

My dear Theo

З любов'ю з фронту

a film by Alisa Kovalenko

PRESS NOTES

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Logline

Ukrainian volunteer soldier, filmmaker, and mother Alisa Kovalenko creates a testament to the power of love in times of war—balancing frontline routines, the horrors of the battlefield, and tender, poetic letters to her little son, Théo.



Synopsis

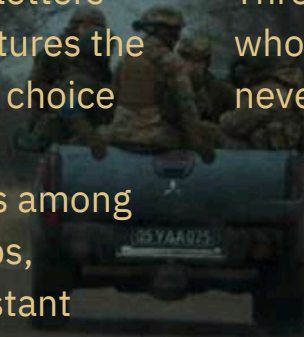
February 2022. Ukrainian filmmaker Alisa Kovalenko resolves to fulfill a promise she made to herself: to volunteer in the Ukrainian Armed Forces if the Russian invasion of her country escalates to full scale. Leaving behind her 5-year-old son, Théo, she goes to fight on the frontline.

This film, which was never meant to exist, was born from the effort to preserve—amidst the horrors and dangers of war—evidence of a mother’s unwavering love for her child. Through intimate video diaries and poetic letters addressed to a future, grown-up Théo, Alisa captures the devastating reality of war while reflecting on her choice to serve. Her camera reveals both the chaos of destruction and the profound humanity she finds among her fellow soldiers—their unbreakable friendships, mutual support, and tender connections with distant loved ones.

Serving both as a mother’s testament of love and a war documentary, the film interweaves Kovalenko's personal journey with the larger narrative of those fighting to ensure future generations may live in peace.

This first-person documentary offers an intense, intimate perspective on the human cost of war and the profound bonds between parent and child that endure even in the darkest times.

Through her lens, Alisa Kovalenko honors both the living who serve and those who made the ultimate sacrifice, never to return to their families.



Director *Alisa Kovalenko*

Alisa Kovalenko is an award-winning Ukrainian documentary filmmaker, based in Kyiv. Her first two feature-length documentaries, **Alisa in Warland** (IDFA 2015) and **Home Games** (Sheffield Doc/Fest 2018) were both screened over 100 festivals, winning multiple awards. Alisa's third film, **We Will Not Fade Away**, a teenage adventure documentary set in war-torn Donbas, premiered at the Berlinale 2023. **We Will Not Fade Away** won 20 international awards, was named Best Ukrainian Documentary in 2023 by the Ukrainian Film Academy and was selected for the European Film Awards 2023. The same year, she co-directed together with Simon Lereng Wilmont a short documentary for young audiences, **Girl Away from Home** (IDFA 2023).

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Alisa joined a volunteer combat unit associated with the Armed Forces of Ukraine and fought on the frontline for months, before returning to filmmaking. From this existential experience she has drawn **My Dear Théo**.

Alisa is an awardee of the Chicken & Egg Award 2024. Her films have been screened by major broadcasters and platforms such as Netflix and Arte.



About *HAKA FILMS*

HAKA FILMS is one of the most dynamically developing and innovative film production houses in Poland. Since 2022 they have been premiering at least one film a year.

Their first documentary, **Boylesque** by Bogna Kowalczyk premiered at the Main Competition at Hot Docs. The second one, **We Will Not Fade Away** by Alisa Kovalenko, premiered at Berlinale 2023. **Lili** by Sylwia Rosak had its first screening at Santa Barbara IFF in 2024 and the premiere of Alisa Kovalenko's **My Dear Théo** will take place at CPH:DOX 2025 in its International Competition.

As a lead producer, the company has also produced Netflix series: **Detective Forst** by Daniel Jaroszek, and is currently in development of several features and production of documentaries including **One for the Team** by Katarzyna Wiśniowska and **Insurance Against Meteorities** by Natalia Śliwowska.

