

**36. Venice
International Film
Critics' Week**



ERASING

A FILM BY GABOR FABRICIUS

2021 | DRAMA | HUNGARY | BLACK & WHITE | 103' | HUNGARIAN

NEVER STAY SILENT!

LOG LINE




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SYNOPSIS



1983, behind the Iron Curtain of Eastern Europe in Budapest. Frank is the charismatic singer of a banned punk band that carries the voice of their generation against a totalitarian regime. Taken by the police psychiatric hospital in an attempt to silence him, Frank will sacrifice everything to resist.



ERASING FRANK IS AN ATTEMPT
TO REDEFINE DIRECT CINEMA AND
SOCIAL DRAMA. I WANT TO LET
THE AUDIENCE GO THROUGH RAW
EXPERIENCE IN A DESHUMANIZED
ORWELLIAN REALITY.

GÁBOR FABRICIUS

INTERVIEW WITH GÁBOR FABRICIUS

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE STORY AND WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO EXPLORE THIS PERIOD, THE 1980S?

— The story is inspired by real events and is based on research which took us two years. Even in the 1980s leading intellectuals, artists and other figures were interned and mistreated in psychiatric wards, where they were kept on the pretext that they had psychological troubles. As they were not allowed out, this meant that in reality these psychiatric hospitals functioned as prisons. We researched real lives and collected oral histories. During this process I recorded over six hours of interviews and we also used more than sixty books and publications to create a solid background for the script.

On this basis, I can say that everything which is shown in the film happened to someone in the era: nothing is fictional. The mosaic style

narrative shows the diversity of the stories that I collected from various sources. This created a very special film language based on the fragmented memories which had very nearly been erased, just as happens to our fictional character, Frank.

I wanted to give expression to the symbolic essence of any totalitarian regime and I found this in the deployment of psychiatry for political purposes. This was the wielding of political power, where the authorities targeted and oppressed the vulnerable, by attacking their identity, their sense of self and understanding.

The period is not well known; it was a time of trauma for us behind the Iron Curtain, that has not been faithfully portrayed, or not really portrayed at all. Transgenerational trauma stays with us, even if we are not really aware of it, or we simply treat trauma as something taboo.





I needed to invoke these taboos. An Orwellian-Kafkaesque atmosphere might seem dystopian, but it is reality in a totalitarian system and there are many totalitarian situations. I think it is essential to pass on this experience and knowledge to future generations so they can be properly aware of the value of freedom, and understand how important it is to protect it when a political (or other) power tries to take control over our lives.

handling space and time. The audience should navigate, work together, pay attention to what is going on in the space, who are they watching, what noises are there in the background, rather than getting blocks of clear information — tools, that might make the film easy to swallow and consequently boring. *Erasing Frank* works as a collaboration between filmmaker and viewer, a dialogue, where effort and energy are needed from them, in order to gain an experience, that they will hopefully not forget.

THE STORY SEEMS TO TAKE PLACE IN A SORT OF NEARBY PAST, BUT SOMEHOW THINGS ARE NOT ALL CLEAR AS TO WHERE AND WHEN THE NARRATIVE TAKES PLACE. WHAT WAS YOUR IDEA BEHIND THIS SETTING?

— Yes, absolutely, my vision was to set the film in some sort of eternal Orwellian-Kafkaesque environment. The majority of my work was to cut out the specifics and push towards the universal, only keeping the essential elements. It is not Budapest, or Moscow. It is everywhere, any time. I used the historical background only as a springboard to push the story into a dystopian sphere. This was not only to erase the “specific” in order to gain the “universal”, but also to focus on the thematic content, the characters and the story, so as not to produce a series of examples or illustrations. Illustration kills the cinematic experience; it can mean a film becomes little more than a “show”. It is important to get lost in a scene, as we would, if we lived through such events in reality. The documentary approach is valid when

THE GIRLFRIEND WORKS IN THE PSYCHIATRIC CENTRE. SHE WANTS TO ESCAPE FROM THE REGIME, AND YET SHE IS COLLABORATING WITH IT. HOW DID YOU BUILD HER CHARACTER AND HOW DID YOU WORK WITH YOUR ACTRESS?

— The dramatic structure is also an examination of the characters’ relationship to power. Just like in *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, where the main character is chained and the other, somewhat freer or unfettered characters examine their different relationships to power.

Anna, the young psychiatrist, tries to play a double game, just like many of us. We are “in” or implicated in the system but nonetheless for moral or ethical reasons, we try to remain “outside” of it at the same time. Her character is perhaps the most interesting from this point of view, something of an archetype for all of us, whereas the character of Frank is more like a superhero, who is running towards his destiny to show the only possible ethical reaction





in extreme times. Anna's character is built around the way most of Hungarian society behaved under that regime: fear and paranoia created an emotional response to the propaganda. I used the oral histories I had collected and also personal observations of people around me. I let the actors and actresses find themselves in the role, so the casting process was long. For the leading actress, however, it was much shorter. Andrea Waskovics (Anna), said to me, "Anna is me. Maybe it's because my mother is a chemist, her attitude is just like Anna's character." It was the same with the lead role, Benjamin Fuchs (Frank). We had to stop shooting for over four hours while he was processing very difficult emotional moments, when he realized that that his own rage was represented in a script written many years before.

