Outliving Shakespeare

A FILM BY INNA SAHAKYAN & RUBEN GHAZARYAN

Armenia, The Netherlands | 2025 | 94'

World Premiere

PRESS NOTES

Further press materials
available HERE

Contacts

Production

Bars Media

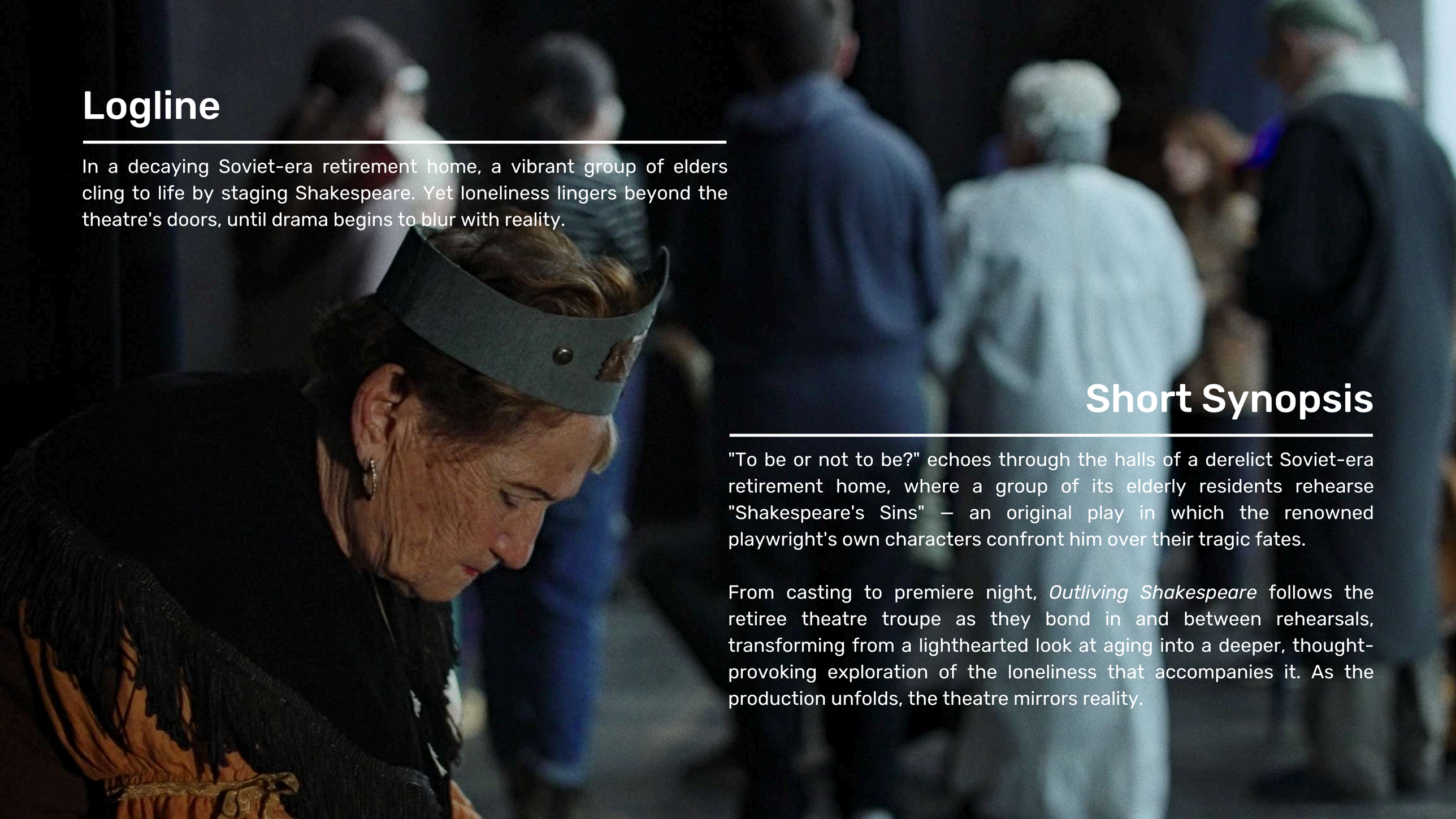
Inna Sahakyan
+374 91 430337
isahakyan@gmail.com
documentarystudio.barsmedia.am

BIND
Rosalien Hollestelle
rosalien@bindfilm.nl
bindfilm.nl

Publicist

NOISE Film & TV

Kai Hermann
+49 152 534 509 55
kai@noisefilmpr.com
noisefilmpr.com



Logline

In a decaying Soviet-era retirement home, a vibrant group of elders cling to life by staging Shakespeare. Yet loneliness lingers beyond the theatre's doors, until drama begins to blur with reality.

