

EVERYWHERE,  
EVEN IN AFRICA

with Marika Bakuradze

# MEERAB MINDA

It was April when I was first sent the script from Munich and called to casting. Filming was due to begin the following January, and when I looked over the script and saw the long strings of letters that are so characteristic of German texts, I became



“Nowhere in Africa”.  
Shooting movie. 2001

nervous. I felt there was no way I would be able to memorize it all in such a short time, and I decided instantly to refuse the part. However, my agent pointed out to me that for Caroline – the film’s director – my case was not unusual since a precedent had been set in a previous film of hers, *Beyond Silence*,

which had been made under similar circumstances with the French actress Sylvie Testud. Testud’s character had been completely overdubbed in post-production, and if necessary my role would be handled in the same way.

Hearing the voice of another in place of my own has always been, and remains to this day, one of the things I find most unpleasant and intolerable. When I saw *Nowhere in Africa* for the first time and heard somebody else’s voice I was devastated. Only twice over the course of the entire film can my real voice be heard: once when I speak English and once when I talk in the local African language, Kiswahili.

Eventually, though, my agent won me over and I went for an interview. The first round went well and the director asked to see me again.

Caroline Link, the film's director, became particularly well known after *Nowhere in Africa* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film of 2003, but even before filming began she was a serious director of considerable renown, with a previous Oscar nomination under her belt for her debut film. During our second meeting we went through a few scenes together, and I found it interesting that my character's story had much in common with my own personal history, despite the fact that I look nothing at all like a German man. Circumstance had taken us both far away from our homelands, and I understood his problems and experiences very well. For this reason I think some inner part of me was apparent from the start, and the director picked up on this. In my opinion it was this situation that convinced Caroline to offer me the role.



With Caroline Link





“Nowhere in Africa”.  
Shooting movie. 2001





“Nowhere in Africa”.  
Shooting movie. 2001

The film is based on Stefan Zweig’s autobiographical novel *Nowhere in Africa*, which had been a bestseller in Germany in its time, and therefore the public had high expectations of the film. Before long, an introductory press conference was arranged in Munich, where the film was announced together with plans for an extended filming expedition to Africa. This was the first time that the names – including my own – of the actors who were to play the main roles were mentioned. Suddenly, right in the middle of the press conference, a red-haired woman sitting among the rows of journalists called out “Frau Link! I had always pic-



tured a completely different actor for the leading male role.” At the time everyone simply ignored her, but her rude remark affected me. Whenever I recalled her words, not to mention her red hair, I felt a great deal of bitterness.

From the very first day I built good relationships with the locals in the areas where we were filming. I found them considerably more interesting and fun to spend time with than my European colleagues, who turned out to be completely unfit to deal with their environment. Terrified of becoming infected with some exotic disease, they spent their days washing their hands and disinfecting themselves with mosquito spray every five minutes, while I tried to immerse myself as deeply as possible in my surroundings.

When the wife of one of my local colleagues, Sidede Onyulo, passed away, I attended the burial and even accompanied the mourners to the wake. I spent the entire night with them, taking part in all the mourning rituals and eating everything that they offered to me to eat. To be honest it was a rather gruesome sight. They slaughtered a chicken right there and then by ripping its head off with their bare hands. Then they grabbed hold of the fleeing headless chicken, plucked the carcass, and laid it

“Nowhere in Africa”.  
shooting movie. 2001



directly on the fire. After all this, the family matriarch offered me, with her own hands, a piece of half-cooked, still bloody meat. I knew it would be disrespectful to refuse and so, although I had to force myself, I took the meat and ate it.

With that one action I showed them my attitude, and as a result they found it easy to see that I was different from the others. At first they held back from entering into a relationship with me, but Sidede, who went everywhere with me, explained to everyone that I was an actor shooting a film, and that was why I was here among them. White people were known collectively as Jack in those parts. They referred to all of us as Jack. For them the name signified an invading British colonialist. However, they understood from my behaviour that I wished to have a different type of relationship with them, and in fact they told me that they suspected I was probably not just another Jack.

I was able to answer them directly through the film. In one scene my character Walter is asked “Why are you in this country? You must be very rich.” To which Walter replies “I am neither rich, nor better than you in any way. I am here because I was driven out of my own country.”

Thanks to my role I was able to recite this speech in Kiswahili, and when I answered them in their own language they were greatly surprised. They realized that I too was a child of a past colonial power, just like them.





