

A BIT OF A STRANGER

Ukraine / Germany / Sweden 2024, 90 min.

a film by
Svitlana Lishchynska

PRESS NOTES

World premiere
Berlinale 2024
Panorama

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)



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Short synopsis

Four generations of Ukrainian women from one family explore how their ethnic identity has been destroyed by the full-scale Russian invasion. Together and one-by-one at the same time, they embark on an emotional journey shaped by their newfound memories and family history.

Long synopsis

Svitlana is a film director born in Mariupol, Ukraine. For several years she documented her family life: four generations of women who felt how Moscow's long-term imperial policy robbed them of their national identity. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the shock throughout the first months of the war is overwhelming. Her daughter, Alexandra, and her two-year-old grand-daughter, Stephanie, escape to London. Valentina, Svitlana's mother, stays in Kyiv and keeps in touch with Mariupol and her daughter via phone. Eager to find out what exactly has happened in Mariupol, Svitlana discovers how their individual experience of war collides with their newfound quest to learn about their families' history. Throughout their events, the three adult women wonder what patriotism really is and if it is worth dying for.



About the characters

SVITLANA (52) is the director and protagonist of the film. Sveta grew up in the Soviet Union and experienced the suppression of any expression of individuality in a totalitarian society. As a result, she dislikes anything associated with communism and any manifestation of despotism and violence triggers her. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything Sveta was taught turned out to be fake and she had to adapt to the new reality. As a person with a suppressed identity and shattered boundaries, Sveta found a way to survive by devoting herself fully to her work. At the end of the 90s, she moved to work in Kiev. As a result, Sveta failed to bring up her daughter or giving her an inner core.

ALEXANDRA (28) Sveta's daughter, has pro-Russian views and is very vulnerable to all kinds of propaganda, both commercial and political. Sasha grew up in Mariupol during the times of independent Ukraine, but in the Russian information field. Mariupol was a very Russified city. After finishing school, Sasha moved to Kiev with Sveta, where she became a hairdresser, married and gave birth to a daughter, Stephy. The full-scale invasion greatly shook Sasha and shattered all her perceptions of reality. Sasha found herself in a deep psychological crisis, which prompted her to work on her identity.

VALENTINA (76), Sveta's mother. Valia's ancestors were Zaporozhian Cossacks who were forcibly resettled from the central regions of Ukraine to Kuban during the Russian Empire. Valia's grandmother's family was forcibly dispossessed under the Soviet regime. As a result, their family was forced to move to Mariupol. Valia's mother spoke Ukrainian and observed traditions. However, Soviet society fostered the notion that it was shameful to be Ukrainian, so Valia inherited almost nothing Ukrainian from her mother.

She now deeply regrets the loss of continuity of traditions and loves Mariupol very much. She actively keeps in touch with her sister's family who remained in the occupied city and dreams of returning to Mariupol someday to say goodbye to the city.

Director's statement

The idea for this film came before the full-scale Russian invasion. After 2014, when pro-Ukrainian sentiment intensified in Ukraine, I decided to explore my identity. I was interested because my family and I come from the eastern part of Ukraine, which was heavily influenced by Russia.

In the process of working on the film it became obvious to me that the regime that existed in the USSR was designed to destroy all individuality: a person should not stand out, a person meant nothing, a person should live in poverty and not have an opinion. As a result, the country has a society of “unloved” people, vulnerable to propaganda. I am among them.

Having neither individuality nor ethical foundations, I raised my daughter without passing any values to her. As a result, my daughter had an existential crisis and depression. As for me, I was faced with a choice: to stay in Ukraine, which is bombed daily, sinking into trauma and where democracy is weakening, where my home, my relatives and my friends used to live, or to look for a calmer place on this planet.

Depicting four generations of women, with this film I show how the consciousness of people has been transformed under the influence of dictatorship and imperial policy of Russia. By combining a personal and political history, past and present, I found a non-linear but emotional way to tell the story, filled with atmosphere, feelings, and meanings.



About the director

Svitlana Lishchynska

Svitlana Lishchynska (born 1970, Mariupol) a Ukrainian film director. Svetlana has worked for more than 25 years for the leading Ukrainian TV channels. She directed numerous reality shows and documentary projects. Since 2015, Svetlana has been engaged in film production. She has directed several documentaries and written two full-length feature films.



Filmography

Mariupol. Reconstructed, 2022, documentary, 52'

Ballroom King, 2019, documentary, 62'

Treasures of Verona, 2019, documentary, 60'

Invisible Battalion, 2017, documentary, 89'

Interview with the director

Could you talk about the genesis of the documentary?

