

# A St. Petersburg Tale

If history taught him anything, he wouldn't be lingering on the past.

**Genre:** Dramedy

**Running time:** 125 minutes

**Language:** Russian and German with English subtitles

**Country of Origin:** United States

**Country of Filming:** Russian Federation

**Technical specifications:**

Shooting format: Digital, ARRIRAW

Screening format: DCP and ProRes

4K UHD | HDR & SDR | Dolby Atmos & 5.1 | 2.39:1 Aspect Ratio

**Completion date:** March 2024

**Distirbution availability:** Worldwide

**Synopsis:** Aleksey, a middle-aged history professor from St. Petersburg, living in Berlin for the past three decades and haunted by memories of a lost love, embarks on a desperate trip back to his hometown to find his ex-girlfriend, Nadia, before she marries someone else. While searching the city for her, encountering familiar places and people from his youth, Aleksey reconnects with his bohemian childhood friend Nikolai and former neighbor Irina. While Nadia's sister, Zhenya, staunchly opposes Aleksey's presence during this crucial time in her sister's life, Aleksey pressures her more, leading to his own estrangement amongst the only people he knows in St. Petersburg. Caught between his longing for Nadia and the repercussions of his return, Aleksey must confront the consequences of his actions, seek redemption in the face of lost love and make amends with friends he left behind thirty years ago. *A St. Petersburg Tale* explores themes of unrequited love, friendship and forgiveness, and the healing nature of returning to one's roots.

**Logline:** After 30 years of living in Berlin, Aleksey returns to his native St. Petersburg to dissuade his ex-girlfriend from marrying someone else, but encounters with people from his past and the ensuing adventures derail his mission, yet offer him a new perspective and a chance for a fresh start.



## Cast:

Aleksey Shtukin.....Aleksey  
Oksana Bazilevich.....Irina  
Artur Vakha (*Merited Artist of Russia*).....Nikolai  
Irina Sokolova (*People's Artist of Russia*).....Marivanna  
Valery Kukhareshin (*People's Artist of Russia*).....Professor Nikitin  
Elena Rufanova (*Merited Artist of Russia*).....Zhenya  
Svetlana Smirnova-Katsagadzhieva.....Daria  
Anna Korshuk (*Merited Artist of St. Petersburg*).....Nadia

## Crew:

Directed by.....Saman Yaghmai-Aledavoud  
Written by.....Saman Yaghmai-Aledavoud & Ray Haratian  
Produced by.....Saman Yaghmai-Aledavoud & Elena Petrova  
Co-Producer.....Irina Egorova  
Casting by.....Svetlana Gusinskaya  
Music by.....Ramin Kousha (*Crystal Simorgh nominee for Best Music, 2020 Iran Fajr Film Festival*)  
Music by.....Etienne Monsaingeon  
Sound Designer.....Joshua Chase (*Emmy nominee for Outstanding Sound Editing for a Series, 2015*)  
Post Sound Services.....Kami Asgar, 424 Post (*Academy Award nominee for Best Sound Editing, 2007*)  
Costume Designer.....Ella Fedyanova  
Editor.....Sepideh Abdolvahab (*Two-time Crystal Simorgh winner for Best Editing, Iran Fajr Film Festival*)  
Production Designers.....Evgeniya Ilyshina & Dmitry Malich  
Director of Photography.....Saman Yaghmai-Aledavoud  
Post Finishing Services.....Ramy Katrib, DigitalFilm Tree



**Saman Yaghmai-Aledavoud** (Director/Producer/Writer) Born and raised in Iran, Saman moved to Los Angeles to formally study filmmaking. He graduated with honors with an emphasis on cinematography, and completed shooting five thesis films for his peers. Saman also completed internships with Seamus McGarvey, ASC, BSC, the Academy Award-nominated cinematographer of *Atonement* (2007) and *Anna Karenina* (2012), and Alex Nepomniaschy, ASC. He has worked on numerous projects and previously won the Best Director award at the 2011 Las Vegas International Film Festival for his thesis film *\$lowdown*, which

tackled the impact of the 2008 recession on mental health.

