



**DREAM PALACE**

# Beginning

*With a pre-recorded introduction by director Luca Guadagnino.*

## **Director Dea Kulumbegashvili on ‘Beginning’**

*Beginning is a profoundly mysterious film – full of surprises, even shocks, but with very little explained. How did you want viewers to respond?*

I want the audience to somehow be in the world of this woman [Yana] and to experience what she’s experiencing. In general, when thinking about a character, how much do we need to know? In life, how much do we really know about each other? I thought, that’s the power the character has – she doesn’t explain.

*We know little about Yana except that she was an actress before she married.*

She’s an actress and somehow she’s still performing her part. I feel like in general, we assume a role in life, and taking a responsibility requires some kind of performance. Ia [Sukhitashvili] is an incredible actress – she’s the main actress of a big state dramatic theatre here. When I was doing the casting and talking to her, I understood that she’s just such an actress. Even when she talks to you in the street, that’s who she is – she’s an actress. So I understood that it should be stated in the film that Yana is a former actress. We made this decision together.

*You begin with an explosion, but it’s very little mentioned afterwards. Its effect in the narrative is to leave ripples, rather than being the centre of the film.*

From the very beginning, I thought that Yana would have been a supporting character in another film. When you start a film with an explosion, you expect that whoever is more active in solving the problem should be the main character. But the film is not about that – I wanted to make a film about a supporting character.

At the same time, this traumatic experience is something usual in these characters’ lives, the presence of violence is banal for them. The next day, they don’t talk about it. I think this is how it happens in life – things happen and we don’t talk about it every day, we just go on living.

*The film begins with the story of Abraham and Isaac; later there’s a lesson on Satan. How much did you want us to read the story in these religious terms?*

In contemporary Western society, most of us tend to think that we’re not religious at all. But I think European culture is based on the Christian religion, it still cannot exist without it, because there’s so much – our morals, our understanding of good and evil, how we relate to life. At the same time, it’s irrelevant, because there is no one who requires [Yana’s] sacrifice, there is no one who will stop her when she performs the act of sacrifice.

*It’s not clear whether Yana herself is really religious.*

I didn't want to make a film about religion. She does believe to a certain degree, but she's not a believer. She's more a good wife and a good mother, she's performing the role that David, her husband, asked her to perform, but she's not a religious person. I was always doubting whether David is such a believer either. I think they both accepted this way of life and it gives them structure.

*We barely meet the Jehovah's Witnesses community in the film, although we do see some of their practices. Why that religion?*

I'd written only one scene, when Yana is sitting at the table at the end of the film. But I didn't have anything else.

Then I was in New York, and I returned to Georgia to visit my father. There were distant relatives visiting him, and they happened to convert and become Jehovah's Witnesses. I could see how alienated and estranged they felt because of their choice of religion. I was asking the same question about my own life: I was thinking, 'What does it mean to come back home?' I was dealing with the same feelings, but in a different context.

I started to attend the religious services. I'm not a religious person, but meeting them was a very important moment in my life – because I could see that you don't even need to leave to become an outsider. And that's how I started to work on the film.

*The film is shot in Lagodekhi, the town where you grew up, and uses its landscapes vividly.*

Yana's house is maybe 20 minutes' walk from the house where I grew up, where my family still lives. This place is very significant for me, because it was always a place of violence – especially in the 90s when I was growing up, there was a civil war. The town is on the border with Azerbaijan, there was a lot of trafficking happening – after 6pm, we were not allowed to play on the river because it was dangerous, and even now it's not particularly safe.

*One of the boldest things about the film is its use of extremely long takes – like a six-minute close-up of Yana lying in a forest with her eyes closed. When I saw it in San Sebastián, some viewers were visibly restless during that scene, checking their phones, even walking out. You must have known you were taking a risk.*

Absolutely. Everybody's free to do whatever they wish at that moment. Once you disengage and start to check your phone, that's what the shot is doing to you. When we were filming it, I was looking at Ia and there was light changing on her face – it was almost an ecstatic moment.

To me, this is what cinema is: it's simple, it's light, it's the camera, it's human, it's nature, I don't need anything to happen in terms of action. Everyone was against it – the editor wanted to cut it in half, the producers were calling me – but even if I failed, I believed in it. There are moments when cinema just happens in front of the camera.

*The film was originally going to be called 'Naked Sky'. Its new title is very abstract, it doesn't give us many clues.*

The title 'Naked Sky' gave us just one direction in which to read the film, and that bothered me. We don't know if the beginning of the film is the beginning of something new for Yana, or if it's actually in the end that something new is going to start for her. I constantly had this line in my head: 'In the Beginning was the Word.' This title gives me space to experience the film without really pushing me into one way of understanding it.

*A theme that emerges in your Q&A discussion with Luca Guadagnino [showing with the film on MUBI] is that the film isn't just about a woman's victimisation versus her empowerment, but about a more complex dynamic.*

I'm interested in making films in general about being a woman. What does it mean to be a woman, in your body, in your senses, feelings, your mind? It's a complex existence. I am curious about female existence, and for me this film is about [la's] existential crisis. I want to be truthful to the people I know, and the people I grew up with in this town – and I happened to grow up surrounded by many women.

