



Cherry Kompot is a taste of home

A new film explores the tug of home for Ukrainians abroad. **Peter Watts** hears from the team behind the project and speaks to the Ukrainian actor who found her life transformed after answering a Facebook ad

Sofia Sapozhok left her home in Ukraine four months after Russia invaded the country in 2021. Sapozhok, a Jewish Ukrainian actor from Kyiv, had arrived in the US alone, hoping to find sanctuary. She spent the first few months in a state of shock, working out what she would do for the next couple of years. She was in Los Angeles when she got a message from her mother, who had been scouring Facebook, keeping an eye on posts

from LA's large Ukrainian community. That's how she came across an appeal: a Jewish-Ukrainian woman with acting experience was needed for a short film. "That was me!" says Sapozhok. "It was perfect. This was my first few months in LA when I was doing nothing, trying to learn better English and dealing with my emotions. I was invited to the audition – and got the part. It's a small role but they loved me because I could help with the dialogue for the other actors in the film."

The film, *Cherry Kompot*, is a dark comedy made by an international team of film-makers who met at LA's American Film Institute conservatory. It follows Lev, an elderly Jewish Ukrainian man in the US, who refuses to participate in the shiva following the death of his wife, Sonia. She then proceeds to haunt and taunt him, emerging in unexpected places – a mirror, TV set and even on a wall, where she appears to pop up through the wallpaper.

In less than 15 minutes, the film navigates several

themes – grief, guilt, love, immigration and the importance of shared cultural memories and customs, particularly food – such as the cherry compote of the title.

Writer Camille Tsalik, director Teddy Schaffer and English producer Lara Marks make up the creative trio behind the film, but the initial concept came from Tsalik, a Jewish Ukrainian, whose grandmother, her 'Baba', died during the pandemic. "Camille couldn't mourn in

person, so she used the writing process as part of her grieving process," explains Marks, an Oxford graduate, director and actor, who moved to LA to pursue her career in film. "What I loved about the script is that it is so funny and clever and the characters are very three-dimensional as they are based on real people. It's a story about navigating grief when you are losing your connection to your homeland. Lev is grieving for his wife, but he's in Florida and is grieving for the person who tied him to home."

The characters of Lev and Sonia speak Ukrainian and a major challenge was finding

actors who could speak the language. The team approached a Ukrainian culture centre and visited Ukrainian shops in West Hollywood to make contact with older residents which, although unsuccessful in finding actors, did help develop a more fleshed out understanding of the customs and concerns of Ukrainian immigrants.

Eventually, the team recruited Russian actress Irina Dubova, while Lev's role went to Barry Primus. The Facebook appeal was serendipitously spotted by Sapozhok's mother back home.

Sapozhok plays 'Young Sonia' in a fleeting flashback. But her arrival on set also allowed her to authenticate dialogue and accents for Dubova and Primus and even help write the subtitles. "With Sofia, Camille and our Russian assistant director, we had enough authentic voices on set, but for the main role we really needed a good actor. Barry taped an audition and his performance was brilliant. That was the moment we realised we needed to prioritise performance over authenticity. Barry is American but has Yiddish roots so he drew on that to tap into the character and accent," says Marks.

The script was written in 2020 and revised several times, but after the conflict in Ukraine broke out, the production team had to make a decision. Should they incorporate the war into the script? "The project took on a new significance as we wrestled with thoughts about the loss of a homeland and the grief that comes from that, which reflected the themes of the film on a macro level. We talked about the war, especially as Sofia was on the set, but eventually felt the story should stand alone and speak for itself. We thought a narrative about a very human situation could be powerful," says Marks.

That's something Sapozhok could confirm after seeing *Cherry Kompot* for the first time on the big screen. "It was very emotional because it was my first work in LA, my first work in English and my first movie," she says. The film premiered at AFI Fest in Los Angeles and recently won the award for 'Best Short Film' at the Eastern Europe Film Festival.

Sapozhok has since collaborated on another film, *Thank You*, made with a Ukrainian director exploring the first days of the Ukraine war. She is now studying film production in LA as she ponders what to do when her visa expires this summer.

Cherry Kompot also resonated with her because the characters are very familiar. "They are close to my family experience. I could identify with that and the humour – after the invasion, we made jokes all the time even though it was such a dark time. You can't just sit and cry." ■

Cherry Kompot can be streamed here: vimeo.com/828352297 with the password Cherry. **Peter Watts** is a journalist and author. His latest book is *Denmark Street: London's Street Of Sound*, Paradise Road, 2023.

SANTIAGO SERRANO; SOFIA SANINA; ALAMY

Clockwise from above: Lev (Barry Primus), with Sonia (Irina Dubova) emerging from the wallpaper, in *Cherry Kompot*; Sofia Sapozhok; the shiva table; Lev and other family members, Liza and Sam



THE FILM THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

OUR SERIES IN WHICH INTERVIEWEES TALK ABOUT A FILM THAT HAS MADE AN IMPACT ON THEIR LIVES



Mandy Patinkin (left) and Barbra Streisand in *Yentl*

This issue: The twice Mercury Music Prize-nominated singer **Jessie Ware** on Barbra Streisand's 1983 film, *Yentl*

As a child I remember listening to Babs on the vinyl in our living room duetting with Bee Gee Robin Gibb, and once overhearing my mum and grandma talking about getting tickets to see her in concert because she was the 'voice' and 'the ultimate storyteller'. Even before watching *The Way We Were* (1973) and *Yentl* (1983), I already knew her catch phrases such as, "Papa can you hear me?", from *Yentl*.

During our twenties, my friend and I had a stint of DJing as the outfit *Yentl* and the Gentile, wearing self-made merch with Barbra's angelic face hovering on the front. When I was finding my own singing voice on my first record (*Devotion*, 2012), the covers of her vinyl records – along with Whitney Houston and Billie Holiday – would face me as I sung in the recording booth, reminding me to try and be myself, to try and sing every note as beautifully as the next.

To me, Barbra represents talent, confidence, glamour and beauty. She's inspiring because of her breadth – excelling in not only music but acting and directing. And, she does all that while being out publicly as a proud Jew.

Barbra's passion project, *Yentl*, took her 15 years to make and was an endeavour that most of Hollywood ridiculed until it had significant box-office success. The story of a Jewish woman with a desire to study, has

become even more meaningful to me over the last few years, especially since in my mid-thirties I decided to have a bat-mitzvah. As I got older, I found that I wanted to learn more about Jewish traditions, and really enjoyed debating and analysing the

Jewish texts I studied, deepening my connection with the culture.

Growing up in our household, Barbra represented a strong, unapologetic, talented Jewish woman – an identity that I also saw in my mother and grandmother.

Babs' – and *Yentl*'s – determination to live life on her own terms, motivates me to do the same and to pass that on to my own daughter. ■ *Interview Aviva Dautch*

Jessie Ware's fifth album, *That Feels Good!*, was released last year. On p16, you can read about Esther Kreitman, the sister of Isaac Bashevis Singer, and one of the models for the girl in Bashevis Singer's short story *Yentl*. The story was the inspiration for Barbra Streisand's film.