

FRIDTHJOF FILM PRESENTS  
A FILM BY ANDREAS DALSGAARD & OBAIDAH ZYTOON



# THE WAR SHOW



GIORNATE  
DEGLI AUTORI  
VENICE DAYS

OFFICIAL SELECTION

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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL 2016

DELEGATE PRODUCERS MIRIAM NORCAARD, ALAA HASSAN. SCREENPLAY OBAIDAH ZYTOON, ANDREAS DALSGAARD. WRITTEN IN COLLABORATION WITH SPENCER OSBERG, ALAA HASSAN ET AL. CINEMATOGRAPHERS OBAIDAH ZYTOON, DANA BAKODUNES, LARS SKJEE ET AL.  
EDITOR ADAM NYELSEN. SOUND DESIGN OELI HÖNIGER. COMPOSER COEN STETSON. PRODUCERS RONNIE FRIDTHJOF, DAVID Ø. SØRENSEN. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS RONNIE FRIDTHJOF, MIRIAM NORCAARD, JONAS BERCHALL, DAVID Ø. SØRENSEN.  
FINANCED BY THE FILM INSTITUTE OF DENMARK, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF NORWAY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SWEDEN, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF FINLAND, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF GERMANY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF POLAND, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF CZECH REPUBLIC, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SLOVAKIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF HUNGARY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF ROMANIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF BULGARIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF GREECE, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF ITALY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SPAIN, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF PORTUGAL, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF FRANCE, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF UNITED KINGDOM, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF IRELAND, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF NETHERLANDS, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF BELGIUM, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF LUXEMBOURG, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF AUSTRIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SWITZERLAND, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF ITALY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF GERMANY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF POLAND, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF CZECH REPUBLIC, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SLOVAKIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF HUNGARY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF ROMANIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF BULGARIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF GREECE, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF ITALY, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SPAIN, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF PORTUGAL, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF FRANCE, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF UNITED KINGDOM, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF IRELAND, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF NETHERLANDS, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF BELGIUM, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF LUXEMBOURG, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF AUSTRIA, THE FILM INSTITUTE OF SWITZERLAND.

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# SYN- OPSIS

In March 2011, radio host Obaidah Zytoon and friends join the street protests against the oppressive regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Knowing the Arab Spring will forever change their country, this group of artists and activists begin filming their lives and the events around them. But as the regime's violent response spirals the country into a bloody civil war, their hopes for a better future are tested by violence, imprisonment and death. Obaidah leaves Damascus and journeys around the country, from her hometown of Zabadani, to the center of the rebellion in Homs, to northern Syria where she witnesses the rise of extremism. A deeply personal road movie, *The War Show* captures the fate of Syria through the intimate lens of a small circle of friends.

*The War Show* is based on footage gathered by Obaidah while she lived in Syria and took part in the uprising. Some she shot herself, some was shot by friends. As we studied this footage together, it became obvious that it contained moments of immense power. But the collection had a very fragmented nature. How to tell a coherent story that wouldn't jeopardize these moments for the sake of dramatic storytelling became our challenge. The movie is told in chapters to give the story an open-ended postcard quality. To let the audience explore the scenes on their own. We don't connect all the dots, but let the audience do it.

When we challenged the form of storytelling, a complex reality emerged that in our mind shows a much more human perspective on Syria and war itself. The movie is not obsessed with the creation of a "well-told" narrative. Instead it challenges each moment and the interpretation that it contains. How did these events really happen? What is the role of the camera? How do people act towards the camera? What is the construction of self and society that plays out in front of our eyes?

The construction of *The War Show* was based on hundreds of hours of

conversations. These conversations led to an analysis of every moment in the hundreds of hours of footage that was brought out of the country. From there followed a selection of the moments that would make it into the film. We wanted to tell a personal story about the fate of Obaidah and her friends, within the bigger context of the Syrian regime's oppression. Of the war crimes it has committed. And of the fate of millions of people that are today suffering from the events in Syria. Whether they are refugees in exile, or children and adults still struggling for survival inside the country. How do we come to grasp their sense of being in the world? How do we gain an understanding of the tragedy they all endure? And how do we avoid exploiting their fates for the sake of entertainment, and instead gain a deeper understanding of the situation itself?

There are many important things to be told about the Syrian conflict. We, as a world community, are only beginning to grasp its repercussions. To solve this crisis will take years. To analyze and learn from

this tragedy will take decades. No other conflict has been filmed as much, yet the truth continues to evade us. The role of the camera itself, as a key narrator of the events, but also as a tool that shapes reality itself, has yet to be analyzed in depth. There's a new reality emerging based on old patterns. The axis of extremism and terrorism and its connection to regimes like that of Assad's is under-reported. The regime's cynical game of exploiting terrorist networks to continue their corrupt and deeply criminal actions is not told. The global game of power played by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, US and Turkey, has turned Syrian soil into a proxy-war battlefield. The war is being fought by many more than just Syrians. Yet the Syrian people's desire for self-determination that led to the uprising in 2011 is not gone. This film can show what happened on the ground and in people's minds. The horror of terrorism in Syria and in the larger world today is a deeply human tragedy, which can be explained and must be understood. It could have been different if the international will had been there.

The truth hides in the details. By studying each detail thoroughly and truthfully, we strongly believe that a more complete picture emerges. This is important. It is not for the sake of entertainment, but in the interest of writing history. We wanted to leave a document to the world which will have real value in years to come.



# PRODUCTION NOTES

Obaidah had lived outside of Syria for a little more than a year when the development of *The War Show* began. Obaidah was living in Antakya, Turkey, where she guarded numerous hard drives with footage that she and her friends had collected in Syria between 2011 and 2013. This footage was a treasure of personal memories, interviews, demonstrations and frontline images. The footage also carried a huge responsibility. Many people had been killed since being filmed, and this footage represented their lasting words to this world. Others were still alive, and this footage could put them at risk.

