FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2026 OFFICIAL SELECTION
SPECIAL SCREENING
VESNA
a film by ROSTISLAV KIRPIČENKO

Matka Films and The Bureau Sales present

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VESNA

a film by ROSTISLAV KIRPIČENKO

2026 – 1h41 - France, Lithuania, Estonia - DCP – Colour – VOSTFR
Languages : Ukrainian, Russian

Press kit and photos on www.thebureaufilms.com

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SYNOPSIS

In a Russian-occupied town in southeastern Ukraine, where burying the dead has been forbidden, the church of a young priest, Andriy, has been turned into a morgue for executed Ukrainian civilians. As the occupation tightens its grip, Andriy quietly begins to resist, secretly returning the bodies to their families at great personal risk. Along the way, he forms an unexpected bond with Makarov, an 11-year-old boy who becomes the silent witness to his rebellion.

ROSTISLAV KIRPIČENKO, FILM-MAKER, DIRECTOR OF *VESNA*

Where are you from?

That in itself is a complicated question, but I think it says something about the film. My family, like many in the Soviet era, moved around the USSR – as it was then - a lot. My paternal grandfather is Byelorussian but he was born in Ukraine. He did physics and he was sent to work in Russia after studying in Dnipro, in Ukraine. My father was born there, then my grandparents left for Lithuania, where my father grew up from the age of eleven. When he was 18, my father went back to Ukraine to study. He met my mother, whose whole family is Ukrainian. Then my parents, both physicists by training, went back to Lithuania, and that is where I was born, in 1996. But in 2002, when I was nearly six, we went back to Ukraine. I still have Lithuanian nationality but I barely speak the language.

Which nationality do you claim? Ukrainian? Lithuanian?

That's just it: none. It's a real question for me, but I struggle to find an answer that says anything clearer about that mixture which means you can't claim you belong to just one place. In fact, it was a question that arose when we were looking to fund the film. The Lithuanians don't see me as Lithuanian enough (though we did eventually get help from the Lithuanian film council) and in Ukraine I'm not registered as Ukrainian, since my passport is Lithuanian.

How did the film come together?

I work with a producer who was in my year at the Fémis, Helena Pokorny, who set up Matka Films. At the Fémis, we both met Jean Bréhat (Tessalit Productions), who lectured there. He liked the sound of my film and offered to guide the two of us – Helena and me – when we left the school. Then Helena met some Lithuanian co-producers and some Ukrainian ones, now based in Estonia, and that's how Vesna became a French-Lithuanian-Estonian co-production.

What did you do before arriving at the Fémis? I believe it was something unusual – weren't you a professional footballer?

Yes. I initially trained as a car mechanic. But alongside that I was in a Ukrainian football training academy. After that, I got an offer to continue my training in the Czech Republic. That was two months before the Donbas war broke out in February 2014. That was the first time I became aware of what could happen in the country because of Russia, even if I didn't completely realise the scale of the event and its potential consequences. I was 17. I played in the Czech Republic, a bit in Germany and Luxembourg, and I ended up coming to Paris in 2016, a bit randomly, because I'd found a job as an au pair, then I got a degree in French language and literature, and lastly I went to the Fémis.

When did you acquire your taste for film?

My grandfather, who was a great film enthusiast, tried to share Italian neo-realism with me, but I didn't appreciate it at the time. But I liked going to the cinema with my father, walking to see a film together, whatever it was (often an American blockbuster). That was a time just for the two of us and what I remember is mainly the closeness, the feeling of having someone close to me. My big revelation came when I was 18, one evening when I was going to see my grandparents in Lithuania from Prague, by coach. In the bus, I saw Down By Law by Jarmusch, Charles, Dead or Alive by Alain Tanner, Breathless by Godard and lastly Dr. Strangelove by Kubrick. I didn't know film could do that… It was a wonderful night. (laughter)

Evil is at the heart of your film, but it is shown in a very particular way: in a very small town, resisting Ukrainians come up against other inhabitants of the town, who welcome the Russian occupants who have already started a reign of terror. It is no longer David against Goliath as we might unthinkingly imagine it, it is war already caught up in its day-to-day triviality.

