

KARLOVY VARY SCREENINGS

Wednesday, 3 July - 8:30 AM
Congress Hall
Press & Industry Screening

Wednesday, 3 July - 5:00 PM Grand Hall WORLD PREMIERE

Thursday, 4 July - 10:00 AM
Pupp

Friday, 5 July - 4:00 PM Lazne III

Saturday, 6 July - 8:30 AM Congress Hall

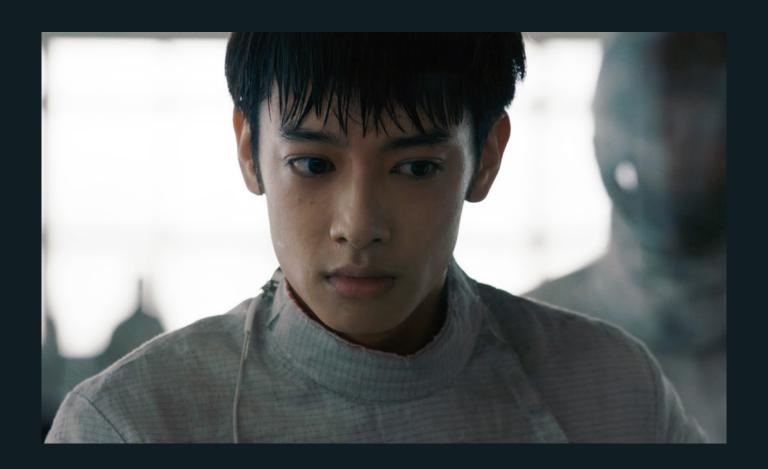
LOGLINE

When his beloved but dangerous older brother is released from prison, high school fencer Zijie believes he is innocent and goes behind their mother's back to help him, only to realize the brother he has idealized might only be a fantasy.

SYNOPSIS

Zijie is a young fencer longing to reconnect with his estranged older brother Zihan, who mysteriously returns after seven years in juvenile prison for killing an opponent during a fencing match. Zijie believes Zihan's insistence that he is innocent and secretly decides to help him, defying their mother's efforts to erase Zihan from their lives. In return, Zihan starts to train Zijie in fencing and Zijie improves immensely, getting selected to compete at the upcoming National Championships.

As the brothers grow closer, their mother finds out that they have reunited and is furious at Zijie, yet Zijie stubbornly sticks by his brother. But Zihan's hostile past is triggered after an argument, leaving Zijie to finally question whether his beloved brother might be a violent sociopath after all.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

While I was in Taipei shooting a short film in 2014, a young man caused a nationwide tragedy when he stabbed multiple people on the Taipei subway. While the man's parents publicly denounced their son, his younger brother continued to stand by him and was in denial of his older brother's horrific crime. His younger brother's reaction reminded me of my relationship with my autistic brother, and inspired me to write *Pierce*.

When I was young, not understanding my brother's condition, I idealized him to be a loving, caring older brother. It was only when I grew up that I realized our relationship was made up in my head. Accepting this has been a painful journey for me, and is the same one Zijie takes in *Pierce*.

The question I ponder both in *Pierce* and real life is - How does one's feelings of love and loyalty change when one knows the truth? Does the truth really matter?

INTERVIEW: A DREAMLIKE PORTRAIT OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

An interview between director Nelicia Low and producer Jeremy Chua



JEREMY CHUA: YOU WERE A NATIONAL FENCER IN SINGAPORE BEFORE FURTHERING YOUR STUDIES IN DIRECTING AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY. THIS IS A RATHER INTERESTING CAREER SWITCH! COULD YOU SHARE HOW YOU GOT YOUR START IN FILMMAKING, AND WHO WERE THE FILMMAKERS YOU FOUND YOURSELF DRAWN TOWARDS?