Short Synopsis

"To be or not to be?" echoes through the halls of a derelict Soviet-era retirement home, where a group of its elderly residents rehearse "Shakespeare's Sins" — an original play in which the renowned playwright's own characters confront him over their tragic fates.

From casting to premiere night, *Outliving Shakespeare* follows the retiree theatre troupe as they bond in and between rehearsals, transforming from a lighthearted look at aging into a deeper, thought-provoking exploration of the loneliness that accompanies it. As the production unfolds, the theatre mirrors reality.

Synopsis

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A resident believing she has found her "Romeo" is suddenly struck with deceit, while another betrays their lifelong beliefs in search of enlightenment. One attempts to return to her family only to be cast out by her son, while another rejoins the troupe following the ethnic cleansing of her homeland, Nagorno-Karabakh. And there are those who never make the final curtain call. The main storyline evolves into a portrait of the actors' lives offstage, set in the spartan yet colourful world of their shared home, a character in itself. An eclectic building is frozen in the chaos of 90's Armenia — where stray cats play in dim, lonely hallways that lead into sunlit, abandoned rooms, covered in kitsch frescos of Yeltsin and Clinton holding hands in the Garden of Eden.

Among the standout characters are two lifelong friends who embody the contrasts of this story. Ligia clings to the illusions of the stage, performing Queen Anne, as Anahit watches on from offstage during rehearsals. While not in the play, she assumes the role of "court jester" in the wider drama of the retirement home. In the end, both of them carry the burden of feeling unneeded, like King Lear cast aside by those he trusted most. Set in a place suspended in time, the film is a tender, unsparing portrait of a generation that once lived fully — and now waits in the wings.


ДРУЖБА
НАЦИЙ

Director's Statement

It's fascinating to observe elders. Their lives carry so many layers — love, mistakes, humour, longing — all shared with an honesty that only time allows. They speak without shame, reflect without fear, and somehow carry both clarity and contradiction. Their world is not black or white, but full of shifting colours: sometimes bright, sometimes fading.

Outliving Shakespeare is a film about those colours. It observes different shades of elderhood inside a crumbling public retirement home in Armenia. Here, in worn-out corridors and kitschy rooms, a group of residents decide to rehearse Shakespeare. The stage becomes their escape. It offers rhythm to their slow days, and for some, a final chance to chase a forgotten dream. But life always seeps in, with loneliness, missed connections, and the quiet ache of being left behind. Slowly, the lines between stage and reality blur. Shakespeare helps them speak truths they couldn't voice before. And we, the audience, begin to see that the real drama lies in their lives, not the play.

In the end, *Outliving Shakespeare* is not just about ageing or theatre. It's about memory, love, and the simple human need to be seen before the curtain falls.

Q&A with Directors - p. 1

Could you talk about the genesis of the documentary?

Inna Sahakyan: The first visit to the retirement home happened at the end of 2021, and filming began in mid-2022. It was the post-COVID period, during a fragile ceasefire following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. I had just completed my animated documentary *Aurora's Sunrise* about the Armenian genocide after seven intense years of work. It was a deeply taxing time, both emotionally and mentally. As a director, I was really searching for something lighter, more hopeful. I didn't want to deal with heavy topics at the time. When I first visited the retirement home, the atmosphere and its residents were unexpectedly warm and full of life, despite some of the sombre aspects of the place and the sense of time being frozen. The theatre brought so much joy into their lives, especially for the main characters. There was humour everywhere, as you can observe in the film. I found that interesting because I've always been drawn to stories about older people. My debut film, *The Last Tightrope Dancer in Armenia*, was about two elderly masters of tightrope dancing. So I thought that this film (*Outliving Shakespeare*) could be an uplifting documentary, one that shows how people can live fully and joyfully until the very end, and how art and friendship can heal. That was the initial impulse behind the film. But what began as a film about the theatre and art as therapy in this seemingly dark place gradually grew into a more intimate, human-centred story. We tried to reflect that in the edit, letting the theatre slowly fade in the background as the personal dramas unfolded.