I started developing this film before the war. It was supposed to be a local Ukrainian story. I am originally from Mariupol, which was a very Russified area of Ukraine, and it was important for me to make a film about the colonised part of our consciousness in Eastern Ukraine. And I thought that this issue would be relevant only to the Ukrainians as the language issue is indeed important here. So I planned to film my home in Mariupol where I grew up, my family, my cousins, my aunt, and some residents of Mariupol who attended free courses of the Ukrainian language. The feeling of the impending war was already in the air, and I thought it would be even more critical to talk about Russification in Ukraine. After the full-scale war erupted, the development of this project was halted. I started filming myself as I was shooting some volunteer videos about displaced persons at the time. Then I was working on the film 'Mariupol Reconstruction' together with producer Anna Kapustina, and after we completed it, I suggested a new project to her, which went on to become 'A Bit of a Stranger'. I told her that I had some pre-war material, and I had some war material with myself in it, and perhaps we could do something about it. And so we applied to the DOK Leipzig market, and the project kicked off from there.

Tell us about the title of the film 'A Bit of a Stranger'?

I developed this project in a workshop, where Danish film producer Mikael Opstrup was a tutor. When we were talking about my film, about what I wanted to convey, he just dropped this phrase, which went along the lines of me being a bit of a stranger. So that stuck with me.

'A Bit of a Stranger' speaks to many themes: the relationship to the totalitarian Soviet regime I was born into, the independent, democratic Ukraine I found myself in after the collapse, the relationship with my estranged daughter, and the world she found herself in when she fled to the UK as the war spiralled.

How did your family members respond to you wanting to make this very personal film?

Oh, that was a dramatic story. I wanted to shoot our New Year's celebrations because I felt that something important was about to happen. However, my mother totally opposed the filming, we did not talk to each other for some two weeks

after. And then it was Steffi's birthday in mid February, and although they did not want me and the crew to film the family party, I guess they felt somewhat guilty about the New Year's situation, so they let me film. When the full-scale war unfurled, my daughter very much objected to the filming because we all were worn out from stress, and she could not even imagine what kind of film I was making and how it would unfold. You know how when making a TV reportage documentary, the crew parachutes in, shoots for some hours and then exits the scene? When Sasha realised that I was going to film her day in, day out, she was totally against it. She thought that it was a very draining process. Then my producer Anna Kapustina stepped in, and as the master of negotiations, she helped me talk to my daughter about it and set this collaboration in motion. And as the process went on, the discussion of identity grew more and more important for my family. They really started to reflect on it more. I am not sure if that would happen to the same extent if the film was never made. So it became a collective journey for us, which we were all engrossed in. I am extremely grateful to my family.

How did your role as a film director, daughter and mother affect the filming process? What challenges did you face owing to this multifaceted role?

It affects the process greatly, and it is a challenge when you are a director, character and family member – all in one. I used to be the one behind the camera, who could observe what was going on and attend to the needs of the directorial process, because you see the whole picture through the lens. But when you are facing the camera, you are inside the picture, inside life, and it is not fiction, perhaps you should forget that you are a director for a moment and stop preoccupying yourself with all the details.

Tell us about the crew filming inside your home.

We started working with a very professional and talented DoP, but I felt that when he entered my home, he – as a film professional – was like an alien person to my family. And I wanted to achieve an atmosphere of intimacy and emotional closeness in the film. So I asked a friend of mine, Petro Tsymbal, with whom I had collaborated on many films, to be our DoP. Petro often wears many hats in production, from a DoP to an editor or a sound recorder. He is also like a friend of the family, who knows my mother. So it was the best decision to have him as our DoP.

But there was another issue when filming abroad because Ukrainian men aged 18–60 are barred from travel due to the general mobilisation and martial law.

Hence, we brought on board a woman DoP, Khrystyna Lyzohub, who had previously worked on 'Butterfly Vision'. Before accompanying my mother to the UK, Khrystyna shot some scenes with her in Kyiv. It was crucial for us to do that, so that my mother could feel at ease with her, open up and let her film her when she was feeling vulnerable.

I am interested in the use of archival material in the film. You have included family archives in the documentary, from those of your mother's wedding in the late 1960s, to those of your own wedding in the early 1990s, to those of young Sasha. When did you come to the decision to use family archives in the film?

I planned to use my family archives from early on. I put a part about the family archives even in my first treatment of the film. And that part, which you saw in the film, captured how we bid farewell to the Communist Party, scoffing at the totalitarian regime. There is a salient sentiment felt in that archival material. And I started looking for something similar in my own archives, not only relating to our family affairs but also something that would comment on the political milieu of the times.

You are telling the story from your point of view, using your voice-over. How early in the process did you make that decision, and how did it affect the film's narrative?