“Nowhere in Africa”. The  
Academy Award for Best  
Foreign Language Film 2003

With Levan Tsuladze  
and Zuka Papuashvili.  
Tbilisi



In 1985 Soviet military forces invaded Afghanistan, and my friends and I watched as preparations were undertaken to send us dark-skinned Georgians and Armenians into the country. The Azeris were let off the hook for fear they might join forces with the Afghans, their fellow Muslims, and turn on the Soviets with lethal results. It was forbidden by law to send students to war, but when it became evident that there was a shortage of troops, the government simply changed the law in order to fill the army with young men. This action had a direct effect on Levan Berikashvili. Although he did not manage to escape military service, he was, however, fortunate enough to be billeted to Siberia. They hauled him straight out of his second year class at university and took him away, while I stayed put. My mother did everything she could to make sure I did not have to go to Afghanistan, and she was only just in time as pretty much everything was already set for my departure. I had even been sent some money – two rubles, allot-

ted to each recruit to be spent on having his head shaved.

went to the doctor to have my health checked, knowing that my entire future depended on his findings. I will never forget how my father helped us. In a short period of time he managed to come up with 2000 rubles, the standard bribe to be paid to the doctor in return for a falsified statement of health. In exchange for the money I received the highly coveted classification “186” on my medical card. This meant that I was in poor health and physically imbalanced. Perhaps there was a certain degree of thoughtlessness to my actions, but as a result of them I would not have to stand as a soldier on the front line of the war, for the army did not accept anyone classified as “186”. In short, my parents had literally saved my life through their efforts. Meanwhile, I remain indebted to the Soviet Union to the tune of two rubles.

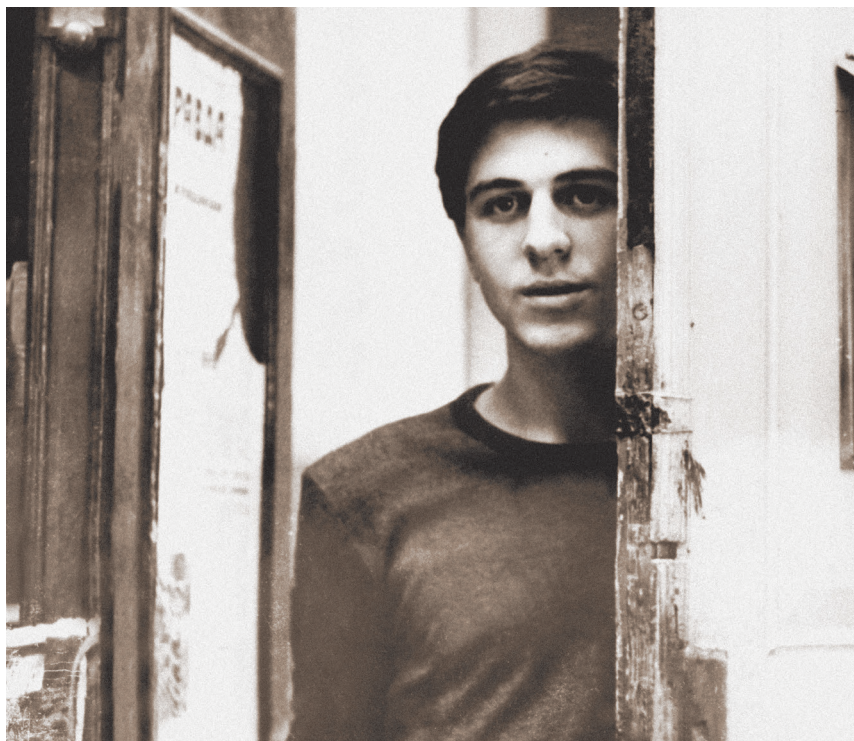
At dawn on April 9th, my mother’s friend Temur Chitaishvili turned up unexpectedly at our door and shouted something about people being shot at. From the street we could hear a cacophony of voices and the horrific, deafening roar of tanks. Suddenly we saw a wave of people











