



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2026 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD

ULYA



Short synopsis

Soviet Union, Latvia, 1964. Ulya, an Old Believer teenage girl nearing two meters tall, grows up on a faraway country farm. Her unusual height troubles her family, who wonder if there's a place for her in the world. When her class photo reaches basketball coaches, Ulya is whisked to Riga to join a famous basketball team. Struggling with her height and identity, she trains hard, but realizes basketball can't fulfill her dream of a normal life. After fleeing back home, Ulya discovers both village life and basketball see her only for her height. Accepting herself, she faces a choice: hide or aim to be the best basketball player in the world.

Synopsis

Soviet Union, Latvia, 1964. On the Paberze farm, located among the snowy fields in Latgale, in a family of Old Believers, lives a teenage girl, Ulya, whose height is approaching two meters at an alarming rate and does not seem to be stopping. So far, she has found a safe heaven in her village, where surrounded by her loving family she helps out with farmwork. But the question gnaws at her parents (and Ulya also): is there really a place in the world for a giant-sized girl?

An opportunity to find such a place arises when her older sister Tatjana's fiancé, Pavel, secretly sends Ulya's class photo to Karbergs, the head-coach of the legendary Latvian women's basketball team TTT. Karbergs sees huge potential in the giant girl and whisks her away to capital Riga.

Ulya goes in the hope that there will be taller houses and taller people in the big city. But her hopes are soon crushed, because on the basketball court her height sticks out even more. With the help of her ill-mannered, foul-mouthed coach, she realizes the only way to avoid everyone's derisive eyes is to start playing better.

After working hard and experiencing her first successes, she is struck by the painful realization that everyone sees her as just a means for their own ends; that basketball does not help fulfill her own dream – to be normal and have a normal life. Ahead of an important professional test – the famous Leningrad Spartakiad – Ulya runs back home to her home village.

Back home, Ulya soon starts to feel that life in her home village is not very different from the world of basketball: here, too, she is useful because of her strength and height. Not only that, Ulya feels she has changed as a person. Coming to terms with the understanding that there is no short Ulya in the world, it's now time for her to ask herself: what does she want? Keep hiding under the tall Latgale trees or become the best basketball player in the world?

Director Viesturs Kairiņš on film



It all began with the actor Kārlis Arnolds Avots. When I invited him to join my theatre, it was our very first conversation in life. He told me that his dream was to play Ulyana Semjonova. At the time, we were talking about theatre.

A few years later, while we were filming our previous film *January*, I listened as Kārlis passionately shared this idea with cinematographer Wojtek Staroń during a break. I listened—and suddenly realized this was not a theatre play, but a film. In theatre, the idea seemed achievable. In cinema, it felt impossible. And it was precisely at that point of impossibility that everything clicked for me.

The filming process felt like a constantly interrupted dream. We searched for poetic solutions to reflect Ulya's inner world, trying to enter her mind, her thoughts, her sensations—to be as subjective as possible. Paradoxically, the story evolved in the opposite direction: from something deeply personal into something universal. Ulya's story became a story about all of us.

A person always carries within them a vague inner landscape, like a memory. For me, that inner landscape is Latgale—my childhood land in eastern Latvia. The same place where Ulya was born in a small village and later discovered by sports professionals. I understand this landscape deeply, and it became the key to the film's poetic language. We began shooting in Latgale, and it shaped the entire aesthetic of the film. It became like a dream of a person's inner world.

What makes this story especially personal to me is that the film takes place in the year my parents met. My father was an amateur photographer, and I inherited five boxes of his negative rolls. Many scenes and the overall atmosphere of the film are directly inspired by his photographs.

Kārlis Arnolds Avots on playing Ulya in the film



8 years ago I joined a new acting class, and at that moment they were working on Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky. I reread the novel, at my mother's place. I didn't want to compete with any of the actors for the most significant roles like Raskolnikov or Svidrigailov. They were all taken.

And I realized that, in truth, the role I wanted to play the most was the old pawnbroker woman - the one Raskolnikov murders. I said this out loud, and my mother replied that I would be a very tall old woman, like Ulyana Semjonova.

I slammed the book shut, walked out of the house, and started to cry. I realized there's not a story or a role that moves my heart like Ulya.

I loved her. She was my neighbor, and she became my friend. I found her life more compelling than any other story I've come across. She trusted me - and I felt a personal responsibility for that.

The filming process was challenging, but at the same time also effortless. Nothing had to be forced - her life story, her past, my real-life relationship with Ulya and the people around her had, over the years, grown into me.

Challenging as ever because, I had to be consciously aware of details - how not to tense up too much, remind myself that I have to carry a different rhythm, a controlled structure of energy which is not my own. My body, too, were living a completely different life than in any other role. But the most important was accessing the soul.

I always reminded myself that she is here.

All of that, in truth, helped me move away from myself. And of course, the constant battle with doubt after a shooting day - did I do everything I'm capable of, as honestly as I possibly can?