What drew you to this retirement home and made it a compelling choice for a documentary?

IS: I was drawn to this elderly home in part because it encapsulates the history of our country and its present reality. The building itself is very symbolic, with its distinct interiors and kitsch frescoes of Yeltsin and Clinton holding hands in the Garden of Eden. It was built during the Soviet era, and it carries the darker remnants of that era. But it also holds the bright, cherished memories of its residents from their youth. This place has lived through the Perestroika period, and it still looks ahead to the future.

Q&A with Directors - p. 2

In a sense, it represents 30 years of our independence. Like the country itself, it's not fully functioning. We are independent, but not completely. Beyond the historical aspect, though, it also feels as if time has stopped there because it's that fragile space between life and death, youth and old age.

Ruben Ghazaryan: I joined the project at a later stage, so I wasn't there from the beginning. In a way, I was keeping my distance from the subject of aging and death. To me, elderly homes symbolised abandonment. It wasn't necessarily that the place itself was bad, but perhaps ending up there suggested that something had gone wrong.

The documentary features an eclectic and vibrant cast of characters. What made you focus on characters like Ligia and Anahit, and what was their relationship to filming?

IS: They loved having us there. They flirted with us, chatted with us, and even fed us. It was such a beautiful, human connection. And, as I've often noticed with older people, which isn't always the case with other protagonists, they seemed more at ease in front of the camera, letting you observe their daily lives freely and honestly. I think that comes with age, being more accepting and not caring about appearances and all that. We filmed around 250 hours, so we had so much material that didn't make it into the 90-minute film. Making a documentary about more than 10 people is always a challenge, and we wanted to give equal space to all of them, but it's hardly possible within the timeframe of a single film. Some people would naturally come more into focus. At the beginning, we followed the theatre troupe. Its members, such as Ligia and Suren, brought vibrant energy and were like different colours in a palette. But as often happens in documentaries, the story started to lead us and find its own direction. That's how Anahit came into the picture. She wasn't someone we initially focused on, but whenever we weren't filming the troupe and their rehearsals, Anahit was always there. She was what called the spirit of the place. Over time, she became one of the central figures, tying together all the other characters and their stories, both on and off stage.

Q&A with Directors - p. 3

The film has two main layers: life on stage and life behind it, in the elderly home itself. So on stage it's Ligia who perhaps shines the brightest, and real life in the elderly home is embodied by Anahit. Anahit watches on from offstage, assuming the role of a 'court jester' who comments on everything and pulls back the curtain on real life once the lights go off. Anahit and Ligia's friendship is also an important thread that runs through the film.

RG: There is so much more to say about the characters, but the main thing is that when we started editing, we had to figure out what would hold all of them together. We had around 70 days of filming and a vast amount of different material. But it was a surprise that the thing that could actually hold it all together was not the theatre itself; it was Anahit, who wasn't even in the troupe. As we were thinking about structure, storytelling, and trying to shape the film, it started to feel somewhat artificial. At one point, we just let the material lead the process. That's when everything happened, and the film, as it is now, was born.

Could you talk about your approach to music in the documentary?

IS: I was traveling a lot with *Aurora's Sunrise*. As I was often absent and life went on at the elderly home, Ruben joined me as a co-director, along with another director, the very talented Lilit Movsisyan who participated in much of the filming when Ruben and I weren't there. Since Ruben was more actively involved during the editing process, I would leave it to him to answer that question.

RG: The film was originally more musical, but we eventually pared it down to two, three tracks. Most of the music you hear in the film is by Soviet composer Oleg Karavaychuk, which fit the film so naturally that we knew right away that it belonged there. The idea of using that music in the documentary came from our editor Artur Sahakyan.

Q&A with Directors - p. 4

The character Raya's music has a somewhat flat quality, it is present in the film when she plays during rehearsals, but we chose not to use it as offscreen music. However, the musical style in the film was partly inspired by that character and her non-harmonic, solo piano. Karavaychuk was a Soviet composer who represented the more unconventional side of music in the USSR at the time.

IS: We had planned to work with a composer, but during editing, when we tried Karavaychuk's music, it really resonated with the topic, the scenes, and the eclecticism of the building and the lives of the people. That music also reflects the tension: belonging to the Soviet era but also being defiant of that system through its idiosyncratic style: atonal, non-linear, and unpredictable yet incredibly emotional.