“Step”. Director Alexander Rekhviashvili. 1985

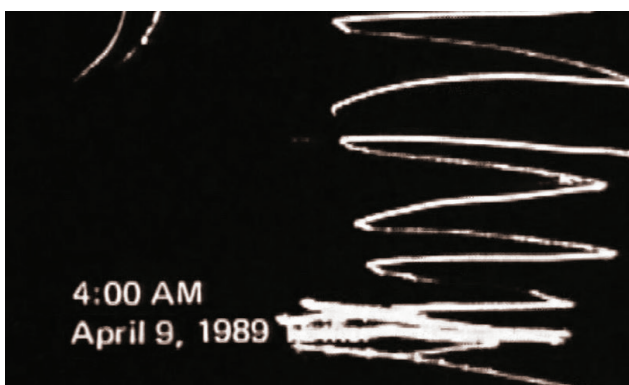
moving up towards the higher streets. They fled into courtyards and apartment blocks, while in our block all the lights came on rapidly in every room. Whenever I remember those events in detail and think over them, I can see that the attack had been devised with the utmost vindictiveness:



it came at 4 o'clock in the morning, the hardest part of the nightshift. That night, when the wounded and scared came running instinctively into our block, we moved a step closer to the oncoming tragedy. Although a long time has passed since then, I believe that one of the most painful wounds in our recent history was opened that night, a wound that remains unhealed to this day.

Soon after the events of April, Levan Kitia released his short film *Crossroads*. I had a part in the film and so I attended the premiere, which took place at the House of Cinema in Tbilisi. The scenes in the film depicting April 9th were realized for the most part using voices: the voices of people standing outside the parliament building, the voices of female singers, and the voice of Patriarch Ilia II, all accompanied in the background by a distant, low roar. Visually we are presented with a mostly black background, but thanks to these voices the scenes have a deeply emotional effect.

A few minutes before the show was to begin, Levan unexpectedly pulled a bunch of keys out of his pocket and scratched a line through the entire tape. As we listened to the voices, the scratches he had made with the keys flashed briefly onto the black screen. This experiment, undertaken by the director seemingly on a whim, added an extremely important element to the film. It was as if the scratches represented all the pain of that night.



Inside I still felt young enough to be able to run away from the developments in the country. I was not yet aware that life is short, and I believed that if I could only leave it all behind I would be able to achieve anything I wanted. My decision was facilitated by my loved ones, since every time I called them in Tbilisi they said the same thing: “If you get the chance stay where you are. It’s better over there”. I knew they were not just saying these things for the sake of it. I also knew that the 30 dollars I had sent them recently would come in very useful.



Dusk had already fallen when I left our house on Mtatsminda and walked down to Rustaveli Avenue to buy bread at a bakery near Griboyedov Street. I was standing by the bakery door, and just as the shop assistant handed me the bread, shots suddenly rang out. The two sides had started shooting at each other, and bullets were flying in all directions and raining down directly onto my head. I stood there not knowing what to do. I told myself not to run. Somehow I had to stay calm and walk back up to the house. I decided it was a test: if a bullet hit me I would admit defeat there and then. If stayed alive, I would never set foot in this city again. With this thought swirling around in my head I climbed up the hill to Mtatsminda, holding the bread in my hand.

At that moment the warm bread reminded me of the chicken I had carried through the forest when I was a child. The freshly baked bread warmed me and gave me the strength to walk through the rain of bullets.

I reached the house unharmed and did exactly what I had told myself I would do. I put the bread on the table, and just a few days later I went to Moscow to apply for a visa for Europe.

I do not consider Russian cinema a separate entity. It is simply a part of the whole process, the part that periodically connects me to that country.

Vienna. 1998-99



My first serious offer came in 1999 for the film *Luna Papa*, which was to be a joint production between Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Japan, Switzerland, France, Germany, and Austria.

During the first phase I stayed in Tajikistan for three months, returning to Vienna whenever there was a gap in the filming. A little while later we were called back to film some extra scenes, which meant another trip to Tajikistan. This time

I looked forward in a completely different way to 5pm, when I would see the surroundings I loved so much once again.

On my second visit I was much better prepared. In Austria I had written a list consisting of all the necessary items I needed personally,

and all the groceries and necessities I had been asked to take back with me. For example, the camera crew had requested a bottle of a particular brand of Irish whiskey, which had to be of a certain vintage. Others wanted chocolate, Swiss cheese, wine, and so on. Once I had satisfied everybody's demands, I stocked up on a large quantity of coloured lightbulbs of the type used to decorate fir trees.

In the evenings, left alone in the impenetrable darkness of the desert, I needed light that would



With Chulpan Khamatova and Ato Muhamedjanov. "Luna Papa". Shooting movie. 1999

inspire me. Besides, I was living alone in a cabin, far from the main accommodation block, with only frogs and lizards for company. It was a chance for me to arrange my surroundings just as I wanted them. In my cabin I was isolated from other people, and on my first visit Chulpan had explained to me that if I wanted to win the battle against these terrible toads I would need to use drinking chalices. She had worked this strategy out for herself: every time she found a frog's shelter she covered it with a drinking chalice, thus ensuring that there was no way for the frog to creep out at night.

