

## THE SWAN SONG OF FEDOR OZEROV

Director Yuri Semashko

Lithuania, Germany | 2025

78 min. | Belarussian, Russian with English subtitles

**Screenplay** Yuri Semashko. **Cinematography** Siarhei Kavalious. **Editing** Yuri Semashko. **Music** Sinie Gory. **Sound Design** Laura Matissek. **Sound** Yuri Semashko. **Production Design** Yuri Semashko. **Costumes** Anastasiya Ryabova. **Make-Up** Anastasiya Ryabova. **Casting** Yuri Semashko. **Animation** Maja Bühler. **Producer** Kęstutis Drazdauskas. **Co-Producers** Marc-Daniel Dichant, Christian Riegel, Leonid Kalitenya, Vladimir Kozlov. **Production company** Artbox (Vinius, Lithuania). **With** Viachaslau Kmit, Violetta Rahachova, Pavel Haradnitski, Anastasiya Rysik, Alexey Lyubchenko, Pavel Mikhalenia, Mike Mazur, Mikhail Zui.

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### Synopsis

His guitar is out of tune and Fedor (25) isn't in the best of moods. At the end of the year, the threat of World War III is constantly on the news, which he listens to hungover. While his sister Nina is focused on activism, the apathetic musician becomes active for one thing only: his desire to form a band and write songs. But for that he needs his missing lucky pullover! In ever more obsessive fashion, he sets out in search of the magical object, which is linked to his hope for creative inspiration: an odyssey-cum-detective story driven by great music that leads him through the flats of friends, women and strangers and into conversations with comical characters whose angst is only exceeded by their egos. Everyone here is looking for meaning, kindred spirits or just some intimacy in the face of the end of the world. Combining wit, poetry, Orpheus & Eurydice, orcs & elves and short magical animations, Yuri Semashko creates a portrait of a creative generation defying the weight of the world in a friendly, innocent tone. Born in Belarus and now in exile in Poland, he allows the real horror of repressive systems to simmer under the surface. His microbudget debut is humorous by design. (Alena Martens)

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Now based in Warsaw, Yuri Semashko was born in Minsk, Belarus, in 1993 and is an engineer by training. A self-taught filmmaker, he has created several short films and animations, including BLOOD AND KARAOKE (exground filmfest 2024), GARBAGE HEAD (International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 2023) and WHEN I WAS A GENERAL (2021). In 2024, he finished filming his first feature film, THE SWAN SONG OF FEDOR OZEROV, which was presented in November 2024 at the Work in Progress session at Cottbus Film Festival.

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**Films:** 2021: Kogda ya byl general / When I Was A General (short film). 2022: Musornaya golova / Garbage Head (short film). 2023: Krov i karaoke / Blood and Karaoke (short film). 2025: The Swan Song of Fedor Ozerov.

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### Director's Statement

#### What Do We Do? We Create

#### Art as escapism and coping mechanism

When the world is falling apart, with wars raging, dictators in power, and endless bad news every day...what do we do? Right – we create. We make movies, music, songs, and more. Because that's who we are: creators. The protagonist of my film is also a creator, absurdly obsessed with writing a new song – even as the threat of nuclear war looms.

In this film, I explore themes of escapism through art, the complex and sometimes toxic relationship between creators and their audience, and the desperate pursuit of illusory inspiration. This inspiration takes the form of a sweater with daisies, which becomes the center of the film's main detective intrigue. At the same time, the film is filled with music, irony, and partly inspired by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

I'm from Belarus, but for the past few years, I've been living in Poland. I shot this film in Warsaw with a small, dedicated team of Belarusian immigrants living in Poland. Despite working with a very limited budget, we made it happen, because of our passion for filmmaking and our commitment to developing Belarusian independent cinema. Unfortunately, this cinema is now forced to exist in exile and without financial support.