Acting also as a production service, we participated in such projects as the 95th Academy Awards Nominee **EO** (D: Jerzy Skolimowski), **Operation Hyacinth** (D: Piotr Domalewski), **Adventures of a Mathematician** (D: Thorsten Klein), **Delegation** (D: Asaf Saban), and **Mr. Jones** (D: Agnieszka Holland).

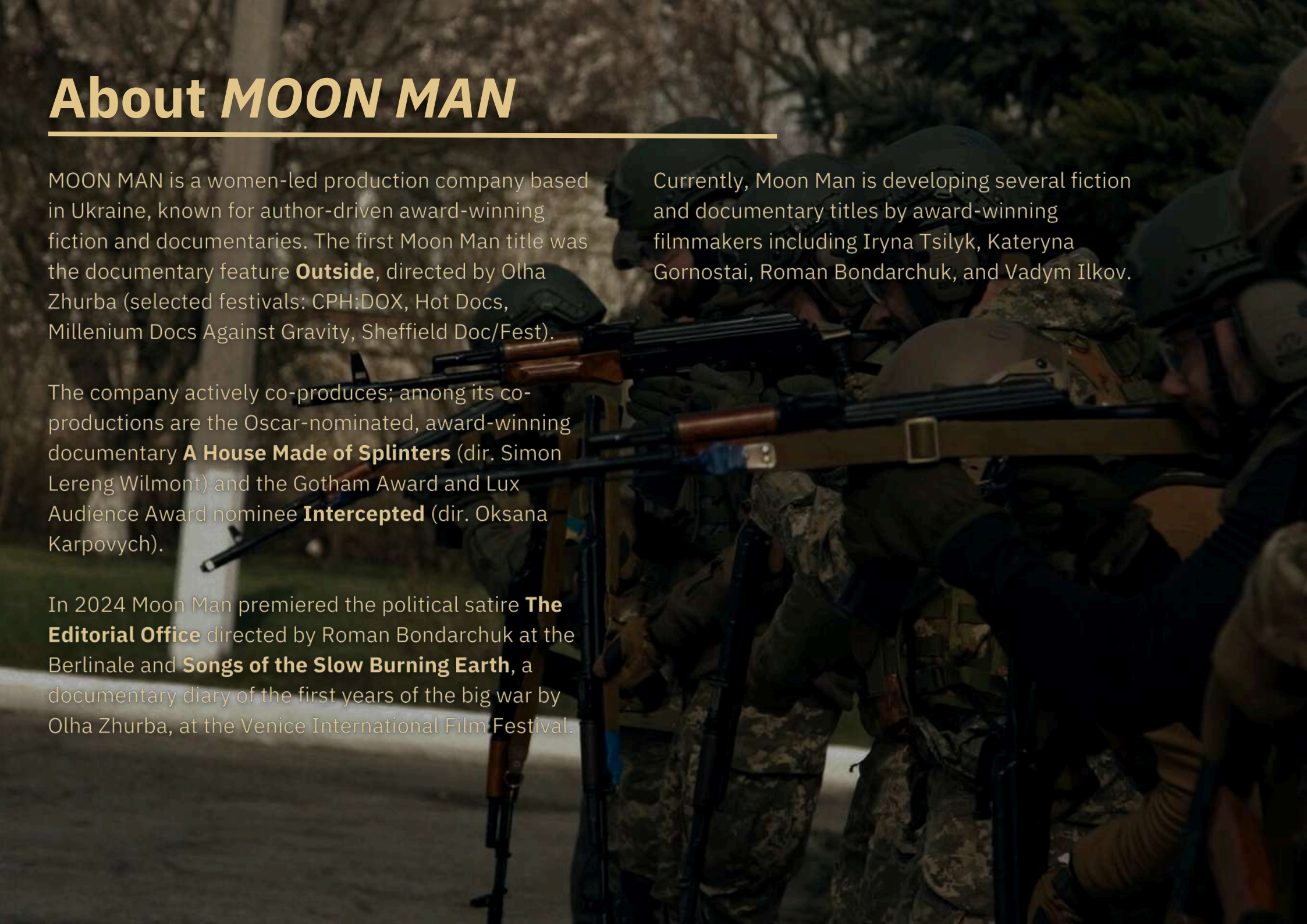
About **MOON MAN**

MOON MAN is a women-led production company based in Ukraine, known for author-driven award-winning fiction and documentaries. The first Moon Man title was the documentary feature **Outside**, directed by Olha Zhurba (selected festivals: CPH:DOX, Hot Docs, Millenium Docs Against Gravity, Sheffield Doc/Fest).

The company actively co-produces; among its co-productions are the Oscar-nominated, award-winning documentary **A House Made of Splinters** (dir. Simon Lereng Wilmont) and the Gotham Award and Lux Audience Award nominee **Intercepted** (dir. Oksana Karpovych).

In 2024 Moon Man premiered the political satire **The Editorial Office** directed by Roman Bondarchuk at the Berlinale and **Songs of the Slow Burning Earth**, a documentary diary of the first years of the big war by Olha Zhurba, at the Venice International Film Festival.

Currently, Moon Man is developing several fiction and documentary titles by award-winning filmmakers including Iryna Tsilyk, Kateryna Gornostai, Roman Bondarchuk, and Vadym Ilkov.



Interview with the director

When we spoke about your film *We Will Not Fade Away*, you mentioned that in the early days of the war, cinema had lost all its meaning. In *My Dear Théo*, you say in a voice-over that this film was never meant to be made. At what point on the front line did you decide to pick up the camera and start filming?

The camera was with me from the beginning when I was in Donbas. I was filming with the characters of **We Will Not Fade Away** in Donbas near the front line when the full-scale invasion broke out. When I decided to join the volunteer army and head to the front line, I brought the camera with me, thinking maybe I'd film something to keep as a memory. But once I was there, the camera mostly stayed in my backpack, tucked away in sandbags or trenches. There were times I didn't even take it to certain positions. So what I filmed were just small fragments. For me, the most important thing was recording my conversations with Théo, so he would have something to hold onto—a piece of our time together. I also filmed some moments with my comrades. However, it wasn't anything dramaturgical—just snippets and tiny pieces of our life there. That's why I never thought it could turn into a feature-length film with a narrative structure.



