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New Orleans filmmaker hopes 'A Non-Fictional War' keeps the spotlight on Ukraine's struggles

'I was not surprised when the invasion happened, but I'm still surprised that all of the West hasn't done enough to stop this monster, Putin.'

BY LESLIE CARDÉ | Contributing writer

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New Orleans actors Casey Groves and Erin Cessna portray the real-life couple struggling to deal with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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PROVIDED PHOTO

The silence of the morning was broken by the shrill sound of air-raid sirens as Ukrainian Oleksandra Basko wrote in her diary during the early days of bombings in her homeland.

It is through these diaries that director Natasha O. Ramer adapted the story of one couple's survival through relentless attacks by Russia as told in her production, "A Non-Fictional War."

Ramer herself was born in Kazakhstan, formerly part of the Soviet Union, but moved to Ukraine when she was only a year old. Eventually, she studied theater as a student at the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts in Moscow, met her husband later in Lithuania, and after he moved to the U.S. to teach first at Berkeley, then Yale, joined him in New Haven, where they raised their child.

The marriage didn't last, but she connected later with a past friend from Moscow, who was teaching at Tulane University. Eventually, Ramer moved to New Orleans, where she started her theater production company and married Tulane's Russian history professor, Sam Ramer.

Her company, "Moscow Nights," engages in productions which bring Russian and Eastern European culture to the United States. But it is the story of the invasion of the country she called home as a child that has elevated her work to a level that has garnered many film festival awards across the world for "A Non-Fictional War."

'He wants to destroy the land and our culture'

She often doesn't recognize the Moscow where she was a student, back in the days when Nikita Khrushchev was the country's leader. With Putin now making decisions, she fears he will never stop bombing Ukraine until it's too late.



Natasha O. Ramer

"He wants to destroy the land and our culture," said Ramer. "I was not surprised when the invasion happened, but I'm still surprised that all of the West hasn't done enough to stop this monster, Putin.

"We are all human beings. If there's a fire on the block next to you, you would rush in to help people, simply as another human being would help anyone. Putin is a coward, a bandit, and a bully, and if you let him treat people like this, he will continue.

"Putin only understands power and strength against his imperialism. This is about normal humanity, and protecting those who are merely trying to exist."

The film, with Murrell White Jr. as executive producer, was initially a theatrical production that premiered at Tulane University.

But putting it on film meant getting grants to pay for the shooting and the post-production editing. Local and national entities like the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, National Endowment for the Arts, New Orleans Theatre Association, Jewish Endowment Foundation of Louisiana, South Arts, and Gulf Coast Bank stepped up to make Ramer's dream of garnering a larger audience a reality.



PROVIDED PHOTO

Now on the festival circuit, in 2024 the film won awards for best film, best director, and best actors in festivals from Barcelona and London to Melbourne, Edinburgh, New York, Hollywood, Romania and beyond.

Stay and fight or leave to survive?

Two New Orleans actors, Erin Cessna as Sasha and Casey D. Groves as Slava, take us through the trials of the first six days of the wars as they ponder whether to leave their homeland to survive or stay and fight for their beloved country.

The script, taken from Oleksandra Basko's diary, delves into the psychological toll that the stress of survival takes on both the individual and on a marriage. It has resonated with audiences everywhere.

"We could never have achieved this level of success without the creativity and expertise of our cinematographer and post-production editor, Antony Sandoval, who teaches at Tulane University," Ramer said.

“Together, we were able to meticulously craft every scene to evoke not just the essence of the film but also a vibrant spectrum of sound, color and the distinctive special effects that define experimental cinema.”

“A Non-Fictional War” is interspersed with real footage of the seizing of Chernobyl, site of the country’s largest nuclear reactor, as well as the early bombings on the outskirts of Kiev.

The terror has been real

For the real-life Oleksandra Basko, a 30-year old who actually lives in Vinnytsia, Ukraine, about 125 miles southwest of Kiev, the terror has been real.

Her city has been routinely bombed, albeit not into oblivion like Mariupol, and other cities to the south and east of the capital. However, the threat is ever-present. Just last weekend, Russia sent drones and missiles into Kiev, doing major structural damage and killing three people.

“It’s been nearly three years of relentless bombing, and I don’t want people to forget about Ukraine,” Ramer said. “My dream is to get distribution of this film so we can show this on television to a much wider audience than one gets at film festivals. In the meantime, we are lined up for more festivals across the world in 2025.”

Basko, a doula in her city who brings babies into the world, is hopeful that eventually death will not be a part of everyday life.

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