



SASHENKA

FILM BY OLEXANDR ZHOVNA



UKRAINIAN STATE
FILM AGENCY


Cinemastudio



SASHENKA

2022 | 130 MIN | SOCIAL PSYCHO THRILLER
UKRAINE | UKRAINIAN (ENGLISH SUBTITLES)

Director: Olexander Zhovna
Screenplay: Olexander Zhovna
Cinematographer: Kolbinev Sergey
Producers: Olexander Zhovna, Evgeny Sivkov
Creative Producer: Roman Balayan

Production: CINEMASTUDIO





**A SHOCKING MURDER THAT SHOOK SOVIET SOCIETY
IN THE SEVENTIES AND EXPOSED THE REVERSE SIDE
OF THE SOVIET MORALITY.**

In the night, someone shoots an elderly couple in their sleep with a hunting rifle, leaving their twenty-year-old son, disabled and confined to a wheelchair, an orphan. The investigation reveals the life story of what seems at first glance to be an ordinary Soviet family. While still young, the couple lost their long-desired infant daughter.

Later in life, the fate gives them a child, but he happens to be a boy. The mother's pathological desire to have a daughter becomes an obsession. The woman treats Sashenka as a girl, dresses him as a girl and buys him dolls. The father supports his wife in every way. This is how starts a dramatic and astonishing story of human vices and deviations.

THE SHOOTING OF «SASHENKA» TOOK PLACE IN S. MOSHNY, CHERKASY REGION, CHERKASY AND ODESSA

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

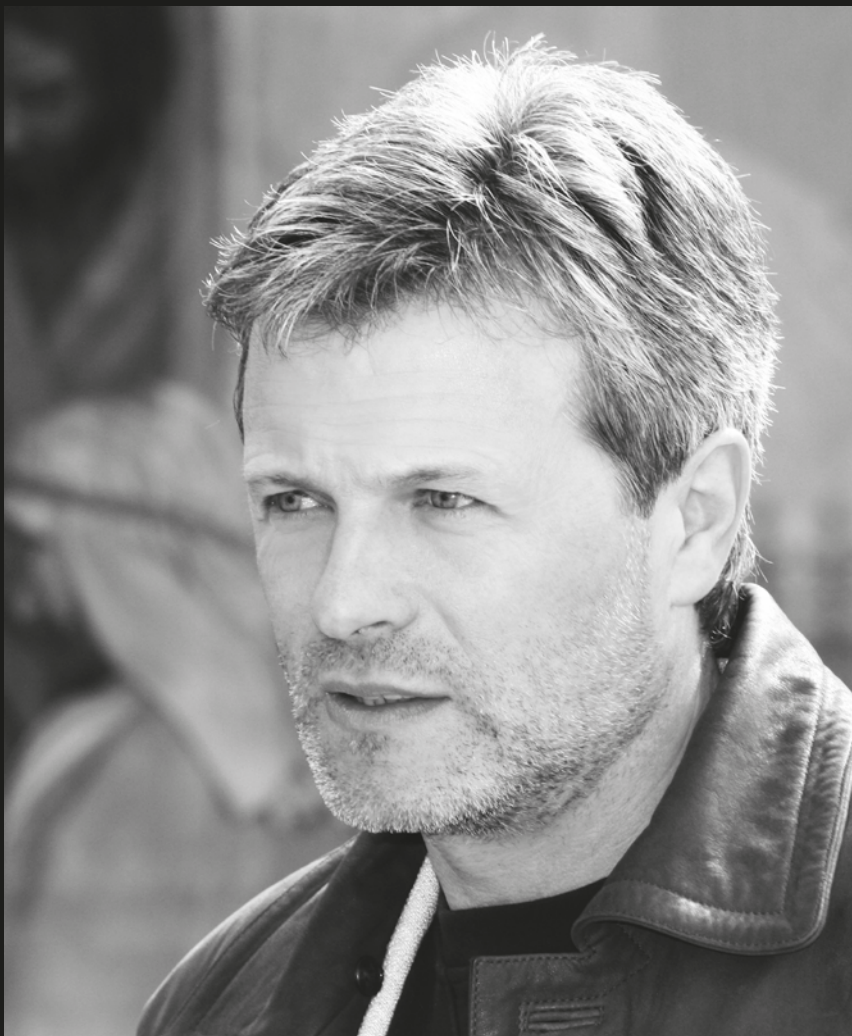
I have always been attracted to a parallel world: to people with parallel intelligence, parallel consciousness, parallel psyche, the so-called marginal part of society*. Marcus Aurelius argued** that man differs from the beast by freely submitting to his fate instead of pursuing a shameful struggle, characteristic of animals. I wished to try to find out if this is really the case. In particular, I was interested to understand the non-standard psychic manifestations of the human being, everybody's natural despotism. To analyse whether it was a rebellion against nature, or a Nature's own amusement, an experiment on humanity? And if so, why does nature need it? For this purpose, let us examine, with the help of cinema, a real story that took place in the USSR in the 1970s, a story that would turn us into witnesses of human virtues and vices, of inscrutable variations in the psyche, a motley palette of feelings and an unprecedented game of imagination. Along with them, we will also see several absolutely brilliant failures of intellect and stunning refractions of the conscience.

