

# FILM FROM LATVIA

## FESTIVAL DE CANNES 2009

### Silence

**Short Film in Competition**

Directed by Laila Pakalniņa

Short feature, 2009, 14', Latvia

#### TECHNICAL INFORMATION

**Director** Laila Pakalniņa

**Screenplay** Laila Pakalniņa

**Cinematographer** Gints Bērziņš

**Production Designer** Jurgis Krāsons

**Sound** Anrijs Krenbergs

**Editor** Kaspar Kallas

**Producer** Laila Pakalniņa

**Main Cast** Guna Zariņa, Mirdza Ševele, Rūdolfs Hecers

**Original title** Klusums

**Format** 35 mm

**Screen Ratio** 1:1.85

**Colour** Colour

**Sound** Dolby Digital Surround EX

**Dialogue** Latvian

**Subtitles** English

#### PRODUCTION COMPANY

**Hargla Company**

Producer Laila Pakalniņa

Valtaiķu 19, Riga, LV 1029, Latvia

Tel.: +371 29235618

Fax: +371 67577686

## **DIRECTOR**

**Laila Pakalniņa**

**Features:** Silence (short)/ Stones (short) 2008 / Fire (short) 2007 / The Hostage 2006/ Water (short) 2006 / The Python 2003 / The Shoe 1998 / Anna's Christmas (short) 1992

**Documentaries:** Three Man and a Fish Pond 2008/ Theodore 2006 / Dream Land 2004 / The Bus 2004 / It'll Be Fine 2004/ Martins 2002 / Papa Gena 2001 / Wake up 2000 / The Oak 1997 / Ubans 1995 / The Mail 1995 / The Ferry 1994 / The Church 1993 / The Pilgrimage 1991 / The Linen 1991 / The Dome 1991 / The Choice 1990 / And 1988

## **FESTIVAL CONTACT**

Liga Miezite Jensen

Festival Coordinator

Tel.: +371 67358865

[liga.miezite@nfc.gov.lv](mailto:liga.miezite@nfc.gov.lv)

## **SYNOPSIS**

There should be silence in a museum. And someone should see to it that the silence is there. It's the logical order of things. However, it might seem weird to somebody.

## **DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

I wanted to make a film not for the mind but for the feelings of the spectator, therefore silence here, of course, has a greater meaning than words. Words – for the mind, silence – for the feelings.

Laila Pakalniņa

## **SILENCE**

By Dita Rietuma, daily *Diena*

Laila Pakalniņa's short film *Klusums* is one of five short films – *Ūdens* (Water), *Uguns* (Fire), *Akmeņi* (Stones) and *Gaiss* (Air) that are connected by the base elements idea as well as by the main character Marija, as portrayed by actress Guna Zariņa. In *Klusums*, Marija's visit to a museum – the space with silent paintings, sculptures and provocatively loud visitors – resembles Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and the contrasting sound and silence takes on a different, ironic meaning.

*Klusums* is the fourth completed short film, now only *Gaiss* remains in the concept stage,

and ideally these shorts about Marija should combine into a joint story. Laila Pakalniņa's visually elegant and refined style, where the logic of camera movement and the complicated *travellings* are often primary and dominant over classic narration principles and traditional character psychology, is recognizable in all of these films. In her short films, the director shapes the story as a coded system of imagery that at the same time balances on riddle, metaphor, and also on the dividing line of a joke.

In this series, Pakalniņa remains faithful to her principles: she eschews primitive narration and pedantic storytelling, and fragmentation, a hallmark of her full-length features, acquires an even greater significance. The viewer is forced to edit the films himself, to find the square root of meaning in the events. "Playing with misunderstandings" is how the director defines the technique, used in shorts and other films, whereby the viewer is provoked into shaking off the clichés of perception and abandoning himself to Pakalniņa's games.

Each of the *base elements* cycle of short films has also individually received international recognition – *Ūdens* was in the shorts competition at the 2006 *Berlinale*, in 2008 *Uguns* was nominated for best European short film award by the European Film Academy, *Akmeņi* was in the Locarno film festival's official programme, and *Klusums* is selected for the Cannes short film competition. This is the director's return to the Cannes official programme after an eleven-year pause – in 1998, her film *Kurpe* (The Shoe) was part of the *Un Certain Regard* section, and in 1996, two of her documentary films, *Prāmis* (The Ferry) and *Pasts* (The Mail), were screened in the same section.

