

CROSSING

A FILM BY LEVAN AKIN

 74 Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Panorama
Opening Film



LOGLINE

Lia, a retired teacher living in Georgia, made a promise to find her long lost niece Tekla. The search takes her to Istanbul, a beautiful city that seems full of connections and possibilities. There she meets Evrim, a lawyer fighting for trans rights, and Tekla starts to feel closer than ever...

SYNOPSIS



Lia, a retired teacher living in Georgia, made a promise to find out what happened to her long lost niece Tekla. When Lia learns from Achi, a neighbor, that Tekla might be living in Turkey, they set off together to find her. In Istanbul they discover a beautiful city full of connections and possibilities - but looking for someone who never intended to be found is harder than they thought. Until they meet Evrim, a lawyer fighting for trans rights. As Lia and Achi weave their way through the city's backstreets, Tekla starts to feel closer than ever.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

With *Crossing* I set out to make a film about solidarity and finding the small gestures of kindness and understanding between strangers and family alike. I also wanted to show rooms and places that are rarely explored in stories from the region.

The film is based on a true story I was told whilst researching *And Then We Danced*, about a grandmother traveling from Georgia to Turkey in search of her trans granddaughter. Just like with my previous film, making *Crossing* was very challenging. The existence of LGBTQ+ people in Georgia and Turkey is under large pressure and Turkey's president Erdogan ran most of his recent presidential campaign around anti-LGBTQ+ rhetorics.

In my film we follow retired schoolteacher Lia who is looking to fulfill her recently deceased sister's dying wish – to find her lost trans daughter, Tekla. Together with a down on his luck young man, Achi, who claims to have Tekla's address in Istanbul, she travels from Georgia to Turkey to find her niece. Lia and Achi are from different generations and as such don't have much in common even though they live in the same country. There is a great divide of ideology in Georgia between the Soviet and the post-Soviet generation. Achi desperately wants to leave Georgia as he lives under the oppressive rule of his older brother and he knows there is no future in Georgia for his young western leaning generation.

As the journey unravels, so does Lia. Through her relationship to Achi and her encounters with the trans community in Istanbul, specifically with Evrim (a trans woman who works as a lawyer for an NGO in Istanbul), Lia begins to open up and see the world and her place in it differently. All three main characters have made great sacrifices in limiting their lives and inhibitions in order to not upset the ruling hegemony.

I myself am Georgian born in Sweden (my ancestry is from Batumi), and I have ties to Turkey (both my parents were born there). The journey from Batumi in Georgia, along the Black Sea to Istanbul is a journey I have taken many times myself as a child. I am a mix of many cultures, traditions and norms and the themes of modernity versus tradition are very personal and something I have struggled with myself. I drew a lot from my own experiences, asking myself if my grandparents were living today, would they accept me for who I am? Probably not - but in showing these examples of acceptance I hope to inspire new ways forward.

INTERVIEW WITH LEVAN AKIN

You mentioned that *Crossing* is based on a true story, can you tell us about the origins and inspirations for the script?

The film is very loosely based on a story I heard while researching. I met the grandfather of a trans girl who stood by her side and supported her, even when her other family did not. The idea that a Georgian person in their 70s would be more accepting of their trans granddaughter than her own parents in their 40s really made me consider my own prejudices. When my previous film *And Then We Danced* premiered in Georgia it was met by fierce demonstrations and violence. Even the parents of people that had been involved in making the film watched the film with prejudice. This is purely anecdotal but one team member told me that after their parents had seen the film, they expressed remorse at having been so anti 'LGBTQI+'. The film had changed their minds. Tying back to the grandfather and his granddaughter, I thought that it would be very interesting to show this intergenerational gap and how it can be overlapped. I wanted to explore this, and funnily this was also explored while shooting the film as we employed people from the local queer community behind the camera and our lead actress Mzia Arabuli who is 72 years had never encountered trans people prior to the shoot and she developed many new and deep relationships with the community. I wrote the film mostly while doing research in Istanbul. I met with NGO's in both Istanbul and Ankara and the Turkish characters in the film grew out of this research. I wanted the film to feel like Istanbul feels to me. Full of possibilities, exciting and alive.

What do you think *Crossing* says about family?