We tried to avoid voice-over, but it got a tad complicated since we have three, almost four, characters in the film, and sometimes they look similar to one another. For example, some have mixed me up with my daughter. After showing a part of the rough cut, people have expressed that they had to spend some time figuring out who was who and what was happening, and that they could not fully follow the emotional line of the story. That said, it was essential for me to use voice-over not only as a narrative tool but also as an element that conveys my contemplations.

The decision to use voice-over was made, I think, after the second workshop in Leipzig's MDR, as part of the ARTE Generation Ukraine initiative. They proposed that I leave in some breathing in my voice-over and refrain from making it sound clean or polished. The people who have seen the final cut said that the film became even more honest, even more personal.

When your mother leaves Ukraine, you make a decision to stay, saying that for you learning to be free means learning to love. I think that captures the message of the film. Could you expand on it?

To me, this film is also about shedding infantilism and becoming an adult. Because dictatorships and totalitarian regimes make people infantile. And when we are talking about freedom and liberty, we are talking about responsibility, responsibility for our future and for what the world would become. That is why; I decided to stay in Ukraine, to be a Ukrainian director, to make films in Ukraine. And I can change things here, because I know the language, I know the history, and I know the people. I can be useful here.

In the final scene, we observe you on a train en route to Kyiv, you are sleeping and dreaming of Mariupol. Could you tell us more about this scene and where you are coming from?

It is not really important where I am coming from but where I arrive, and I arrive in Kyiv. I was coming from the war, from my past, and the dreaming sequence captures that – the death, the life, the right to be. And then, I arrive in Kyiv.



Producer's statement

At the beginning of 2022, an event took place that forever changed the lives of both Ukrainians and the world as a whole – the war began. This topic turned my life around and as a producer, it gives me the opportunity to live only by experiencing my presence through the prism of films, by what I can do – make films on a painful topic for my country. I understand the great relevance and importance of the topic for the viewer, both Ukrainian and international as a whole. Svitlana started shooting the film even before the war. I was impressed by how deeply she feels the story, how professionally she approaches the case. I was very interested in the idea of the film, it combines an important component – the interaction of different social motivation. The film is a deep look with a philosophical undertone with focus on human mentality.

This story is Svitlana's deep philosophical view on issues that Ukrainians have only recently not thought about. Her view of the development of events in the last centuries through the prism of her family impressed me immediately. It is an approachable way to convey to audiences worldwide the deep trauma of our society – how imperial Russia caused damage and the consequences that we experienced.

About the producer

Anna Kapustina is a producer based in Kyiv, Ukraine and the owner of the production company ALBATROS COMMUNICOS FILM. From 2003 – 2014 she produced commercials, TV programmes and international reality shows. Since 2014, she has been the producer of the Ukrainian cinematographic community #BABYLON`13 and NGO HERO.UA. Her documentary THE FIRST COMPANY was awarded a Docudays Audience Award and recognised as the Best Ukrainian Documentary. Her film THE EARTH IS BLUE AS AN ORANGE (2020) had its World Premiere in the Competition at the Sundance Film Festival (Best Director Award) and was selected in the Berlinale Generation program, IDFA, CPH:DOX, HotDoc and more than 100 Festivals and won more than 40 Awards.

Credits

Written and Directed by	Svitlana Lishchynska
Production	Albatros Comunicos Film
Producers	Anna Kapustina
Coproduction with	ZDF/ARTE Fredrik Lange (Sweden / Vilda Bomben Film) Anthony Muir and Kristina Börjeson (Sweden / Film I Vast)
Cinematographers	Petro Tsymbal Krystyna Lizohub Ivan Fomichenko Vlad Dergunov Maryna Svitlychna Denis Strashny (engl) Anja Zhukova Shaun Holder Jasleen Kaur Sethi Jack Bradley Jack Laurensen Sound recorder Nataliia Avramenko
Editors	Svitlana Lishchynska Anja Zhukova



74th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Panorama

FOUR GENERATIONS OF WOMEN
AND A CANCELED PAST

A BIT OF A STRANGER

A FILM BY SVITLANA LISHCHYNSKA

PRESENTED BY ALBATROS COMMUNICOS UKRAINE IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH ZDF · VILDA BOHLEN FILM AG · FILM I VÄST · DIRECTED BY SVITLANA LISHCHYNSKA · PRODUCED BY ANNA KAPUSTINA · CO-PRODUCED BY FREDRIK LANGE AND KRISTINA BÖRJESON
SCREENPLAY BY MIRIAM CARBE · EDITOR SVITLANA LISHCHYNSKA · ANJA ZHUKOVA · COSTUME DESIGNER NATALIA ALVAREZ · PRODUCTION DESIGNER ANDRII RYZHANUK · EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ERIK CLAUSSEN · CASTING DIRECTOR HECTOR MORA · INTERNATIONAL SALES FILM HARBOUR

BDI Award
Best Documentary
Project by a Female
Director 2022

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