Nelicia Low: In fact, I started fencing because of the movies I loved when I was a kid (Star Wars and Lord of the Rings); it was films that led me to fencing and not the other way around! I wanted to be a film director since I was young. I had a rather tumultuous childhood due partly to my older brother being autistic, and it was through movies that I felt both connection and comfort. I remember when I was young, watching certain movies gave me a strange, out-of-body feeling. Even though it was I who was watching the movie, the movie made me feel seen. As I grew older, my love for cinema grew deeper, and it was Ang Lee's holy trinity of movies - Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, Brokeback Mountain and Lust, Caution - that solidified the path I was on. His sincerity, authenticity and bravery in making those movies are what I strive to do in my own movies. I also greatly admire his work with actors, and I want to create fresh, real performances like he did with my own actors.

JC: THE MOTIVATIONS AND CHOICES OF A FIRST FEATURE FILM ARE ALWAYS THE MOST PERSONAL. YOU'VE CHOSEN TO SET YOUR STORY AND SHOOT THE FILM IN TAIWAN INSTEAD OF SINGAPORE. WHY?

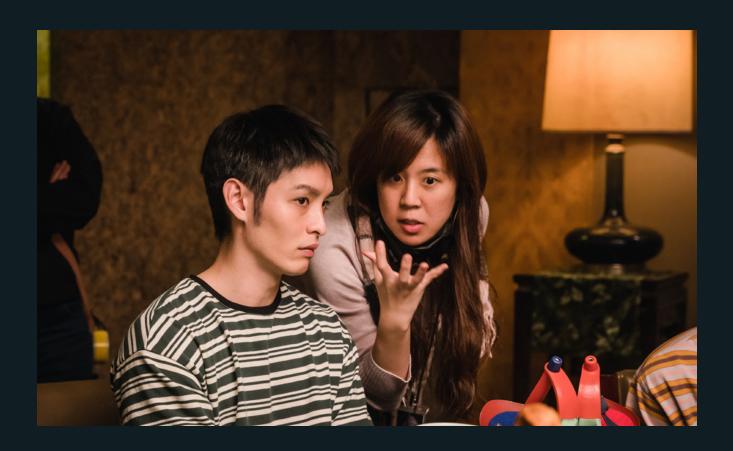
NL: The story was partly inspired by a real life incident that happened in Taipei while I was there making my short film in 2014 - 21-year-old Cheng Chieh stabbed as many people as he could on the subway, killing four. While his younger brother visited him at the police station, crying, in denial that his older brother could do something so monstrous, his parents went onto the streets of Taipei to publicly apologize and begged the government to execute their son. His younger brother's reaction reminded me strongly of my relationship with my older brother, who is autistic. When I was young, I used to idealise him to be a loving, caring older brother, but as I grew up, I realized that our entire relationship was made up in my head. Accepting that I would never know if my brother actually reciprocated my love has been a painful journey for me, and is the same one the lead character Zijie takes in *Pierce*. Because of the real-life incident that sparked this idea, I could not quite imagine setting the film anywhere else.

JC: BOTH YOUR SHORT FILM *Freeze* and your first feature *Pierce* investigate complex scenarios about sibling relationships. How has this exploration evolved from the short to the feature?

NL: Both *Freeze* and *Pierce* were attempts to dig into my own complex feelings regarding my older brother. When most people think about love or family, the first thing that comes to mind is the love between parent and child. But for me, due to my brother's condition and my default responsibility as his lifelong caretaker, the sibling relationship was the most significant one in my life.

Freeze was a deeper look at the role of a caretaker — an outsider might feel that caretakers have it difficult and pity our lot in life, but that was not exactly true for me. If you are born into the role, as I was, it becomes your normal; you do not know to pity yourself nor ask for a different role. In Freeze, I wanted to portray the truth of this feeling, how if there was any hatred at all, it was directed within, and not at the person we had to take care of.