Obaidah, producer Alaa Hasan, and co-writer Spencer Osberg started talks with the producer Miriam Nørgaard about how to develop the movie. Andreas Dalsgaard then joined the team and they met in Antakya, close to the Syrian border. Based on this meeting Andreas started a writing process to see if it was possible to tell the story safely. This, while still addressing issues crucial to understanding Syria today – political violence, forced disappearance, displacement, sieges, extremism, media coverage of the war and migration.

Security has been a paramount concern of this production, to ensure that those appearing in the footage and their families would not be put at further risk, from either the Syrian regime or opposition groups. This included securing the consent of characters who appear in the footage – and in the case of Obaidah’s friends who have died, securing the consent of their remaining family – and blurring out the identities of those who could be put at risk. Obaidah has shown immense courage by sharing this footage and telling her story. For someone who is not Syrian it is impossible to truly

fathom the horror that has befallen them and their country, or how Syrians still live with the war every day of their lives. Any film, regardless of how powerful, will never be able to portray this reality fully.

Andreas and members of the core team made numerous trips to Antakya during 2015 to create the foundations of the production. Andreas and Obaidah watched hundreds of hours of footage together and Andreas developed hundreds of pages of notes from interviews with Obaidah. This type of immersive



listening built trust and common vision. Based on this work Andreas developed a script, which became the foundation upon which the narrative and structure were built. It created a bridge across which both Eastern and Western perspectives could travel and be translated.

The consultation process alone lasted eight months before it was decided between the producers and directors that they were ready to begin post-production of *The War Show*.

Obaidah's footage was translated and editor Adam Nielsen joined the team. He spent weeks becoming acquainted with the material, and in the six months following him and Andreas produced numerous structures for the footage as we gradually closed in on the final narrative of the movie. Obaidah joined the process a couple months into the editing, and would continuously comment and take part in the editing, as did producer Alaa Hasan. This was not an easy process. Creating this story and revisiting the footage forced

Obaidah to undergo constant grief in which the rest of the team was vicariously immersed. However we all saw how our film could bridge the human divide, project the voices of the oppressed, and help relight empathy in a world that has grown inured to Syrian suffering.

For the last three weeks before film lock, the process moved from the studio to the home of Miriam, who stepped into the editing role as we did rewrites of the voice over. Composer Colin Stetson joined as composer, as Obaidah had heard Colin's previous works and experienced a strong connection to his work. Colin composed and produced a score that threads together the emotional fabric of *the War Show*. Finally, we moved into approval of the film with the cast and from here into the final mix, and sound editing in Finland.

This film would also not have been possible without the community of Syrian artists, activists and writers who have supported it, a dedicated production team, supporting financiers and many other individuals and organizations around the planet.





# THE WAR



LOCATION  
**SYRIA**

LANGUAGE  
**SYRIAN**

GENRE  
**DOCUMENTARY**

SHOOTING  
**2011-2015**

RELEASE DATE  
**2016**

DURATION  
**100 MIN**

DIRECTORS  
**ANDREAS DALSGAARD  
& OBAIDAH ZYTOON**

OFFICIAL SITE  
**[WWW.THEWARSHOW.COM](http://WWW.THEWARSHOW.COM)**

# INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTORS

## WHAT IS "THE WAR SHOW" ABOUT?

OZ The main character is Syria, with the film about a group of friends, myself included, and what happened to us there. It is our private journey and our personal story. We had been together for a long time. We decided to go on a journey and traveled around the country (Syria) together – this journey brought a higher perspective to our friendship. The film captures different moments – almost like postcards during the uprising and beginning of the war, and up until now. We meet a lot of different groups in the film and it is definitely a unique view into what actually happened inside Syria and what is still happening. These moments felt exceptional while we experienced them and now it is like a treasure, because of what happened to us... It is a huge thing for us.

AD Once you have seen the film, I believe you get a whole other understanding of the war in Syria. The film is not told from a political angle, but from an angle of friendship. It shows in a very human way why things went so wrong. This group of friends is very easy to identify with. I have Danish friends who are very similar to the characters in the film. These Syrian friends are just like any other collection of people within the artistic environment in, for

example, Europe or the US, and they don't fit into a Western stereotype of Muslims, but they do want to connect with the world and with each other. They find inspiration from everywhere – Jim Morrison, Sufi philosophy, ancient Greeks, Lebanese hip-hop, and much more. They don't strive for a 'Western culture', but they do admire some of the freedoms European states offer. They are very media savvy and highly critical of both Western and Middle Eastern media.



The media is constantly telling stories about this big group they label 'Muslims' that are very stereotypical – you have the radical Islamist, the woman fighting for freedom, the assimilated young man. All labels are defined by us, and media interest is too. It's close to the Bush doctrine of 'either you're with us, or you're against us', and it robs Muslims of the ability to define themselves more freely. Obaidah is a strong believer in Jihad, as the word contains a beautiful concept: 'To strive for good'. To be a martyr is to be someone who sacrifices their life for others. The way Western media uses these labels is wrong, and a word like 'Islamist' is both

misleading and offensive because it robs from the world community of Muslims the ability to be religious and not be labelled extremist. These labels matter a lot, and so does our use of words. Radical extremism is not the same as Islamism and we should differ.

The current media world is driven by clicks and ratings. This creates a death cult as a result, of who can deliver the most dramatic footage. The speed is so fast that there is not time to analyze or criticize sources or the validity of news coverage. When we see news footage from Syria it is almost always the most dramatic scenes – the battles that we are presented with. It is not only the Western media's need for drama that it feeds into, but a general need for drama that feeds into social media as well. It helps increase violence inside Syria. If you get attention in the media, this means more support in terms of money, foreign fighters and weapons. ISIS probably has one of the most clever media campaigns of





our time, one that has brought tens of thousands of people together and has resulted in violence and terror.