Additionally, he received a nomination for Best Cinematography at the 2021 Wild Bunch Film Festival for his work on *Unspoken Badge*, a unique western shot entirely on location on Super 16.

Saman is a filmmaker that prioritizes compelling narratives and authentic performances over flashy camerawork and other distractions. He is passionate about delving into the complexities of human emotions and experiences, including themes such as immigration, lost connections, and nostalgia.





**Aleksey Shtukin (Aleksey)** Aleksey graduated from the prestigious Leningrad State Institute of Theatre, now known as the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts. Similar to the Aleksey character in our story, he left Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union and lived in Israel for almost two decades. During his time in Israel, he worked on several indie films and as a TV host before returning to St. Petersburg in the early 2010s, which he now calls home. He is actively involved in Russian film and television productions. When he was cast as Aleksey in *A St. Petersburg Tale*, he expressed that he had waited all his life to play this part.



**Oksana Bazilevich (Irina)** Oksana also graduated from the prestigious Russian State Institute of Performing Arts, where Aleksey Shtukin, Artur Vakha, and Valery Kukhareshin are alumni. Her acting career spans back to 1992. She gained recognition for her role as Valentina Kalitnikova in the television series *Such a Job*. She has played more than 100 characters in films and TV shows since. Oksana was honored with the Golden Sofit, the highest theatrical award in St. Petersburg, for her outstanding performance in the play *Night of Hens*.



**Artur Vakha (Nikolai)** (*Merited Artist of Russia, 1999*) Artur is a familiar face from his work in film and television and is a favorite in St. Petersburg for his decades of work in theater. He is also recognizable by his trademark deep voice and has dubbed many American films and TV shows, most notably the voice of Rocky Balboa and Mr. Potato Head in *Toy Story*. He graduated from the esteemed Russian State Institute of Performing Arts too, and just like his character, Nikolai, truly lives in the moment!



**Irina Sokolova (Marivanna)** (*Winner of Golden Mask, 2021; People's Artist of Russia, 1980; Merited Artist of Russia, 1974*) A favorite of the Leningraders-Petersburgers with over 50 years on stage! Born and raised into a family of artists, Irina's parents were both theater actors. She was given the role of the Gnome in *Cinderella* at the age of five. Coincidentally to her role in *A St. Petersburg Tale*, her grandmother was the head of the costume department at the Murmansk Drama Theater.



**Valery Kukhareshin (Professor Nikitin)** (*People's Artist of Russia, 2005; Merited Artist of Russia, 1995*) Valery is a well respected and reputable actor from St. Petersburg who started his career in the 80s during the Soviet era. He has over 40 years of acting experience and is a familiar face in Russia but also recognizable by his voice. He was the official Russian voice of Disney's Scrooge McDuck and voiced many American films and TV shows, most notably the voice of Dr. Gregory House in *House*.



**Elena Rufanova (Zhenya)** (*Merited Artist of Russia, 2007*) Elena is celebrated as a versatile actress in theater, film, and television. Renowned for her sharp portrayals and fearless approach to her craft, she garnered international recognition for her role as Eva Brown in Alexander Sokurov's Palme d'Or-nominated film *Moloch* (1999), alongside Irina Sokolova. Rufanova's performance showcased her versatility and earned widespread praise from film critics. She also appeared as the First Lady in Sokurov's acclaimed experimental film *Russian Ark*, famously shot in a single uninterrupted take spanning 87 minutes. In 2007 Elena received the prestigious title of Merited Artist of Russia for her contributions to the performing arts. A classmate of Aleksey Shtukin at the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts, the two reunite on screen in *A St. Petersburg Tale*.



**Director's statement:** In the summer of 2016, my girlfriend (now my wife and a producer of the film) invited me to her hometown of St. Petersburg. A bit intimidated by the portrayal of Russians I was exposed to by the media, surprisingly I found myself captivated by the people, the city's rich history, culture, architecture, and enchanting white nights. This experience sparked a dream within me—to make a film set against St. Petersburg as the backdrop.

