

SAUNA DAY (Sannapäiv)

Estonia, 2024, 13 min.

a film by
Anna Hints & Tushar Prakash

PRESS NOTES

World premiere



63^e SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2024



Synopsis

Sauna Day invites you into the world of Southern Estonian men who go to the dark-intimate space of a smoke sauna after a hard day's work. Beneath their tough exteriors lies a desire for connection, veiled in secrecy.

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Anna Hints is an Estonian film director with a background in the contemporary art scene and experimental music. Anna is deeply rooted in the distinct culture of South Estonia, yet for 5 years her second home has been India. Anna studied literature, folklore and has a degree both in Photography and Film Directing. Anna's debut short fiction *Ice* (2017), which received the Best Short Film award at the Estonian Film and TV Awards, has been screened at more than 95 film festivals and won 14 awards worldwide. Anna's feature debut ***Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*** had its world premiere at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, where it competed in the World Cinema Documentary Competition and won the Directing Award at the World Cinema Documentary Competition. It was selected as the Estonian entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 96th Academy Awards and won the award for Best Documentary at the 36th European Film Awards.



Tushar Prakash (left) & Anna Hints (right)
Picture by Erlend Štaub

Tushar Prakash is an Indian filmmaker, who is a graduate of the National Polish Film School in Lodz. Since 2020 he has been living in Estonia. His graduation film ***Jestem OK*** won the Best Student Fiction Film and The Polish Film Society Award For Artistic Courage & Bravery at the Lodzia Po Wisle student film festival in Warsaw. The film also won the Honorable Mention at the Koszalin Film Festival in Poland. He co-directed ***The Karma Killings***, a feature documentary on the infamous Nithari serial killings, the first Indian documentary to be acquired by NETFLIX. He was also the editor for the Indian short film ***Circus*** directed by Tariq Vasudeva, the film premiered at the Moscow International Film Festival 2018. His feature fiction film in development has participated at the Produire Au Sud workshop in France and La Fabrique Des Cinémas Du Monde at the Cannes Film Festival where it was mentored by Claire Dennis. He is amongst the first Indian alumni of EAVE.

Anna and Tushar have been creatively collaborating since 2019. They have written two short fiction scripts together: ***The Weight of Light*** and ***Sauna Day***. ***The Weight Of Light*** won the Baltic Producers Media Award at Baltic Pitching Forum in Vilnius 2021 and celebrated its world premiere at the Tampere Film Festival 2024 as part of the International Competition. It also received the Youth Jury Award at the Human Rights Film Festival in San Sebastian 2024.

Tushar was also one of the editors of Anna's feature-length debut ***Smoke Sauna Sisterhood***.

The couple's experimental short ***Kissing Your Tongue*** is their first creative collaboration that is also part of the expanded cinema project *Time Quartet* curated by Len Murusalu.

Anna and Tushar also directed and produced the short ***The Estonian Man*** together, which was screened on national television in Estonia in February 2024 and is celebrating its international premiere at Millennium Docs Against Gravity in May 2024.

[Filmography Anna Hints](#)

[Filmography Tushar Prakash](#)

About the producers

Johanna Maria Paulson

Johanna Maria Paulson is an Estonian film producer who graduated from the Baltic Film, Media, and Arts School in 2017. She is co-running Stellar Film, an acknowledged film production company based in Tallinn, Estonia. Her experience includes working on shorts, documentaries, TV series, and international feature films, many of which have received worldwide recognition at A-class festivals. Her most recent works include the short films *Sauna Day* (dir. Anna Hints & Tushar Prakash), which will have its world premiere at Cannes La Semaine de la Critique; *The Weight of Light* (dir. Anna Hints), which premiered at the Tampere Film Festival; the experimental short *Dear Passengers* (dir. Madli Lääne) that was well-received on an international scale and won the best short film award at the Estonian Film and Television Awards 2023; and a Finnish-Estonian co-production *The Missile*, which started its festival life at Göteborg Film Festival in January 2024.

Evelin Penttilä

Evelin Penttilä is a film producer based in Estonia. She started her career as a film producer in 2011 by producing short films and commercials along with assisting experienced feature film producers in Estonia, Finland, Germany and UK. She produced her first feature film *Zero Point* by director Mihkel Ulk in 2014, which was awarded the debut of the year by Estonian Cultural Endowment and distributed on VoD to more than 80 territories(it was the first Baltic film sold to Netflix). Her filmography today includes more than 10 feature films and numerous short films as a producer or co-producer including feature films *The Sleeping Beast* by Jaak Kilmi(2022), *Maria's Paradise*(2019) by Zaida Bergroth, *Helene* (2020) by Antti Jokinen, *Hit Big* (2022) by JP Valkeapää, *The Missile* (2024) by Miia Tervo and short films *Bad Hair* (2019) by Oskar Lehema, *For Tomorrow Paradise Arrives* (2021) by Anna Hints, *The Weight of Light* (2024) by Anna Hints, *Sauna Day* (2024) by Anna Hints & Tushar Prakash and others. She founded Stellar Film in 2015, which she is currently running side by side with producer Johanna Maria Paulson.

