

Kira Kovalenko: Once I knew for sure that I'd be filming in Mizur, some people, who I immediately stopped talking to, said to me: "Yet another depressing film, it's such a depressing place." I actually see the Caucasus mostly as a colorful place. For me, there's a lot of light there. And I really love the people. I made a short film where I put my protagonist in an orange dress, a really bright one. Sokurov said: "That's exactly the way it is; in this provincial world, people want to dress in bright colors." His words stayed with me. For me, it's a mixture of provinciality and a desire for color. A lot of women in the Caucasus walk around in bright purple jackets. It's a way of living a dignified existence: people are trying to preserve their identity, to extract themselves from all of the gray. That's why I chose the color purple for Ada: the protagonists had to pull away from their surroundings; they couldn't appear to blend in with them.

Language

Although the original script was written by Kira Kovalenko in her native Russian, the film's protagonists speak Ossetian. Kovalenko's previous film *Sofichka* (2016), which is based on the Russian-language novel by Fazil Iskander, was filmed in Abkhazian.

Kira Kovalenko: Kantemir [Balagov] and I joke about the fact that I've yet to make a film in my own language. The truth is, though, that this [choice] wasn't a matter of principle. This film could have been shot in Russian; it's just that when it comes to what feels natural, and to language as a vehicle for national character, I choose the language that comes most naturally to the actors and that best reveals their identity. During auditions I called in certain people who I liked, started talking with them, and asked what language they speak at home with their parents. They all told me that they speak Ossetian. When they're in town they mainly speak Russian, but at home everybody speaks Ossetian. I held auditions in both languages. It may sound strange, but it's actually easier for me to film in a language that I don't know. I know what the dialogue's about, but beyond that I just listen, and language becomes all about

intonation and music for me; I try to gauge whether I'm getting the right feeling from how it sounds. It's really interesting to work with intonation, and the [Ossetian] language's intonation isn't that different from Russian's. Ossetians insert Russian words into Ossetian sentences as well; there's a sort of hybrid language taking hold all over the Caucasus these days, which I find fascinating.

Music

In a nightclub scene, we hear the "The Stars Are Shining in the Sky" by Khasan Abubakarov and "The City Lights Are Going Out" by Islam Jambekov; both songs are sung in Russian by Caucasian performers and are popular throughout the region. The soundtrack also includes a remix of the lyrical ballad "The Wind" by the Chechen singer-songwriter Timur Mutsuraev. Some of the songs Mutsuraev wrote during the Chechen wars have been declared extremist in Russia.

Kira Kovalenko: I call it "Caucasian romanticism," all of this music. They all sing in Russian, all of the lyrics are more or less the same, but they have so much in them that's yielding and romantic.

Family

The main protagonist, Ada, lives her life surrounded by four men, each of whom stakes some kind of claim to her: her father, her younger brother Dakka, her older brother Akim, and Tamik, who's in love with her. But Ada doesn't see a relationship with a man and the possibility of marriage as a reliable escape route.

Kira Kovalenko: I needed to create a family that's [built] entirely around Ada, that both protects her and smothers her. She doesn't even have her own space at night. Her younger brother sees her almost as a mother. Before this script made its appearance, I had another one ready. It was in Ossetian and about Ossetia, with three brothers and a father, and the father and two of the brothers crossed over into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I'd spent a long time, around a year, looking for a way to get things off the ground. I'd been sending letters all that year, but nobody had paid any attention to them. And when I sent the script to [producer Alexander] Rodnyansky, and he said "Yes, let's do this," I realized that, by the end of that year, I felt like I'd already shot that film, that I needed to move on. I quickly decided that I'd write a new script. It was then that I knew I'd have a female protagonist, even though the same story could work with a boy, up to a point; having a girl added my feelings, the family relationship, that personal angle into the mix. I think that constrictiveness must be a sort of feature of the Caucasus, because you can feel it in almost every situation. In the Caucasus, even when you marry, you're just moving from one closed system into another. For women, it's a move sideways, not a step up. On Telegram channels today you can read all sorts of stories from women in the Caucasus; it's a big problem that needs to be brought into the open.

The actors

The film stars Milana Aguzarova, a drama student. Playing the role of her father is Alik Karaev, a People's Artist of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania and an actor at the North Ossetian State Equestrian Theater, Narti. The remaining roles are played by non-professional actors.