I fell in love with foreign films when I took my first film class, History of International Cinema, and always dreamt of making films internationally and exploring different cultures and languages through universal stories, just like the experiences I had traveling or watching foreign films. I was surprised that the charming St. Petersburg had not been explored extensively in romantic comedies like New York in Woody Allen films or Rome and Paris in countless other films.

While St. Petersburg was the inspiration for the setting of the story, I wanted to tell a universal human story drawn from my own experience with immigration and lost connections, yet exploring my imagination. The narrative follows a Russian immigrant in Germany returning home after 30 years, mirroring my own journey of adaptation and longing, having been unable to return home for over 20 years.

I left Iran to pursue a better life and to make movies without the fear of self-censorship or facing government bans or other consequences Iranian filmmakers have been dealing with. Many of my family members had already left Iran due to the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and before that because of the 1979 Revolution and the sudden changes it brought. As an Iranian diaspora, I carry the memories and stories of my homeland, and sometimes a nostalgic song or food can bring those memories back to life. As an immigrant, I have been drawn to themes of immigration and displacement and fascinated by nostalgia.

Many Russians also left their homeland after the fall of the Soviet Union due to the chaos and uncertainty. Many have never been back. This parallel with my own experience became the backbone of the story and the film's main character. Our story takes place during 5 days, and while nostalgia deeply informs the film's themes, my co-writer and I decided not to have any flashbacks and just follow the story on a linear path forward. Learning from Chaplin, who used comedy to make very human and emotional films, I decided to make a light, entertaining film, with elements of romantic comedy and unpredictable turns of events that the audience enjoys while having a multi-layered story and characters that explore deep philosophical thoughts. Balancing the comedy and the drama was perhaps the biggest challenge that I had to tackle in every aspect of storytelling, from writing, directing, editing, to music.



To ensure authenticity, I had to make the film in the Russian language and learn the culture and recent history. Subsequent trips to St. Petersburg in 2018 and 2019 enriched my understanding of the city's culture and history, shaping the narrative and adding authenticity. I spent the pandemic working on the script and funded the shoot through family and friends. While this was my first film with a limited budget that I had raised independently, I did not approach it as a "small, indie" film. I knew that I only get to tell this story once, so I wanted it to be well made with no compromise on quality to connect with a big audience.



Drawing inspiration from Iranian films I grew up watching, which often feature simple visuals and focus on strong storytelling with deep emotions, I aimed to craft a simple and minimalistic yet immersive experience for the audience. I decided to shoot in real locations and draw on 15 years of experience as a cinematographer, especially on documentaries, to achieve a cinematic look for the film on a tight budget, without any elements of filmmaking overpowering or distracting from the narrative. In essence, I aimed to achieve the feel of Italian neorealism, emphasizing authenticity and a connection to the human experience.

St. Petersburg is picturesque. Almost anywhere you point the camera looks good. However, the weather during the shoot was not cooperative. When I wanted a sunny day, it was rainy; when I wanted rain, it was sunny. I used to complain to the crew and remember my boom operator saying, "It's St. Petersburg!" so I learned there is no bargaining with nature and to embrace the weather conditions and shoot. This added to the authenticity of the film, as we really captured the city the way it is.

Most of the film was captured using a 35mm lens, resembling the way we perceive the world. I incorporated motivated lighting and camera movement that complement the storytelling, immersing the audience in the performances and the unfolding story. My visual inspiration for this film stemmed from the brighter, vibrant colors found in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism paintings by artists such as Gauguin, Pissarro, and Van Gogh. During the summer light, St. Petersburg exudes a similar aura in my eyes.