HOW DID YOU CAST YOUR MAIN CHARACTER? AND HOW DID YOU WORK WITH YOUR MAIN ACTOR TO BUILD THIS CHARACTER?

— I selected him from over 1500 possible candidates. I wanted a real underground singer, a true character, who I would not have to "direct" too much, who would bring in the hate and rage against the mainstream and throw it all against the camera and the audience. Benji is like that. He is himself, since he is not a professional actor.

For each scene, my main question to him was, "What do you think about this event? How would you react?" He is a super sensitive person, so his thoughts are in the film as well.

In this sense, I am a documentarist, who creates the situation, and the real character reacts. I have been experimenting with reality before in my shorts, not telling the actor what will happen, and throwing them into a situation to prompt reactions. This method was used a lot in *Erasing Frank*. The long opening sequence for example (an almost 3-minute-long single shot) was directed like this. I did not tell them that the army would arrive, and we ended up using that first take, for the originality of fear and the paranoia on his face.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO SHOOT IN BLACK AND WHITE?

— The "Budapest School" used to shoot their documentaries on 16mm and in black and white back in the 70s and 80s, for instance Gyula Gazdag, Judit Ember and Béla Tarr. By taking the colour away, illustration is also avoided, so the essence is even more palpable, and the result somewhat more fable-like, mythological. I also felt that documentary style casting and camerawork bring more truth in black and white. While making the film, I used *Titicut Follies (1967)* by Frederick Wiseman as a reference film. This was footage recorded in a mental institution, released as a documentary but subsequently banned and subject to a history of litigation about the infringement of the rights of the inmates filmed who had been filmed.

In times of mass moving-image production for on-demand platforms, with standardized





narratives and aesthetics, *Erasing Frank* is a special, immersive audiovisual experience. My aim was to create an experience that gets under your skin, twists your senses and stays with you. Becoming immersed in a chain of events, in an atmosphere and getting lost in time and space, then finding a helping hand at just about the right time. This is a form and approach that I hope to develop more in the forthcoming feature I am working on.

WAS THE MUSICAL BAND ALSO BASED ON AN EXISTING BAND?

— There were lots of bands who resisted in those times. Music was a tool of resistance. Singers were more like politicians who got on stage with a guitar in their hands. Otherwise, they would not have been able to get hold of a microphone as the secret police were after them. Interestingly, there were two bands who represented resistance in a unique way: an intellectual one called *Spions*, the first ever punk band behind the Iron Curtain, set up 1976, and a rougher, more violent one, *Cpg*, with lots of violent stories. I used both as role models to create Frank's band and character. Intellectual strength was as important for me in his character as energy and power: a subculture, that we have absolutely lost since, underground people, with a true motivation and honest ideals, who could not cope with the mainstream, but kept the truth in their hearts.

MUSIC IS PART OF YOUR CINEMATIC UNIVERSE. DO YOU, LIKE THE BAND IN THE FILM, CONSIDER CINEMA AS A TOOL OF RESISTANCE?

— I do, if resistance is needed for ethical or moral purposes. I see cinema as the most international language and, as such, it helps to preserve our identity. We must constantly perform a balancing act of resistance and cooperation, this is how we define our identities, especially in times when our uniqueness and differences are being questioned, or even banned. We all have to be proud of who we are and resist whenever anybody wants to attack that. Attacks are coming from various sources: it can be ideology, it can be temptation or lies, it can be plain aggression or paranoia. Freedom is fluid and we have to understand its essence, so that we are capable of understanding when somebody is taking it away. Is your sexual orientation inconvenient? Freedom is taken away. Is your way of thinking labelled? Freedom is taken away. You feel obliged to consume like everybody else? You are laughed at out loud for who you are? You are a woman in a masculine setup? A migrant? The lists are never-ending.

FRANK YELLS ON STAGE: "NEVER STAY SILENT!" - IS THIS A MESSAGE TO ANYONE LIVING UNDER AN OPPRESSIVE REGIME?

— It is hard to say. People who lived through oppressive regimes are aware that talking is deadly dangerous. Frank is a totalitarian character in a totalitarian world. Only extreme idols dare to talk. ●



BIO DIRECTOR

Gábor is writer and director, graduate from Central Saint-Martins College London. He has published two novels and ERASING FRANK is his debut feature after several shorts that played in various festivals including TIFF.





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SOUND DESIGNER TAMÁS ZÁNYI PRODUCER GÁBOR FABRICIUS, TAMÁS BARNA
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CAST

FRANK BENJAMIN FUCHS HANNA KINCŐ BLÉNESI
ANNA ANDREA WASKOVICH DR. ERŐS ISTVÁN LÉNÁRT VAS PÁL FRENÁK
EZÉ ZSIGMOND GERLÓCZY PRAVDA PÉTER IVÁNYI WILHEIM ZSOLT ZAYZON

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