



NEW RELEASES

Smoke Sauna Sisterhood

Smoke Sauna Sisterhood (Savvusanna sõsarad)

Director: Anna Hints

©: Alexandra Film, Kepler22 Productions, Ursus Parvus

Production Company: Alexandra Film

In co-production with: Kepler22 Productions, Ursus Parvus

With the support of: Estonian Film Institute, Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, Icelandic Film Centre, Sundance Institute Documentary Program, The Cultural Endowment of Estonia, Tartu Film Fund

International Sales: Outlook Filmsales

Post-production Co-ordinator: Priit Pääsuke

Screenwriter: Anna Hints

Story Consultant: Merit Kask

Cinematographers: Ants Tammik, Anna Hints

VFX: Hendrik Proosa

Editors: Hendrik Mägar, Tushar Prakash, Qutaiba Barhamji, Martin Männik, Anna Hints

Credits Designer: Eva Reiska

Colourist: Sten-Johan Lill

Music: Edvard Egilsson, Eeter

Vocalists: Anna Hints, Unnur Jónsdóttir, Marja-Liisa Plats

Sound Designer: Huldar Freyr Arnarson

Co-sound Designer: Edvard Egilsson

Estonia-France-Iceland 2023

89 mins

Digital

A Conic Release

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While completing the deeply cleansing smoke sauna rituals and traditions of Estonia's Võro community, a group of women share their innermost secrets and intimate experiences. Their stories touch on trauma and shame but also surprise, joy and acceptance. Director Anna Hints' camera beautifully observes the bodies, processes and healing power of the smoke sauna, while patiently tapping into the healing power of shared storytelling. A documentary like you may have never seen before, this special film won the World Cinema Documentary Directing Award at Sundance Film Festival, and was selected as Estonia's official entry for Best International Feature Film at the Academy Awards.

Kimberley Sheehan, Film and Events Programmer

The word 'intimate' is too often attached to films; Anna Hints's mesmeric documentary *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*, however, truly earns that descriptor. The film unfolds entirely within and around a wooden cabin in the forest, where a group of women take part in the smoke sauna, a bathing ritual originating in south-east Estonia. Inside the hut a stone-covered, chimney-less stove fills the space with smoke and the women gather naked in the heat. Sweating in the darkness they share their deepest secrets and hidden shames; it becomes clear that the sauna is about purifying the soul as much as the body.

Hints was inducted into this tradition by her grandmother and her insider's perspective is central to the film's warmth and candour. She does not pander to outsiders, using no voiceover and few intertitles. She places the viewer inside the ritual without contextualisation, asking us to watch and listen as the smoke gradually works its magic. As the women begin to talk, the difficult conversations that unfold – about body shaming, breast cancer, childbirth, abortion and grief – provide the film's thematic meat. Interludes in which the voice of an older woman is heard, her silhouetted face obscured by shimmering smoke, connect these testimonies to ancient tradition, reminding us that the struggles of which these women speak are – the odd giggling reference to dick pics aside – eternal ones.

It's a testament to the resourcefulness of Hints and her team, particularly cinematographer Ants Tammik, that *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* captures so viscerally the interior of the cabin. A single sauna can last four hours, and the challenges of filming within a tiny space at lens-shattering temperatures while maintaining the trust of the participants, who are laying themselves bare physically and emotionally, are clear. Most of the women did not wish to show their faces, so Tammik and Hints focus instead on tight close-ups of other body parts – a back beaded in sweat, a dangling foot, a perspiring buttock – lit by glowing coals or gentle shafts of daylight. It's not always clear who is speaking; often their testimonies float above deindividualised images of hands, torsos and limbs, edited in slow, deliberate sequences. The dissection of headless women's bodies is often in cinema a hallmark of the male gaze, but here this approach does not objectify. Instead, the overall effect is a vivid sweat-drenched embodiment of the sauna's spirit – a collective physical experience which transcends the individual in favour of sisterhood.

SIGHT AND SOUND

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In Estonian culture, the smoke sauna is considered a living entity with its own voice, singing and chanting along with those who sweat within its walls. To make her sauna speak, Hints works with sound designer Huldar Freyr Arnarson, composer Eðvarð Egilsson and her own folk band Eeter, crafting a visceral, otherworldly soundtrack. As befits a film that explores the porous boundaries between body, soul and earth, atmospheric musical compositions blend with recordings of natural soundscapes – sizzling hisses, ghostly exhalations, and measured breaths. Meanwhile Hints performs traditional chants alongside the women, powerful mantras – 'Become strong, become powerful!' 'We sweat out all this pain! We sweat out all this fear!' – which express the ritual's emancipatory power.

Such empowerment does not come easily. The discussions we overhear are sometimes harrowing – one description of a sexual assault is deeply distressing – and this unvarnished approach is reflected in Hints's candid, unromanticised aesthetic. Loving shots of imperfect bodies are reminiscent of the joyful fleshiness of a Jenny Saville portrait, while the way the women merge with the trees, water and foliage that surround the cabin brings to mind the semi-obscured forms of Ana Mendieta's land art. Like those artists, Hints captures images of women's bodies and the environment which are beautiful but also raw and powerful. Saunas are also used to smoke meat: in one sequence the women hack at a bloody pig's carcass with an axe, hanging the pork above benches usually occupied by sweating human bodies. The film opens with a similarly resonant image: a woman standing on the surface of a frozen lake, striking at it with a spade, attempting to break through the thick ice.

Smoke Sauna Sisterhood was shot over the course of seven years, but because Hints provides no time markers beyond the gradual changing of the seasons, we never quite know where we are in this chronology. Just as when sweating in a sauna, we might lose track of the passing minutes, the film suspends us in a liminal space, sequestered away from the modern world. By the end, that frozen lake has thawed; amid the lush surroundings the women float – weightless, unburdened, free.

Rachel Pronger, *Sight and Sound*, 12 October 2023