

A film by Victoria Verseau



























DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This film is a deeply personal story based on my experience of transitioning and the loss of Meril, my only friend sharing the trans experience. When she died, three years after the operation, my world fell apart. I mirrored myself in her and started to question everything. Through this story, I reflect on the events that unfolded, exploring their impact on me. It also involves the perspectives from Aamina and Athena, both in the beginning of transition. In some of the scenes we reenact situations me and Meril faced, which Aamina and Athena may also confront in their futures.

Through this story the three of us give a sincere account of our experience of transition, future and womanhood. The story moves fluidly between past and present, intertwining reconstructed memories, documentary footage of us three trying to make the film as we return to the secluded Thai town where Meril and I met, and secret video diaries from 2012, initially for my own personal reflection. Meril's fragmented story remains a consistent presence, her absence felt throughout. This film is a grieving process, a way to get closer to my memory of Meril.

I wanted to understand who we were and how it could end like this. It delves into existential questions of meaning and trans women's relationship to mortality. It is about the physical changes one goes through in a transition, also about the inner journey that is less tangible. It's a movie made by and about trans people, aiming for an honest portrayal of our lives.

QUESTIONS I ASKED MYSELF GOING INTO THE PROJECT, ANSWERS I GOT DURING THE PROCESS AND AFTER FINISHING THE FILM

Embarking on this project, I contemplated whether I could relate to life post-tranistion. The endeavor to transition into womanhood was, in a sense, extraordinary and far removed from everyday life. That struggle had become an essential part of my identity. Strangely enough I felt a great emptiness after my innermost dream was fulfilled. Post-transition I didn't need to fight the same way as before, I had reached my goal and I started wondering who I was without that struggle. Would I ever be able to accept the loss of Meril and understand why she chose to disappear? Could the making of this movie bring me closer to some kind of answer, make me understand who I'd become? Could the project prepare Athena and Aamina better for what might be coming for them in the near future?

Now that the movie's done, I've found some answers. This project actually saved me. When it was at its worst, the only thing that kept me going was the feeling this story had to be told. It gave my life meaning and purpose. Unlike Meril, I couldn't disappear; I had a reason to persevere.

THE CHALLENGE OF TELLING: THIS STORY / TRANS NARRATIVE / ATHENA AND AAMINA

I wanted Aamina and Athena to be part of the story. In this film they offer their perspectives on life and transition. Through our voices, the film presents three very different perspectives, suggesting that the spectrum of trans narratives is as diverse and unique as the individuals who live them.

Athena and Aamina sometimes question the film, which I find crucial to address. I can't escape the feeling there's a sense of exploitation in documentaries when sharing others' stories, even your own. Someone must be willing to share their story on camera. The film has its own unique fingerprint, in how it addresses issues of identity and from what perspective.

In the film, frequent arguments and tension arise among us three. We're all in a process of becoming, but the film freezes us in time, which doesn't fully align with being in transition. Aamina wrestles with mixing documentary and fiction, stressing the need for accurate portrayal without sensationalizing or exoticizing trans women.

In the film's finale, Aamina opted out. Her feelings about her involvement had changed, and she no longer wanted to support what she saw as a negative portrayal of gender confirmation surgery. Accepting her critique was tough, but I think it adds to the ongoing discussion on tragic trans narratives in film and perhaps even beyond. Is there a distinction when the creator of the narrative is transgender herself and aims to provide a sincere depiction of her own experiences? I believe so, and I aspire for this film to ignite a conversation around gender transitioning that hasn't yet received much attention. I wanted a true story to emerge, embracing life's complexities. The narrative revolves around transition and the constant change surrounding it, which at times also made it difficult to bring this film into a definite, final form.