When did you realise that the material you had captured could become a film?

My good friend and colleague Maryna Stepanska was working on a documentary about filmmakers reflecting on the full-scale war and their choices. Many of us volunteered to join the army when the war began. When Maryna asked me to share some of my footage, I replied, “Maryna, there is nothing interesting there. Just trees, fields, trenches, and waiting faces... It’ll probably be just a family archive.” But as we went through some of the material together, she said, “There is something very special in this footage.” Maybe it was special because it wasn’t meant to be a film. Rather, it captured the intimate perspective of a soldier—what I saw, what the experience felt like... A director making a film about war would likely never focus on the insects in a trench, as they may seem insignificant. But for a soldier, they are part of everyday reality. You spend hours, days, and nights in that trench, and you begin to notice the small things—the leaves, the trees, and the minute details that might seem trivial but are all part of the lived experience. There is also a deeper, existential element that the camera can’t quite capture. For me, it was even more important to express what I was feeling in writing. That’s why, in the end, I believe the letters hold far more emotional weight than the footage itself.

Let’s delve into the writing process. How did you approach it, and how did it influence your editing process?

I had a lot of letters—some long, others short, and a few brief notes. I started by organising everything chronologically, sometimes connecting different parts. When we began editing with the wonderful Kasia Boniecka, the editor who also worked on my film **We Will Not Fade Away**, I had already selected some of the letters, but there were still about 20 pages—which was a lot to work with. Deciding what to keep was tough. We started by going through all the material. Interestingly, we began editing from the end of the film, knowing that the closing scenes would focus on my final moments on the front line. So we worked backwards—from the last point to the first. We had around 30 hours of footage, including extensive recordings of my conversations with Théo. A third of the material consisted of these long talks, and of course, we couldn’t use a lot of them in the film, even though there were some beautiful moments.