Our film criticizes this phenomenon and it offers a different way of seeing, which is focused on the moments in between the battles and on the encounters between people that somehow are all affected. Oby and her friends represents that large group of Syrians we rarely get to see in the media. They are spiritual people and, just like others all over the world, they are enjoying, searching and exploring life while trying to understand the events that happen around them.

OZ I did radio for seven years in Syria and this is my fifth war I have experienced in the region. I felt changes were coming. We all felt that the film would be a good way to document this change by following this group of friends – almost like a reality show, in the sense that this is their experience during those years. But

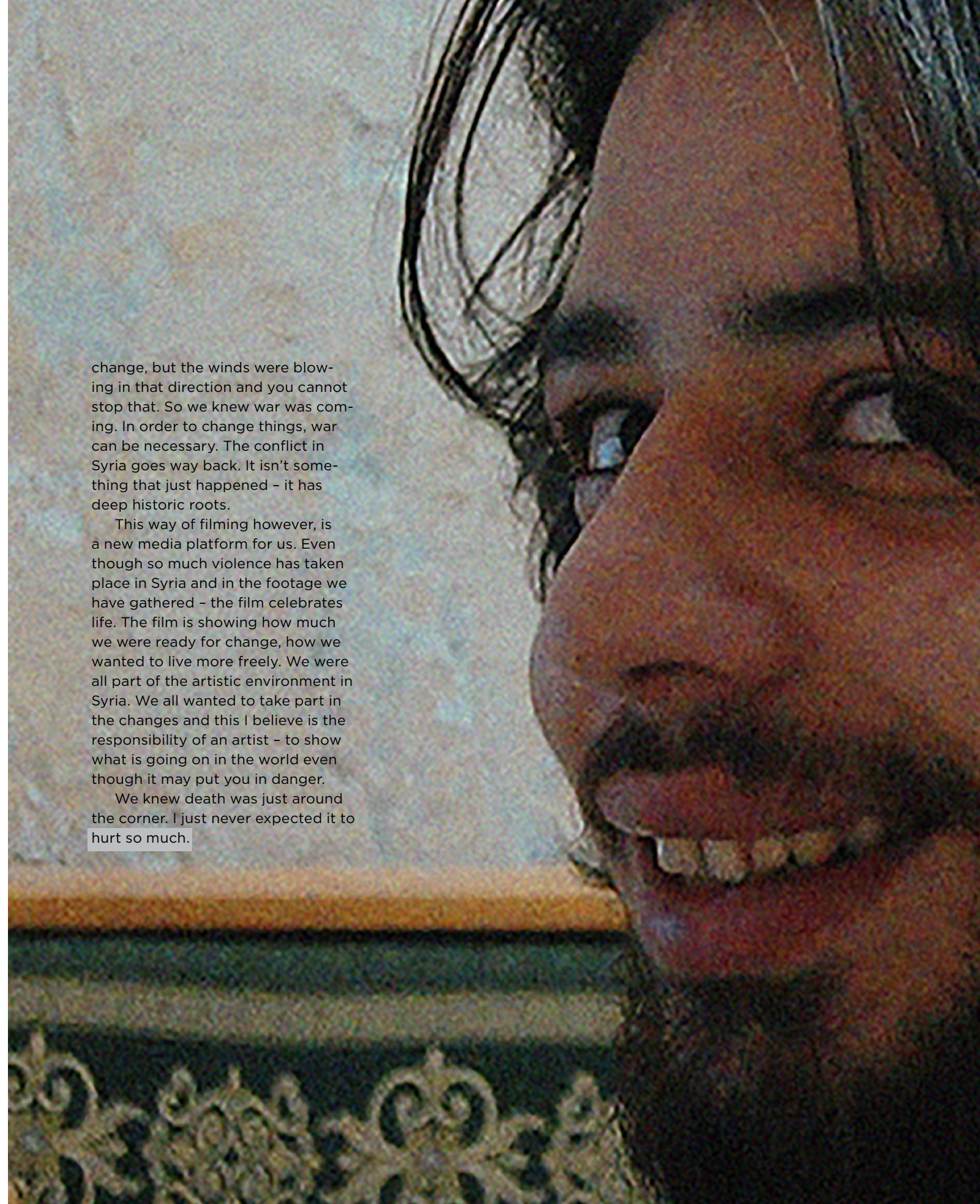
the difference is this is not a staged reality – this is the truth. This is what happened to us... So the film may not show the whole picture, but it documents a slice of the truth that represents hundreds of thousands of people.

The film is a streaming of the war crimes that are taking place in Syria. Our dictator didn't want the

change, but the winds were blowing in that direction and you cannot stop that. So we knew war was coming. In order to change things, war can be necessary. The conflict in Syria goes way back. It isn't something that just happened – it has deep historic roots.

This way of filming however, is a new media platform for us. Even though so much violence has taken place in Syria and in the footage we have gathered – the film celebrates life. The film is showing how much we were ready for change, how we wanted to live more freely. We were all part of the artistic environment in Syria. We all wanted to take part in the changes and this I believe is the responsibility of an artist – to show what is going on in the world even though it may put you in danger.

We knew death was just around the corner. I just never expected it to hurt so much.





**YOU HAVE BEEN FILMING SINCE 2011. A LOT HAS HAPPENED IN THOSE FIVE YEARS. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAIN THINGS YOU DIDN'T SEE COMING?**

OZ Like I said - I never expected the pain. Even though we celebrated life, we also lived every day with the knowledge of death. Death was a factor in our lives every day and we talked a lot about it. When you live in a country like Syria with the Assad regime, you know that you could be the next one to lose your life or to be thrown in prison, being tortured and so forth. We wanted to celebrate life. And we felt that we could overcome anything. This wasn't true... When my friends started getting killed I

had no idea of the pain that I would feel.

