

VIRAGO

Written and Directed by
Kerli Kirch



Virago

DIRECTOR: Kerli Kirch

GENRE: Dark Comedy

SCRIPT: Kerli Kirch

STYLE: Magical Realism

ART DIRECTOR: Kaia Tungal

LENGTH: 15 minutes

**DIRECTOR OF
PHOTOGRAPHY:** Mart
Ratassepp / Carolyn Niitla

PRODUCTION COMPANY:
Nafta Films OÜ

PRODUCER: Diana Mikita

A dense forest scene with tall, thin trees and a fallen log in the foreground. The ground is covered in moss and fallen branches. The lighting is soft, suggesting a misty or overcast day.

Logline

In Virago village where no man has lived long enough to see his fortieth birthday, Tõnu is about to turn forty.

Synopsis

Before World War II, Virago was like every other Southern Estonian village where women worked hard in the fields and men worked even harder... on drinking their vodka. Given the choice between fixing the village's broken, blue tractor, and hitting the bottle, the men of Virago made quick work of the bottle. But then the War came and the men went to hide in the woods, leaving Virago in the hands of their wives. The brave women brought up the next generation of Virago men, who suddenly started dropping like flies. From that time on, no man in Virago has lived long enough to see his fortieth birthday.

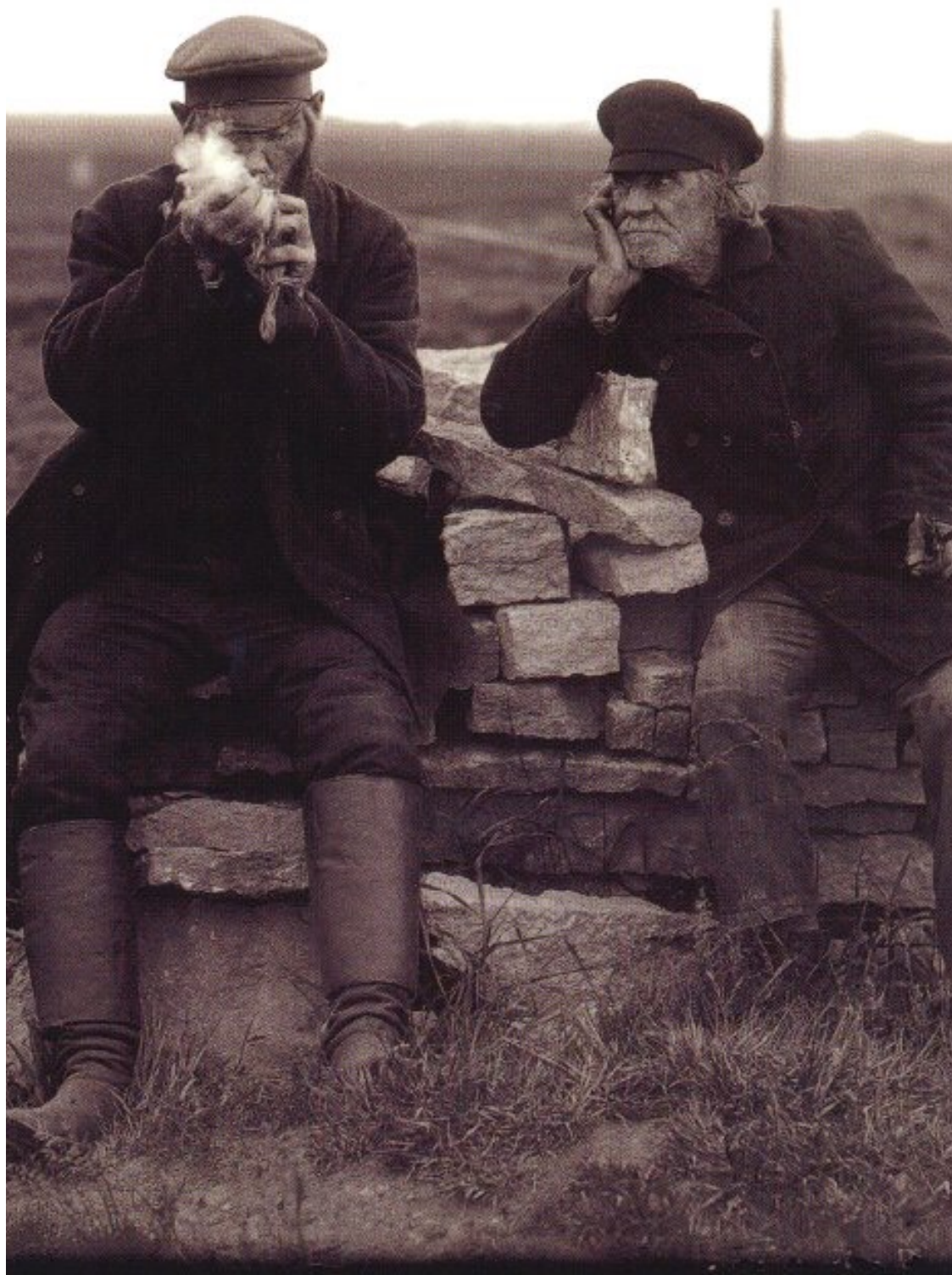
The story continues in contemporary Virago, where suddenly a man lives whose fortieth birthday is approaching. This man is Tõnu who represents a second chance for the men of Virago. Tõnu's days pass under dictatorship of his mighty wife Olga, who tirelessly commands her painstaking but feckless husband to fix their broken blue tractor. Although Tõnu is almost forty, Olga is not too worried about the looming destiny of the men of Virago. But when her husband's fortieth birthday arrives and the man almost kicks the bucket due to electric shock, Olga loses her calm. It becomes her mission to keep Tõnu alive. She secretly removes all hazardous-looking items from Tõnu's sight, including two "suspicious" red bricks that moments later were supposed to stop the blue tractor from running over her husband. It is up to the viewer to decide whether it was Olga's care or carelessness that killed Tõnu. Or was it the man's faith, because, after failing yet again to fix the blue tractor, Tõnu kicked its tires and gave up, essentially turning his back on his responsibilities, just like other village men a quarter century ago.