Evelin is a member of European Film Academy, part of ACE Producers & EAVE networks and was selected as Producer on the Move 2022.

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Q&A with Anna Hints & Tushar Prakash

***Sauna Day* unfolds in a very short period of time. What is the stake of setting a short during a single day?**

Anna Hints: We always imagined the film would be about that one particular day in summer. The day itself is significant, it's a Saturday and in the south, we call Saturday a sauna day. But before that, the men come together, some of them travel from the city to this village in the valley, to do the work together.

Tushar Prakash: By setting the short in a day, we can also show that this is a ritual that these two men have been performing, they have been participating in it continuously. Everything might seem mundane, but then there is also an unsaid part of their regular activities.

AH: What's very important to the smoke sauna culture is the understanding of time not as linear, but as cyclical. I've been thinking a lot about narratives in relation to time where my grandmother (a sauna keeper) would tell me the kind of stories they would never encourage you to make a film of because they are not linear, tri-act, or a hero's journey. In recent years, I have reconnected with that heritage of mine and it has been a healing journey, coming to terms with the fact that I'm carrying a different understanding of time and storytelling, which is something I can share with Tushar who comes from India. Like *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*, our fairy tales, legends and myths, they are more connected with stories Tushar and I were brought up with. And now we are trying to show this understanding into our films.

A ritual is somewhat of a present continuous tense that has been recurring for a while. How does the short film form help you convey that sense of ritualistic time?

TP: We managed to express some of the intensity around what is happening between these two men—which is not exclusive to only this one day—by being attentive to gestures. Instead of focusing on something that is said, we looked for something that is felt in the body. An intensity that is felt in the gestures, the way the body moves and assumes position, all because these two men have participated in this ritual before.

AH: I have also made the mistake of making short films that are wanna-be-long films, but really, I'm fascinated by the short format. Even if you have a poem, then it can be a haiku, a ballad or something else. Time is the quintessential part of filmmaking. We often forget that and get caught up in thinking of a narrative structure that we are so used to the hero's journey, it's these three acts, conflicts, and it's all very linear. As a result, we get stuck in thinking this is the way films should be and we forget that in the

history of the human experience, there are so many different ways to tell stories and so many different ways to perceive time. And when we did *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*, where Tushar was one of the editors and we edited for a year. We talked about time a lot then and of creating more together in the future.

Good world-building doesn't need a full-length film's time. But there is something else in *Sauna Day's* concept of time, that is not just duration.

AH: *Sauna Day* works as a short and I'm actually very proud of that. Like in literature where you can have poems, novels, or short stories on the same topic, I find it very interesting how the format itself can transform your relationship to the content. It's not a question of whether this is good or bad, it just gives you different access points and forms different kinds of connotations in your mind, which I find fascinating. For this short film, it felt right to take everything else away and keep the timeless essence of the smoke sauna and of the encounter that happens there. Perhaps you can gather this is a present day film based on the clothes the men are wearing, but this is why we go to a smoke sauna, to seek a kind of freedom. Outside, there is this traditional society where we wear our signifiers, literally and metaphorically. The smoke sauna is where you take all that off. For that short, we took that outside world out of the equation: you know it's there, but the focus is on the inside of that space. I'm interested in depicting the smoke sauna as a canvas to explore the human condition as opposed to social media as a space for self-representation and showing off.

Both actors and non-actors are involved in *Sauna Day*. How did you work with them to get to that emotional core of what is left unsaid? It seems like the film peels away layers of performance.

TP:I often think about what you mentioned, about stripping away performance. I've always considered how to remove the acting aspect from actors so they are not acting at all. Instead, they genuinely live the experience, making it feel completely natural to them. And I think a lot of filmmakers' strive for this and every filmmaker kind of has their own method, like Bresson would have 50 takes to achieve it. We felt that this film will work when the line between reality and fiction totally blurs. When you're watching this, you're not watching a performance. Rather, you're seeing something coming from the community, and even when the people from that community would watch it, they would recognise it as something theirs, not foreign. For that reason, in the casting process, we were trying to find out where the actors came from, where they grew up, what their mother tongue was. We wanted the actors to be able to blend into the community. We did not want to write a closed text script, we wanted a map which we could then build on; instead of limiting the reality to the text, we wanted it to work well with the reality in front of us.

AH: Background was important in the sense that if we would find actors from that community, like Agur [Seim], speaking the language, we would embrace the opportunity to work with them. Everything is connected, not just to the stories we tell, but how we make films. There is an energy that comes through that process and is felt in the final result: starting the day in a circle, chanting together, doing meditation. Also, the men actually built the roof they are talking about building in the film. Maybe in the end, it ends up a 13 minute-short, but to get there you need four days of living and working together, in their characters. In general, I am looking for life in art, I want art to be alive. It doesn't mean that it has to be a realistic format, but I feel a lot of the typical fiction films and the way the shooting is done is killing life, taking away the possibility to really react to what you're seeing. What I love about documentaries is that you can react to life, so in fiction I want to create the possibilities for life to emerge. It's about being very open with everyone involved from the beginning, how to create this particular space and time where miracles can happen, basically. And being ready to capture those miracles where we recognise them.