The first time they showed me a picture of one of my very close friends, who is in the film, and who had been tortured to death by the Assad regime, I couldn't believe it. I was in shock. He died too early and there was nothing I could do. I couldn't change it. Then later on, many more followed, including my sister... You never get use to losing the people you love and know. Never.

Every day there are reports from Syria about people that I know who had disappeared or been killed. The not knowing part is the worst. So much money is being spent on people trying to get news about family members who have disappeared in Syrian prisons. They rarely do, but we got to see a lot of pictures of people that the Assad regime has killed. That is how we found out who had been murdered within our group.



We are survivors of perhaps one of the world's worst crimes against humanity ever and sadly I am expecting worse for Syrians. I don't believe in refugee camps as the only way for us to survive. There are many Assad people hiding between the refugees and Al Qaida. They are everywhere and people that are not in Syria still fear Assad. Also, every refugee is facing huge integration issues.

Whenever there is war and war crimes are taking place, the war must change the planet. I have lost my homeland but Syria is where Syrians are. We are Syria and we need to educate the world and travel the globe so we all learn from this. I

sometimes feel guilty that I am alive, but then I think that I am meant to tell others what happened. With this film I am meant to give people knowledge from the inside.

AD That the film is done together with Syrians, and that it's based on their own footage, is part of what makes this film strong. Its uniqueness comes from another place though.

It comes from the film's artistic soul, expressed in how we choose scenes, how we order them to build a narrative, how we use music, sound, emotion and style. A film is like a symphony and your way of orchestrating fragments of melodies into a work of art is key. The film itself is a unique creative meeting of Oby and myself, and also between a larger community of Syrian artists and a Danish production team of producer, editor and sound recordist. Including also



a Canadian composer and co-writer and Finnish sound designer. I have strived hard to find a common cinematic language that was powerful as a work of art and also felt true and honest to Oby and the characters. It has been a tough struggle to find the right shape for this film, where it wouldn't simplify reality for the sake of storytelling, and the film's unique shape, in chapters of a postcard-like quality, is one of the offsprings of this collaboration.

#### YES, HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THE FILM ANDREAS?

AD I was approached in early 2015 with this film, mainly to put the material shot by Oby and her friends together in a way that everyone in the film feels that this is their story. It meant a lot of interviewing and primarily listening on my behalf. I started developing a script and then the editing process began. It was very important to me to have Oby and her friends explaining to me what they saw in the footage. Sometimes I would not think that a particular scene was important and then Oby would explain the meaning and the importance of it to me. This also meant that the editing and narration process has been extremely long – from early September of 2015 up until now [August 2016].

#### OBY CAME TO DENMARK DURING THE EDITING PHASE. HOW WAS IT WORKING TOGETHER?

AD It was a huge advantage for the whole process of understanding the material that Oby came to Denmark. She could explain the scenes and analyze the Syrian state of being for me. I would find the cinematic language, structure the stories and select which ones to use. She is an experienced storyteller from radio and has a very poetic way of seeing the world and it reflects on her communication. She is very honest and believes in telling the story as true to reality as possible.

At the same time, we had to deal with all of the trauma that she has gone through, which obviously has been and still is extremely hard for her. In the beginning, there were things she couldn't talk about without breaking down crying. Now, slowly, she can tell the stories without crying. I believe in a way that us talking and talking and talking about what happened to her and her friends has been helpful in the healing process. But of course this is not something that one can forget just like that. Especially since new things are happening every day to the people that still live in Syria. But Oby is very strong and she has so much she wants the world to know, so she continues.

OZ Andreas has been very good at listening to what we went through. He has gone out of his way to understand it all. In the beginning it was

hard to find a mutual 'language' because of cultural differences and so forth. Also it is very precious material to me and I wanted to sort of tell the story more 'away from me', but Andreas wanted the audience to get to know me too, and I am glad that he got on board. He very quickly got into the characters because he did such a great work interview-wise.

#### WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISUNDERSTANDING IN THE WESTERN WORLD IN REGARDS TO THE CONFLICT AND WAR IN SYRIA?

OZ That it is about religion first and foremost. It is not. Religion is just the way to get people to follow. It is about money and it is a conflict that has roots way back in history. I feel sorry for Europe because I believe it is going to get worse. What we have seen so far in terms of terrorism is just the beginning. Any kind of liberal way of life is a target for others that don't agree with the liberal lifestyle that Europe represents. This violence will be even more spread out.

I hope people will seek knowledge and vote for the right politicians. Every time you place a vote in a political party that represents fascism, you are actually supporting extremism, so it is a big misunderstanding to place a vote on those parties if we want this all to stop. We have to start thinking that what we send out in the world is what will come back to us in the end.

AD The biggest misunderstanding is also that "nothing could be done". It is very clear to me after my own research that there were strong forces in the Syrian society – fairly moderate ones – that could have been given a lot more support. Us not intervening dealt the cards in Assad's favor. Therefore, I am hoping that we learn from this even though it is too late to change what has already happened.

OZ The reason why no one is doing anything to stop the war is a fear of confronting Russia and Iran. They are the ones making sure that Assad stays in power. A lot of times the Assad supporters will say: 'do you prefer ISIS to Assad?' But there are other ways to go than one or the other, and also ISIS was created to keep people in their place and to create fear. ISIS came from the outside. Al Qaida and the Assad regime came from the inside.



**HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE FOR SYRIA AND SYRIANS, INCLUDING YOURSELF, OBY?**

OZ I don't see this war ending. I fear the worst for Syrians so I am not hopeful in that sense. I think the world will be divided into two from now on. It already has been. And I don't think we will ever be able to go back. I want the world to open their eyes. Three-hundred thousand people are kept in prison in Syria or have disappeared. The world has to stand up and demand they be released and see to it that this is no longer happening.