### **Playing with Misunderstandings**

By Dita Rietuma, daily *Diena*

Laila Pakalniņa (1962) is the most internationally renowned Latvian film director, whose works—both documentary and feature productions—have been screened at the world's biggest film festivals, including Cannes, Venice, Berlin, and Locarno.

Pakalniņa has a background in documentary film—she studied documentary film direction at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (V.G.I.K.), in Moscow—yet her documentaries do not conform to the traditional conventions of the genre, such as heated, journalistic studies of socially or politically engaged issues. Rather, they are fragile observations, pedantically meticulous documentations of environments and people that strive to stop time and to peer into the most hidden depths of a particular phenomenon or person.

Pakalniņa has worked in both documentaries and feature films, yet she has discovered her own distinctive and unique territory, space, and style in each of these cinematic genres. In Pakalniņa's works, the narration—the film's "story"—is purposely dissolved into the fragmentary nature and visual poetics of the events. Here, the tragic coexists with the comic, the domestic with the poetic, and what is kept silent is often more meaningful than that which is formulated in words. It therefore comes as no surprise that one of the characteristic features of Pakalniņa's films is an ornately fashioned sound, which creates a whole new dimension. The director uses a musical score only in exceptional cases, instead, her film music is created by the sounds of daily life—the sound of reality.

Before studying documentary film direction, Pakalniņa worked as a TV journalist. Her earliest works—her first documentaries—still exhibit some of the traditional features of the documentary genre; often they were politically engaged documents resonant with the zeitgeist of the late eighties and early nineties, when Latvia was on the brink of regaining independence. But in the mid-nineties, her documentary film trilogy, *Veļa* (The Linen), *Prāmis* (The Ferry), and *Pasts* (The Mail), introduced an absolutely different aesthetic—the director's own unique style and vision.

In *Veļa* (1991), Pakalniņa and her director of photography Gints Bērziņš, a former classmate with whom she has collaborated on many films, first offered their documentary model. The work is a "silent" film, where words aren't essential; far more significant is the materiality created by sound—the world of sound, which in Pakalniņa's subsequent films will become just as important as the aestheticized frame compositions and a desire to find a "still life" anywhere, even in run-down suburbs or small towns, neighbourhoods of old wooden houses or other seemingly unappealing details. These principles dominated Pakalniņa's films throughout the nineties, including her formal experiments, such as *Ozols* (The Oak), from 1997, and *Papa Gena* (2001), a variation on the theme of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, made for the Venice Biennale.

Pakalniņa's feature-film debut was 1998's *Kurpe* (The Shoe)—a poetic and ironic look at Soviet reality, set in the 1950s in the director's hometown of Liepāja. The plot is marked by intrigue: three Soviet border guards have the task of finding the supposed border-crosser whose shoeprint in the freshly raked beach sand has raised quite an alarm in the local garrison. The film, a take on the classic fairytale *Cinderella*, gradually assumes a surrealist, absurd tone. In *Kurpe*, Pakalniņa created her own distinctive feature-film formula: carefully selected frame compositions and complex, drawn-out, cinematographically virtuoso scenes in which the director pays even more attention to texture, atmosphere, and the seeming flow of time than she does to her actors, who are just one of the components in Pakalniņa's refined formal games.

After *Kurpe* debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998, the French newspaper *Libération* entitled the film's review "Cinderella in Latvia": "Every day, the shoe found in the freshly raked sand wreaks havoc on the entire garrison. But instead of setting in motion a spy film in the style of Carol Reed, the shoe brings about a string of events in this sunny border town. The contrast between the mayhem and cursing at the beginning of the film, and the absolutely pointless searching and unmotivated use of force later on, creates the film's true humour.

The film was made with delicate touches. For instance, the depiction of passive resistance to the Soviet occupation - the residents' consistent refusal to answer the soldiers' questions - is a rare phenomenon. There's something of Jacques Tati in these pedantic shots and sounds. But sometimes Pakalniņa is even more of a stylist. We hear music behind a door, various noises...but as soon as the door is opened, we see the apartment's inhabitants frozen in place, as if they were posing for an old-fashioned photograph."

In *Kurpe*, Pakalniņa continued to employ her "special pauses" - events that begin after the action has ended, giving practically every scene a distinctive aftertaste and post-sonic "space." The characters leave the shot, but the camera and sound continue to roll; Pakalniņa takes her actors out of the frame, but the camera continues to record a landscape or city wall - the almost tangible textures of time.