*When I use the concept of parallelism, I mean people who, without leaving the society, do not share its life; their life is somewhat parallel. They call them many names: mentally retarded, insane, underdeveloped, mentally ill and the like. It means all those who are not like you and me, who do not conform to a common, generally accepted norm. Those who are different physically, mentally, intellectually etc. That is just what I meant: the outsiders are much more interesting to me than those of the so-called norm.

Our film is a social drama visualised in the form of a tense psychological noir.

Why was it filmed in black and white? First of all, in my opinion, it is the colour of the Soviet era in which the events of the film take place. It also corresponds to the style in which I see this story. Also, I don't know of any colour film that would be 'more colourful' than black and white cinema. Colour holds the visual imagination in check, serving as a limit. Black and white allows complete freedom for everyone's imagination. After all, the sensory palette is significantly more colourful and varied than the visual palette.

**I was only referring to the opinions on the position of a free man, in particular those of Marcus Aurelius. It is well-known that he claimed that every man who faces the trials of fate with anger and bitterness is similar to a pig that beats and squeals when it is dragged to the slaughterhouse. The distinctive feature of a thinking being is free submission to fate rather than the shameful struggle, characteristic of beasts. I guess that's close to how I view the things.



OLEXANDER ZHOVNA

Screenwriter, film director.
Born on 15 February 1960 in Ukraine.
Ukrainian writer, screenwriter, film director.
Honoured Art Worker of Ukraine.

AWARDS

Numerous national and foreign awards in literature and cinema.
Works of translated into various languages, published in Tokyo and New York.

FILMOGRAPHY

Short films:

- A Small Life | 2007

Feature films:

- Sashenka | 2022
- Liza's Tale | 2019

Documentaries:

- My dear Ukrainians | 2014
- Massacre | 1997

Scripts:

- Second Hand | 2005
directed by Yaroslav Lupi
- The Night is Bright | 2004
by Rustam Ibragimbekov, directed by Roman Balayan
- Musical Score on the Gravestone | 1995
directed by Yaroslav Lupiy

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

How did the idea for the script come about?

I could start to imitate depth of thought, fantasize and pronounce clever speeches; however, it is usually much simpler than that, and yet there is a reason for it. In short, the scenario is based on real events that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

You are a citizen of Ukraine whose childhood and youth took place during the Soviet period. When did you acquire a national identity? Was it 30 years ago or recently... when the talk of 'brother nations', alas, has to be forgotten...?