Pierce was even more difficult to write because it is a story solely about love, which I realised is much more complex and nuanced than hate. Perhaps as a way to cope with the fact that my brother was autistic, I projected my love onto him as a child — I imagined him to be this caring, loving older brother who always held my hand when we went out together. It was the way I survived, because I had loved him so much and so desperately needed him to love me back. Later on, I would realize that he never held my hand willingly even once, and it was I who, as a child, grabbed onto my older brother's hand so that he would not run away and get lost. I had gaslit myself into believing that my act of protecting him was his act of love for me. When I grew up and truly understood my brother's condition, what was strange was that the love I had for him, which was built on a fantasy, remained as strong and pure as ever. This is precisely what I wanted to explore in *Pierce* - If love is completely made up in your head, is it still love after all?



JC: THE UNIVERSES AND DESTINIES OF THE YOUNGER PROTAGONIST JIE AND HIS OLDER BROTHER ARE IN CONSTANT POLAR TENSION THROUGHOUT THE SCRIPT YET THERE ARE ALSO INCREDIBLE MOMENTS OF TENDERNESS AND ENDEARMENT THAT DRIVES AMBIGUITY. HOW DID YOU DESIGN THIS PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL TUG OF WAR BETWEEN THE TWO BROTHERS?

NL: It was always my intention for the older brother character to be someone who was neither clearly black or white. If he was simply an evil psychopath, there would be no hope for the brothers' relationship in the film, and no reason to keep watching. To me, the older brother Zihan was never someone whose condition was hopeless. While researching for the film, I came across the biography of Ted Bundy's long-time ex-girlfriend, Liz, whose story inspired a big part of Zihan's character. Liz had seen moments of care and tenderness in him, and always wondered why he never killed her when he had so many chances to. At the end of his life, before Ted Bundy was executed, he had sent a letter to Liz and told her that he did truly love her, and he wanted her to know because he knew she would always wonder if his love for her was real. I had also read a news article about a father who was dealing with a psychopathic child, and who one day saw this child saving his younger brother from drowning in their swimming pool, which was completely uncharacteristic of a psychopathic child. These incidents and that of the Taipei subway incident made me realise there must have been some good in these people, in order for others to have harboured hope.

I wrote Zihan to be someone overconfident in his ability to charm and manipulate, who was arrogant and revelled in his younger brother's belief in and admiration towards him. But it is this overconfidence that would become his downfall as his younger brother's earnest love for him surprisingly affects him, and he begins to buy into the lie he has created — that he is the perfect older brother. There is a quote from Jeanette Winterson that I used to tell the actor Tsao Yu-Ning, who plays Zihan: "As your lover describes you, so you are." Essentially, Zijie's love starts to move Zihan to the point that even Zihan himself is not sure if he is only pretending to care for his younger brother, or if he actually genuinely cares for him.

JC: EACH ACTOR PORTRAY THEIR ROLES WITH INTENSITY AND FRAGILITY IN TANDEM. WHAT QUALITIES WERE YOU LOOKING FOR WHEN YOU WERE CASTING?

NL: The most important thing to me is that the cast must have a strong personal connection to the characters they play, as I tap on this personal connection when I work with them to create more authentic performances. It is a bonus if they are very skilled and experienced — for instance, Ding Ning who plays Mother is a veteran actress in Taiwan who is incredible and has amazing inner life.

Liu Hsiu-Fu who plays Zijie is a newcomer but has a natural ability to live completely in the moment and thus feel and react in a genuine way. He also has a strong personal connection to his character - I believe that throughout the entire process of making the film, he and I (and rightly so) were the only ones who truly understood Zijie's final extreme choice. I believe he is the only one who could play the character of Zijie! In the casting process, Yu-Ning was the only actor I met who did not question at all why or how his character Zihan came to be the way he is, because of his personal connection too. He accepted and understood immediately that Zihan was just that way. Yu-Ning is also inherently a very restrained person; his feelings and thoughts are rarely obvious, and I felt that this quality naturally added to the enigma of the character he was playing. The only difference lay in how he was naturally restrained, while his character was hiding his real feelings on purpose. Yu-Ning also has a younger brother whom he adores in real-life, which really came to play in all his scenes with Hsiu-Fu. When the characters spoke about their past, I had Yu-Ning ad-lib much of his dialogue, which he based on his own memories with his younger brother.