Chulpan had already seen the script for Aleksei German's new film, and it was she who first recommended me for a part, which was how I ended

"Luna Papa".  
Shooting movie.  
Director Bakhtiyar  
Hudaynazarov. 1999



up at casting for *Paper Soldier* in 2008. The film was to be premiered at the Venice Film Festival and the entire cast and crew were planning to make the trip to Italy. For me, however, this was not an easy step.

I was being asked to go to Venice to promote a Russian film in September 2008, just one month after the August war. As soon as I was asked I knew I would not be able to do it. I immediately called Chulpan and told her that there was no way I could stand on stage with a delegation of Russians while tanks from their country were still present in mine. Chulpan understood my position perfectly. Next I called Aleksei and asked him to go to the festival without me. His reply gave me pause for thought.

He told me that if the cast and crew members were to present themselves at the festival without the actor who had played the main role, everyone would think that we were playing at toy soldiers instead of setting an example as professionals. He

asked me to stand together with him and the other Russians and to say that, in spite of the bombs, there remained spheres in which it was possible for our two countries to find a common language. I found his reply interesting, but I was still not convinced, and I told him that at this



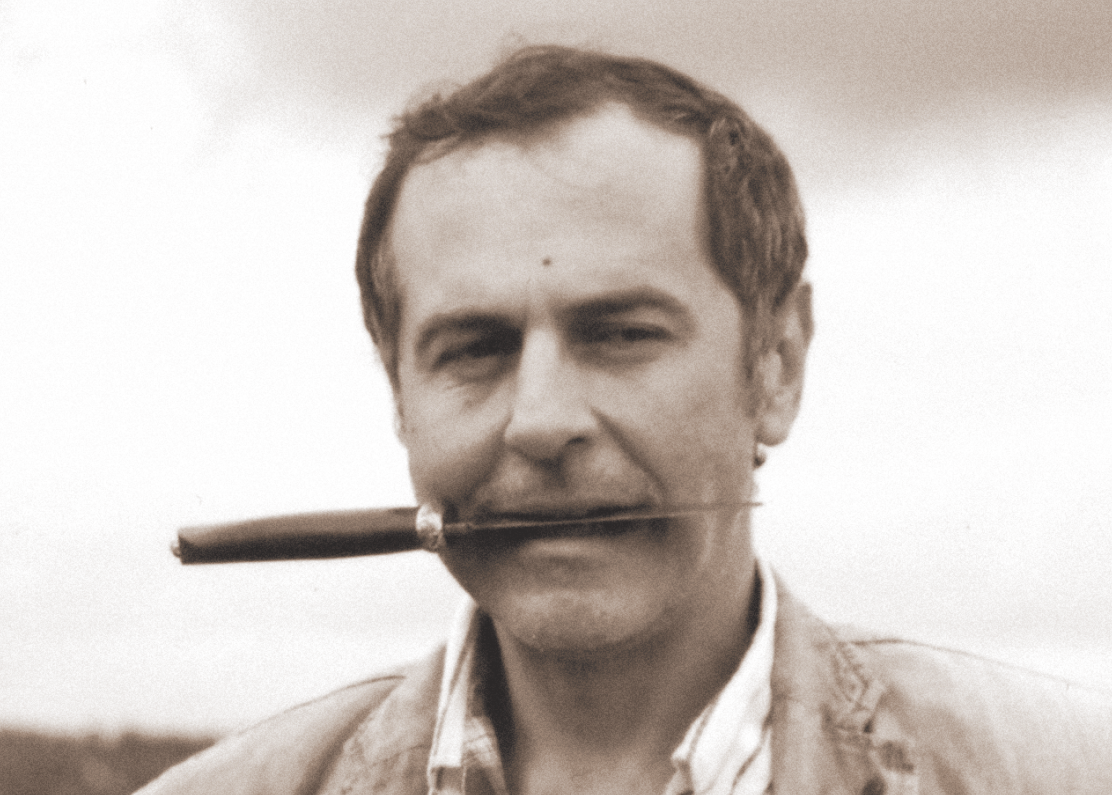




“Paper Soldier”.  
Director Aleksei  
German, 2008

moment I found it difficult to believe in such idealistic arguments. German then explained to me how he himself felt about the situation, as a professional and an auteur. He told me that he felt we stood above politics, saying “Merab, we’ve made a really valuable film, and there’s nothing for you to feel ashamed of. If you don’t come with us we’ll be criticized from all sides”. And with that he put an end to our conversation.