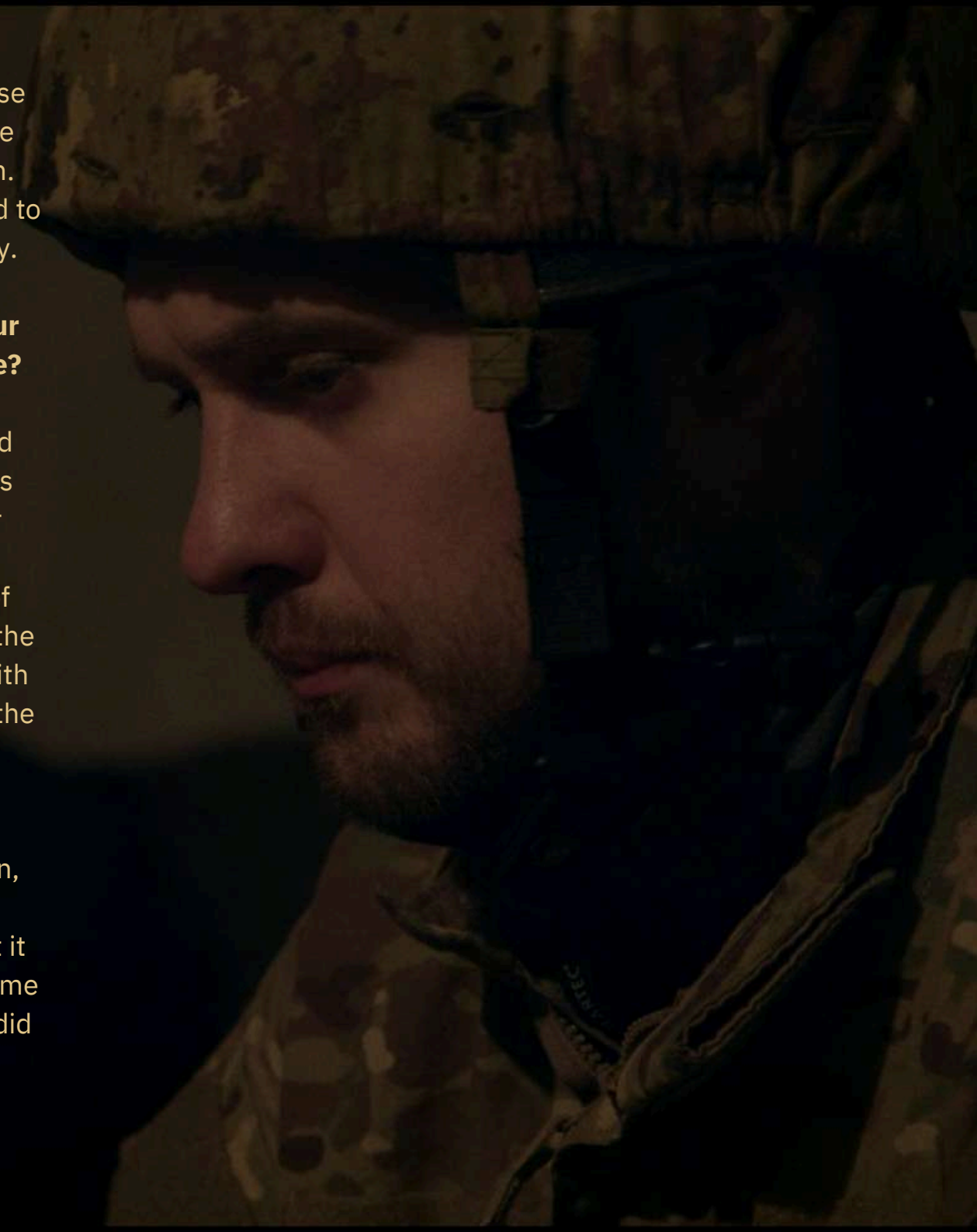
The early stages of editing were particularly difficult for me, as by then, some of my comrades had died in action, and I was struggling to process my emotions. It was heartbreaking. Kasia and I were editing in Montségur, France, and I realised I had to find a way to work through this. Then, suddenly, it hit me—I was creating a time capsule with this film, a world where everyone was still alive. A cherished place where I could visit my friends, my brothers-in-arms, my comrades. That thought helped me