JC: THE CINEMATOGRAPHY POSSESSES A RHYTHM THAT IS IN SYNC WITH THE MISE EN SCENE. IT HAS AN ABSTRACTED DREAMLIKE TEXTURE IN SCENES DEPICTING THE BROTHER'S CHILDHOOD. AT TIMES, THE CAMERA ORBITS AROUND THEM AS THOUGH CAPTURING A SIMMERING DUEL WHEREAS THERE IS A EXPLOSION OF AGGRESSION IN MOMENTS OF FENCING. WAS THERE ANY IMPROVISATION IN HOW YOU WORKED WITH YOUR CINEMATOGRAPHER, MICHEL DYMEK?

NL: I wanted to work with Michal because he values story above everything else. In a film that tethers between still, simmering buildup of tension and visually/aurally-charged fencing scenes, Michal was able to adapt and build our vision around the performance of the actors while capturing the right rhythmic quality to complement the story and emotions on screen.

I worked with Michal on the shotlist daily for a month, starting six months before the shoot. Everything was planned to precision, and a strategy for the cinematography of the entire film was formed according to the progressing emotional beats. There were a few major things we focused on - Firstly, the sense of the entire brothers' relationship being a fantasy of Zijie's. We focused on the first time that Zihan appears at Zijie's school to train him, and determined that this would be one of the few long takes we would use in the film in order to create a sense of unease about Zihan's intentions of being there for Zijie. We also felt the image had to be eerily beautiful, and this was achieved in collaboration with our art directors Hsu Kuei-Ting and Marcus Zheng - Kuei-Ting came up with the idea of using sprinklers in a wide dark field to create this ethereal, almost magical image. These sprinklers also added to the recurring water motif throughout the film — the rain when the brothers share a happy moment, and the river important in the brothers' history. Together with our sound designers, we decided to add echoes to selective scenes to elevate the surrealism of it all. Eric Mendelsohn, whom I co-edited the film with, also helped refine this sense of surrealism of this sprinkler scene - At the end of the long take, Zihan runs off into the distance, the long take is finally broken and we cut to Zijie's stunned close up shot, confused at why his brother turned up to coach him. We then cut back to the empty field after Zihan has disappeared completely. Eric and I decided to cut from Zijie's reaction to the empty field quicker, so that it is almost as if Zihan has magically and suddenly disappeared from the field, rather than actually ran off into the distance, thus making us wonder what Zijie is wondering - Was my brother really here at all, helping me? Or was it just my imagination?



The next thing that Michal and I worked on was how to create a visual connection between the two brothers whenever the mysterious river incident from their childhood was brought up in their conversations — At first, Michal had an idea to use a long rotating camera to create a sense of Zihan's manipulation and confusion. While I thought it was a good idea, and we did end up using this long rotating camera throughout the film in other moments, I felt that the main connection needed to be something visually simpler, that also allowed the acting to stand out. I remembered watching a documentary called *The Imposter* (2012), where the filmmakers made the interviewee, a conman, look into the lens, which was a disturbing feeling for the audience and really made the viewer try to decipher for themselves whether he was telling the truth. I also took inspiration from Bong Joon Ho's *Memories of Murder* (2003), where there were several extreme close ups that Bong used to make both the characters and the audience try to guess if the man captured was the murderer or not. I thus designed the extreme close up shots with Michal using ultra long lenses for whenever Zijie questions Zihan about the river in the film, and had the actors look directly into the camera lens. I feel that this not only creates a connection between the two brothers, throwing us into their private world, but also helps us feel what Zijie is feeling when he is trying to read his older brother's enigmatic face.

JC: AS A FORMER NATIONAL FENCER, IT IS VERY APT THAT YOU TAKE US INTO THE WORLD OF FENCING THROUGH OUR SENSES. WHAT WERE SOME OF THE ELEMENTS THAT YOU STRIVED TO ACHIEVE CINEMATOGRAPHICALLY?