Director's Vision

The story of *Virago* is inspired by events that took place in an actual Southern Estonian village called Vastse-Roosa, where I grew up. Strangely, the men of this village tend to meet the Grim Reaper way too early. For instance, my grandfather as well as two of my uncles were all six feet under by their early forties and fifties. Because most of the women lost their men at a young age – some to the woods, some to Russians, some to the river, some to vodka – all of life's chores, including children, households, fieldwork, were put on their shoulders. My grandmother used to say, "The harder the times, the more the women looked after each other."

Even today, unfortunately, the men don't live nearly as long as their wives. Today, there are so few mature men in the village that I can count them on my two-hands. Even while writing this story, one man, approaching his fifties, got buried under hay barrels, another one, in his thirties, drove his car into the river, and third one died of cancer. One cannot but think that some sort of a curse lies on my home village. The women have no time to ponder over this curse because the country life knows no mercy and the daily work needs to get done. Therefore, *Virago* is my way of examining the tragic destiny of Estonian countrymen. On the other hand, the film is also a tribute to resilient Estonian countrywomen. I named the village in the film *Virago*, because throughout history, this word has been used to describe both heroic and hostile women.



Themes

In a narrower sense, *Virago* can be viewed as a story about the everlasting battle of the sexes. This is visualized through tough countrywomen who challenge traditional gender roles by successfully executing “men’s jobs,” but also through their feckless husbands who have abandoned their “manly” duties. On a larger level, however, the film is about the battle between a man’s will and his destiny. So, besides the commonplace country life, something mystical looms in the distance, something that is larger than life. And this something is the curse that the men of *Virago* brought on themselves when they escaped from the village on the threshold of World War II, turning their backs on their families and responsibilities. An odd symbol of faith in the film is the old blue tractor that still lives in every Eastern European village. The working tractor refers to the times when *Virago* is ruled by resilient women. The broken tractor, however, indicates the presence of inept men. In the second half of the film, Tõnu gets a chance to break the curse that lies on the men of *Virago* – all he needs to do is fix the broken blue tractor. Unfortunately, he gives up on the tractor and it runs him over.

Additionally, the story focuses on the dialectic, multilayered nature of human beings and life. In this film, the mundane and the magical go hand in hand; nothing is eternally good or bad; in every woman, there is a man; our world is in constant change, but also remains the same; and every end brings a new beginning. Inspired by these dialectics, the film portrays the deaths of the men simultaneously tragic and comical; their wives’ condolences (“May God rest his soul!”) express grief as well as triumph; and Tõnu’s tragic end is also a new beginning for Olga.

Magical Realism

In accordance with the ideas of magical realism, the events in *Virago* take place in a realistic geographical, historical, and cultural context, but the story includes some fantastical elements - it is informed by an odd mythology (men die at young age) that gives the film a mysterious feel. Nevertheless, the story is told in a way that the focus is not on the supernatural, but rather on the everyday world where these strange things happen.

Magical realism is also expressed visually through a dialectic play between the mundane and the supernatural. On the one hand, we see everyday life that is portrayed through Southern Estonian landscape, farm work, fields, and country people's veiny working hands. On the other hand, we can sense *Virago's* dark secret that is presented via the old woman's lies, the sudden deaths of the men, the women's shady gazes, Tõnu's ghostly appearances, suddenly gathering thunder, and the everlasting blue tractor that's color always pops out in the background of otherwise natural shades. Another example of visualizing magical realism is the dark woods that is filled with the men's corpses. No blood, no signs of fighting – It looks like all of them just dropped dead for no reason.