To me, the themes of youth and age reverberate throughout all my films. If *And Then We Danced* was a sort of farewell to youth in a way this film asks the question of how you keep living when you have nothing to live for anymore, as is how Lia describes her life. We don't choose the families we are born into, but perhaps we can choose people that become like family in our lives. Lia, Achi, Tekla and Evrim as well as the street busking children Izzet and Gulpembe are all outcasts in very different ways. But they all find context in each other. Finding Tekla is sort of the last thing Lia needs to do in her life - then she will be done. In searching for Tekla, and through walking in Tekla's footsteps, even meeting Tekla's neighbors and friends, Lia slowly gets a new perspective and a new life. This is Tekla's gift to her beloved aunt Lia. Kinship from a queer context has always filled a very important function. It has in many ways been the only way for a lot of queer people to create a safe space with one another. Also family members of queer people, or in the case of *Crossing* - family members of a trans child have also felt ostracized and have had to cut their child off from the family in order to not upset the hegemony.

***Crossing* is full of characters in transit, looking for a new life or running from an old one. What made you use Istanbul as this point of axis?**

Istanbul is a place where one can disappear - if that's what one wishes. It's easy to run away to Istanbul. It is also a place where all kinds of people and circumstances exist, so it's easy to find a space of acceptance there. Despite general impressions that we get from the media here in Western Europe, I would not say that Istanbul has a specifically anti-LGBTQI+ stance in itself - on the contrary, the electorate of Istanbul which is not ruled by AKP is quite LGBTQI+ friendly. It is more a societal thing in Turkey as a whole, since it is very patriarchal. The thing with Istanbul is that it is a place where in very short distance you can find polar opposite worlds. One street is very religious, and if you walk down two streets it is suddenly a queer haven, where men walk holding hands. I wanted to portray this dichotomy in the film. When Lia and Achi are walking to the trans-neighborhood in the film the short distance that they walk is actually the distance in reality. Everyone lives on top of each other in Istanbul, all kinds of religions, people and not to forget the cats and dogs. This film is in many ways also a love letter to Istanbul. To the history of the city, I spent many summers there as a child and I adore Turkish music. I am so glad I was able to shoot a film and capture this ever changing city.

INTERVIEW WITH LEVAN AKIN

Mzia Arabuli embodies the character of Lia in a very interesting way, stoic yet emotional, is driven, but gives nothing away. Can you tell us about the character of Lia?

Lia is a woman that feels like she has nothing to live for and therefore nothing to lose anymore. She has promised her sister to find her child and this is what she sets out to do. She does not have time or patience for any shenanigans. I wanted to portray a person that slowly invites life back in. And I also wanted to portray the act of self-forgiveness. Tekla is a catalyst for this. I wanted Lia to give zero shits, she is a woman that has kept a lot of things bottled up. She never wanted to get married as she could never subjugate herself to a man. She spent her years as a teacher which she, in many ways, loved but she also felt deeply unappreciated in her profession. The last 5 years she spent taking care of her sick sister. Lia and Tekla were very close. Both being outside the norm in different ways. I had a very clear idea of who I wanted Lia to be and Mzia embodied her perfectly, her tough demeanor hides a very soft core, plus Mzia has a great sense of humor which I adore. She reminds me in many ways of the great Anna Magnani!

The character of Evrim is the film's hero in a way. She has the most positive and aspirational character. Was this always your intention for the script ?

The plight of anyone being outside of the norm is difficult all over the world. Even more so now. I wanted to show someone with a lust for life even in adversity. I wanted to show small gestures of solidarity between people. Evrim is based on an amalgam of many trans women that I met in Turkey. What struck me with these women was their confidence to keep going, to keep pushing and not allowing themselves to be shut down. I wanted her character to tackle hardship head on.

***Crossing* offers us a glimpse into the lives of Trans people living in Istanbul. Can you tell us a little about finding this community and shooting with them? Especially in the light of Erdogan's continued anti LGBTQI+ campaigning.**

I did research and met with many from the community in Istanbul and Ankara. It was not without its challenges. I spent many months in Istanbul, some people had to be very discreet and at times, I had to meet with people from the authorities, like the police station in the film is the actual police station where they take children after they've been arrested. So we had to get permission while also interviewing the police. To my surprise (or luck), the policeman I spoke to loved cinema and TV and had seen some of my work so he agreed to help us. (The police in Istanbul are not an ally of the LGBTQI+ community).