Yuri Semashko

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### Interview

#### Making Art in Exile

**Belarusian filmmaker Yuri Semashko on the jump from shorts to features and making the most of a small budget with a passionate cast and crew**

*Barbara Wurm: Yuri, you made a film about a musician. When I saw it at a work-in-progress screening at CoCo – Connecting Cottbus, it didn't have the music in it yet. Where does this love for music come from – in Fedor's life, in your film, and, I guess, in your life?*

Yuri Semashko: I have a lot of friends who are musicians and almost all the actors in this film are also musicians. For me, it felt natural to put a lot of their music in my film. Of course, Viachaslau Kmit, who plays Fedor, is also a musician. Still, the film is not a musical because due to the very limited budget, we couldn't do more crazy musical performances. But the role of the music is also that of a substitute. As a filmmaker, it is difficult to make films about filmmaking. So I started to think about other related professions that I can explore in my film. And a film about musicians was kind of self-evident because I am really a music fan. I love old classic rock and have listened to a lot of great music in my life. I always dreamt about making films with a lot of music. So maybe, sometime, I'll get to make a real big classical musical.

*Christiane Büchner: Fedor is really busy with his music and he's so completely concerned with his fear of failing that he does not react to other fears. Maybe you can say something about the states of fear in your film.*

YS: I think fear is a very natural thing for creators of art because you often experience feelings like procrastination. As soon as you practice your art, your fear goes away. The power of making films or making music is that when you make them, you know, your fear goes away. You feel very powerful, without the doubts that you had during the procrastination stage. But this stage is also very important for creation. Because if we don't procrastinate first, we just can't do something later. You need to exhaust yourself, exhaust your feelings. To feel the energy to be able to create something, like writing a song or making a film. I know this from my film process and I just transferred my feeling – to Fedor. It's now his feeling. So maybe 90% of the film is just about procrastination. He does nothing until he writes a song within five minutes. And it is the most boring part of the film when he just writes a song and everything is perfect.

*BW: Is this fear connected with you personally, with the milieu of artists and creative people? Or rather with your generation, the political situation in Belarus? Or is it a universal fear?*

YS: I think it's universal because, for example, other characters in the film who are not creators, have fears too. But their fears are about World War III, about a nuclear war, apocalyptic fears. Every character in this film fears something – it concerns everyone. It doesn't matter what their nationality or profession is. So I think fear is mostly a universal thing.

*CB: Another question about the music. The album Minsky Syndrome: I thought it might exist. So I looked it up on the Internet and I found a headline: 'The Minsk Syndrome of Janokovich'. Is there a connection?*

YS: No, no. It was just a possibility to mention Minsk in my film. We shot the whole film in Poland and I just wanted Minsk in the film, even if it's just the name of his album. We never get to know in which country the story takes place. Of course, people who live in Poland will recognise the Polish capital Warsaw. And if I said it's Minsk, nobody would believe it. Because of our very limited budget, we were not able to erase all the little hints like car plates and other details. Nevertheless, I decided not to mention the real place. When I was thinking about a title for the album, I scrolled through my notes in my phone, and I saw the words 'Minsky Syndrome.' Sometimes I just write down titles or a few words in my phone and, yeah, look what a good name for an album. Thanks to this title, I established the connection to Belarus.

*BW: For those who will read this interview in a couple of decades, it might be important to point out that basically the whole intellectual sphere of Belarus, nearly a whole generation, seems to be outside the country at the moment. Do you still have connections to colleagues and friends who are in Belarus?*

YS: My whole family is in Belarus right now. I'm not going to back to Belarus because of this whole political tension. But I think my connection is still pretty strong. And of course, we all want to be back, once the situation changes. We don't feel at home in Poland or in Germany. We feel like strangers. Even in a legal way, you need to work yourself through all these visas or permit issues. It is so exhausting. Being home is nicer, but emigration will give us the power to make this breakthrough happen. Because when you're at home, you feel comfortable and you don't need to do something extra. The whole crew who worked on the film are all Belarusian emigrants in Warsaw. I don't know how we managed it. It was hard, but we made it. And now we are at the Berlinale. We couldn't imagine something like this, while we were making the film. Our desperation eventually turned into art.

*CB: It is also your first long film. In your short films, you used a lot of animation with a very laconic style. Was it difficult for you to adapt to a longer form?*

YS: In this film I have only two animated sequences. And they were not made by me. It was in Oberhausen that I met the German artist Maja Bühler, who did the animation for those two sequences. I only did the animation for the titles. The rest of the film is live action. It was challenging for me. Usually, I like to work with very accurate shooting and editing outlines. But we had a very small budget and limited time and I had a crew and worked with actors. Thus, we improvised a lot during the filming and worked more in a documentary style of shooting. Maybe it's not as artificial style-wise as the films I made before. But I think it's still pretty much my style. Maybe a bit like a new language.