That was no doubt my starting point. I mean, if you want to talk about the ongoing war, it is difficult not to make a film that is basically one long speech. I looked at how the current occupation is going in Ukraine. We have virtually no images (personally, I've only seen film «diaries» from Mariupol, but they were quite bitty and went back to the beginning of the invasion). What we do have is lots of accounts. And they are dreadful, terrifying and almost always linked to torture, executions or rapes, or all three at once. So making a film at that place – that of a small, occupied town – became necessary in making a fictional film. But examining that occupation in detail, close-up – what it implies, the ties it destroys and those it creates elsewhere – means you have to avoid quick assumptions that So-and-So is a monster, like one of the film's main characters, because he has chosen to collaborate in order to protect his family, or because he commits atrocities, like the Russian captain. And that explains their deeds. It's too easy a get-out: if they are monsters, or mad, they are not responsible. Each action has a cause and it was important for me to analyse the causes of that extreme cruelty and violence shown by some characters or the moral grey areas of others.

Why? In what sense?

Because all that is what makes up a human being.
Because the situation, an occupation, obliges us to look at lines of opposition differently. Occupation creates novel situations which are bound to bring about actions which overtake even those who do them. And each action has a consequence. Doing evil brings about destruction beyond what is intended, destruction that is long-term and maybe irreparable. But wanting to do good, to resist, even if that seems to us the very definition of heroism, can potentially have harmful outcomes.

Is that the situation the film's characters are caught up in?

Yes, even when they haven't created it. They still have to interpret it, with all the dangers that may be inferred from that interpretation.

The film talks about war on the scale of a microcosm, where each person has their own version of duty. Madness and death are never far off. But the film allows people watching to stand apart from the various mechanisms.

The film doesn't seek to denounce a situation…

It seeks to depict it. Even if we know which side we're on, obviously. Indeed, knowing that was what made making this film from the point of view of the different characters' mechanisms interesting.

Does that allow the film to grasp each person's «truth» – given that as we know, sadly, in war everyone behaves, believes they're doing their duty, according to «their» truth?

No doubt that is what it is to be dragged into a war, overnight, with no preparation.
That's the whole idea around the character of the priest: here is someone who knows very well about good and evil. He is prepared for it. But war calls for responses that are maybe of a different order, and the way he rushes to respond can only make things around him worse. That is where occupation acts a very particular space-time, I think. Somewhere beyond morals.
Either that space eludes morals, inasmuch as everyone faced with it is constantly coming up against death and suffering, or it reveals that a substitution of meaning has occurred.

What do you mean?

In the sense that actions such as giving one's (innocent but executed) son a decent burial or helping a lonely child become punishable deeds. That marks the beginning of an irreversible disaster.
It seems to me that war distorts the idea of time and makes it uncertain. It varies according to point of view. The people suffering, the Ukrainians, are plunged into an oblivion where it is hard not only to make out but also to hope for the end of the horrors. For the occupant, power is desirable but the impunity it confers is more fragile than he imagines.
I try to show that with the character of the Russian captain. The film shows that everyone is caught in that gulf. And everyone can very well end up in the same grave.
Power in war is something extremely short-lived. It may vanish in one decision taken by others on a larger scale. Decisions can be turned around. Human life is worth nothing, it's the abyss, everyone comes near it but no one knows where it leads.
That, I believe, is something that is peculiar to this war: it shows us the Russians don't give a damn about their own people. They aren't protected by the power above them either.
This is why I see war as a space-time which absorbs everything and makes everyone suddenly have to make do over an uncertain amount of time: how long will this war last? Six months? A year? Five years? …

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022. When did you write the first draft of the screenplay and at what stage of the fighting between Russians and Ukrainians do you place it?

I place the film a year after the outbreak of hostilities. There are a few little details in the dialogues about Kherson and the Kharkiv region which set it in the winter of 2022-23.
I wrote an initial version when I was in my final year at the Fémis. After I finished studying, Helena and Jean supported me in developing the screenplay in more detail.

So the bodies people are forbidden to bury were already there… Is that something that's documented in Ukraine?

Yes: on the one hand it's a common tactic to discourage people, terrorise them, and deprive them of the grieving process. But on the other hand, the presence of bodies means the existence of proof of war crimes and crimes against humanity.
Stocking the bodies allowed terror to set in, but each time the front lines move communal graves are found, when all of a sudden the occupant tries to obliterate all traces of war crimes, hiding deep down the very bodies people were forbidden to bury. These things have happened in all areas that have been occupied and then freed. Few things in the film are made up.

The film looks at the war from a child's side, and doesn't spare him…

He's a collaborator's child. His function is to be able to cross all lines. He also bears in himself problems other than those of war. From a child's perspective, war is terrible but being bullied at school is just as bad. On the same level. A child just wants to be accepted by their friends and play with them. He can speak his mind in all innocence, unaware of the danger, which he defies without the slightest idea of what's coming to him.

The film was shot in Lithuania, was it?