You're based in Sweden, but your family is originally from Georgia, which is where *And Then We Danced* Was Set. In this new movie, the film is set in both Georgia and Turkey. Can you talk about your experience as an international filmmaker, and what interests you in making films that cross national borders?

Growing up I had close family in Turkey as there are many Georgians that have been living there for generations. I used to spend the summers with my grandparents in Istanbul as well as in Batumi and Tbilisi. The journey on the bus along the Black Sea to Georgia in the film is actually a trip I did countless times. In feeling the urge to tell this story I thought a lot about my grandmother and whether she would accept me or other LGBTQI+ members of our family.

INTERVIEW WITH LEVAN AKIN

***Crossing* carries an important message of acceptance and understanding. What are your hopes for the film on release?**

I hope it touches people and that it helps with intergenerational LGBTQI+ acceptance in the region and all over the world. But I also just hope people feel happy and hopeful when they see it. That they find a space of solidarity, which I feel is much needed in these times

LEVAN AKIN



WRITER / DIRECTOR

Levan Akin (b. 1979) is a Swedish filmmaker of Georgian descent. His work explores class, gender and sexuality. His body of work includes the critically acclaimed film *And Then We Danced*, which premiered at the Director's Fortnight in Cannes 2019 and was selected as Sweden's official entry for the Oscars. Akin has also made notable contributions to television, including the series *Real Humans* (adapted as *Humans* for AMC in the US and UK). Additionally, he served as a co-executive producer and director for AMC's highly regarded adaptation of *Interview With The Vampire* (2022). Akin's latest film, *Crossing*, is scheduled to premiere at Berlinale in 2024.

FILMOGRAPHY

2024 **CROSSING** | Director and Writer | Feature Fiction | French Quarter Film
2024 **INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE S2** | Director & Co-Executive Producer | TV-series | AMC
2022 **INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE** | Director (2 episodes) | TV-series | AMC
2021 **DEG / DOUGH** | Director and Writer | TV-series | SVT
2019 **AND THEN WE DANCED** | Director and Writer | Feature Fiction | French Quarter Film
2015 **CIRKELN / THE CIRCLE** | Director and Writer | Feature fiction | RMV Film
2012 **ÄKTA MÄNNISKOR / REAL HUMANS** | Director (4 episodes) | TV-series | SVT
2011 **ANNO 1790** | Director (3 episodes) | TV-series | SVT
2011 **KATINKAS KALAS / CERTAIN PEOPLE** | Director and Writer | Feature fiction | Filmlance
2009 **LIVET I FAGERVIK** | Director (3 episodes) | TV-series | SVT
2008 **DE SISTA SAKERNA** | Director and Writer | Short film

TOP CREDITS

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY
LEVAN AKIN

STARRING
MZIA ARABULI - LIA
LUCAS KANKAVA - ACHI
DENIZ DUMANL - EVRIM

PRODUCED BY
MATHILDE DEDYE

CO-PRODUCERS
KATJA ADOMEIT
NADIA TURINCEV
OMAR EL KADI
ERSAN ÇONGAR
NINO CHICHUA
ANNA KHAZARADZE
ANNA CRONEMAN
CHARLOTTA DENWARD

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
LUDVIG ANDERSSON
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LEVAN AKIN

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
LISABI FRIDELL

EDITOR
LEVAN AKIN
EMMA LAGRELIUS

SOUND DESIGNER
SIGRID DPA JENSEN
ANNE GRY FRIIS KRISTENSEN

PRODUCTION DESIGNER
ROGER ROSENBERG

COSTUME DESIGNER
LINN EKLUND

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THE SWEDISH ARTS GRANTS COMMITTEE

TECHNICAL DETAILS

TITLE
CROSSING

COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION
SWEDEN, DENMARK, FRANCE,
TURKEY, GEORGIA

RUNTIME
106 MINUTES

ASPECT RATIO
16:9 (1.77:1)

LANGUAGE
GEORGIAN, TURKISH

SOUND
5.1

YEAR OF PRODUCTION
2024

ASSETS



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