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‘Mother of Chernobyl’

The year is 1987, and in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster a young Ukrainian mother named Masha grapples with an unfathomable decision: stay or go.

For those of us who have never lived in the Soviet Union, the woman’s choice is difficult to comprehend. But for Masha — and for many whose lives and identities were bound to the few pieces of property they could pass on to their children — it is the only option: Remain in the radiation zone.

Masha is the main protagonist of the student short film “Mother of Chernobyl,” and her troubles are just the beginning.

“To her, that apartment is all she has left of her family,” said the film’s producer, UC Santa Barbara film and media studies major Mitchka Saberi, “and she imagined that it would be where she raises her kids and then hands it off to them because that was the only thing she could give them.”

Add to that the future Masha fears for her child, born deformed due to radiation, and there isn’t much incentive to leave the only home they have ever known.

The film, which began as a student production, is now an official selection at the Santa Barbara Film Festival (SBIFF). It will screen Sunday, Jan. 19, at 7:30 p.m. at the Arlington Theatre.

Such a granular perspective on the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster is fairly rare; most stories prefer instead to hit the high notes: the timeline of the reactor

failures, the evacuations of the masses, the devastation to the area, the tragic health effects, the impact on politics and international relations, and the ensuing emptiness and desolation of places like Pripyat, the city where the meltdowns occurred. But for the film's director, Alexander Shuryepov, the decisions of a young woman in the face of such a devastating event loom just as large — they reflect the type of choices his own family faced.

"My mother and grandmother were both in Kyiv during the time of the disaster; I grew up hearing them recount their side of the story," said Shuryepov, who wrote and directed the film in 2019 as a freshman in UC Santa Barbara's film and media studies department. The project started out like any regular assignment at the UCSB Carsey-Wolf Center's GreenScreen program, with the single requirement that it somehow had to involve the environment.

Over the course of production the film evolved into an intimate, unique look at Ukranian culture and society, gleaned, according to Shuryepov, from moments he had witnessed during a visit to the country.

The film's concept and story were powerful enough to make it one of the four films (out of 16 candidates) selected to be produced in the 2019 spring quarter. However, the idea of an old Soviet-style, Russian-language period film threatened to be too big for the mere 10 weeks the filmmakers had to cast, shoot and edit the film.

"We had to find actors that could speak Russian fluently, and props and decor that were authentic to the location and time period," Saberi said. Fortunately, they had Shuryepov's old family photos, which provided insight for for props and costumes. They also transformed a colleague's apartment for the interior shots, and filmed some of the exterior shots at the Goleta Butterfly Grove, "a forest area nearby that doesn't quite look like it belongs in Santa Barbara," according to Saberi.

"We had to work day and night for weeks on end to make sure we could make the film as impactful as we believed it could be," Saberi continued.

All of their hard work paid off. "Mother of Chernobyl" premiered at the campus's Pollock Theater at the end of the quarter, where it was received with "great enthusiasm," according to Saberi. It has since gone on to receive awards and recognition at the 2019 Indie Short Fest, the 2019 Hollywood Independent Filmmaker Awards and Festival and the Short Film Factory.

The SBIFF this year also will screen a movie written, directed and produced by Alumnus Peter Miyakawa, who graduated from UCSB in 2018. "Easy Living," an Italian film, will receive its U.S. premiere Monday, Jan. 20, at 4:30 p.m. at the Lobero Theater. Ticket information for “Mother of Chernobyl” and “Easy Living” is available at the SBIFF website.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.