keep going. During the editing process, we came to realise that while the ending is painful and filled with sorrow, the film still carries a sense of light, even in the face of death. That light provides strength. Despite the loss, we wanted to honour their lives and keep that light alive in our memory.

You also narrated the film. Was it difficult to bring your voice into the narration? What challenges did you face?

As we edited, it became clear that the story had to unfold chronologically. We couldn't jump through time, as it was about the evolution of emotions. My letters evolved over time, and we couldn't interrupt that progression, as the letters themselves had a natural dramaturgy. The tone of the letters shifted, emotions deepened, so we followed the emotional trajectory within them. However, we began with the end in mind, as we knew what the final moments of the film would be.

Narrating the film through voice-over was one of the hardest parts for me. I wanted to be vulnerable and open, but some moments were so painful to share. I wrote the letters for my son, knowing that he might read them, but it was still difficult to talk about certain traumas, like my time in captivity. The recording sessions were tough too. We did many takes with my sound designer Mariia Nesterenko, whom I've known for years, which made me feel more comfortable, but it was still a challenge.



The film is structured as both a memory diary and a letter to your son. What led you to choose this form?

It came from reflecting on the transience of memory and how we can preserve it for our children and share these experiences with them. I also thought about parents who died without having the chance to speak to their children and say the important words. For me, the letters became a bridge—a way to connect with our children and confide our feelings and thoughts, not just recount the events. Many war films focus on military action and operations, but what happens in between and after these events? I wanted to make space for these thoughts and reflections—something that other parents and children could relate to as well.

I don't think I have ever seen a war documentary narrated from a parent's perspective. It's something unique to Ukraine. Before February 2022, many people now fighting on the front lines weren't professional soldiers—they were ordinary people like me: filmmakers, musicians, engineers, lawyers, fitness trainers... And parents. So I wanted to capture this humanity, not only focusing on the heroism of those fighting on the front lines, but also on something more delicate and tender—something fragile within us. It was also important to show the fear we all felt. We weren't brave soldiers at all times; we had our vulnerabilities and fears as humans. I wanted to emphasise that.

The film also reflects on the complexity of the decision to be on the front line as a parent.

Some might think I am crazy—a mother going to war—but after everything I had endured and witnessed, I never doubted my decision. I had a sense of what was to come since 2014, when I filmed in Donbas, shortly after Crimea was annexed by Russia. At the time, I was grappling with the question of who I was as a filmmaker in the midst of those events. That's when I made a promise to myself. Yes, emotionally, it was a tough decision because I am a mother. But at the same time, I knew I had to do this as a citizen of my country. This decision was about honouring my promise and staying true to my belief in fighting for our freedom. Moreover, since no one in my family could fight on the front lines—my partner is French, my parents are pensioners, and my brother has health issues—I felt that someone in my family had to join the effort. There was also this feeling that we, as parents, are responsible for our children's future, so that in the years to come, they would not have to go to the front line instead of us. We were certain that we had to stop it now.

The film features clear chronological and geographical markers, from your operations in the Kyiv region to the Kharkiv region in 2022. Yet, it also feels like one endless day, punctuated by frontline routines, conversations with loved ones, time in the trenches, and long moments of waiting. How did this sense of time and rhythm shape your editing choices?

