



## NEW RELEASES

# Queendom

### Queendom

Directed by: Agniia Galdanova

©: Galdanova Film LLC

Production Company: Galdanova Film

In association with: Sundance Institute

Documentary Film Program, International

Documentary Association, InMaat Productions,

Doc Society, Sopka Films

International Sales: Dogwoof Ltd

Executive Producers: Jess Search,

Arnaud Borges, David France

Co-executive Producer: James Costa

Produced by: Igor Myakotin, Agniia Galdanova

Consulting Producers: Alice Henty, Melody Gilbert

Bookkeeper: David Harrison

Cinematography by: Ruslan Fedotov

Additional Cinematography: Aliaksandr Tsymbaliuk,

Nikolai Zheludovich, Aleksander Elkan

Edited by: Vlad Fishez

Editorial Consultants: Tyler H. Walk,

Richard Acosta, Charlotte Munch Bengtsen,

Alex O'Flinn, Péter Kerekes

Post-production Services: Dum Dum Films

Titles and Credits Design: République Studio,

Mael Sinic, Tom Uferas, Amélie Vancoppenolle

Music by: Damien Vandesande, Toke Brorson Odin

Sound Design: Andrey Dergachev

Location Sound Mixers: Agniia Galdanova,

Agatha Carioca Vandesande, Ilya Rodionov

Re-recording Mixer: Andrey Dergachev

Supervising Sound Editor: Andrey Dergachev

Dialogue Editor: Ruslan Khusein

USA-UK-Norway 2023©

98 mins

Digital

A Dogwoof release

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No one quite uses the term 'degenerate art' in *Queendom*, but the sentiment is nigh. Russia, it seems, is not a country big enough to hold both a chest-baring Kremlin folk saviour, who bombs his neighbours and murders his critics, and a trans drag artist from the Far East who flaunts her shock-effect queer fantasy costumes in the streets and at protests. One is indecent and must be expunged.

Agniia Galdanova's astonishing dispatch from a Russia sinking into spartanism shows us the human stakes of our contemporary culture wars – prejudice as a tool of repression, art as a space of liberty and possibility. A breathtaking portrait of creative courage in a cold climate, it starts in Magadan, a frozen mining town and former gulag gateway on Siberia's eastern shore, with Gena Marvin teetering out to an icy lake in white and black pantomime snow-queen regalia – high heels, tights and corset, fur coat and ruff, hairless head painted like a cartoon Pierrot – for a self-directed photoshoot. Her friend and assistant Yulia quotes an old Soviet saying from the post-Stalin thaw about the marvels of liberalisation – 'to see Paris and die' – but a quick visit to the supermarket to get some supper suggests less cosmopolitan perspectives. 'Your lingerie is showing,' a security guard reprimands her. 'There are little kids here. You're disturbing the peace.' 'Local norms have changed,' Yulia tells Marvin afterwards. 'Fear and aggression are on the rise.' Not to mention she's back in 'the boonies', in the shadow of the gulag. 'We have fear and subservience in our DNA. Thank god you're different.'

So the film goes, mixing the documentary spectacle of Marvin's extraordinary costume excursions, in her birth town of Magadan and her adopted St Petersburg, with observational drama of how her society reacts – and how Marvin changes in turn, growing into her trans identity while revolting against Russia's rising tide of chauvinism. She is heckled and beaten up; removed from a Paratroopers' Day parade, while wearing trails of white foam and what looks like a meringue on her head, for an 'overtly provocative and destructive outfit that can lead to incidents'; and – after attending a protest for Alexei Navalny bound in duct tape the colours of the Russian flag – expelled from art school for violating the laws and symbols of the Russian Federation. The culture clash also finds more intimate form in the orphaned Marvin's interactions with her grandparents, who are baffled by her social media monetisation plans, let alone her insistence on stepping out in drag. Meanwhile the country is gearing up for Putin's 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Gena's final performance in Russia sees her walking St Petersburg's streets wearing barbed wire, like a trans flagellant, before she's bundled into a police van.

'Normally, in documentary you get fascinated by someone who's already accomplished things and you just want to catch the last bits of how they live,' Galdanova tells me after a screening of *Queendom* in competition at the BFI London Film Festival. (It won the Next:Wave award at Copenhagen's CPH:DOX after its SXSW premiere in March and is now emerging on release for awards season.) Marvin, though, was just getting started with her public performances, transition and politics, all of which flourish on camera. Galdanova met her at the turn of the decade while researching a TV docuseries about drag artists in

## NEW RELEASES

### **The Eternal Daughter**

Continued from Fri 24 Nov

### **Fallen Leaves (Kuolleet lehdet)**

From Fri 1 Dec

### **Queendom**

From Fri 1 Dec

### **Tish**

From Fri 15 Dec (Preview on Fri 1 Dec 18:00 + Q&A with director Paul Sng)

### **Priscilla (preview screenings)**

Previews from Wed 27 Dec. Opens Fri 5 Jan

### **The Boy and the Heron (Kimitachi wa do Ikiruka)**

From Wed 27 Dec

## RE-RELEASES

### **The Red Shoes**

From Fri 8 Dec

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Russia and switched her plan. 'There was a feeling. I didn't know where it would take us but I felt there was something more. Every time we filmed she surprised us with new ideas and layers, her reflections on herself, her parents, her country. That's the beauty of documentary: you never know what's around the corner.'

I called Marvin in Paris a few days later. 'I knew Agniia had an idea, a plan, but I wasn't expecting much.' Her St Petersburg flat had been across the road from Galdanova's mother's house, so they started hanging out and clicked. 'Having a camera allowed me to come out and embrace parts of myself I wasn't aware were there' – before the film, Marvin's performances had been closeted, largely shared on Instagram. 'She really captured that transition and growth when I didn't know what was going on; there was an interest in creating images. When we first started filming in Magadan in winter, it was fun.'

That was 2019-20. Both agree the January 2021 protests against Navalny's homecoming arrest were a turning point in Marvin's political consciousness. 'You could either be where you are or decide to grow,' she says. 'I wanted to speak out about what was happening in the country and the only way was to use my body as a political act.' The Ukraine war was another turning point, with the writing on the wall after the first wave of arrests of protesters, including Marvin. 'I feel my country is now evil,' she writes in the film to a European contact. Army service, which her grandfather had earlier urged as a means to straighten her out, 'means death to me. I cannot and will not participate in this monstrous war. Please help me escape my country.' Galdanova sent her own daughter to Paris, then filmed Marvin's flight into exile in April 2022. Neither has been home since. Marvin has seen Paris, but couldn't attend her grandmother's funeral.

'Be a normal guy,' Marvin's grandfather had told her in a phone call after her expulsion from art school. When she reaches Paris in the film, she calls her grandparents to tell them she's safe. 'I went out last night and saw a normal city. I feel like a normal human being here,' she says. 'I'm not an anomaly, I'm not a weirdo. No one's going to grab, kick or punch me.' Given how Putin has sought to weaponise 'normality' for his reactionary agenda, I ask Marvin what normal means to her. She takes a while to answer. 'I thought a lot about what I was going to tell my grandparents in that phone call. I'd never been abroad and I'd only been in Paris for two days then; I had no assumptions about what it would be like. It's not ideal, of course, and it's best not to have high expectations, I'm learning now. But that was what my grandparents needed to hear from me.'

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, December 2023