ON THE ARTISTIC FORM OF THE FILM

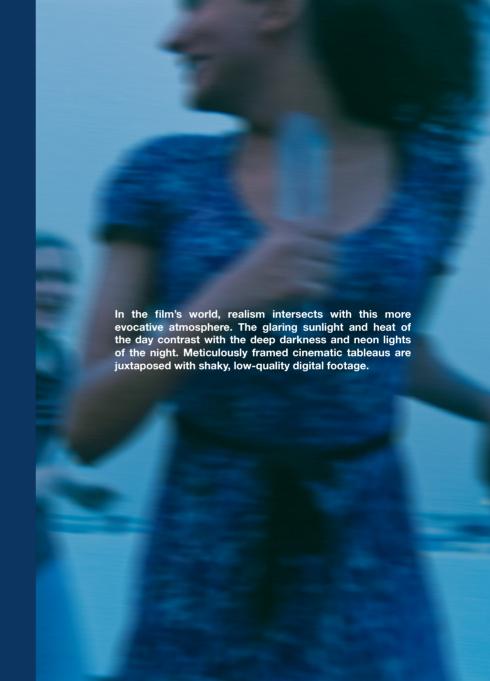
The film seamlessly blends formats, styles, and times, it has no clear boundaries, it is trans. Through the movement of return, I wanted to capture the memories, emotions and ambiences of the places where my close friendship with Meril blossomed. Parts of Thailand that are usually portrayed on films from Western perspectives - filled with people, beautiful beaches, tourists, tuck-tucks and cars - are not there. The remote city is far away from tourist brochures. I revisit the silent hotel, which was a protective shell but also a prison where we recovered after surgery. The now deserted, decaying and waterlogged shopping center where Meril and I once bought our first bikinis. The dirt roads on the outskirts of the city, where we ventured on our first walks as soon as we could during the healing process. We wanted to find the ocean to feel free, but we found a vast muddy wasteland stretching to the horizon instead of the anticipated shoreline.

I aimed to capture a sense of remoteness, where time seems to move differently, making visible the impossibility of reaching the past with Meril. What I find in attempting to revisit those moments is a void, a degraded emptiness where the vibrancy of the past remains unreachable.

Since Meril passed away, I often dream of us and the place where our friendship grew. In these dreams, it's just us, people are gone, leaving empty roads and nature taking over. The Thai city feels like a time capsule of our stories, with its own personality and peculiar atmosphere that gets under my skin. In those dreams, it feels like there's something unseen pulsating beneath the surface of reality, a presence that never appears. An underlying sense of something invisible, a longing for someone who's no longer there.

Part of my artistic practice is collecting things. It began with used hormone pill packages when I started taking female hormones in 2010 and turned into hoarding. I struggle to let go or to accept that time changes everything. Even objects age, become forgotten and fade. I have an idea that energies and emotions get stuck in physical items, giving them their own radiance. These objects appear in the film, too. As an artist, I feel emboldened to approach the wordless, the hidden depths beyond reality, the strong presence I sense but also doubt.

When someone passes away, they're gone, creating a boundary between the living and the dead. Yet, I wrestle with the belief, doubt, and desire for something to be there and that is partly what this film is about. That longing for someone that's gone and the impossibility to communicate with that person again. Throughout the process I safeguarded this more elusive and artistic element of the film.





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Victoria Verseau (b. 1988) is a Swedish artist and filmmaker exploring themes such as body, memory and identity, drawing from her experiences as a trans woman. Based on her own story, she examines larger existential questions; who we are, how we exist and who we want to be. She lives and works in Stockholm, where she graduated with an MFA from the Royal Institute of Art in 2020.

Verseau had solo exhibitions in Sweden and abroad, with her films show-cased globally. Her debut feature Trans Memoria will premiere at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in the Proxima Competition 2024.

FILMOGRAPHY

2024 TRANS MEMORIA, 72 min 2021 APPROACHING A GHOST, 20 min 2016 EXERCISE ONE, 14 min 2015 THE SESSION 14 min 2014 TO BE UNCLEAR 20 min

https://victoriaverseau.com/

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

The film is titled "Trans Memoria", in it you are remembering a late friend, Meril, imitating old pictures of the two of you, tracing down her life. Why do you see so much power in memories and remembering?

I see memories as a part of what defines our identity. We'r made up of memories. Memories of moments, events, places and feelings are fragments that together create a puzzle who make up who we are. Memories in relation to time I find very interesting. I aim to explore the profound existential questions of life: our identity, our existence, and our aspirations. To me, a starting point is me and my transition. I think that through this film, I am trying to understand who I am and who I've become. There is also something mysterious about memories that fascinates me. What has happened is long gone but still lingers as internal stories and images, and these memories often change with time. I think memories are related to dreams where reality is altered. It is a way for us to connect to those who have passed and time lost. And in this in-between space, which can be somewhat scary at times, I want to be in my creative practise. Something undiscovered lies there that I'd like to dare to approach.