I had to be a little more objective if I wanted to see things differently. Not one of the people with whom I was due to stand on stage in Venice had ever expressed hatred for the Georgian nation. None of them were so-called “Putinists”, none of them had been poisoned by ideology, and in our dealings with each other we had never discussed such questions. Indeed, the film itself was completely detached from political concerns. Incidentally, what I have written above goes for my entire circle of friends in Russia, with whom I continue to have the pleasure of collaborating.





It is essential to separate the aggressors from those normal people who perhaps find it extremely difficult to live under the current Russian “regime”. In particular I have in mind artists, whose profession, by its very nature, has always been in opposition to and even in conflict with the government of the day, no matter how benevolent that government may be.

In light of all these considerations I came to the decision that I could not abandon my friends, especially Chulpan, my partner once again in this film. It was not an easy decision for me, but nevertheless I went to Venice. We knew that our appearance, Russians and Georgians together, would

be turned into some kind of political statement, and to help me avoid all the political questions from the reporters, my agent, Daniela Stibitz, accompanied me everywhere like a bodyguard, never letting me out of her sight. Even so they tried to provoke me in small ways – several Russian journalists came up to me and said some words to me in Georgian, hoping to draw me into conversation. I ignored them completely. Despite our best efforts, though, the artistic values of the film ended up being overshadowed by the theme of war.

The main topic discussed during the premiere was the fact that I was there together with the Russians. As soon as we walked out onto the stage the assembled journalists started hurling questions at us. Once I realized that we would not be given enough space to reply, it occurred to me, purely by instinct, that the only way I could effectively show my attitude at that moment was with a kiss. I turned to Chulpan, picked up her hand, and kissed it right there, in front of the watching crowd.

With Chulpan Khamatova.  
International movie festival  
Venice. 2008





The way in which I was chosen for and confirmed in the role was rather strange. Indeed, the whole process of landing the role came about by a very strange twist of fortune. At first the role was to be played by Gega Kobakhidze, who, as one of the main participants in the famous hijacking of Aeroflot Flight 6833 in 1983-84, had been sentenced to death by firing squad. Of course I was still young at the time, but I knew of Gega since there were only four years between us and our respective periods of study at the Tbilisi Theatre and Film University had briefly overlapped. Because of this personal connection I took a great interest in everything that happened to Gega and the other hijackers. The chain then continues with another unfortunate link: following Gega's arrest Goglika Chogovadze was considered as a candidate for the role, but he died suddenly from an electric shock at Lake Lisi on the outskirts of Tbilisi. As far as I know, Goglika had already done a screen test when this tragedy occurred, but his death changed everything, and it was at this point that I became part of the life of *Repentance*.

I read about the search for an actor to play the role of Tornike in a newspaper article. The article said that although work on the film had already begun, circumstances had made it necessary for the

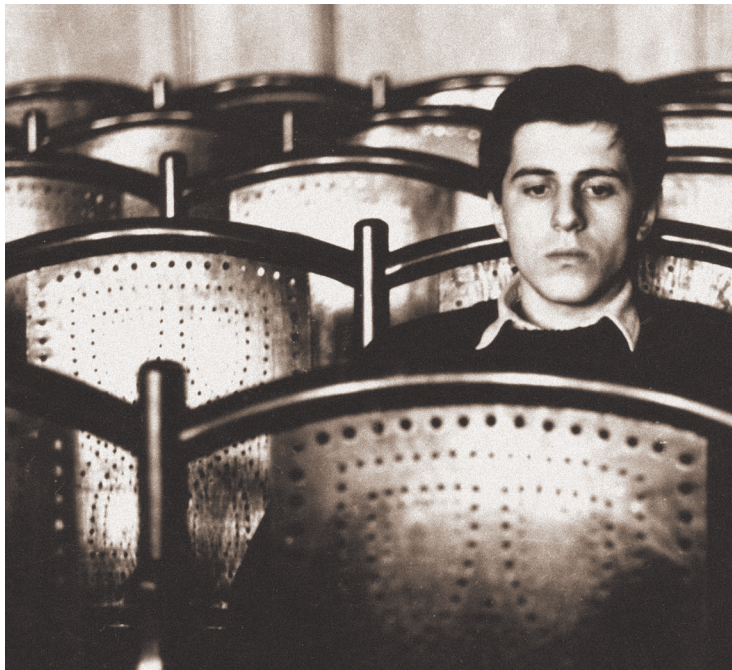


With Ia Ninidze.  
"Repentance". 1984

director Tengiz Abuladze to change the actor playing the main role, and that a competition would be held to find someone suitable. Nothing else was mentioned – no additional information and no explanation of the circumstances. Soon after the article was published, a group of Tengiz’s assistants came to the Theatre and Film University to take a look at the male students. At that time I was in my second year of study, and Nino Tarkhan-Mouravi suggested to Malkhaz Aslamazishvili and Lela Tsipuria that I should go to the auditions. Sure enough they summoned me, and off I went.