The film uses natural light and contrasts that are inherent to Estonian summer. It offers a glimpse into sunny hay cutting days as well as to grey, rainy evenings. We see the golden hour in the fields as well as the dark, lifeless forest. *Virago* forwards the raw beauty of the Estonian countryside, but also the bond between the land and its people. Besides human beings, things such as the blue tractor and the village itself, are also characters in this film. While the historic *Virago* era ends with the sunrise (because women have made the village life flourish), the era of Tõnu and Olga starts out as foggy and rainy (because it symbolizes Olga's downtime).



Time Periods

Consistent with the respective time periods, the film offers insights into Virago during World War II, the Soviet period, and contemporary times. During the 1940s, the village looks quite shabby – patched roofs, skinny, dirty children, etc. The Soviet Virago does not look much better – we see the blue tractor with flat tires sloppily parked in front of the local pub. The pub's grimy walls are decorated with hammers and sickles. But in contemporary Virago, which is almost man-free, beautiful idyllic country houses stand side by side, contrasting sharply with Olga and Tõnu's miserable yellow house which desperately needs a renovating hand since the Soviet times. This parallels the current situation in real Southern Estonian villages. The film will be shot mostly in Vastse-Roosa village, which allows the viewer to experience the real history and culture of the place. One of the most vivid elements that communicates different eras in Virago, is the blue tractor. During the 1940s, it is “played” by old Fordson, during the 1960s, by Belarus MTZ-52, and in contemporary Virago, by Belarus MTZ-82.

Characters



For the secondary characters and extras, the locals and actors with Southern Estonian roots will be brought on board, so that the sense of place could be forwarded the best.

Virago is more organic than theatric, which is why the direct experiences of Southern Estonians and rural people play important role in the film.

Tõnu (39)

Tõnu is a feckless but painstaking countryman whose main activity in the film is fixing the broken blue tractor. At the first sight, it looks like just another job that his nagging wife Olga came up with. But in a deeper sense, the tractor symbolizes a second chance that has been given for the men of Virago. If Tõnu fixes it, he will break the curse that lies on the men since World War II. Tõnu is still alive on his fortieth birthday because he is not like other Virago men throughout the history – he tries. Instead of sleeping under the tractor, Tõnu is desperately trying to bring it back to life. Unfortunately, he is not capable of jumping over the shadow that accompanies the men of Virago, and be a man that the village and Olga really need.



Juhan Ulfsak



Meelis Rämmeld



Andres Mähar



Olga (40)

Olga is Tõnu's mighty wife who acts as a neck and head of the man. In the beginning, Olga's only wish is that Tõnu would somehow be useful in the farm work. Hence, she presents him with various jobs that other women never let their men do because they were too dangerous (e.g. chopping wood). But at the moment when Tõnu almost kicks the bucket, Olga's cold heart melts and she realizes that she cares about her husband more than she thought. From now on, it becomes Olga's mission to keep Tõnu out of danger. Without realizing it, Olga becomes similar to the other village women whose excessive care pushed their men to their grave too early. Just like Tõnu could not fight with the destiny of the men of Virago, Olga also could not differ from the rest of the women.



Hilje Murel



Elisabeth Reinsalu



Riina Maidre



Music

The film's score and music originate from an award-winning musician Maarja Nuut's repertoire. With violin, her voice, and loop station, Maarja "creates a quirky sound world that seems to be out of a Baltic fairy tale book, firmly rooted in village traditions and yet completely contemporary." In her work, the old and the new are equally fresh, and the violin sounds that gain power throughout the songs can be compared to the women of Virago, who throughout the film gather their forces and keep marching forward no matter how tough the journey.



Kerli Kirch

Kerli Kirch has co-created and co-directed various plays for an award-winning Southern Estonian theatre group Kõgõkogo, where she also acted. The plays were inspired by real life and spiced up with Estonian sarcasm, delivered by three young Southern Estonian women. Throughout the years, their stage plays received a lot of positive critique from Estonian actors and directors. They received various awards, including several nominations in school theatre festivals and the first place in Estonian Comedy Festival. Later, Kerli co-directed a play with an Estonian theatre critic Rait Avestik and writer Lea Mändmets, which was performed in the theatre Cabaret Rhizome.



Through the film program at the University of Miami, Kerli has also made her first “experiments” in the film world – both in terms of screenwriting and directing. She is also part of the Miami female filmmakers group where she currently works as 1st AD for a trilogy called Dark Eros. The films focus on themes of love and sexuality from the perspective of dark comedy. Virago would be Kerli’s first professionally produced film.



For the men who died
and women who lived
in Vastse-Roosa.