There is of course a certain nostalgia to this work. I find physical places very important in the film, they are almost like characters themselves. The hotel that me and Meril stayed in 2012 looked almost the same when Aamina, Athena and I revisited it in 2019. The smell, the rooms, corridors, conference rooms were almost the same but they had aged. When I returned last year in 2023, the hotel had closed down and started to degenerate. I wasn't allowed to enter the hotel, where so much of my life was defined, those rooms that meant so much for me. The place had become unreachable, invisible and secret. Also the shopping mall that Maria and I had visited to buy our first bikinis, had been abandoned and decayed. The roof had fallen in and the space had been filled with rain water. The escalators went straight into that muddy water. In the tidal land that surrounded the city, and which was my view from the hospital window, a motorway had been built.

When reenacting the last photo me and Meril took together in a temple garden, I was interested in seeing what had changed. All the little details and big things and if I could recreate things exactly how they once were. But it is impossible to bring back something that is gone, everything constantly changes, both me and these places. I think there is something breathtaking with all these timelayers, that you can capture with the camera and that are

put together in the film. I see it as if places have their own personality and awareness, a unique ambiance and a presence of sorts. I wanted to approach and depict that in this film.

Also, the film is made as a commemoration of Meril. A proof that she once exited. Her family didn't accept her decision to transition, and after she informed them of her situation, they never allowed her to return home. I don't know where or if she is buried, I tried to find her grave but never found it, which makes it more difficult to move on. I realized I had a strong need for a physical place, a monument, a grave where I could go and grieve and remember Meril, a proof that she was once an existing human in this world. Her facebook page is gone and it is as if every trace of her has been erased. But through this movie she somehow exists again.

Are you afraid of forgetting moments in life?

I think, the older I get and the more I work with memories in my films and in my art, the less I understand time. Time becomes more and more abstract somehow. I think that by working with memories, it would make me feel more okay with losing things. I thought I would accept losing people more lightly, places, objects and times, that working artistically with memories would make me therapeutically process the loss. But everything changes and eventually slowly moves into destructive oblivion. I try to keep everything that is moving away from me, and have become afraid of changes. Maybe I became more afraid after Meril's disappearance, and by working on this film, I realize that now. During the making of it I have actually also developed a hoarding behavior. I now never throw things away. Everything means something, is charged with memories, is connected to my lived life and worth saving. This has almost become a problem. I have had to rent more storages and all of them are filling up quickly. Some of these collected objects have also gotten a place in the film. When I work with them I get so close to those people and places, my memory of them. I think that makes it harder for me to accept and understand that what I once had is irrevocably forever gone. Sometimes I can even forget that Meril is gone. The time that has passed since we were in Thailand, now 12 years ago, feels shorter than what it felt just three years after the operation and the moment when I realized that Meril had passed away. It doesn't feel like a long time ago, when I was 15-year-old gay boy living in a "small-town-prison". It is a bit scary, actually.

At one point you show videos of your younger self as a kid. Right after that we see your current self being covered in a white bedsheet, in some way freeing yourself from under it. What made you decide to put the two scenes into that order?

I think the scene with the bedsheet is a little bit funny and I wanted to add a few moments of humor in contrast to the often dark narrative. You clearly

understand it is a bedsheet and a person underneath, but you don't totally understand what that person is doing. Is it trying to mimic a ghost? White sheets are an obvious and sometimes almost cute symbol of a ghost, often used in films and storybooks for children. Then, when I get out of the bedsheet you understand it was actually me making my bed. This is how I do it to get my duvet into the bedsheet. It is also something I don't like doing for some reason, so I procrastinate making my bed, perhaps because it is difficult and a job to make one's bed, but also perhaps because I feel trapped in the bedsheet. I like things that could be two things at the same time. A ghost or just someone making one's bed, humorous but also serious and sad, me playing a ghost or just caught in a bed sheet.

To answer the question: I put the scene after the collage of my childhood because after that period of time - when I hit puberty and before I got help from the hospital to start the transition - I thought I would actually not survive and end up where Meril ended. Becoming a ghost. But I didn't, I survived. Even though the period after Meril's passing and the post-op phase was extremely difficult, I made it, and today I feel much better.