I wore a short fur jacket that had been cut up by my grandmother so that the hood was missing. I often wore the jacket, even though it fit me so

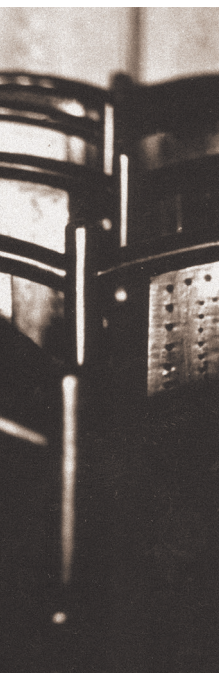
“Repentance”. Director Tengiz Abuladze. Shooting movie. 1984



poorly that my discomfort was clear for all to see. Trussed up in my fur jacket, I made my way to the studio building in Dighomi to which we had been summoned. As I entered I saw that the foyer was filled with boys of my age. They all looked like well-dressed wrestlers, and as soon as I stood next to them I knew I had no chance. I was convinced that up against these ogres, the best role I could hope for was that of the little wooden puppet Buratino. Nevertheless, I figured that since I had gone all the way out to Dighomi I might as well go through with the audition. They asked me my age and I replied that I was 17. They told me I looked older, and at that point I became even more certain that all was lost. I stood up, said goodbye, and

walked out of the hall, wishing only to take my leave of Tengiz and his assistants, Neli Kutateladze and Nana Janelidze, with my pride still intact. To my amazement I was soon called back for a second audition, where I found myself among the lucky few who had made it to the next round.

In parallel with my burgeoning film career I was deeply involved in the theatre. I was about to finish university and was preparing my graduation piece: *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In fact I was so busy that once filming for *Repentance* was over I did not even give a second thought to its release.





“Repentance”.  
Shooting movie 1984

One day at the Theatre and Film University I bumped into Goga Khaindrava, who told me that he had seen me on film the day before and that I had done a great job. I did not even know that the film was finished. Goga promised me that he would take me to the studio the next day and show me the film sur-

reptitiously. When we arrived at the studio, the director and a few technical staff were correcting the color and light, and since they appeared deeply ensconced in their work we felt it best to stay outside the auditorium. I don't think anyone even knew we were there. Goga let me quietly into the equipment room, and through a small window in the room I looked at the screen and saw myself on film for the first time. I nearly died from shock! I felt as though someone had suddenly punched me in the face in order to sober me up. It was the first time in my life I had seen myself at that resolution. No-one had ever taken a photograph or a home video of me so close up. The age of the selfie was of course still in the distant future, and on group photos taken at school and university we all appeared as small as dots, so to see myself on such an enormous screen was a huge shock to me. As I watched I thought about how I looked and acted – the size of my nose and the way I opened my mouth and spoke. I hated watching myself so much that I ended up feeling depressed and deeply



embarrassed. I thought about how the film would be seen by the whole country, my whole family, all my friends, and I wanted to curl up and die. Stupefied by my thoughts I came back out into the foyer, where Goga was waiting for me. “You did a great job, right?” he asked me. I nodded, but I was still in the depths of shock, and so ashamed that I could not recall anything about the film other than a hazy mishmash of places, people, and events.

Before its official release, the film could only be seen on videotapes that were passed from hand to hand “under the table”. *Repentance* was one of the top three videos of the period, along with *Caligula* and *Emmanuel*. You could be arrested merely for having one of those tapes in your possession, but thanks to the people who passed them around, the film started to build up a small following.

In chronological order, the film was shown first in Tbilisi, then in Moscow, and finally at the 40th International Film Festival in Cannes. Tengiz traveled to France together with Avto Makharadze, and *Repentance* won three prizes at Cannes. Canon became the official distributor of the film, and *Repentance* was shown in over 100 countries. Roskino, meanwhile, bought us each a Zhiguli 05 car as a reward for our part in the film’s success. I sold mine as quickly as I could.









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