RG: In a way, it is also a musical representation of a person's experience of life in later years: wandering off at times and then finding their way back.

The camera seldom leaves the interior of the retirement home, with the exception of rare events. Could you talk about your choice not to venture much beyond this building?

IS: From the outset, I thought the film would take place mostly inside. Even the wedding and apricot picking happen within the grounds of the elderly home. In reality, we leave the confines of the elderly home three times: when Ararat passes away, when the group goes on a trip to the lake, and when Ligia visits her family. Ruben might agree with me, but I don't think the burial of Ararat or Ligia visiting her family truly take us outside the world of the elderly home, at least not in the physical sense. The burial happens because it needs to happen, and Ligia's family home is not necessarily a "better" place to be. So emotionally, it remains on the same plane as the elderly home. The only true escape is the trip to Lake Sevan. That scene is vital because it's the only moment in the film where we see them truly free, dancing and experiencing joy.

Q&A with Directors - p. 5

It shows that they can live that way too, even though their lives are now mostly spent inside the building. The scene at the lake adds another emotional layer to the story of the elderly home and its residents.

There are a few unexpected sights in the retirement home, including a robot, which is rather surprising in such a dilapidated place.

IS: The robot was originally designed to keep sick children company during their long hospital stays. But the company that made it decided to give one to the retirement home as an experiment. It quickly became a big part of their lives: a "baby" for many of them and even a kind of therapist. Visually, it adds to the eclectic mix of the place, blending past, present, and future. When we started filming, I thought the robot would take up more space in the film because it's such an odd sight. But like in the case of the theatre, the real human dramas took centre stage. The robot became just another part of the environment, like the stray cats, the building with all its frescos, and other elements.

TVs are ever-present in the film. Of course, they are part of the residents' reality, but they also serve as a device to anchor the events in a broader context. Could you elaborate on this creative choice?

IS: Since nearly the entire film is set in the same space, which captures the microcosm of that community, TVs act as small windows connecting them to the outside world and the broader context. During filming, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the blockade were happening, so that was the reality. The TV coverage particularly relates to the storyline of a couple from Nagorno-Karabakh. They fled the region as tensions escalated and were relocated to the retirement home. After the ceasefire, they decided to return to Nagorno-Karabakh, and then the blockade happened. In September 2023, war and ethnic cleansing forced them to leave Nagorno-Karabakh again. We filmed them at the very beginning, not knowing how the conflict would unfold.

Q&A with Directors - p. 6

At first, I even considered leaving Gayana's story out, since she had left early and wasn't around for most of the filming. But when she returned, we felt compelled to include her, as her story echoed the personal fates of so many and reflected the larger events around them.

RG: Actually, what these people did during that period, sitting and watching TV, was the only thing that the whole Armenian nation could do at that time. So that also reflects the behaviour of a nation that felt helpless, with no way to influence the events as they were taking place.

IS: Even though the film is about this specific place and the elderly, it also speaks to what's happening in the world today, not only in Armenia. That is what is happening in Gaza right now. What can we do? What can other Palestinians outside Gaza do to help? That's the weight of this moment and the sense of helplessness imposed by the current global geopolitical order. You feel powerless to influence anything, even when it’s happening to your people less than 100 kilometres away. All you can do is watch the news and face what's happening there in this way.

In what ways would you say this film is a portrait of a generation that "now waits in the wings", as the synopsis puts it?

RG: The USSR collapsed, as it should have. The characters' stories are steeped in that specific historical context, but they are also uniquely personal. The generational aspect is a part of it.

IS: That generation has gone through so much. If you look closely at each of their stories, they have lived through major socio-political changes and personal struggles. And now, they are left waiting in the wings. The film is not only necessarily about these 10 specific people in an elderly home; it's more universal. It's about aging, loneliness, and the existential questions of life and society regardless of time, place, or nationality.

Interview by Sevara Pan
October 2025

Inna Sahakyan - Director

Inna Sahakyan is a documentary filmmaker and producer whose work uncovers forgotten stories through deeply human, character-driven narratives.