Usually not making my bed is the first sign that my mental health is getting worse. Then I don't even have energy to make my bed. When I am depressed, like many others, I have a hard time relating to the often gray repetitive everyday life. I can't do the necessary everyday chores such as making my bed, clean the apartment, take out the trash, wash dirty plates, get dressed, change underwear, change panty liner, shave the beard I never could get rid of, pay rent, open letters, fold clothes and put them in the wardrobe, take my hormones and antidepressants, shower, put on makeup, get out of the house, go to the subway, shop for groceries, go to the studio, work etc. When depressed my apartment turns incredibly and embarrassingly messy. That mess, all those objects starting to spread is a warning, I am approaching something dark. The internal, invisible, mental landscape becomes visible in the external, physical space. The inner self has a relationship to the physical world, objects around us.

The film bravely does not shy away from contextualizing the physical burdens you undergo once you decided to get a gender confirming surgery. You cut moments of your various surgeries and dilation exercises together in the form of a fast-sequenced collage. Why was it important for you to capture these moments in the film?

I felt it was important to depict the immense physical struggle that I and many trans people go through. When it becomes visible and tangible maybe people can really understand, feel and see what it could mean to transition.

Then of course this is very individual. Some people have an easier time transitioning, healing from the surgery, having a "better" result than I did. And some people don't do the surgeries in their transition. It is very different and there are as many stories and perspectives as there are transpersons. This is my personal journey that I wanted to share. At the same time, I am also very ambivalent about sharing this which I am sure many would consider private. I am constantly debating with myself if I should or shouldn't and it has caused a lot of anxiety. Often in the morning when I've just woken up and am very fragile, I feel terrible that I have shared this in the film. But in the evening and night when I am usually up, creative and energetic, it feels totally right. Then I feel I should never censor myself in art, never hide anything and I want to dare. My integrity is very undecided, which makes it difficult to make a mostly documentary film where you yourself is the main character.

In one scene you mentioned that "there are no ghosts, there is no magic." The journey for answers seems to have tested your limits. What kept you moving forward with the project, and perhaps also beyond it?

Yes, there was a moment where I realized that there was a boundary in my search. I could never reach Meril again. I couldn't find her through working with the project or by going back to her old apartment and the hotel where we healed after surgery. Once someone has passed away, one can never talk to that person again. At least that was my experience. It is that silence and muteness, that impossibility I wanted to speak about. I wish so much that I could talk to Meril again, or my very much loved grandmother Brita. who passed away more than 20 years ago. But I can't. Still, I think about them every day - they only exist in my memory. There was a time when I started this project when I thought that perhaps it was possible, perhaps I could find something, ghosts could exist, and I wished for that. But during the making of this film I started doubting this. I have a very hard time with the sometimes mute and harsh reality, everyday life, a place that lacks magic. But I also think that in the silence of the dead, in the wordless and empty, there is a quiet, invisible but noticeable presence and ambience of sorts. I can feel it when I am alone in a forest, for example, or alone in a room: there is sometimes a presence. Something that we don't have an answer for, lingering behind the curtain of reality, beyond our consciousness. Something magical, that I don't doubt.

And I think the fact that we don't have an answer for everything, that there are limits to what we can know and understand, is very important for finding meaning, because in that mystery, there is magic. This realisation - I think - is what kept me moving forward and still keeps me going to this day. Nowadays, when I feel better, I can even find meaning and magic in the gray and boring routines of everyday life. Of course, this isn't always the case

and I will always have a hard time with everyday life to some extent.

At one point Athena, one of your companions, asked you to search for new goals and starting a new chapter. What is your next goal?

I think this project and the collaboration with Athena and Aamina helped me a lot to move on from the deep depression I was in after Meril's passing. We helped each other and Athena has also expressed she might have not been here today if she didn't have this project to work with, it saved her, and it also saved me. That feels so big, that this project could help us so much! Of course those feelings have changed a lot during the process of working with this film. At times, working on it has tested our limits and has been far from painless for any of us. Making this film and the transition has been the most challenging and difficult things I have ever done in my life. So it has two sides to it.

As I mentioned before, I feel much better today than when Athena, Aamina and I were filming in Thailand in 2019. I found meaning in life again. So did Athena and Aamina, who both now went through their transitions. Back then they were both in the beginning of it, uncertain times lay ahead. I can even love life today, and the project, and Athena and Aamina helped me to get here. I really hope it will last long.