In terms of soundtrack, I envisioned a movie experience that transports viewers right beside the characters or onto the streets of St. Petersburg with Aleksey. We worked extensively with my production sound recordist and a sound designer in St. Petersburg to gather sounds of the city to use in the film. I was blessed to have Kami Asgar's support to be able to mix the film in Dolby Atmos. The music, a modern composition, is inspired by Russian sounds and instruments, and recorded by a jazz band we put together, adding a distinct cultural flavor to the overall sonic landscape of the film.



My love for St. Petersburg, my vision for immersive and emotionally resonant storytelling, and my commitment to capturing the city's unique essence and authenticity are all embedded in this film. The project began long before the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Innocent people continue to endure the profound impact of war, undergoing dramatic life changes and forced migration on either side. Just as I experienced the Iran-Iraq war as a child, witnessing most of my family leave. Now, many Russians are leaving due to the war, uncertain future, and choosing not to return. I hope to take the audience on a journey that transcends borders, and fostering empathy and understanding during these challenging times, shedding light on the human side of Russians.

**Financing and filming:** Financed independently in the US and filmed over 22 days in St. Petersburg, Russia, *A St. Petersburg Tale* represents a remarkable achievement amidst challenging circumstances. Produced by a first-time husband-and-wife filmmaking team, principal photography took place during the summers of 2021 and 2022, amidst both a pandemic and a war, capturing a unique moment in history. Shot entirely on location for authenticity in the historic parts of St. Petersburg, known as the “Venice of the North,” it showcases iconic locations including the UNESCO World Heritage Sites Hermitage, Palace Square, the Bronze Horseman, Tikhvin Cemetery (resting place of Russian luminaries like Dostoevsky and Tchaikovsky), and the annual Scarlet Sails event amidst the city’s famed White Nights.



**Talent and soundtrack:** *A St. Petersburg Tale* features an exceptional ensemble of international talent from St. Petersburg and Los Angeles, featuring acclaimed Merited Artists of the Russian Federation Elena Rufanova and Irina Sokolova, renowned for their roles in Alexander Sokurov’s Palme d’Or-nominated film *Moloch* (1999), alongside Artur Vakha and Valery Kukhareshin.

The captivating score is composed by Ramin Kousha, known for his work on the Palme d’Or-nominated film *Leila’s Brothers* (2022), in collaboration with French composer Etienne Monsaingeon. The film also features nostalgic Soviet pop songs, including “There is Only Moment” (Есть только миг) and Samotsvety’s “All That I Have in My

Life” (Все, что в жизни есть у меня), adding depth and nostalgia to the film’s soundtrack.

**Post-production:** Post-production was meticulously carried out in Los Angeles. The film was edited by Sepideh Abdolvahab, a two-time Crystal Simorgh winner for Best Editing at the Iran Fajr Film Festival. Additionally, the team at 424 Post, led by Oscar-nominee Kami Asgar (*Apocalypto*), handled sound in collaboration with Emmy-nominated sound designer Joshua Chase (*Daredevil*). The final touches, including VFX color grading and finishing, were expertly handled by Digital FilmTree (*Ted Lasso*).

**Distribution:** *A St. Petersburg Tale* offers a timeless cinematic experience. Crafted with the mature audience in mind, at a time when there is a lack of films for them, the film’s strength lies in its ability to captivate the younger audiences as well. The film holds potential to thrive in major culturally diverse cities with a pre-existing interest in foreign cinema, particularly those with a large Eastern European population, such as NYC, Chicago, LA, Toronto, Berlin, London, Tel Aviv, and Buenos Aires.

With its European flair, artistic sensibility, and tour de force performances, the film will resonate with fans of international cinema. Its unique blend of romance, humor, and nostalgia ensures that *A St. Petersburg Tale* will captivate audiences and leave a lasting impression due to its universal appeal, fostering cultural exchange through storytelling. Last year, Wim Wenders’ *Perfect Days* with a story set in Tokyo and in Japanese proved to be a success.

[Trailer](#)

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NIKOLI  
What are you planning  
to tell her?



ZHENYA  
Give back the dress!



ALEKSEY  
Nadia and I used to  
come sit here and talk  
when we first met.