*How do you locate yourself in regard to Georgian cinema, to its history and its film community now?*

Georgia is a very strange country. In one way we're all related to each other and we constantly socialise. It's a very small country and Tbilisi is a very small city, so we see each other every day. The beauty of Georgia is that we all do our own thing, but we feel connected in a state of mind.

Of course I am very connected. I love *Pirosmani* [1969]. I find that film very inspiring. I love the Shengelaia brothers, especially their satire – we call it 'tragic farce', it's its own genre in Georgian cinema. Everything made by Otar Iosseliani is incredibly inspiring. I can be walking in the street and I remember some Georgian film and I think, 'OK, this is my response.' That is the nature of Georgian culture in a way – we don't distance ourselves from the traditions, or the icons, or the great directors.

**Interview by Jonathan Romney, *Sight & Sound*, May 2021**

BEGINNING

Director: Dea Kulumbegashvili  
©: First Picture, O.F.A., Zadig Films  
Production Companies: First Picture, Office of Film Architecture  
In co-production with: Zadig Films, G.A. Films  
In association with: Paradoxal Inc.  
Produced with the support of the: Georgian National Film Centre  
Produced with the support of the co-development scheme of the: Netherlands Film Fund  
Produced with the support of the: Hubert Bals Fund, Sam Spiegel International Film Lab  
Executive Produced by: Gaetan Rousseau, Carlos Reygadas  
Produced by: Ilan Amouyal, David Zerat, Rati Oneli, Dea Kulumbegashvili, Paul Rozenberg  
Written by: Dea Kulumbegashvili, Rati Oneli  
Cinematography: Arseni Khachaturan  
Edited by: Matthieu Taponier  
Production Designer: Guram Navrozashvili  
Costume Designer: Ketevan Kalandadze  
Music: Nicolas Jaar  
Sound Design: Séverin Favriau, Emeline Aldeguer  
Stunt Co-ordinator: David Khubua

DREAM PALACE

**Beginning** + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino  
Sat 22 May 11:30; Tue 22 Jun 20:30  
**Black Narcissus**  
Sat 22 May 14:20 (+ intro by Edgar Wright); Mon 7 Jun 17:50  
**The Wonders (Le meraviglie)** + pre-recorded intro by Mark Cousins  
Sat 22 May 15:15; Thu 3 Jun 20:30  
**Hair** + pre-recorded intro by Kleber Mendonça Filho  
Sat 22 May 20:30; Fri 28 May 17:45  
**Magnificent Obsession + Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)**  
Sun 23 May 15:45 (+ intro by Heather Stewart, BFI Creative Director);  
Sun 6 Jun 18:40  
**Beau Travail** + pre-recorded intro by Kirsten Johnson  
Sun 23 May 18:40; Sun 30 May 18:20  
**Mirror (Zerkalo)** + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska  
Mon 24 May 17:50; Wed 9 Jun 14:30  
**Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat)** + pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane  
Mon 24 May 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:50  
**Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Bú sànn)**  
Wed 26 May 18:10 (+ intro by Peter Strickland); Wed 2 Jun 20:50  
**The Gleaners & I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)**  
+ pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze  
Thu 27 May 18:15; Fri 26 Jun 14:30  
**The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)**  
+ pre-recorded intro by Mike Williams, Editor *Sight & Sound*  
Fri 28 May 20:50; Wed 30 Jun 14:30

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Cast:

Ia Sukhitashvili (*Yana*)  
Rati Oneli (*David*)  
Kakha Kintsurashvili (*Alex*)  
Saba Gogichaishvili (*Giorgi*)  
Ia Kokiashvili (*mother*)  
Mari Kopchenovi (*sister*)  
William Dunbar (*American Jehovah’s Witness*)  
Giorgi Tsereteli (*local policeman*)  
  
Georgia/France/Belgium/USA/Netherlands/Israel 2020©  
125 mins

The General

Sat 29 May 12:45  
**Footloose** + pre-recorded intro by Francis Lee  
Sat 29 May 18:00  
**Winner of the Dream Palace Audience Vote: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)**  
Sun 30 May 12:20  
**Broadcast News**  
Sun 30 May 15:40 (+ intro by Sarah Smith); Sat 19 Jun 20:20  
**Car Wash**  
Mon 31 May 18:50  
**Blow Out**  
Tue 1 Jun 20:40  
**The Shout** + pre-recorded intro by Mark Jenkin  
Thu 3 Jun  
**David Byrne’s American Utopia**  
Mon 14 Jun 18:00  
**The Elephant Man** + pre-recorded intro by Prano Bailey-Bond  
Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00  
**The Warriors**  
Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia); Mon 28 Jun 14:30  
**The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover**  
Thu 24 Jun 20:30

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