In South Africa when apartheid was going on, things started to change when the people started standing up and a global action took place in terms of boycotts etc. People are dying in prisons from torture, but mainly from dehydration often due to lack of space and no food and water.

For myself – I want to put the film behind me and live in quietness for a while so I will get my creativity back. There are so many projects I wish to do.



**WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE FOR THE AUDIENCE TO TAKE WITH THEM, WHEN WATCHING THE FILM?**

AD I hope that people will recognize that we all share a big responsibility in terms of this huge crisis with refugees and war, and act on the fact that Syria is a horrible tragedy of historic proportions. But this responsibility is no bigger than it has been before in history. Look at World War II or the war in the former Yugoslavia.

I truly hope that the film will affect both politicians and everyday people in a sense that they will think about what they, and we, can do. I hope that the film will challenge our understanding of Syria, the refugee crisis and how radical extremism and media work in relation to violence and power. The struggle is not about Islam, but religion is used cynically by criminal gangs and politicians to gain power – the Assad family most notably.

OZ The film is not just for Europeans and Americans, it is also very much a film for Syrians. I know that we will get criticism for it as well, but I do believe that it is a 'slice' of our history – a 'slice' of Syrian history and of course an important document that tells the story of what happened to a group of friends that loved life and celebrated life.

I hope that the film can make outsiders understand why people are fleeing in small boats. I hope the film will bring people knowledge and that everyone will start checking the information that the media gives us. I believe it is important if we want to change the world. I am not too hopeful about the war coming to an end in Syria, but I hope it will. I will say this: I don't like it when the media victimizes us. Like, 'they killed our revolution'. No they didn't. The resistance is still there. It is living inside us as Syrians and it will never die.



# CHARACTERS

In order of appearance

## AMAL

Born in 1991 in Damascus, Amal was in her second year at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Damascus when the Syrian uprising began and she discontinued her studies. Before the uprising, she had a history of civil society activism and volunteerism, including working with literacy programs that helped underprivileged children to read. Amal is also a founding member of the Waw Al Wasel artist-activist collective.



## HOUSSAM

A brilliant designer and a student of architecture, Houssam, from Damascus, dedicated his life to the peaceful revolution in Syria, seeing it as his part in the global struggle against the systems of oppression and corruption. He was only 23 years old and was going to have his graduation exam the day he was arrested by Syrian Air Force Intelligence and tortured to death in May, 2013.



## LULU

Was born in Damascus in 1990 into a religiously conservative family. She had been studying law at the University of Damascus when the Syrian uprising began. Joining the protests helped fuel her own personal liberation of embracing feminist activism by removing her hijab. She fled the war in Syria in 2012 and spent three years in Jordan, before smuggling herself to Europe, and today lives in Germany.



## HISHAM

While his family was from Daraa, in Southern Syria, Hisham himself was born and raised in Kuwait in the late 1980s. He studied business management systems in university, had an eclectic taste in music, but the real center of his universe was love, with his unending adoration of his girlfriend Lulu being the source of both his greatest strength and weakness in life. Hisham disappeared in Damascus in 2012 and was found dead amongst the collection of images, called the Ceasar Report, which a former regime photographer smuggled out of Syria and published in 2014.



For security reasons we have changed the names of Lulu and Amal. Their real names are known to the production

## RABEA

A drummer in a band called “Ana” – meaning “I” in Arabic – while also a career costume designer for theatre and film, Rabea was born in Damascus in 1980, but spent much of his childhood in his father’s hometown of Zabadani. He believed in music as a form of artistic resistance to the oppression and ugliness of the Syrian regime. He was found shot through the neck in the trunk of his sister’s car in the spring of 2012. No one has ever been charged with his murder.



## ARGHA

Born in 1989 in Damascus, Argha studied dentistry at the International University of Science and Technology in Damascus, and is a futurist who believes technology will help humanity adapt to the earth’s changing climate. He was arrested by Syrian military in 2013 for avoiding conscription, and spent two years, two months and 20 days in prison before being released.



# BACKGROUND ON THE SYRIA WAR

The French authorities that set up the contours of modern Syria, following the end of World War I and the collapse of Ottoman control over the Middle East, did so with the explicit intention of creating an unstable state, pitting various sects, tribes and local powerbrokers against each other to ensure Syria remained dependent on French support for stability.

Following independence from France in 1945, Syria experienced more than two decades of regular military coups. These ended in 1970 when Hafez al-Assad, an officer from the minority Alawite sect who had risen through the ranks of the Syrian air force, seized control of the state. He and his Baath Party ruled for 30 years, suppressing all dissent through mass incarceration, torture and arbitrary execution. The 1982 Hama massacre – when the Syrian army killed between 10,000 and 40,000 people in the city to crush an uprising by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood – became symbolic of Hafez’s ruthlessness.

Hafez died in the year 2000 and passed the presidency to his son Bashar, who was initially welcomed as a reformer but within several years, despite some economic liberalization in Syria, had resumed

the repressive governance style of his father’s regime.

In March 2011, inspired by the “Arab Spring” uprisings sweeping the Middle East and North Africa, school children in the southern Syrian city of Daraa scrawled anti-Assad slogans on a wall. Security services arrested and tortured the children, and when the families and locals began protesting for their release, security services opened fire on them. The funeral marches for the dead protesters became protests against the regime themselves, spurring security services to fire on the crowd, creating more anger against the regime and more martyrs, whose funerals would become even bigger protests that the security forces again fired upon, creating a cycle that helped galvanize and propel the growing protest movement.