In the years that followed *Kurpe*, Pakalniņa continued to cultivate her own unique cinematic style, both in documentaries and in features. Her second feature film, *Pitons* (The Python, 2003), is also based on the intrigue of a "search." In *Pitons*, as in *Kurpe*, there is no essential reason for the intrigue (for instance, whether or not the border-crosser will ever be found); the film's "search" merely escalates into absurdity. In *Pitons*, the characters search for a snake that has escaped from an exotic photo session and found its way into a school. The school becomes a colourful playground for the director's imagination; it is also a miniature model of a totalitarian world, where everything is dictated by the school's domineering principal, whose "order" has been thrown into disarray by the escaped python. In this film as well, the director provokes her audience with long, complex shots, accenting seemingly insignificant details instead of filming psychological close-ups of the protagonists. Pakalniņa consciously chooses to play a game of "hide and seek" with her viewers. These provocations - the director's refined visuality and sonic space that creates another "parallel reality" - have become stable features of Pakalniņa's films. In *Pitons*, the director's tone becomes even more ironic as her black humour thickens.

Pakalniņa's third full-length feature, *Kīlnieks* (The Hostage, 2006), continues this tragicomic, absurd tone, offering a seemingly unreal situation: At Riga's tiny airport, a terrorist has

hijacked an airplane and taken a hostage, and the city and the entire country get involved in putting an end to the emergency. Here Pakalniņa has chosen a very delicate and risky theme - the hijacking of an airplane - that essentially becomes a litmus test for Latvia's values and national character traits. Almost all of Latvia's clichéd national symbols, from the Song Festival choir to chocolate, are brought before the hijacker in an attempt to satisfy his desires. Pakalniņa does everything she can to overturn her audience's preconceptions about how the plot should develop in this "film about a hijacked airplane" - just as she did in her "film about a border-crosser" and her "film about a school". *Ķīlnieks* is not by any means an action movie, though there is more than enough lively, absurd action. Rather, it is a tragicomedy, where the director is fundamentally interested in letting a seemingly realistic extreme situation develop into the logic of an absurd comedy.

After *Pitons*, Pakalniņa began working on a series of short films, which, following the completion of the fifth short, will be combined into a full-length feature. The series consists of five novellas, entitled *Ūdens* (Water), *Uguns* (Fire), *Akmeņi* (Stones), *Klusums* (Silence), and *Gaiss* (Air).

In recent years, alongside her work on the short-film series, Pakalniņa has sought and discovered new territories. This has resulted in the film that seems to be most atypical of her style, *Leiputrija* (Dream Land, 2004), where the human world and the animal world - or, more precisely, animals and the mountains of garbage created by civilization - are placed alongside one another. The action in this documentary takes place in the "civilization of trash": the dump. *Leiputrija* marks a new direction in Pakalniņa's oeuvre; it is also her first work with the nature fanatic and filmmaker Māris Maskalāns, who is the film's director of photography and co-director. Their collaboration has given rise to a seductively beautiful story about an absolutely foreign world, a universe unto itself, where the layers of trash created by human beings is populated and used by... animals.

The film *Par dzimtenīti* (Three Men and a Fish Pond), which was screened at the Locarno Festival 2008, was also created with Māris Maskalāns. Once again the filmmakers play their trump cards: Maskalāns's incredible documentation of the environment and animals, his shots and close-ups of life in the animal world, have been edited by Pakalniņa, who compares and contrasts them with the human world. This time, civilization is represented by three men who live by a fishpond in Latgale, the most economically underdeveloped region of Latvia. Their daily work is tied to this specific corner of nature, where they look after the fishpond and study birds. The parallels and contrasts between events, the poetry of the animal world, and the vital and sometimes brutal events in the daily lives of the characters will open up a whole new world for the careful viewer.

Pakalniņa's creative partnership with Māris Maskalāns has certainly expanded the cinematic

space of her films. Animals now take their place as important characters in Pakalniņa's work, alongside the flow and textures of time, and the people who appear in this space. In their own way, animals have become an "ideal world" in the director's value system. But humans still have a chance too: one of Pakalniņa's latest documentary films, *Teodors* (2006), is a portrait of an old man living in a seaside village, captured in the flow of time. He has spent the last years of his life sitting on a bench at a bus stop, simply watching what goes on around him.