

THE CAGE IS LOOKING FOR A BIRD

A FILM BY MALIKA MUSAEVA



PRODUCTION NOTES

Original Title: Kletka ishet ptitsu

Title in English: The Cage is Looking for a Bird

Running Time: 87 minutes

Language: Chechen, with English Subtitles

Press contacts

For further information, materials and interview requests please contact:

PREMIER

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Background

A debut feature from first-time writer-director Malika Musaeva, *THE CAGE IS LOOKING FOR A BIRD* focuses on a group of Chechen women living in a remote rural village and their struggles to defend their right for freedom and the choice to live their own lives. At the centre is a friendship between two teenage girls, on the precipice of adulthood, who seek refuge in each other as they navigate decisions around their future.

About the film

THE CAGE IS LOOKING FOR A BIRD is set in a small Chechen village, and tells the story of several women searching for freedom and the right to determine their own future. Yaha spends her days with Madina, her closest friend. Both girls dream of leaving their homes after graduation and escaping to the real world, to live a life they can choose for themselves.

Yaha's older sister Heda also dreams of being free, but the price for this is very high - if she decides to try for a divorce, her only son will in all likelihood be taken away from her, in line with the traditions in her culture.

The film shines a light on these women's stories, and whether they can succeed in attaining freedom and at what cost?

THE CAGE IS LOOKING FOR A BIRD is produced by Ilya Stewart's newly launched European-based Hype Studios in co-production with the Sokurov.fund and in association with Totem Films. The filmmakers have agreed to donate 50% of all proceeds to Human Rights Watch.

Director's Note

A film about freedom

I like to draw inspiration from what I know. This film is a mosaic of characters and destinies that I have observed in my life. The result is a very feminine story, the heroines of which have a personal tragedy - an internal conflict that they are trying to overcome. This is a film about a lack of freedom, the inability to choose your own path and views. Sometimes circumstances can be stronger than yourself, and you have to compromise, realising that you can't get out. These stories were constantly asking to come out, but it seems to me that in the film I could only touch them a little.

The original idea – to shoot about Chechen refugees in Europe – arose after moving to Germany and studying at the Hamburg Media School. I applied for funding but nothing worked out. German television and the federal states are more likely to fund medium-sized, superficial films that won't make you think. As the Artistic Director told me, "Your kitchen drama is of no interest to anyone" - that is, the inner drama of the hero in the story. We were taught in film school that the conflict should be external. I strongly disagree with this, but the study itself was useful. Probably, not in terms of content, but in a professional way. In Nalchik, of course we shot our works quite differently. In Hamburg, I learned to be responsible for my mistakes and for every word I said during the preparation and filming of the feature. But such an experience is not always useful, sometimes it can destroy more than teach.

Filming without actors

For six months, I just struggled to start filming. In 2018, producer Nikolai Yankin and I went to the Chechen village of Aldy, where I lived when the war began. We really wanted to shoot there, but literally an hour later we realised that nothing would work: people were scared, asking who we were, why the car had St. Petersburg licence plates. I thought about shooting in Kabardino-Balkaria, there was even a small casting call in Nalchik. I also liked the Balkarian village of Bezengi. It was foreign to the locals. Then we filmed in Ingushetia. We were first allowed, but then banned. If it were not for the support of the Minister of Culture of Ingushetia and his deputy, I would not have made the film, I am sure of this.

The action takes place now in the small village of Arshty on the border with Chechnya where Chechens live. All our actors are locals, and this was the most interesting thing. It worked great: they turned out to be surprisingly organic, grasping everything on the fly. Almost everyone behaved as if they had studied acting all their lives. I can't understand where they derived the connection, although when the actress playing the role of the main character's sister read the script, she said: "Are you shooting about my life?"

The experiences of my characters are very familiar to me, and I can relate to them. In the process of making the film, I realised that to some extent I myself am the protagonist. The fact that this is the first time a film in the Chechen language will be shown at an event of this magnitude makes it even more important for me personally.

The Soundtrack

In the atmosphere and the way of shooting, I referred to the film "Wuthering Heights" by Andrea Arnold based on the novel by Emily Bronte. I watched it when I was in the studio. I also turned to the "children's" films of Iranian directors whom I love very much for their simplicity, humanity, beauty, and glorification of human qualities. And, of course, I was inspired by Italian neorealism, for

example, "Hoodlums" by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Murat Kabardokov wrote the music for the film. There are few people I have worked with as cool as him. Murat is a sensitive, understanding person with an amazing combination of subtlety, clarity and crazy capacity for work. We watched the film together at Lenfilm, where I edited it, and discussed the use of national folklore. I asked them to bring us a Chechen pondar, a violin-like instrument, but the picture was repulsed by that sound. The story is very feminine, delicate. Murat suggested the flute, and everything became fine at once. The soundtrack was recorded with a small quartet at the documentary film studio in St. Petersburg. I was lucky enough to see the process.

Sokurov's decision

The picture wouldn't have happened without the Example of Intonation Foundation and Alexander Sokurov. We always keep in touch with him, discussing the idea for the film and the script. I didn't send the groundwork to Alexander Sokurov because it was a prerequisite. His opinion is very important to me. It's a luxury to be able to talk to him and learn from him. Alexander Nikolaevich always gives valuable advice, but he never asks me to change anything as he sees fit. He leaves you absolutely free to do whatever you want.

I know that Alexander Nikolayevich publicly praised the film "The Cage is Looking for a Bird," but I always cringe when he praises me. I mean, I think I do everything badly. It's just that Alexander Nikolayevich treats all of us warmly, he loves all of us: both graduates and students. For me, he's like a beacon, like a light in the dark.