Through the spring of 2011 the protests spread across the country and by that summer soldiers that had defected from the Syrian Army had begun organizing an armed

opposition, dubbed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which generally held to a secular democratic doctrine. Numerous defected regime officials have reported that the Assad regime actively sought the Islamification of the armed opposition, to force the regime’s traditional support base – Alawites, Christians, Druze and other minority sects – to stay loyal out of fear for their own safety. To this end, by October 2011 the regime had released from its prisons hundreds of jihadist fighters, many of whom subsequently went on to lead Islamist militias. While initially only a small segment of the forces opposing Assad, the jihadists generally showed themselves more proficient on the battlefield against Syrian regime forces, which earned the jihadists credibility even among the secular opposition.

Many in the peaceful opposition and the FSA had counted on financial and military support from secular Western governments, in particular the implementation of a “no-fly zone” to prevent Assad

from bombing civilians in opposition-held residential areas. When such western support did not materialize, the secular elements of the opposition lost the initiative to the jihadists, who were better funded and armed, thus better able to protect the local population and provide services.

Jabhat al-Nusra (currently known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), the largest jihadist militia, eventually split, with many fighters joining the then-newly-formed “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” in 2013. While Syrian regime forces appeared to be losing ground through much of 2014, a major Russian military intervention on behalf of the regime, and increased military support from Iran and Hezbollah, has fundamentally changed the balance of power on the battlefield, such that today a military defeat for Assad seems unlikely.



# SYRIA TODAY

The Syrian Civil War is the most catastrophic humanitarian crisis of our era. The conflict has killed more than 400,000 people, wounded almost 2 million, and forced more than 11 million people to flee their homes – more than half Syria’s pre-war population. Of those who have fled their homes, 6.6 million are internally displaced, 4.8 million are refugees in neighboring countries, and another 1 million have fled to Europe.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, half a million Syrians have been held prisoner or “disappeared” since 2011, mostly in government prisons and security facilities where torture has become industrialized, with some 60,000 people having been tortured to death or died as a result of inhumane conditions. The Syrian army and allied forces – notably Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – regularly bomb hospitals in opposition areas and assassinate doctors and aid workers, indiscriminately bomb densely packed residential neighborhoods, schools, markets and public spaces. As of July 2016, pro-regime forces had surrounded and were besieging 18 different opposition areas in Syria, meaning some 600,000 people were being cut off from food, water, fuel, electricity and all other basic commodities – of these, some 300,000 are thought to be in the eastern portion of Aleppo city alone.

There are dozens of extremist religious militias opposing Assad – most notably the so-called “Islamic State” group and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly the Syrian

affiliate of Al Qaeda – that regularly kidnap, torture and execute civilians and prisoners, while sending car bombs and firing artillery into Syrian regime-control residential areas, indiscriminately kill civilians. Even many of the “moderate” armed opposition groups and Kurdish militias fighting in the country have been accused of war crimes.

As of 2016, dozens of governments – including from the United States, Britain, France, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, among many others – have spent billions of dollars either directly participating in the conflict or training, funding and arming different parties to the war. At the same time thousands of foreign nationals from dozens of countries have gone to Syria to fight with one or another side. Moving in the opposite direction, the Islamic State group is thought to have sent hundreds of operatives into Europe amongst the fleeing refugees, some of whom were responsible for terrorist attacks in Paris and in Brussels. Such attacks have helped spread fear and xenophobic sentiments across the Western world, created the impetus for the massive expansion of state surveillance of the citizenry and empowering once-fringe far right wing political parties.

At the end of 2014 the UN issued an appeal for \$8.4 billion in humanitarian funding related to Syria – its

largest ever request for funds related to a single crisis, up from \$6.5 billion requested in 2014; both years it received only half the funding needed. For 2016, the UN asked for \$3.2 billion to assist 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. As of July this year, pledges from the international community had amounted to \$850 million, or just 26% of the UN’s request for Syrians in need.

Internationally mediated negotiations to end the conflict have repeatedly collapsed, and although Syrian regime-affiliated forces have made significant gains in retaking territory from opposition groups in the past nine months, a decisive military victory is unlikely. On present course the conflict will continue, as will the death and human suffering, the refugee crisis, the globalization of terrorism and the erosion of democracy in the Western world.



In the first three chapters of *The War Show*, Obaidah Zytoon moves between the Syrian capital, Damascus, and Zabadani, her hometown, with the film beginning just before the uprising in March 2011, and the third chapter ending Christmas day that same year.

For many Syrians this period in Damascus represented an ideal manifestation of the protest movement, where the protests stayed peaceful and unarmed, even in the face of the brutal and bloody response of the Syrian regime. Today, in most of Damascus, the regime remains solidly in control and the peaceful protest movement has been crushed. While there are still pockets of armed resistance in Damascus and larger opposition-held areas on the city's outskirts, these neighborhoods have suffered years of siege and bombardment by regime forces.

For the revolutionaries, Zabadani, already well-known for its independent spirit, represented the first major urban area to escape the regime's control and be held by local forces. At the same time, Zabadani was also the first prominent example of massive weapons shipments being smuggled from outside the country into opposition areas. The Syrian army subjected Zabadani to intermittent sieges and attacks for three years, but in the summer of 2015 the city became the focus of a massive military operation by the Syrian army and air force, allied militias and Hezbollah. The battle lasted months, and ended with Zabadani heavily destroyed, almost the entire civilian population fleeing, and the last remaining rebels evacuated under a UN-brokered cease-fire.

In the film's fourth chapter, beginning the end of 2011, Obaidah and cinematographer Dana Bakdounes

get smuggled into the old city in central Homs, where the largely Sunni population had risen up against the Assad regime, while neighborhoods around them, home to many from the Alawite sect, had remained loyal to the government. The city was a war within itself, and two months before Obaidah and Dana visited regime forces had implemented a siege of the old city – the first major example of Assad using mass starvation as a weapon of war.