Your other short, *The Estonian Man*, also explores the traditional idea of how labour should be split between two genders? I'd like to know how you see them—emotional labour and physical labour—coming together in *Sauna Day*.

TP: I was with a friend who was showing me some of the places where we could shoot ***Sauna Day*** in the South of Estonia and he said, "Okay, now I have to go and help my friend build a roof." So I said I'll also come along and help out. That's what you do in Estonia, in South Estonia especially, if there is any labour happening, you participate. It's one of the unsaid rules amongst men. Definitely that there is, if I'm going to go build a roof, you have to kind of come in and help. As you see in *The Estonian Man*, I'm trying to figure out how this works. While I was there with them, though, I could see that manual work is a stage for this kind of unsaid hierarchy between men. Every man knows what they have to do and who's good with what, so when I came in with my lack of talent, I very well managed to fit into the bottom of the hierarchy [laughs]. I observed this well oiled machine, this beautiful synchronicity and harmony of work and when Anna and I talked about it more, we wanted to take a community work project through which we could investigate male gender roles. Even though it's not shown in the short film itself, building the roof really played a very interesting role in assembling this unit of men together. Through the work of building the roof, before the sauna scene, they managed to find that relationship hierarchy where everyone has their role. It allowed the actors to integrate into the community.

AH: Personally, I have a conflicted relationship with tradition and with this kind of gender roles. So on one hand, my roots are in the southeast of Estonia, from two indigenous groups, and I carry a lot of heritage that most people have forgotten or it has

been lost. But while tradition and heritage is something that can give you a feeling of belonging, at the same time it can offer a very narrow look at things, and I could never fit in some of it. That's why the first time I heard the term "non-binary", it immediately resonated with me as I never fitted the gender binary. I truly believe that, yes, I can carry a heritage, but I have a choice of what or how I carry on with me.

TP: So if the men work in this unsaid, focused manner, women's labour offers a tool for sharing stories, gossip. They're both social rituals, but they play a very different role for the genders, since the men don't want to share. They want to work, they want this feeling of communion, which comes from silence or from mundane conversations. But for women, community comes from sharing, talking, sharing recipes. It's two different, but equal perspectives on how work has a social role and also becomes a space for gender politics and identities to play out.

You have experience of shooting in a sauna, but *Sauna Day* uses close ups more sparsely in favour of full shots and longer takes. Can you talk me through the visual style and how you worked with your cinematographer to such expressive minimalism?

AH: Technically speaking, we had experience of filming in full heat in Smoke Sauna Sisterhood with Ants Tammik, so we used the same technique of placing cameras and lenses inside on the floor, then in time putting them higher up to adjust to the heat, while another pair of lenses were positioned outside for the exterior shots. Inside, there were wet pieces of cloth on the cinematographer's and the sound operator's heads. Tushar and I were not there, I only had a receiver to whisper something to the cinematographer if needed. Only the two actors were there. We worked in long takes and we wanted to make the viewer feel that heat becoming almost unbearable until it stops abruptly. We had prepared everything, so when it came to the sauna, they had built the roof already, the men talked, some of them left, and there came that ritual of whisking. It was actually one take: everything was ready and we captured that energy. We asked ourselves the important question of how to capture what is not said, but felt. How do you capture what is not allowed? And do it in a convincing, visceral way.

This is your third collaboration and second co-directed film. How would you describe your process of creating together?

TP: Filmmaking can be such a lonely process and collaboration definitely gives more courage, and it gives more comfort to know that there is another person with whom you can split the weight. The most interesting flora, fauna, and animal wildlife is found where two geographies meet. Something similar happens with collaboration. I'm a big believer in the idea that a local story is a global story, you can take something very

local, but you can still make it extremely global. Somehow this collision of two minds coming from different geographies, but having the same taste can take something which is really local, and can take it to the world. It's been a journey for me to accept that, being in a position where you're learning from another person, witnessing another person's process, getting comfortable with the questions that come from the other person and to really celebrate that meeting point.

AH: Since I can remember, I have had this need to create. I remember staging plays as a child, where my brother, my mother, everyone would become part of it. My background is in contemporary art and when I think of performances or exhibitions involving my close friends, I guess for me, co-creating is just a natural way of being together. Tushar and I are partners, but also partners in life and art. I think in every film, we will be contributing to each other's work, but that can take different forms. But it's just a beautiful way of sharing a passion and human connection. I think it's just like a way of being alive, creating, not just films, but also creating everyday life. And I firmly believe one plus one equals three in life and in art. There's always unexpected, something more in this equation.

*Interview by Savina Petkova
May 2024*

Credits

CAST

Jaak Hillar Rasmus Kaljujärv
Agur Seim

CREW

Screenwriters & directors Anna Hints & Tushar Prakash

Production Company Stellar Film
Producers Johanna Maria Paulson, Evelin Penttilä

Cinematographer Ants Tammik
Production Designer Inga Vares
Editor Emeri Abel
Sound Designer Tanel Kadalipp
Costume Designer Inga Vares
Make-Up Designer Piret Sootla

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