Producer Guntis Trekteris on film



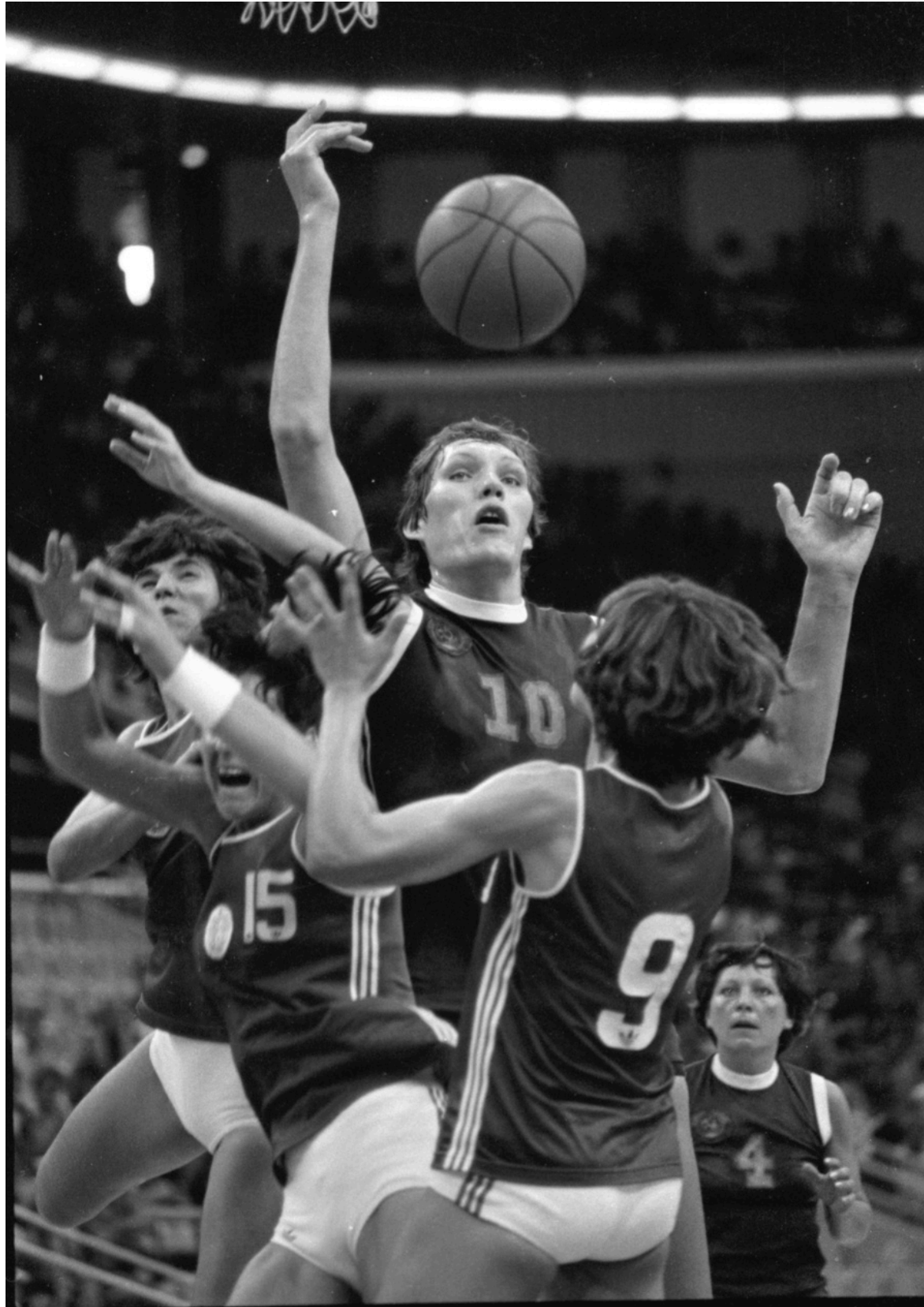
ULYA is a coming-of-age story about difference, identity, and the cost of being seen only for what sets you apart. Set in Soviet Latvia of the 1960s, the film follows a young girl whose extraordinary height opens doors to greatness while distancing her from the simple, “normal” life she longs for. For us, this is not just a sports story, but a human one—about the tension between belonging and individuality, and the courage it takes to define oneself beyond expectations.

Rooted in the cultural contrast between a secluded Old Believers’ village and the demanding world of elite Soviet sport, the film explores how systems—whether family, society, or institutions—can reduce a person to their function. Ulya’s journey is about discovering and reclaiming her own voice in a world eager to decide her fate.

During production, we made bold and risky creative choices on casting, languages used as well as shooting format. These decisions challenged convention and required trust from the entire team as well as financiers, but ultimately proved essential in capturing the authenticity and emotional truth of Ulya’s story.