I came into the world in a small Ukrainian town, Novomirgorod, I still live there. Once, as a student in Kiev, the doctors gave me a terrible diagnosis, at least so it seemed to me, and I went home to die, so that my parents could bury me at home. I did not manage to die so I stayed where I am today. Identification as a Ukrainian happened much earlier. Back at school in the '70s, I was known as a dissident. Once, with a friend, we hung a yellow and blue flag in the square. In Soviet time, can you imagine. It meant a prison term at the very least. We did not get caught. This patriotic bravado of a youngster, not a very conscious one, was later solidified and made more conscious by Soviet officials and finally thoroughly reinforced by Putin today.



The film was edited before the war. And yet it explores the nature of violence. Who could have imagined then that we would find ourselves at this point of no return... What do you think art people can and should do now?

Yes, I shot and edited the film before the full-scale war, and although the subject is based on violence, it is of a slightly different kind compared to what is happening in Ukraine today. So, the final result of my work is kind of not on time. One can only hope that the film will prove to be timeless. This is a bombastic joke of mine. Actually, a possibility of exploiting the war theme is currently opening up. Particularly and primarily in cinematography. I guess it has to be done. But it is not what I am going to do. All the more so because at present there is no shortage of people willing to cover the subject. And I am not comfortable in a crowd. Though it has to be done. But it should be done carefully, not too much, so as not to overdo it. For there is always the risk of a militarization of art, including cinema, as happened in Russia, where they started from memory and respect and arrived to a cult of victory, to the phrase 'we can repeat it' and eventually to a real war. I would not want something like this to happen in Ukraine after its victory.

The film is based on real events. The murder of the parents. Did the childhood friends of the protagonist feature in the criminal records? Or did you invent them? If yes, please tell us what they represent for you... To be honest, I do not at all see Sashenka as the main character...

The events really took place in the USSR in the 70s. A disabled person killed his parents. That is all there is to it. I got interested. I wrote the script. Naturally, I invented the characters. At first, as an author, one controls the thoughts, the actions of the characters. But over time, the invented characters gain strength, become independent and start living their own independent lives. The author becomes just an observer of the events that happen to them. I never decided which character is a main one. It is up to them to find their place in the story. Everything depends on their power to affect the viewer, the reader.

A question about the cast and the crew. They are all young. They are not aware of the Soviet past. How did you choose the actors, what task did you set for them?

There were online auditions. I took a decision after a visual screening. Most often I relied on my intuition, and it has not so far failed me. It is quite simple and easy to understand. One watches, one sees and one determines whether this character is suitable or not. Although this time there was an unforeseen exception. It was clear enough with everyone except Sashenka himself. Many actors who tried to get the leading role did what I wanted and seemed to satisfy me. And one did it all wrong. In the end I chose him. Now I realise I was not wrong. By the way, this is his first film role.



For me, the film is a confrontation between ugly Soviet morality, natural deviance and/or family (childhood trauma) and a manifestation of humanity such as mercy and self-sacrifice. In the finale, the latter triumphs. Are you an optimist? Do you believe that human nature is based on peace, kindness, love, empathy?

I think a story like this could have happened anywhere and anytime. But the fact that it happened in the USSR is particularly telling. An event which is officially impossible, or rather unacceptable. How could it be, in a morally correct Soviet society? Remember the famous phrase of a Soviet woman, uttered on Soviet television, that there is no sex in the USSR. In fact, in the eyes of Soviet ideology, the phenomena that would discredit Soviet citizens and their moral code simply did not exist and could not exist. In reality, the made-up official morality imposed by the Soviet ideology provoked further opposition and emergence of hidden internal morality of the Soviet people, including unpredictable and absolutely diverse rules. We have attempted to analyse one such manifestation in our film. Or rather, we suggest the viewer to analyse it.

Does a Ukrainian filmmaker want to make movies today, when there is war in Ukraine?

Honestly speaking, the desire has faded. You think and worry more about Ukrainian children and old people killed by the Russian army, about Ukrainian women raped by Russian soldiers. There will be films about it. It will be after Ukraine's complete victory.

You know, today I would make a tragicomedy about Putin, specifically for him, so that he would finally see himself from the outside and feel his total pettiness.







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