Her films include the award-winning *The Last Tightrope Dancer in Armenia* and *Mel*, a moving portrait of a transgender weightlifter's journey. Her animated documentary *Aurora's Sunrise* (2022) about genocide survivor and early Hollywood star Aurora Mardiganian became a festival favourite, screening at over 80 international festivals and winning major awards, including the APSA for Best Animated Film, the Movies that Matter Special Mention and Audience Award, the Grand Prix at FIFDH Geneva, and an audience favourite at IDFA.

She is currently working on *In Front of Us*, a documentary following strong female protagonists who give voice to victims and explore the complexities and limits of international law in addressing war crimes and genocide, drawing on the recent humanitarian crises in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Filmography

In Production	**In Front of Us** (documentary feature 90' - director/producer)
2025	**Outliving Shakespeare** (documentary feature 94' - director/producer)
2022	**Aurora's Sunrise** (animated documentary 96' - director/producer)
2021	**Mel** (documentary feature 74' - director/producer)
2013	**One, Two, Three** (documentary feature 74' - producer)
2012	**Donkeymentary** (documentary feature 52' - producer)
2010	**The Last Tightrope Dancer in Armenia** (documentary feature 72' - co-director/producer)

Ruben Ghazaryan - Co-Director

Ruben Ghazaryan is an Armenian filmmaker experienced in international documentary co-productions.

A graduate of the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinematography and VGIK Moscow, he has directed, filmed, and edited numerous projects across Armenia and abroad.

At Bars Media, he created acclaimed TV documentary series such as *Mysteries of Armenia*, *My Army*, and *The Road*. He has filmed in different countries including Rwanda, Brazil, and Afghanistan, contributing to projects for the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative.

Most recently, Ruben was editor, art director, and director of live-action scenes for the award-winning *Aurora's Sunrise*.

Filmography

In Development	**All for the Better** (fiction debut 120' - director)
2025	**Outliving Shakespeare** (documentary feature 94' - co-director)
2022	**Aurora's Sunrise** (animated documentary 96' - editor/fiction scenes director)
2016-2024	**Aurora Prize Humanitarian Films** (series of short documentaries 5-25' - director)
2017	**The Road** (documentary series 12 episodes x 26' - director)
2015	**My Army** (documentary series 14 episodes x 26' - director)

Bars Media - Producer

Founded in 1993, Bars Media is Armenia's leading independent documentary studio, with films theatrically released across Europe and the U.S. Its productions have screened at over 100 international festivals — including Tribeca, IDFA, Movies that Matter, and Annecy — and have been broadcast worldwide on BBC, ARTE, PBS, and NHK.

The studio's acclaimed works include *A Story of People in War and Peace* (2006), *The Last Tightrope Dancer in Armenia* (2010), *Mel* (2021), and *Aurora's Sunrise* (2022) — Armenia's Official Selection for the 95th Academy Awards®, winner of the Grand Prix at FIFDH Geneva and MiradasDoc, an audience favourite at IDFA, and the recipient of the Audience Award at Movies that Matter.

Dedicated to telling powerful human stories from underrepresented regions, Bars Media continues to produce award-winning films and series that illuminate lives from Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and beyond.

BIND

BIND's objective is to tell striking, unique stories that move and inspire, that open eyes and take root.

Since its establishment in 2007, BIND develops and produces genuine, provocative films about real people and the quest for their identity. Films that have proven to be a powerful way to portray contemporary topics in an intriguing or surprising manner. Their aim is to create an effective connection between engaged filmmakers and their audience.

Over these years, BIND has produced many award-winning films, resulting in winning an International Emmy Award, two Dutch Academy Awards for Best Film, a Berlinale Special Mention, a Grand Award at New York ICFF, TIFF Kids awards, a Cinekid Award, a Prix Jeunesse, and more.

Credits

Directors	Inna Sahakyan Ruben Ghazaryan
Scriptwriters	Inna Sahakyan Lilit Movsisyan
Onset Director	Lilit Movsisyan
Producers	Vardan Hovhannisyan Inna Sahakyan Mariam Davtyan
Co-Producers	Joram Willink Esther van Driesum Rosalien Hollestelle
Editor	Artur Sahakyan
Sound Design & Mix	Lennert Hunfeld

Instagram

Outliving Shakespeare / @outlivingshakespearemovie
Bars Media / @bars_media_studio
BIND / @bindfilm
Inna Sahakyan / @i_sahakyan_i
NOISE Film & TV / @noisefilmtv