At its heart, ULYA is about accepting who you are—and deciding what to do with it.

ULYANA SEMJONOVA (1952–2026)



A two-time Olympic champion (1976, 1980), three-time world champion, and ten-time European champion, she is the most decorated player in the history of women's basketball in terms of international titles. An outstanding center, she was a long-time leader of Latvia's strongest team TTT (1967–1987) and of the USSR national team (1968–1986). She was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame (1993), the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame (1999), and the FIBA Hall of Fame (2007).

Ulyana (Ulya) was born in a remote part of Latvia and only discovered basketball quite late, when the tall teenager was invited to train in the capital. Semjonova quickly mastered the fundamentals of the game and in the following years achieved exceptional technical and tactical excellence, which allowed her to fully utilize her unique height (210 cm) and made her virtually unbeatable on the court. Her wide arsenal of basketball skills and strong game intelligence enabled her to actively contribute to team play; coaches often built their tactics around her unique abilities and playing style. Neutralizing Semjonova was for many years the greatest challenge for coaches and players of the best teams in the USSR and other European countries; she was often recognized as the top scorer of a game or tournament.

After the end of her playing career, U. Semjonova became actively involved in the work of the Latvian Olympic Committee (LOC), serving as its Vice President (1988–1992). She was one of the initiators behind the establishment of the Latvian Olympians Social Fund, which provided support to retired athletes.

Cast:

Kārlis Arnolds Avots.....	Ulya
Chulpan Khamatova.....	Mother
Aleksas Kazanavičius.....	Father
Arturs Krūzkops.....	Kārlis Karbergs, coach
Kaspars Dumburs.....	Pauls Karpovičs, coach
Alise Dzene.....	Maija, Ulya's teammate
Dārta Cīrule.....	Maiga, Ulya's teammate
Madara Viļčuka.....	Ilze, Ulya's teammate
Shamil Khamatov.....	Ulya's brother

Crew:

Director..... **Viesturs Kairišs**
Scriptwriters..... **Kārlis Arnolds Avots, Livia Ulman, Andris Feldmanis**
With participation of..... **Viesturs Kairišs, Wojciech Staroń**
Director of Photography..... **Wojciech Staroń (PSC)**
Production Designer..... **Ieva Jurjāne**
Key Make-up Designer..... **Liisi Põllumaa**
Costume Designer..... **Rūta Lečaitė**
Editor..... **Armands Začs**
Music by..... **PUULUUP**
Supervising Sound Designer..... **Siim Skepast**
Music Supervisor..... **Juris Vaivods**
Co-producers..... **Pille Rünk / Estonia, Małgorzata Staroń / Poland, Ieva Norvilienė / Lithuania**
Producer..... **Guntis Trekteris / Latvia**
Production companies..... **Ego Media (LV), Allfilm (EE), Staron Film (PL), Tremora (LT)**

Viesturs Kairišs - Biography

Born 1971 in Riga. He was studying at the Latvian Academy of Culture, where in 1997 he obtained a qualification as a theatre and film director and began working as a staff director at the New Riga Theatre. His theatre productions were presented at international festivals, including the Vienna Festival Week (*Hotel Europa*), the Hebbel Theatre (*The Snake*), the Avignon Festival (*Hotel Europa*), and the Bonn Biennale (*Dark Deer, Hotel Europa*).

Kairišs made his debut in opera directing with Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* at the Latvian National Opera, for which he received the Grand Music Award in 1999. Shortly afterward, in 2001, he staged Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at the Latvian National Opera, which was later turned into an art short film and screened at the 42nd Venice Biennale.

In 2007, with his production of Wagner's opera *Die Walküre*, he joined the project of staging the tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung* at the Latvian National Opera. Kairišs directed the final three operas of the cycle, which received positive reviews in prominent music and opera journals. Meanwhile, his production of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Komische Oper Berlin was described by the Financial Times as "a respectable contribution to Britten's flourishing tradition in Germany" and received many other favorable reviews. Since then, his operas have also been staged at the Cologne Opera and the Darmstadt State Opera, likewise receiving positive critical reception.

In 2020, Kairišs became the artistic director of the Dailes Theatre.



Viesturs Kairiņš, filmography

- 2022: **January** (fiction)
- 2020: **The Sign Painter** (fiction)
- 2016: **The Chronicles of Melanie** (fiction)
- 2014: **Invisible City** (documentary)
- 2014: **Pelican in the Desert** (documentary)
- 2009: **Lohengrin from Varka Kru** (documentary)
- 2006: **Dark Deer** (fiction)
- 2004: **Romeo and Juliet** (hybrid documentary)
- 2004: **Monument** (documentary short)
- 2001: **Leaving By the Way** (fiction)
- 2001: **The Magic Flute** (short)
- 2000: **Wedding** (short)
- 1998: **The Train** (documentary short)

Partners:



National Film Centre of Latvia





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