



Чайки

Chaiki

The Gulls

Ella Manzheeva

Producer Elena Glikman, Yaroslav Zhivov. **Production company** Telesto Film Company (Moskau, Russian Federation). **Director** Ella Manzheeva. **Screenplay** Ella Manzheeva. **Director of photography** Alexander Kuznetsov. **Production design** Denis Bauer. **Sound** Philipp Lamshin. **Music** Anton Silayev. **Editor** Sergey Ivanov.

Cast Evgeniya Mandzhieva (Elza), Sergey Adianov (Dzhiga), Evgeny Sangadzhiev (Ulan), Lyubov Ubushieva (Mother), Dmitry Mukeyev (Ledzhin).

DCP, colour. 87 min. Russian, Kalmyk.

Premiere 7 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

World sales Antipode Sales & Distribution

Elza lives in a small town in the Republic of Kalmykia on the Caspian Sea. Another year comes to an end, it's cold and the steppe is covered in a thin layer of snow. When her husband, who makes a living from illegal fishing, asks her one night what she did during the day, she lies. She wasn't at her mother's, but at the bus stop. She thought of leaving – to find out what it might be to escape the infinite expanse of her dreary small world. But she didn't dare; instead she stays and withdraws into herself, unconcerned by who might see. One day, her husband doesn't return from a dangerous boat trip. It is said that a fisherman only returns if he has a woman waiting for him and that seagulls are the souls of the missing. At the start of a somewhat unplanned pregnancy, widowed and alone, Elza wanders ever further through the city, plotting a path between tradition and the contemporary until she's no longer on familiar ground. In her debut film, Ella Manzheeva gains access to Elza's inner life through the lens of landscapes, living rooms, offices, corridors and roads. In *Chaiki*, Kalmykia is not a backdrop but a state of mind.

Dorothee Wenner

Happiness is within each of us

Chaiki is a parable set against the backdrop of modern Kalmykia. It tells the story of a poacher's wife and takes place in a small town on the shores of the Caspian Sea. We often associate our troubles and failures with the people around us. By shifting the responsibility over to them, we justify our weakness, and laziness, our lack of willpower and ideas. However, happiness is within each one of us, and we are the only ones who can let ourselves be happy, daring, free or unhappy. This film is about the energy of life. Slow down. Listen. Listen to yourself and you will hear others. When time finds its space, there comes an incredible happiness and freedom, freedom of the soul. I would like for the viewers to trust themselves more, to rely on their own unique experiences and characters so that the film's drama lives on in their minds and everyone is able to create their own ending, learn their own moral lesson. I'm not trying to convey a particular message by creating this story – I simply ask a question. Everyone may respond in their own way.

Ella Manzheeva

"Kalmykia women put generally their hopes in men"

Chaiki is your first feature-length film. What was your starting point for this story?

Ella Manzheeva: Everything started from an image of a woman who wants to leave her husband. She goes away and comes back, and he does not even notice. I thought this over for a very long time, perhaps a year. And then suddenly I sat down and wrote the screenplay in just five days, all in one go. And only then, stepping back, did I see many real-life stories that happened to me or to people dear to me, and see the characters from my film. And then we filmed a trailer and it was a success. It helped us arouse the interest of other people. But we were not sure if we would manage to realise the film, because not many people in Russia were interested in a film about a small ethnic group. The last film made in Kalmykia was twenty years ago. Everything was difficult and no one wanted to tackle it. In 2013 I participated in the Berlinale Talent Campus. Something changed in my head. I suddenly believed in myself and became very strong. I saw a very clear road in front of me and I understood how I should move my idea forward. Perhaps it was because of certain people I was lucky enough to meet there, maybe because of everything I saw. When I came back, I was a different person. Later I met Lena Glikman, my wonderful producer, who simply believed in the story I wrote. Around that time, the topic apparently also became interesting for the Russian Ministry of Culture. The stars were aligned for my project. We got support and made this film.

Elza, the protagonist of your story, seems to be a deeply sad person. We sense that she's not happy with her life, her work, or her husband's family. The death of her husband doesn't make her sad; it on the contrary, it helps her to change her life. How did you develop this character?