*CB: What is so amazing about your filmic style is this very soft, almost naive way the characters address each other in the dialogue scenes. You have this wonderfully laconic way of writing your scripts. Why do you do this and how do you do this?*

YS: I think this comes naturally, not intentionally. But I like to get an emotional response from the audience. So I make the dialogue weird, funny or just entertaining. Only, when you invite the audience's attention through humour and funny scenes, you can sell them something deeper, like your thoughts about fear and death and creativity. They think they're watching a comedy, but no – it's a tragedy. That's how I feel about life. Sometimes it's very funny and sometimes it's very sad. There's a lot of pain in life, you know, a lot of bad stuff in the world. Our film reflects on how we can make art when the world is falling apart and there's a lot of misery. I don't know the answer, but I'm asking this question. My style comes absolutely naturally, because when I write, I need to entertain myself first. It would be hard for me to write something very serious. Instead, I like to write emotional and funny scenes, and when they are combined, it feels like my style.

*BW: What can you say about the title of the film?*

YS: There are a lot of films with 'Swan Song' in the title. I don't know how it sounds in English, but in Russian it feels like Fedor Ozerov is very important. Like 'The Life and Death of Fedor Ozerov.' I was imitating that style of titles.

*BW: Some parts of your film are rooted in other contexts, like Orcs and Elves on the one hand and Orpheus and Eurydice on the other. Tell us about this cultural network that you put all throughout this minimalist film, which then expands into all spheres.*

YS: I just like mythology. I like fairy tales. I like to create my own world that feels not like the real world. I like artificial things because in these worlds you can do anything and it feels natural inside this world. So I don't need to bother about whether something can happen in real life. And if I want to send my characters to the kingdom of Hades, I just send them there, if I need to. Even the sweater: it's just a sweater, but maybe it's magic! We don't know. I like to create this mythology around objects and archetypes. And it helps me to build the story because I can rely on the myth of Orpheus. Ten years ago, I made a film that was based on the Orpheus theme and I realised that I just really like this story. It is my favourite from Ancient Greek mythology. Sometimes it's also a bit random. I am thinking about something or I watched something and then I decide to add it to the movie and it somehow even completes the whole story. But initially it was random.

*CB: Will you bring the sweater to Berlin?*

YS: Yes, of course. But I'm not sure that I want to wear the sweater during the premiere because I want to create a little bit of mystery around the sweater.

*CB: Well, I think that everybody wants to have this sweater, if it's capable of taking away fears.*

YS: Maybe the sweater did nothing. We don't know if Mitrofan is telling the truth, if his theory is real or not. The sweater has a metaphoric meaning, not a real one. Maybe it brings inspiration. Maybe it takes fear away. As I already said, the lead actor is in reality a musician, not a professional actor. It was his first film and he was living through a creative crisis. He couldn't write a single new song. But during the shoot, he found inspiration – maybe because of the sweater – and he just wrote a whole album in a day or two after we finished shooting. So this process gave him inspiration in real life.

*CB: Maybe it is more about creating situations where we can forget about our fears for a moment and materialise our hopes in something like this sweater?*

YS: Yeah, of course it's all about our inner feelings. It's just all in your head. But I think creative people are also very superstitious – maybe not film directors, but musicians – because music depends more on their mood. They have arbitrary habits, for example, doing something specific before going on stage. That's good for musicians. But film directors are all very well structured. Because you need to manage the whole filmmaking process. But musicians, maybe painters, writers, of course, they all depend on their feelings in the moment of the performance.

*BW: The beautiful poem by Vitaly – did you write it?*

YS: I did. I needed a very bad poem for the script. And I thought, I can just compile one by writing down everything that comes into my head. Because I've heard a lot of bad poetry and can recognise and copy the style. But I really appreciate that you noticed this because it was written in five minutes.