Kira Kovalenko:

We did the rounds of schools, clubs, everywhere where young people come together. There were a lot of photos: several thousand. They really had a laugh when they found out what it was all for, but then they started taking it seriously, and came to really believe in it. I have such affection for all of these guys, but I didn't give any of the actors the full script, apart from Milana. Even her "father" didn't know what was happening beyond his role. I discussed in detail what was going on in every actor's scenes. I was quite worried about the person who played Akim [Soslan Khugaev] – he's a wrestler, a very traditional-looking guy. But they trusted me so completely that they didn't ask questions: what's the character doing, why, how, and so on. I explained everything using straightforward human examples: "This is your sister, you're doing this for this and that reason." None of them had any doubts that I'd be able to make use of them in some way. They also understood that I know them, that I'm from Nalchik myself, which is really close by.

KIRA KOVALENKO | A Q&A FROM THE DIRECTOR

What inspired you to begin work on this film?

The initial inspiration for the story came from a line in Faulkner's Intruder in the Dust about how, while some people can endure slavery, nobody can stand freedom. The idea of freedom as a burden was the single most important theme for me while I was working on the film. Inevitably, the same idea led me to reflect on the burden of memory, and on the link between the two. Is it possible to endure freedom from memory? I had been living with these thoughts for a long time.

Later I remembered a small town which I passed once and decided to return to it again. It is just a small town in a ravine, a group of apartment buildings behind a high wall. I walked around this town and thought about a story that could be born here. This place looked like a box in which a human can be hidden, protected, concealed.

The result was a tale of people who lived through this event, and who, many years later, are trying to come to terms with the trauma it caused. The world around them is still scarred by it, and they're broken themselves, in a way that dictates all of this family's relationships with each other. The attempt to forget and to preserve entails an act of violence against human will, which, paradoxically enough, is also an act of love.

Please share a few words about your actors

Ada - Milana Aguzarova studies acting in a university in Vladikavkaz. When I was flying to Ossetia for auditions, my flight was delayed. I was really late and the first person I saw was Milana who was waiting patiently for me. When I invited her to join the film, I had a different role in mind for her, but when we started talking I realised that I made a mistake. I asked her to come in again and again because I was trying to figure her out, trying to understand why I feel like there are two people in one body. Two entities that are constantly struggling with each other: incredible strength and fragile weakness.

Father - Alik Karaev is the People's Artist of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania and an actor at the North Ossetian State Equestrian Theater, Narti. The moment I met him I instantly felt a strong connection, I realised that he is the man I can always rely on, I saw a lot of light and understanding in him.

In all other roles I casted amateur actors - Soslan Hugaev, Hetag Bibilov, Arsen Hetagurov and Milana Pagieva.

My colleagues went around Ossetia and visited different places where large groups of young people usually spend their time: schools, sport clubs, etc. There were a lot of them, we went through thousands of photographs! Young people usually laughed when we told them why we were taking their pictures, no one believed that they could be actors in a real film. I always recognised my characters, I just had to look at a picture or see a short video and I knew. Didn't really matter how the auditions went. I was absolutely convinced that I saw exactly the people I wrote my script about. This was a tremendously inspiring experience. I saw how my film was coming to life. I never experienced anything that intense ever in my life.

What inspired you to become a filmmaker? What were the sources of your inspiration?

It was never a choice, I never specifically wanted to be a director. I just wanted to get a good education and my intuition drove me to apply to a director's school of Alexander Sokurov. I was never that much into movies, before I started to study under Sokurov I watched a very small number of films. In our first year we watched a newsreel from 1901. Horse drawn carriages rattled on pavement, people strolled by. A young boy looked into a camera and waved his hand at me. The cinema saved this moment. This is my inspiration.

What are your views on the state of the film industry in your country?

I want young people in our country to have more opportunities to make movies so it would be easier for them to freely talk about the issues that really matter to them. I want this to change so that young filmmakers won't have to wait for years to make their first films.

If you could meet a favourite filmmaker, who would it be and what would be your first question?

I would've loved to get on the set of a Lee Chang-dong or Terrence Malick movie. But no I would have no words.



DIRECTOR KIRA KOVALENKO | BIOGRAPHY

Kira Kovalenko was born in Nalchik. She graduated from Alexander Sokurov's directing workshop at Kabardino-Balkarian State University in 2015.

Unclenching The Fists marks her second feature film, as Kira Kovalenko having made her directorial debut in 2016 with *Sofichka*, which premiered at the Tallinn International Film Festival (Black Nights Film Festival).



ALEXANDER RODNYANSKY | A STATEMENT FROM THE PRODUCER

Unclenching the Fists is a brave and mature film that combines a deep understanding of human psychology with an obvious artistic talent of its director. Another important distinction of the film is that it invites the audience to experience the everyday life of people in North Ossetia, a region that so far has been terra incognita to the global cinema.