The sense of time was very important, especially in the sequence we called “long day.” We thought a lot about that feeling of endlessness. The film itself feels like one continuous day, flowing in waves—like a sea you dive into. This was essential—capturing simple images, like a trench, but through the lens of change, allowing the audience to sink deeper into the experience. We wanted to create a rhythm where time feels vast and unending, like the sea—sometimes stormy, sometimes calm, sometimes in anticipation of a storm—but it’s a sea from which you can’t get ashore.

It was also important to capture the sense of waiting. Life on the front line is marked by endless intervals of waiting—even in active phases, like when liberating villages in Kharkiv. You advance, then you wait. You always wait. I wanted to show this side of frontline life—not just moments of battle and heroism, but the relentless routine and hard work. Of course, soldiers are heroes, but their days are also filled with exhaustion and monotony, which can be

mentally draining. Amid those long stretches of waiting, you inevitably find yourself contemplating existential questions and drifting through memories and dreams. I wove this experience into the film by blending my letters and footage, capturing how those thoughts and emotions washed over me during intense operations or in those suspended moments of waiting.

You continued recording even during the most intense and dangerous moments. What did holding the camera mean to you in those times, and how did your comrades feel about its presence during such intense moments? How did their relationship with the camera evolve?

The operation was incredibly intense. We were supposed to liberate the last village in the Kharkiv region, and I thought it would be important to document it. However, the operation didn’t go as planned. At some point, I found myself frustrated with the camera, as it was heavy, but I still felt the need to film this part of reality. As we were waiting, we still held onto the belief that we could succeed. That’s when I filmed some small conversations about children and love. They reveal the warmth that emerges in these moments, set against the horrors of war. Capturing this contrast was really important to me. As for my comrades’ relationship with the camera, they were accepting of it. Some even asked at times, “Why aren’t you filming? You need to film this.” Since I was one of them, not an outsider director making a film, they were at ease with the camera. In fact, many of my comrades hoped I would make a film.

I kept filming as we walked through the field strewn with petal mines, thinking it might be the last moment of my life. I wasn't holding the camera; it was secured to my chest. That was the hardest moment of my time on the front line—not just because of the danger, but because we were so utterly exhausted. We had begun the liberation at three in the morning, with no sleep since. It was gruelling, and we had to walk for many kilometres, unsure whether we would even make it.

How did you approach the music and sound design in the film?

I worked with Wojciech Frycz, the composer I had also collaborated with on **Will Not Fade Away**. During the work on **My Dear Théo**, Wojciech would often say, “You want me to create music that isn't really music—something that blends into the atmosphere, ambient, with subtle nuances.” We could spend hours perfecting tiny details that perhaps no one would even notice. We wanted the music to be delicate, creating an existential portal that transports you into another reality—into your thoughts and dreams. It was a collaborative process, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Wojciech is a brilliant composer. He also writes extensively for theatre, and we often joked that theatre music is very expressive, brimming with dramatic emotion. However, for this film, we wanted to craft something more understated. At the end of the film, the music is slightly

more expressive, but it doesn't dramatise the pain. It conveys it through deep, underlying notes of emotion.

The landscape protects you as you hide in the trenches. The rustling of trees and the wind of the forest become your ears. The sunset offers respite, allowing you to swim in the warm memories of loved ones, even if only for a few moments. Could you talk about the significance of the landscape and nature in your film?

I mention this in one of my letters—it's a paradox. You witness such beauty alongside the horrors of war. A breathtaking sunrise, birds chirping, and yet, at the same time, heavy bombing and lives being lost. The contrast is unsettling—the beauty of nature juxtaposed with fear and pain. Let me share an anecdote. In the forest, there are no horizons, just trees surrounding you, and sometimes I had panic attacks because I couldn't see anything—I could only hear. Instead of hearing something important, like approaching footsteps, we heard the birds chirping endlessly. One morning, my comrade arrived at our position, speaking of a “bastard.” We all immediately knew he meant the bird—the loudest one, chirping through the night without rest. The strangest part was that the birds kept chirping even during the bombings. It's almost an existential statement—when everything else is frozen in horror, life goes on.