Homs earned the title “The Capital of the Revolution” for the perseverance of the resistance, with the siege lasting two and a half years and decimating the old city and local population. In March 2014, the United Nations mediated a local truce, through which the last remaining rebels and residents boarded buses and headed north to other opposition-held areas. Today in the center of Homs, the regime has reasserted control and groups of former residents have returned to try and rebuild their homes and businesses.

In the film's fifth chapter, Obaidah and friends go to Qassab, along Syria's northern border with Turkey. Qassab was famous in Syria for its forests and nature, from its mountains to its pristine beaches. Being at the border with Turkey, following the uprising there were also major weapons smuggling routes running through Qassab, and the local Armenian population actively worked with the regime to try and prevent the influx of foreign fighters and arms to the opposition. Today in Qassab the regime remains in firm control.

In the 6th chapter Obaidah and Dana are in the province of Idlib in 2012, and more specifically the town

## TIMELINE ON

## “THE WAR SHOW”

of Saraqeb. At that point Idlib was almost wholly in opposition hands, and thus had become an example for the opposition in terms of a “Syria-without-Assad”. Being at the Turkish border also meant easy access to foreign funding and weapons.

In Chapter 7, Obaidah and Dana are again in Idlib province in the town of Kafranbel, a prime example of where secular forces first publicly competed against Islamic forces in civil protests. It also effectively marked the beginning of the clash between the secular and Islamist elements of the revolution generally. A group of local activists had become famous during the revolution for their commentary and satire – which they printed on signs, photographed and then distributed via social media – that promoted a secular and democratic culture within the opposition. Behind the campaign was Raed al

Fares – who appears in the film – and his team. Today in Saraqeb and Kafranbel, as in almost all of Idlib, the Syrian regime has been expelled and opposition groups variously compete or collaborate to assert authority – by far the largest and most powerful of these being Jabhat Fatah al-Sham – while being subject to daily air strikes from the Syrian air force and Russian warplanes.

In Saraqeb, almost every opposition fighter whom Obaidah filmed has since been killed. In Kafranbel, Raed al Fares, having survived numerous assassination attempts and regular harassment by elements within Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, remains the public voice of the town and prominent as a speaker for the opposition; he and a team of activists continue to operate the pro-opposition Radio Fresh and several newspapers.



ANDREAS DALSGAARD  
DIRECTOR/WRITER

Born 1980, grew up in northern Denmark. Andreas Dalsgaard has directed documentaries for over a decade. Educated in anthropology at Aarhus University and Paris VII, and film directing at The Danish National Film School, his award-winning films have been shown at +200 festivals worldwide and include *Afghan Muscles* (2007, American Film Institute Grand Prix), Copenhagen (2009, World Best Graduation Film) *Bogota Change* (2009), *The Human Scale* (2012, Al Jazeera Audience Award), *Life Is Sacred* (2015) and numerous shorts. Dalsgaard is also co-founder of the production company Elk Film, writes and directs fiction for both film and theater, and has given conferences and masterclasses worldwide.

OBAIDAH ZYTOON  
DIRECTOR/WRITER

Obaidah Zytoon was born in Zabadani, Syria in 1976. She studied English literature at the University of Damascus before becoming a radio host and producer, working both in Syria and internationally. In 2008, Obaidah produced her first documentary film, *Through Women's Eyes*. Following the 2011 Syrian uprising, Obaidah co-founded the Syrian artist-activist collective Waw Al-Wasel, which produces multi-media art and short films related to the Syrian conflict. She has also coached and trained young Syrians entering media and radio production. *The War*

*Show* is Obaidah's first film as a director.

MIRIAM NØRGAARD  
DELEGATE PRODUCER /  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Miriam Nørgaard has been a producer at Fridthjof Film since 2011, and producer of films such as *The Arms Drop* (2014, IDFA, HotDocs, Raindance), *Pixadores*, Co-producer (2014, Best Documentary São Paulo International Film Festival, IDFA), *Mercy Mercy* (2012, IDFA, HotDocs, Grierson Awards), *Eddie: The Sleepwalking Cannibal*, Associate producer (2012, Tribeca Film Festival). Commissioning editor at the Danish Film Institute 2006 - 10. Educated editor from the National film School of Denmark, track record of 12 feature films and documentaries. Three times nominated for Best Editing by the Danish Film Academy. Masters degree in "Leadership and Innovation in Complex Systems" from Copenhagen Business School, 2012.

ALAA HASSAN  
DELEGATE PRODUCER

Alaa Hassan was born and raised in Syria. He holds a degree in translation from the University of Damascus and is currently an independent filmmaker and photographer based in New York. Alaa has produced and edited numerous short films related to the Syrian uprising. In 2012, Alaa co-founded of the Waw Al Wasel Project, a collective of Syrian multi-media artists and activists. He is also the author and photographer of the

book "*Cardboard Castle*", and is currently developing the feature length film *Topography of Terror*.

SPENCER OSBERG  
CO-WRITER

Born and raised in Halifax, Canada, Spencer has worked in the Middle East since 2005, reporting for media outlets such as Al Jazeera English, CBC, France 24, Globe and Mail, Nikkei Newspapers, The Walrus and Narratively, and for four years was managing editor of Beirut-based Executive magazine. Spencer is currently chief editor at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and writing a book entitled *Everyone Cries at the War Show: Behind the Stories of the Syrian Revolution*. He holds a bachelor of journalism, and a master of fine arts in creative nonfiction, from the University of King's College.

ADAM NIELSEN  
EDITOR

Educated as a film editor from the National Film School of Denmark, 2003, and is the editor of the Oscar-nominated *A War* (2015) by Tobias Lindholm, for whom Nielsen has edited all films. Adam has also edited *Ai Weiwei The Fake Case* (2013, IDFA), *A Hijacking* (2012, Venice Film Festival), which has played at more than 50 festivals including TIFF and for which Adam won his second Danish Academy Award for best editing; *R* (2010, Rotterdam International Festival) which won Adam his first Danish Academy

Award for Best Editing, *Ghost of Cité Soleil* (2005, Telluride) where he was nominated for a Cinema Eye Honors Award for Outstanding Achievement in Editing and *Brothers* (2004, TIFF) where he was nominated for the first time for a Danish Academy Award for Best Editing.