NL: The fencing made sense for the story because of the older brother's character, who was hyper intelligent, hard to read and manipulative. Fencing is very much like chess played with swords, all about strategy and predicting each other's moves. Cinematographically, I wanted to avoid the cliche of shooting widescreen, to see the whole length of the fencing piste, as this feels objective and not personal, while the film is all about what happens between the characters on the deepest level possible. When one fences what you actually see and feel is your opponent in front of you and the distance between you both. This also reflects Zijie's relationship with his older brother — He is not just trying to fence, but also trying to see his older brother for who he really is. Therefore, I chose the 1:66:1 aspect ratio as it most closely reflected what I used to see when I was fencing, and also reflected the viewpoint of Zijie's character whenever he looks at his older brother, trying to understand him.

JC: TALK US THROUGH THE STYLISED JUXTAPOSITION OF ORIGINAL SCORE AND AMERICAN OLDIES. HOW DID YOU WORK WITH THE COMPOSER AND WHAT KIND OF RESPONSES WERE YOU TRYING TO ILLICIT?

NL: To be honest, I chose the Neil Sedaka songs "Oh Carol" and "You Mean Everything to Me" because these are songs my brother likes. Due to his condition he will not be able to understand my movie, but I was hopeful that at least he would like the music. On an artistic level, these American oldies added to the highly nostalgic feeling between the brothers, giving their relationship a sense of melancholy. Working with Piotr Kurek was wonderful because he understood what I was trying to do and found his way to both create this sense of nostalgia between the two brothers whenever a core memory was mentioned. He used a child's toy piano to play the key tune from "You Mean Everything to Me", adding a fantastic and understated child-like melancholy to these moments between the brothers.

With the rest of the score, Piotr brought a unique sword-like sharp quality to the music, which heightened the moments of violence and horror. In the large family lunch scenes, we wanted to create music that was both diegetic and non-diegetic, so the music started off seeming like it was just background music in the restaurant, but would seem to react to the drama unfolding at the table. I wanted to blur the lines between reality and dream throughout the film, to reflect Zijie's overly romanticized view of his brother.



JC: CAN YOU ELABORATE MORE ABOUT THE INTENTION BEHIND THE DIRECTION OF SUCH A DREAMLIKE MOOD AND TONE?

NL: I think that the film is essentially about gaslighting - whether you manipulate yourself into believing you are loved, or whether someone gaslights you on purpose, you build a false sense of love and reality. It is dangerous and someone is bound to get hurt. Hence, I wanted to build this sense of surrealism throughout the film through cinematography, art direction, music and editing, that would all come together and erupt into something almost entirely unbelievable when Zijie makes an extreme decision at the end. The red curtains start to float magically, the sound design is filled with echoing dialogue, the music starts on a sudden note, the brothers are lit in an almost heavenly way, the editing becomes a montage... It is almost as if the dream has taken over reality. I also wanted to leave some room for imagination when Zijie makes his final choice — Perhaps this was just him projecting and imagining what he wanted to do for his older brother, or perhaps it is our own wishful hope that this was just a dream and not reality. Regardless, Zijie comes to the realization that he still loves his brother despite who his brother really is. Despite his love being based mostly on lies and manipulation, he cannot break away. This is ultimately what I am trying to convey in the movie. Of course it is terrible and destructive when we love blindly, projecting our feelings onto those we love only to realize it may all be simply an illusion. But I believe the ability to love so blindly and unconditionally is a gift, and I wish to leave everyone with hope that might even the most cruel and hopeless can be saved.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Writer-director Nelicia Low grew up in Singapore where she represented her country as a National Fencer for 5 years. She retired after the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou to chase her childhood dream of being a filmmaker. Nelicia received her MFA in Film Directing at Columbia University in New York in 2018. Her second short film *Freeze* premiered February 2016 at the Clermont-Ferrand ISFF and went on to screen at Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival 2016, Busan ISFF 2016, Odense IFF 2016, Singapore IFF 2016, as well as over 70 international film festivals around the world.