Unfortunately, in Kalmykia there are numerous people unhappy with their job, their life, their wives, their husbands... and deep inside I am one of them. I fight with this every day. It's just a state of mind that might be absolutely independent from any real problem. It may sound surprising, but ninety per cent of the women who auditioned for the role of Elza told me it was their story. Every one of them wants to leave her husband but

does not leave him because there is nowhere to go and there is no one else to live with. Perhaps it is difficult for a European to understand, but in Kalmykia women generally put their hopes in men. A man will come and solve all your problems. So the most important thing for a woman is to marry. It is something in the genes, in the upbringing, perhaps... and I am the same, regardless of how I may discuss the subject. Perhaps Elza is myself, in a moment of my life.

Kalmykia is located in the European part of Russia. It's the only region where Buddhism is the dominant religion, as we also see in your film. What role did this fact play in the development of your film?

Yes, Buddhism is the main religion in Kalmykia. Our capital, Elista, has the largest Buddhist temple in Europe. Were it not for Buddhism, I would perhaps not have become a film director. Before entering a film school, I went to see a Lama and asked him whether I should try to pass the entrance examination this year or not. And he answered: do as you wish. I was a bit disappointed – I thought he would make a decision about my destiny for me. He just advised me to bring some tea before the divine service – this is a ritual to remove obstacles and open the road. I entrusted this to my grandmother and went away to try to get into film school. Four months later, I passed the examination. I called my grandmother to tell her the good news. She groaned and said, "Thank God. I am really tired of carrying the tea to the temple every day." She brought the tea in for four months. Anyone could pass the examination with such help.

You show what may be typical family structure of the region. If the father is no longer present, the eldest son takes care of the family. In the end, Elza goes with her husband's younger brother to her husband's wake. Is she going to marry him?

Yes. There are many families like this. In most cases, the eldest man in the family takes all the family's problems upon himself. Everyone obeys him. But he must live up to this status. He must prove that he deserves it. But in reality, all the most important decisions are taken by the mother or the grandmother. It's a kind of hidden matriarchy. Perhaps that is why they are so hard to please in their relations with daughters-in-law: you can entrust your family only to a person who is most reliable and loyal. I think Elza and Ulan themselves do not know their future. It's their destiny. Still, there is a possibility of marriage. Their ways of living and thinking are similar. In earlier times, Kalmyks practiced levirate marriage, where a widow was obliged to marry her husband's brother, and a widower his wife's sister. Now it seems strange; we became more European in that sense. It is easier to take a baby from a woman than to make a relative marry her.

We hear the grandmother singing a song during the youngest sister's engagement celebration. What song is she singing?

It is a song about the family, about the preservation of family and the way of life. It is a song of good wishes.

You show wide-angle shots of the foggy waterway scenery as well as images of the sparse landscape of the region. It appears in a way unspecific, nearly unreal. What was the visual concept behind it?

I wished to make a sensual picture, to grasp the spirit of this place, its atmosphere. But our most important reference was our protagonist, Evgeniya Mandzhieva. She inspired us with the

beauty of her soul. And we managed to convey it thanks to our cameraman Alexander Kuznetsov.

Is there a realistic background to the drug trafficking shown in the film?

Yes, it's quite real; the grass grows in every kitchen garden. But it's not interesting.

Interview: Gabriela Seidel-Hollaender, January 2015



Ella Manzheeva was born in 1981 in Elista, Republic of Kalmykia, Russia. She first studied violin at the music academy in Elista, then Sound Directing at the St Petersburg State University of Film and Television, and finally Directing at the High Courses for Scriptwriters and Film Directors in Moscow. Ella Manzheeva took part in the Berlinale Talent Campus in 2013. *Chaiki* is her first full-length feature film.

Films

2007: *Prazdnik/Holiday* (5 min.). 2008: *Chuzhaya. Step./Uninvited. Steppe.* (5 min.). 2009: *Zhenshina vnutri kak step/A Steppe Inside Her* (14 min.). 2015: *Chaiki / The Gulls.*