This film is very close to the bone and honest. Bringing in personal archives of your son must have added another layer of vulnerability.

At first, we didn't use any archival material—only footage from the front line. We weren't sure about it at first. We had considered keeping him as a sort of mental image, someone we don't see throughout the film. But after going through the archival material, we realised it brought a sense of tenderness, sweetness, and contrast—Théo's life in France versus our life at war. Many families of soldiers, including my comrades' families, had been displaced to other countries because of the war. We constantly felt that contrast—they were there, and we were here. But it was important to stay connected to this other world and not let the war be the only reality. Those small glimpses of normal life were what kept us from losing our minds.

Of course, I was concerned about how Théo would react to the film, so we decided as a family to hold a screening for him just a few days ago. Since I made this film for a future Théo, for when he is older, I wasn't sure if he would fully grasp everything intellectually. But he felt it all, as he is very empathetic. He reacted to everything as it unfolded, even recalling moments when I phoned him from the front line. At one point, as he watched a fragment of our personal archive in the film, he looked at me and said, "Mama, I am falling into nostalgia." One moment, in particular, hit me



hard. In the film, there is a scene where I speak about parents going to the front line so that our children wouldn't have to. Théo then turned to me and said, "Mama, I don't want you to go back to the front line. I'll go instead."

What was your experience as a woman on the front line?

When the full-scale invasion began, people experienced it in different ways. For many, it was an overwhelming and sudden shock, but for me, it felt eerily surreal. I was in Donbas, where war had already been a reality for years. There was a looming sense of catastrophe, but my immediate surroundings were unchanged. The full weight of this new reality struck me when I travelled from Donbas to my hometown of Zaporizhia. I arrived at my parents' flat, and for the first time, it was completely empty. Standing there alone, I felt as though I couldn't breathe.

As for my experience on the front line as a woman, being there also meant challenging patriarchal notions of war. As a man, you are automatically seen as a soldier—you don't need to prove it. As a woman, you have to prove that you can be a soldier, that you can be useful. It wasn't always easy. I often heard things like, "Let us help you carry that," or "Don't lift something too heavy." So I deliberately chose to carry the heaviest loads. At times, my commander, Bars, didn't want to send me on dangerous operations, and we would argue about it. I fought to be treated equally. Later,

one of my comrades admitted that he had expected I'd leave within two weeks—and that he was wrong. I may not look like a typical soldier, as I don't have bulging muscles or a physically imposing appearance, but I stayed until the very end.

The first time I went to the front line, I stayed for four months—not because I chose to leave, but because, at the start of the full-scale invasion, many volunteer units were formed, and I was part of one. Initially, we believed we could push them back in a short but intense phase. But then, we realised this would be a long war, and we had to adapt our approach. By June, it became clear that the volunteer effort couldn't continue. Some soldiers had families to support. We were faced with the choice of either joining the army—being incorporated into the official army structure—or leaving. After one of our brothers-in-arms was killed, my commander urged me to think carefully about my decision. He wanted me to make films, but he also said that I was not a bad soldier—at least a brave one—so he would certainly always take me to his new unit.

I am considering returning to the front line. With Trump in power in the US, everything feels uncertain. We've lived with this unpredictability for years, so we are used to it. But right now, it feels like being at the edge of a tsunami. That's why making concrete plans is difficult at the moment.

Interview by Sevara Pan, February 2025

Credits

Written, filmed and narrated by Alisa Kovalenko
Editor Kasia Boniecka
Sound Mariia Nesterenko,
Maciej Amilkiewicz
Music Wojciech Frycz
Producers Kasia Kuczyńska,
Tomasz Morawski
Co-producers Oleksandra Kravchenko,
Darya Bassel
Executive producer Monica Hellström
Production Haka Films,
Moon Man,
Ji.hlava & JB Films