Nelicia was previously selected for the 2018 Singapore IFF's Southeast Asian Film Lab and the 2019 Less is More European film lab, and was chosen for the New Waves: Emerging Voices of Southeast Asia director showcase in 2017.

Nelicia's debut feature film *Pierce* is a fencing-thriller based on her tragically unrequited love for her autistic brother. Despite having grown up with a mentally disabled brother who is unable to love her and melodramatic parents who begrudgingly love her, Nelicia loves her family deeply. This causes her to ask herself the same question over and over again in her films - What is love?

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

ORIGINAL TITLE

刺心切骨 (ci4 xin1 qie1 gu3)

ENGLISH TITLE

Pierce

GENRE

Drama, Thriller

DURATION

107 minutes

COUNTRIES OF PRODUCTION

Singapore, Taiwan, Poland

LANGUAGE

Mandarin Chinese

SUBTITLES AVAILABLE

English, Traditional Chinese

SHOOTING FORMAT

Digital

EXHIBITION FORMAT

2K DCP

ASPECT RATIO

1:1.66

COLOUR/B&W

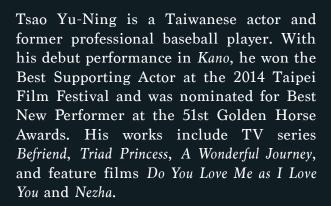
Colour

SOUND

7.1, 5.1

KEY CAST

Liu Hsiu-fu is an actor and model. In 2019, he was nominated for the Best New Actor in a Miniseries at the 54th Golden Bell Awards for his role in the TV series *On Children — Child Of The Cat.* In 2021, he was recognized as the Taipei Film Festival Supernova. His acting credits include TV series *The World Between Us, Bonus Trip,* and *Trick or Love* and the films *Plurality* and *Pierce.*



Ding Ning is a Taiwanese actress. She is known for her roles in *Terrorizers* (2021), *Little Big Women* (2020) and Netflix series *Shards of Her* (2022). She won the Golden Horse Best Supporting Actress for her role in the film *Cities of Last Things* (2018), and was nominated for Golden Bell Award for Best Supporting Actress in Miniseries for *Shards of Her*.

Zijie / LIU HSIU-FU



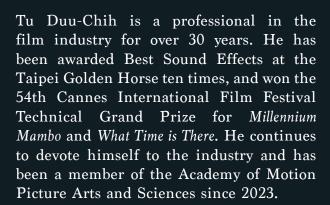


Mother / DING NING



KEY CREW

Michal is a Polish cinematographer who graduated from the Łódź Film School and is a member of the Polish Society of Cinematographers (PSC). He is known for his work in *The Girl with the Needle* (Cannes Film Festival 2024), *A Real Pain* (Sundance Film Festival 2024), *EO* (Cannes Film Festival 2022), *Sweat* (Cannes Film Festival 2021).



Wu Shu-Yao is a supervising sound editor and re-recording mixer, winning 3 Golden Horse Awards for Best Sound Effects for Seediq Bale (2011), The Assassin (2015), and mon mon mon MONSTERS (2017). She won Beset Sound at the 10th Asian Film Awards for The Assassin. Her works include Our Time Will Come (2017), Love Education (2017) and The Great Buddha+ (2017).

Director of Photography / MICHAL DYMEK

Sound Designer / TU DUU-CHIH



Sound Designer / WU SHU-YAO



KEY CREW

WRITER-DIRECTOR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Nelicia Low Michal Dymek PSC

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Patrick Mao Huang Eric Mendelsohn

Izabela Igel

John M. Lo CO-EDITOR

John F. Lyons

CO-PRODUCERS

Evril Kuo COMPOSER Hsu Kuo-Lun Piotr Kurek

Andrzej Lucjanek

SOUND DESIGNERS

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

Tu Duu-Chih
Eric Mendelsohn

Wu Shu-Yao

LINE PRODUCER VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR

Liu Min-Hung Tomi Kuo

pōtocol

PRODUCTION COMPANY (SINGAPORE)