- Malika Musaeva

Biographies

Malika Musaeva – Director/Writer

Malika was born in Grozny (Chechen Republic) in 1992. During the Second Chechen War in 1999 she fled the Chechen Republic. Her family had lived in Ingushetia and Ukraine, before emigrating to Germany. In 2003 Malika returned to Russia and lived in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria.

After graduating from school in 2010, Malika enrolled in the Kabardino-Balkarian State University named after H.M. Berbekov, to the directorial workshop of Alexander Sokurov. During her studies she directed several short films, which were presented at various international film festivals.

Having graduated, she again moved to Germany, where she received a degree in Directing at the Hamburg Media School. In Hamburg, Malika directed two short films. In 2021 she directed her first feature film *THE CAGE IS LOOKING FOR A BIRD*, produced by Hype Studios alongside the Alexander Sokurov's film fund. She is currently residing and working in Germany.

Her filmography includes the short films *SLIGHTLY OPENING THE DOOR* (2013), *THE TOWER OF THE SILENCE* (2014), *MINOR GUILTY* (2016), *ANGST* (2017) and *I CAN STAND* (2018).

Ilya Stewart – Producer

After gaining an education overseas and having graduated from Goldsmiths University in London with a BA in Media and Communications, Ilya moved back to Moscow and started working in the advertising business, focusing entirely on the production aspect. In 2011, together with partner Murad Osmani, he co-founded the production company Hype Production. Hype Film production house is known for the numerous award-winning commercials at Cannes Lions festival and topnotch music videos acknowledged by Berlin Music Video Awards every year. The company was one of the first in Russia to grow and nurture a roster of young, up and coming directors who went on to direct commercials for multinational brands and hit television shows and feature films. In 2022, Ilya launched an independent studio Hype Studios with headquarters and a foothold in Europe. He was recognized as part of *Variety's* "10 Producers to Watch" in 2018.

Hype Studios

Hype Studios was launched in 2022 by producer Ilya Stewart as a new chapter for an established media company, with a strategy to operate on a global scale and with headquarters and a foothold in Europe.

Over the years, Hype has excelled at identifying talent and cultivating relationships with auteurs around the world and has had an increasing presence at major international film festivals and markets. From its offices in both Paris and Berlin, the team shares their filmmakers' passion and drive for telling great stories and building unique worlds. They continue to build bridges and work across borders to bring their incredible and diverse visions to life.

Since 2016, the Hype brand has produced award-winning work, including Kirill Serebrennikov's "The Student", collaborating with the director again on "Leto", "Petrov's Flu" and "Tchaikovsky's Wife". Serebrennikov's films were all selected to compete at the Cannes Film Festival and were released internationally to wide critical acclaim.

Among other notable releases were Vadim Perelman's "Persian Lessons", a German-language Holocaust drama starring Nahuel Perez Biscayart and Lars Eidinger which launched at the Berlin Film Festival, Egor Abramenko's sci-fi thriller "Sputnik" which premiered at Tribeca Film Festival, and Mona Fastvold's "The World To Come" with Vanessa Kirby, Katherine Waterston and Casey Affleck at the Venice Film Festival in 2020.

Since its inception, Hype Studios produced "Sanctuary" directed by Zach Wigton and starring Margaret Qualley and Christopher Abbott, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and was picked up by Neon for distribution in North America, as well as Pietro Marcello's "Scarlet", which was the opening night film at the Director's Fortnight in Cannes in 2022. In 2023, Malika Musaeva's feature film debut was selected to compete at the Berlin Film Festival, which was produced in association with Alexander Sokurov.

Ilya Stewart of Hype Studios states, "Alexander Sokurov is single-handedly responsible for introducing the world to a generation of talented and fearless voices. As a graduate of his acclaimed film school, Malika carries Sokurov's values and traditions with grace and dignity. Her feature film debut is a unique exploration of the price of freedom and a powerful cinematic experience, heavily inspired by her own circumstances and encounters".

Totem Films

TOTEM is a Paris-based international sales & production company launched in 2019. Recent titles include, among many others, ANIMALIA by Sofia Alaoui (Sundance 2023 World Cinema Dramatic Competition - Jury Prize Creative Vision), SLOW by Marija Kavtaradze (Sundance 2023 World Cinema Dramatic Competition - Best Director), THE SUPER 8 YEARS by Nobel Prize Winner Annie Ernaux (Director's Fortnight - Cannes 2022), and Juho Kuosmanen's COMPARTMENT N°6 (Cannes 2021 Competition - Grand Prix).

Totem Films said, "Malika's cinema is a blend of painting and quiet rage. We are so proud to accompany her first international steps. It's rare to encounter such a strong cinema gesture".

CREDITS

Written and Directed by

Malika Musaeva

Director of Photography

Dmitriy Nagovski

Production Designer

AVESTA

Costume Designer

Olga Smirnova

Make-up Artist

Ksenya Yakhnina

Producers

Ilya Stewart, Nikolay Yankin, Murad Osmann, Pavel Buria

Co-producers

Elizaveta Chalenko, Ilya Dzhincharadze

Line Producer

Natasha Smagina

Composer

Murat Kabardokov

Sound designer

Ivan Gusakov

Edit

Vincent Deyveaux

Malika Musaeva

Artistic Director

Alexander Sokurov

Cast

Khadizha Bataeva (Yakha)

Madina Akkueva (Madina)

Fatima Elzhurkaeva (Heda)

Rita Merzhoeva (Maret)

Magomed Alhastov (Ibragim)

Muhammad Bataev (Lyoma)

Khamila Isaeva (Zama)

Bekhan Dzakalov (Mohmad)

Aishat Akkiewa (Madina's mother)

Dzambulat Albakov (Khasan)

Ibgrabim Akkiew (Boy 1)

Usman Haciev (Boy 2)

Alikhan Anzorov (Boy 3)

Ramsan Karsamov (Boy 4)