One of the things I find most meaningful in life is to tell stories, depict internal worlds and ambiences, so my uttermost goal is to keep doing that. I've realized I've lived quite an intense and dramatic life, and I haven't yet had time to fully process much of what I went through between the ages of 18 and 26. I lived fast and hard and came tumbling down and film and art became the solace to channel and deal with it all. I feel exhausted from living like that and have been through things that I think I can never really recover from.

Now, I see it as the time to tell about all that I've been through. I want to continue to make films and art. I am working on several new projects and have started writing on my next feature film. I want to see more of the world, enter the present again and not keep living in the past. I would like to travel, not let fear take over. I want to spend more time with my parents who are getting older quickly. After 30 I have realized time or life goes so much quicker than I before experienced, and I think that has also made me appreciate life more and want to make the most of it. Although there are moments when I have a hard time with aging and that it happens so quickly. I want to try to get better at dealing with it.

To conclude we have to talk about the mid-credit scene: it not only gives closure on the project, but is also filled with the loveliest chaos

and glitter - instead of smoke. Can you walk us through that scene and why you decided to put it after the first credits?

It is the only scene in the film that was filmed quite recently, in 2023, and I wanted to add yet another time layer to the story. It felt important to get the perspectives of me and Athena today and how different they are. As I mentioned, both of us are feeling significantly better today. With the scene we wanted to celebrate that we had managed to finish this 8 year long project, that we'd survived our depression. Unfortunately Aamina didn't want to be there with us. I was very sad about that, but I realize time alters everything and Aamina has changed her mind. I think this is also an interesting situation that is very much a part of the film's theme and adds to the story: everything constantly shifts with time and transition. Places, people, and memories transform and disappear.

I also felt it was very important to end it all with some humor and happiness, as this is the most true ending and the scene is a kind of answer to an earlier scene in the film where Athena asks me "why the film is so hopeless and dark". The static shot and vast landscape in the final scene speaks to the vast landscape in that earlier scene where Athena and I have a heated discussion on a stonebeach. In the scene I say "maybe we find hope in the end we never know" and this final scene is the answer to that sentence: "yes we did".

As for its position: The scene comes in the middle of the credits to indicate that the story never really ends, the transition never ends, we continue living. I also find it quite humorous to add a comical "blooper scene" to a quite serious film. It is also just funny that we had planned this scene so carefully, but then nothing turns out as we'd planned it. We had rigged a meticulously planned wide landscape image with the camera, bought expensive silver seguin dresses and prepared for a stunning final celebration scene. In the scene we're waiting for the sun to appear behind the clouds to get the perfect image when we shoot these color cannons, which were supposed to have coloured smoke in baby blue and pink in them - the colours of the trans flag. The sun doesn't really appear until after we have shot the cannons and when shooting them, we realise that it is only confetti coming out, immediately disappearing in the wind. I had of course ordered the wrong kind of cannons online. I had imagined smoke that would linger in the air, filling the colourless landscape, while Athena and I danced in the haze, creating a beautiful grand finale. It didn't become what I'd imagined, neither did the film nor the transition.

PRODUCER'S NOTES

Trans Memoria embodies for us what is at heart of documentary practice: interrogating films, often cinema in the making, searching to further the cinematic language whilst keeping the art of storytelling at the center. A cinema that intimately recounts our surroundings and societies. This is a film that united us as producers with a single vision, to bring forth a new voice with a distinct vision, to international audiences.

A NEW WAY OF NARRATING TRANS IDENTITY

Trans Memoria asks a universal question: How far are we prepared to go, to become our true selves? This is a political film, in the sense where it tackles norms head on and expands our notion of identity in relation to time. The strength and singularity of Trans Memoria evidently lies in the unique voice of Victoria Verseau who tells her own story and that of her lost friend. Accompanied by Athena and Aamina, themselves on their transitional journeys, together they lay bare the conditions for selfhood. We are conscious of the fact that this film can upset, contrary to many films on the subject, this is not an activist film. Rather, it is a film that dares to be complex, poetic, doubtful, and raw. We embrace this complexity trusting the audience to follow this emerging voice.

A DISTINCT VISUAL STYLE

It is undoubtedly Victoria's artist approach, her visual universe and her cinematic proposal of a process-based film that made us determined to accompany this bold debut.