COLIN STETSON  
COMPOSER

Colin Stetson was born and raised in Ann Arbor, and spent a decade in San Francisco and Brooklyn where he continued to evolve his talents as a horn player working extensively live and in studio with a wide range of acts including *Tom Waits*, *Arcade Fire*, *Bon Iver*, *Lou Reed*, *The Chemical Brothers*, *Sinead O'Connor*, *LCD Soundsystem* and *David Gilmore*. In April of 2015, Constellation Records released the album, *Never were the way she was*, the first recording of Colin's duo project with long-time collaborator Sarah Neufeld. Colin have previously composed music for several films including *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Rust and Bone* (2012) and *Lavender* (2016).

RONNIE FRIDTHJOF  
PRODUCER /  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

In 2013 Ronnie Fridthjof received an "IB" award, which is given by the Danish Director Association to a person who has done something special for the film industry. Educated from The European Film College and Nordisk Film. Ronnie founded Fridthjof Film

A/S in 2000. Ronnie Fridthjof has produced award-winning commercial successes like *Take the Trash* (2008), *All for One* (2011) and *All for Two* (2013) as well as the Cannes and Emmy-winning documentary *Armadillo* (2010, Cannes). Most recently, he produced Fridthjof Film's TV-series *Heartless* (2014) among others selected in the program Generation 14Plus at the Berlin Film Festival 2015.

DAVID B. SØRENSEN  
PRODUCER /  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

David B. Sørensen is a producer, director and writer based in Copenhagen and the founder of Dharmafilm. He has previously worked with financing and development at Nimbus Film, studied film and media science at University of Southern Denmark and is a producer graduate from Super16 in Copenhagen. Working as a producer and director with both fiction, documentary and in between his films have been selected for and won at several international film festivals, including CPH:DOX and Doc Aviv.

JOONAS BERGHÄLL  
CO-PRODUCER /  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Joonas Berghäll is film director, writer and producer. He is also managing director and Founder of Finnish production company Oktober. Joonas has gained a reputation as a creative director and producer who invests in high quality documentary and fiction films. His documentary

film *Steam of Life*, which he directed and produced was nominated for the European Film Award and it was also Finnish candidate for Oscars. His latest film *Mother's Wish* was sold to over 14 financiers all over the world. Currently, Joonas is developing his first feature length fiction film.

SATU MAJAVA  
CO-PRODUCER

Satu Majava is a film producer and co-owner of production company Oktober. Recently, she has finished producing films such as *Kaisa's Enchanted Forest* (by K. Gauriloff, 2016, Hot Docs) and *Mother's Wish* (by J. Berghäll, 2015, Against Gravity). Currently, she is developing films such as *Baby Jane* (based on a novel by Sofi Oksanen) and working on several documentary projects with awarded directors.

OLLI HUHTANEN  
SOUND DESIGNER

Olli Huhtanen is one of the most internationally acclaimed sound designers in Finland. Huhtanen has 25 years of experience and has worked approximately in 130 projects in different kinds of work assignments in the area of film sound. He is a long-term collaborator with several internationally acclaimed directors and artists. Huhtanen won the Finnish Jussi Award for the best sound design in 2012. Recently, he has worked on films such as *Return of the Atom* (2015, TIFF) and *Tectonic Plate* (2016, Berlinale).



FRIDTHJOF FILM

Fridthjof Film was founded in 2000 and is today one of the bigger companies in the Danish film industry with over 50 employees. The company has produced a vast blend of fiction and documentary features. Fridthjof Film has released 5 films in cinemas that have all opened #1 at the box office including the documentary feature Armadillo, which won the top award of “Semaine de la critique” at the Cannes film festival and later an Emmy Award. Their TV-series Heartless was sold to 41 countries and the first TV-series to be part of Berlin Film Festivals “Generations” program. Fridthjof Film have made several films in strong co-productions with other European countries including Finland, Norway, Sweeden, Croatia, Germany & Canada.

OKTOBER

Oktober is a Finnish production company which was established in 2004. It has gained a reputation as a creative production house producing quality documentary and fiction films focusing on cutting-edge social issues that evoke both strong feelings and deep thoughts. Oktober films have been at over a hundred film festivals around the world, premiering in the Berlinale, Hotdocs, BFI London Film Festival and Visions du Reel. Steam of Life was European Film Award nominated, and the Finnish candidate for Oscars. Oktober has focused on creating strong international networks and have been broadcasted worldwide.

DHARMAFILM

Dharmafilm was founded in 2010 by David B. Sørensen and is a film production company working mainly with arthouse features and documentaries for an international audience. Previous titles include the hybrid feature Searching for Bill, which won the Nordic Doc Award at CPH:DOX and Best International Feature at Doc Aviv, as well as Bellum, which was selected for several international film festivals and nominated for best short film of the year by the Danish Film Academy. Dharmafilm is currently in production with Isabella Eklöfs’ first feature, Holiday, and is developing several features and international co-productions.

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DANA BAKDOUNES,  
AMR KHEITO,  
HISHAM ISSA,  
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& LARS SKREE

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ADAM NIELSEN

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COLIN STETSON

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OLLI HUHTANEN

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RONNIE FRIDTHJOF  
& DAVID B. SØRENSEN

Executive producers  
RONNIE FRIDTHJOF,  
MIRIAM NØRGAARD,  
JOONAS BERGHÄLL  
& DAVID B. SØRENSEN

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# TABLE WAR SHOW