Yes, in and around Vilnius. Many of the actors are Lithuanian, particularly those playing Russian soldiers.
We shot an initial block in October-November 2025 then another week in January 2026, so as to have real snow in most of the outdoor scenes. My editor was working as we were shooting. Then I worked with her for a month, then went back to do the scouting for the second part and seven days' shooting.

Your first film was a 70-minute documentary - One, Angarskaia Street - shot in Ukraine and selected for the 2025 Cinéma du reel festival.
Why fiction now, when it is weightier, slower, sometimes even impossible? Why are you so attached to fiction?

I maybe see Vesna as my second first film. Making fiction has always been foremost for me. I like documentaries, the ones by

Chris Marker, by Mekas, Sokurov's Elegy, Seasons of the Year by Pelechian… Documentaries that are almost poems. But I didn't intend to make one myself.

I realised I had to make that film when, in 2022, I met up with my family in Lithuania and was going on to Ukraine with a camera but without knowing what I was going to do. All I knew was that I was going across the country to Dnipro, where I grew up. It turned into a mixture of people's accounts and my self-portrait, me looking back at my life through the prism of war. Which changes everything. War kills memory – but film engraves things and so saves them. That's an important subject inVesna too: saving memory. Indeed, that necessity is what brings the characters together once the initial struggle is lost.

I'm quite a nostalgic, and war makes things impossible to find again. The documentary was all about that. Filming it answered the question of what I could do, whenVesna was already being prepared back in Paris. It was some form of answer.

But I'm attached to fiction. It's a space where I can express myself without granting myself some kind of right or legitimacy I don't allow myself. I don't live in Ukraine at the moment and I can't be on a level with the people who have stayed there, fighting and dying. My place now is as a foreigner. I have no right to be an ambassador of Ukrainian culture when film-makers, such as Oleh Sentsov, are at the front. Only they have the right to speak about the reality in Ukraine, to show the country. I see myself as a contributor. I film things that border on parable. But I do allow myself to set them in Ukraine because I know those people, their nature; they are good people suffering because of terrible injustice. That I can talk about. In fact, that is all I can talk about. Through France I can make films, and I can't see myself, faced with the abyss of pain of the last four years, making a romantic comedy set in Paris.

That, I think, is the territory fiction grants me.

Interview by Philippe Azoury, 3 May 2026

ROSTISLAV KIRPIČENKO

Rostislav was born in Lithuania, returning during his childhood to live in Ukraine with his family. As a young professional footballer, he came to Europe: first the Czech Republic and then Germany. In 2016, Rostislav decided to end his sporting career and settle in Paris, where he studied French language and literature at the Sorbonne before joining the directing department of the Fémis film school in 2019.

VESNA - 2026 - feature film
Official selection, Special screening, 2026 Cannes film festival

ONE, ANGARSKAIA STREET - 2025 - feature-length documentary
Clarens Award for Humanist Documentary Filmmaking - Cinéma du Réel documentary festival, Highlights - Visions du Réel

PETIT PIERROT - 2023 - short fiction film

UNGURYS - 2022 - short fiction film
co-written and directed with Sasha Teboul

CAST LIST

WITH
ANDRIY - Kęstutis Cicėnas
SACHA MAKAROV - Bartas Ždanovičius
OLYA - Anastasiia Pustovit
VASSYA - Valentinas Novopolskis
STEPAN - Viečeslav Lukjanov
IGOR - Daumantas Ciunis

CREW LIST

DIRECTOR Rostislav Kirpičenko
SCREENPLAY Rostislav Kirpičenko
PICTURE Vilius Mačiulskis
EDITING Marie Vettese
SOUND Marius Blažys, Joseph Squire, Damien Favreau, Hugo Cohen
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Lina Remeikaitė
COSTUME Rūta Lečaitė
MAKEUP Justė Butkė
SCENERY Iris Morlat
ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK Sten Sheripov
PRODUCTION Matka Films, Film Jam
PRODUCERS Helena Porkony, Stasys Baltakis
CO-PRODUCTION ESSE House, La Femme qui Aimait les Films, LESTERFILM
CO-PRODUCERS Marianne Lenoir, Éric Lenoir, Vitalii Sheremetiev, Alexey Zgonik, Jonathan Lester, Damien Favreau
IN ASSOCIATION WITH Tessalit productions, Sons of Rigor Films
WITH PARTICIPATION BY the Lithuanian Film Centre, the French National Centre for Film and Moving Picture, the Estonian Film Institut and the Lithuanian National Radio and Television
SUPPORTED BY the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region, in partnership with the CNC and with support from ALCA

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