Victoria Verseau has a background in contemporary art, a graduate from The Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm where recent shows "Body of Ghosts" at Galleri Mejan and critically acclaimed "Engender my Past" at Uppsala Museum of Contemporary Art positions her as one of the new Swedish voices in the field to follow. Having returned to the issues surrounding transition in her art practice, Trans Memoria explores a new form of storytelling, all whilst continuing the work she has already commenced in her sculptures and installations. Drawing from her own experience, transition becomes an ongoing state, identity as something fluid rather than fixed. Victoria proposes a multilayered story and a journey through her own memories. She challenges the border between reality and fiction, through reconstructions

of her encounter with Meril, a friend from Thailand who ater committed suicide, she reproduces the liminal space of transition. An encounter that has left a strong lifelong impression on Victoria.

ALLYSHIP

Trans Memoria is inherently an international film. It was developed within the framework of Eurodoc, presented at Visions du Reel (industry pitch award), Hot Doc's Dealmaker as the first project directed by a trans person, Nordic Panorama and Cannes Doc's (industry pitch award). With selective funding in its production countries, notably Aides aux cinemas du monde as well as support from Eurimages, we have created the solid foundation that is required when bringing new talent into the industry.



ABOUT THE PRODUCER

Malin Hüber is a producer who works closely with artists focusing on bringing new voices and perspectives to international audiences. Hüber is a frequent industry consultant and her work ranges from arthouse gems to streamer originals. A selection of titles include: Blomster by Neil Wigardt (2023), The Conference by Patrik Eklund (2023), Workers! by Petra Bauer and SCOT-

PEP (2019), Lucky One by Mia Engberg (2019), Sometimes It Was Beautiful by Christian Nyampeta (2019), and children's doc series Sport Kids by ao Simon Lereng Wilmont, Victor Kossakovsky and Hanna Heilborn (2015). Hüber is an alumnae of Berlinale Talents, Eurodoc and EAVE.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

HER Film produces cutting edge films by new voices of artists and film-makers alike. We let the story decide it's form, with a focus to broaden perspectives and introduce new voices to international audiences. Selected work includes Trans Memoria by Victoria Verseau (2024), Blomster by Neil Wigardt (2023), Workers! by Petra Bauer and SCOT-PEP (2019), Sometimes It Was Beautiful by Christian Nyampeta (2019) and An Army of Lovers by Ingrid Ryberg (2018).



ABOUT THE CO-PRODUCER

Mathilde Raczymow is producer and co-owner at **Les Films du Bilboquet**. After studying literature, she began working for festivals. In 2010, she joined the Zadig team, where she accompanied several films for television and cinema, before working with other production companies as production manager or executive pro-

ducer. Since 2018, at Les Films du Bilboquet, she has produced documentary and animation films including L'Energie positive des dieux by Laetitia Moller (Award at Champs Elysée Film Festival, theatrical release 2022), On Zenith's edge by Natyvel Pontalier (IDFA), the animation serie Unsung women by Julie Gavras (Arte, 2022). Mathilde is an alumnae of Eurodoc. She teaches in the documentary film master's at Université Paris Cité, and is part of several commissions at the CNC, Regional funds, Procirep and others.

ABOUT THE CO-PRODUCTION COMPANY

Les Films du Bilboquet produces films at the borders of genres, forms, subjects and disciplines. Our filmography has its own global identity, closely crafted together with authors, directors and technicians. We make sure to initiate and reinforce the dialogue between our films by crossing European and African views on cinema. This consistency and cinematic ambition have been shaping through our eventually tough, yet always clear choices. Created by Eugénie Michel Villette and joined by Mathilde Raczymow, Les Films du Bilboquet have produced more than thirty films selected and awarded in prestigious international film festivals.





CREDITS

Writer/director Victoria Verseau she/her **Participants** Athena Love she/her Aamina Larsson she/her Victory Verseau she/her Director of Photography Daniel Takács he/him she/her Producer Malin Hüber / HER Film Co-producer Mathilde Raczymow / she/her Les Films du Bilboquet Editor Neil Wigardt he/him Sound Arno Ledoux he/him Arno Ledoux he/him Composer **Additional Composer** Isak B Sundström he/him Additional Photography Petra Coppla Dahlberg she/her Albin Holmqvist he/him Graphics Emilia Da Silva Rosario she/her