Founded in 2014, Potocol is an independent film company based in Singapore working with established and emerging filmmakers on international co-productions. Recent titles include *Pierce* by Nelicia Low (Crystal Globe Competition - Karlovy Vary International Film Festival 2024), *Last Shadow at First Light* by Nicole Midori Woodford (San Sebastian Film Festival 2023), *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell* by Pham Thien An (Canns Camera d'Or 2023), *Tomorrow is a Long Time* by Jow Zhi Wei (Berlinale 2023), *Autobiography* by Makbul Mubarak (FIPRESCI prize - Venice Orizzonti 2022), *Glorious Ashes* by Bui Thac Chuyen (Montgolfiere d'Or - Nantes 2022) and *Rehana Maryam Noor* by Abdullah Mohammad Saad (Cannes Un Certain Regard 2021).



PRODUCTION COMPANY (TAIWAN)

Flash Forward Entertainment is an acclaimed production, distribution, and sales company located in Taipei. They have been recognized for their exceptional work in recent years, with notable productions such as *Colored*, an immersive AR project that has been selected for the 2024 Cannes XR Competition. They have also produced *Tiger Stripes*, which won the Grand Prix at the Semaine de la Critique Cannes in 2023, and *In the Belly of a Tiger*, which was chosen for the Berlinale Forum. Their films *Moneyboys*, which premiered at Cannes Un Certain Regard in 2021, *Suburban Birds*, which was selected by Locarno in 2018, and *The Road to Mandalay*, which premiered at Venice Days in 2016, have all been highly acclaimed.



PRODUCTION COMPANY (POLAND)

Harine Films is a Polish production company established by Izabela Igel - EAVE and Wajda School graduate film producer. Before she started Harine Films, Iza produced Floating Skyscrapers by Tomasz Wasilewski and Wild Roses by Anna Jadowska. Harine Films' first film is a Romanian-Polish Dog by Florin Serban and Polish-Italian film The Man with the Magic Box. Company scope of interest covers arthouse cinema and work with first- and second-time directors. Its film credits include The Hatcher, Applause, Pierce and Flood.

ELYSIÜM CINÉ

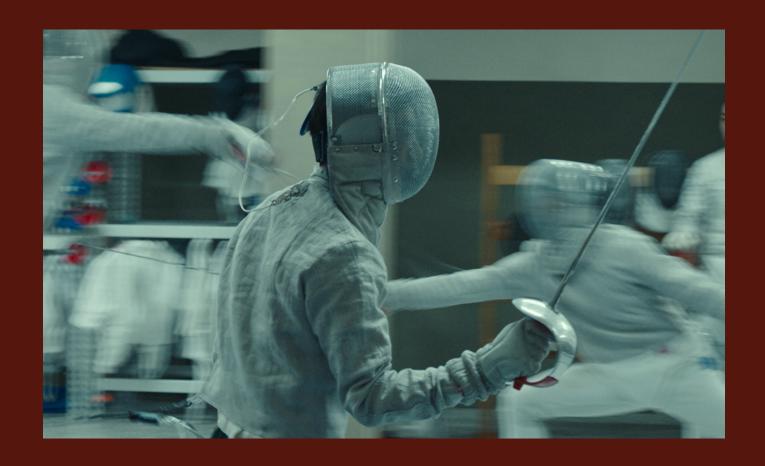
PRODUCTION COMPANY (SINGAPORE)

Elysiüm Ciné is an affiliate company of the flagship Elysiüm Group which is the umbrella under which various businesses ranging from property and investment management to creative and leisure brands, and film production.



CO-PRODUCTION COMPANY (POLAND)

Fixafilm is a high-end, Dolby Vision certified postproduction facility based in Warsaw, Poland, with a strong focus on feature films, documentaries and series. Recent works include features *LaRoy*, *The Sins*, *The Hatcher*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.



PRESS RESOURCES

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World sales