Mature might be an unexpected word to describe the work of such a young director, making her second film, but I am convinced that this is exactly the right term. Kira knows precisely the story she sets out to tell and the way in which she wants to tell it. She has a detailed vision of her film, she knows the tone she should choose and exactly which film techniques would work for her story and which won't. It might sound easy but my decades of experience as a producer tells me that these are the hardest questions and some directors spend their entire career searching for this kind of clarity.

Kira never wastes herself on simple emotions, nor in real life nor in her art. She always shows incredible restraint and this particular trait of her character is reflected in the very nature of her films, which combine the external calmness with incredible internal intensity of emotions. I believe this to be a quality of a truly deep and mature director, whose talent doesn't rely upon political or social environment, upon fashion or artistic preferences, but is self-sufficient and independent instead.

As a young female director Kira strives to tell stories that are relevant to her and reflective of her personal experience: true stories about strong women's confrontation with rigid social norms and patriarchal traditions that are still dominant in modern day North Caucasus. Every story she tells is filled with understanding and deep compassion for her heroines.

Unclenching the Fists is a story about young people constrained by suffocating family bonds and fighting for their individual freedom. But it is also a story about how difficult, even impossible it might be to actually experience such freedom when you finally gained it.

Even though over the course of development and production of the film, the story evolved significantly, I feel that Kira never budged an inch from her original idea. It was incredibly exciting and interesting to get to work with her.

As a director Kira tries to find, in little details and human interactions, the incredibly precise characteristics for her characters. She never uses the obvious or the evident. I think the director's voice of Kira was in many ways formed under the colossal influence of her master - Alexander Sokurov who taught her and his other students - Kantemir Balagov and Vladimir Bitokov - to always find the most convincing dramatic situations. Situations that would allow their character to reveal their internal complexities and struggles, that would pit one worldview against another and will most clearly illustrate the conflicts that they struggle against. These situations and conflicts can never be obvious or overt, the director should never preach but rather allow the audience to make their own conclusions. And I believe for Kira, as well as for other students, literature rather than cinema became a much more important source of artistic inspiration. Literature allows her to transform all of her rich human

experience into a very specific artistic language. So it is not a coincidence that Kira originally drew her inspiration for *Unclenching the Fists* from a William Faulkner novel Intruder in the Dust - a story about the burden of freedom, which sometimes can be much harder than the burden of captivity.

Kira possesses a unique combination of deep knowledge of classical culture tradition with the worldview of a young modern woman. Young and free modern woman. And this is an answer to a question why Kira and other young directors of her generation are interesting to me not only as a producer, but as a human. They show me and the audience a new life that I would've never discovered otherwise. Or they show us the life we think we know but in a way that we have never seen before. They look into the people living beside us and see their stories and their drama of fighting to overcome the many difficulties of human fate. Of eternal struggle in an ever-changing world. It is incredibly interesting and important.

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.

In Cannes, AR Content will debut *Uncle Vanya* from emerging Russian filmmaker Kira Kovalenko as part of the official festival line-up, and *Where Is Anne Frank?* from *Waltz With Bashir* director Ari Folman will play Out Of Competition. Also in development are: Kevin Macdonald's Untitled World War II refugee documentary; the Ziad Doueiri-directed *Debriefing The President*; and Kornel Mondruczko'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 section 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 the Un Certain Regard category 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 Saint Petersburg.

Both producers' involvement in Russian auteur cinema is extensive. In addition to the projects mentioned above, Rodnynansky and Melkumov produced respectively: *The Sun* directed by Alexander Sokurov (Official Selection - Berlin International Film Festival) and *Tulpan* by Sergey Dvortsevov (The 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 will debut *Unclenching The Fists* from emerging Russian filmmaker Kira Kovalenko as part of the official festival line-up. 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

Milana Aguzarova (Ada)
Alik Karaev (Father)
Soslan Khugaev (Akim)
Khetag Bibilov (Dakko)
Arsen Khetagurov (Tamik)
Milana Pagieva (Taira)

CREW

Director: Kira Kovalenko

Screenwriters: Kira Kovalenko, Anton Yarush,
with the participation of Lyubov Mulmenko

Director of photography: Pavel Fomintsev

Production designer: Sergey Zaikov

Make-up: Anna Esmont

Costume designer: Asya Belova

Post-production producer: Platon Emikh

Editing: Mukharam Kabulova, with the participation of Vincent Deyveaux

Sound designer: Rostislav Alimov

Producers: Alexander Rodnyansky, Sergey Melkumov

Executive producer: Natalia Gorina

Production: Non-Stop Production, AR Content