*CB: You have a producer outside of Belarus. You had support from the Belarusian Filmmakers' Network. How was the film conceived and produced?*

YS: It started with a screenplay competition by the Belarusian Filmmakers Network. It's a network of Belarusian filmmakers around the world. And it won a prize and we received around \$3,000 for making a feature film. A very small amount of money. But I never had a budget for my short films and I decided that I could do it. Because you can wait for big budgets for a long time and never get them. So I decided just to make my feature film. Even though I've always wanted to write a screenplay for a feature film, I've never had an idea for one. I was only thinking about short films. So I challenged myself and wrote this screenplay. While we were shooting, we didn't have a producer. We only had support from the Belarusian Filmmakers Network. It's just the grant and some technical support, like hard drives. During the shoot, I was the producer, I was the director, I was the production designer, I was the sound engineer on set. We had a very small crew: me, the cameraman and the actors. Sometimes one, sometimes two or a few other helpers who were holding the microphone. These were two very intense months. We were not able to shoot every day because I was responsible for everything. So we had maybe three shooting days a week, four or six hours each. Because all the actors and the cameraman had day jobs to pay their rent and to live their lives. I didn't have a job during this time because I needed to focus on the film. I had some sleepless nights. I edited at night, so at the end of the shoot I had a rough edit, which we sent to a Lithuanian producer who was interested in our project because he had been part of the jury of the script competition. He said, 'Okay, I like your script. If you can shoot it for \$3,000, I can help you to finance the post-production.' And that's how we got the Lithuanian producer Kęstutis Drazdauskas on board. He helped us finish the film.

*BW: Beside you as the mastermind behind nearly every aspect of this film, there is also Viachaslau Kmit, the great actor or non-actor who plays Fedya. Can you tell us a bit about him?*

YS: He's a very intelligent and smart person because he reads a lot of books. He writes his songs and the lyrics of his songs. When I met him for the first time, I got the feeling that he is like one of the old rock stars, like Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen. I like those kind of guys with just their guitar and none of this whole fancy setup. Just a guy with a guitar and words. The power of the lyrics. When I saw him at a concert, I thought, he's a very nice character in a very old-fashioned style. When I was looking for someone to play the musician Fedor, he was my perfect choice, 100%. In case he would have declined the role, I would maybe never have found the right person. He is not a trained actor and we had some difficulties in shooting some of the scenes. So I built the script around the other characters. Fedor just meets a lot of people and usually they play the main part and Fedor just responds. But I think it's more important to have this charisma, than mere acting skills. We spent a lot of time together and we're now a big group of friends. They're all very nice people.

*BW: So there is really great hope that there's going to be another film with the same crew.*

YS: Yes, of course. The other actors all are young actors who are part of a theatre troop in Warsaw. It's called Tutejshy Theatre. They don't have a building or anything. I was lucky because I had worked with one of them before, the guy who plays Vitaly. I worked with him on my film GARBAGE HEAD. He knew about my script and that I was looking for actors. So he told the other actors from his theatre group and they all came to my auditions. And I said, wow, I now have a lot of amazing young actors. I'm so lucky. I will give all of them roles in my film. And this was a blessing because, I didn't have money to do a lot of casting and they had already worked together for a long time. They didn't need time to get to know each other. They were all friends already. Besides these young actors, we also had a few actors from the previous generation of actors from Belarus. Mitrofan is played by Pavel Gorodnitskiy and Mikhail Zui plays the junkman. They're very famous theatre actors from back when they still lived in Belarus. Now, of course, because of the political situation, they have also emigrated. But I was very happy they read the script and believed in it and just gave me the great opportunity to work with very professional and good actors.

*CB: There's one small comment, maybe it's not a question, but what I really liked was that your film is dedicated to the love and solidarity between siblings – brother and sister. It is not a romantic love, but one of solidarity. As a sister with a very solidaric brother, I really appreciated that.*

YS: Nice. It's the emotional heart of the film, because in all my films, I need in something as an emotional core. When I was thinking about Fedor's story, I was looking for various ways of love, ways of loving his life. Because he's so upset, I couldn't really connect with his obsession about writing songs. Of course I can, but I needed something more human. And so I came up with the idea of focusing on the relationship between an older brother and his young sister. By the way, in real life he is younger than his sister, but in the film he's older. I have two older brothers. Even though I don't have a little sister, I can imagine this relationship. And you remember how they talk to each other: 'Screw you, Fedya', or 'Screw you, Nina.' This is how my brothers and I spoke in Russian as children. We never spoke to each other in a language of love. We always addressed each other like this. So that's why I use these phrases and I bring something in from my personal life. But, yeah, I think we needed something emotional at the end.