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D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
La Biennale di Venezia 2017  
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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL 2017



LOS  
VERSOS  
DEL  
OLVIDO  
OBLIVION  
VERSES  
a film by  
Alireza  
Khatami



# logline

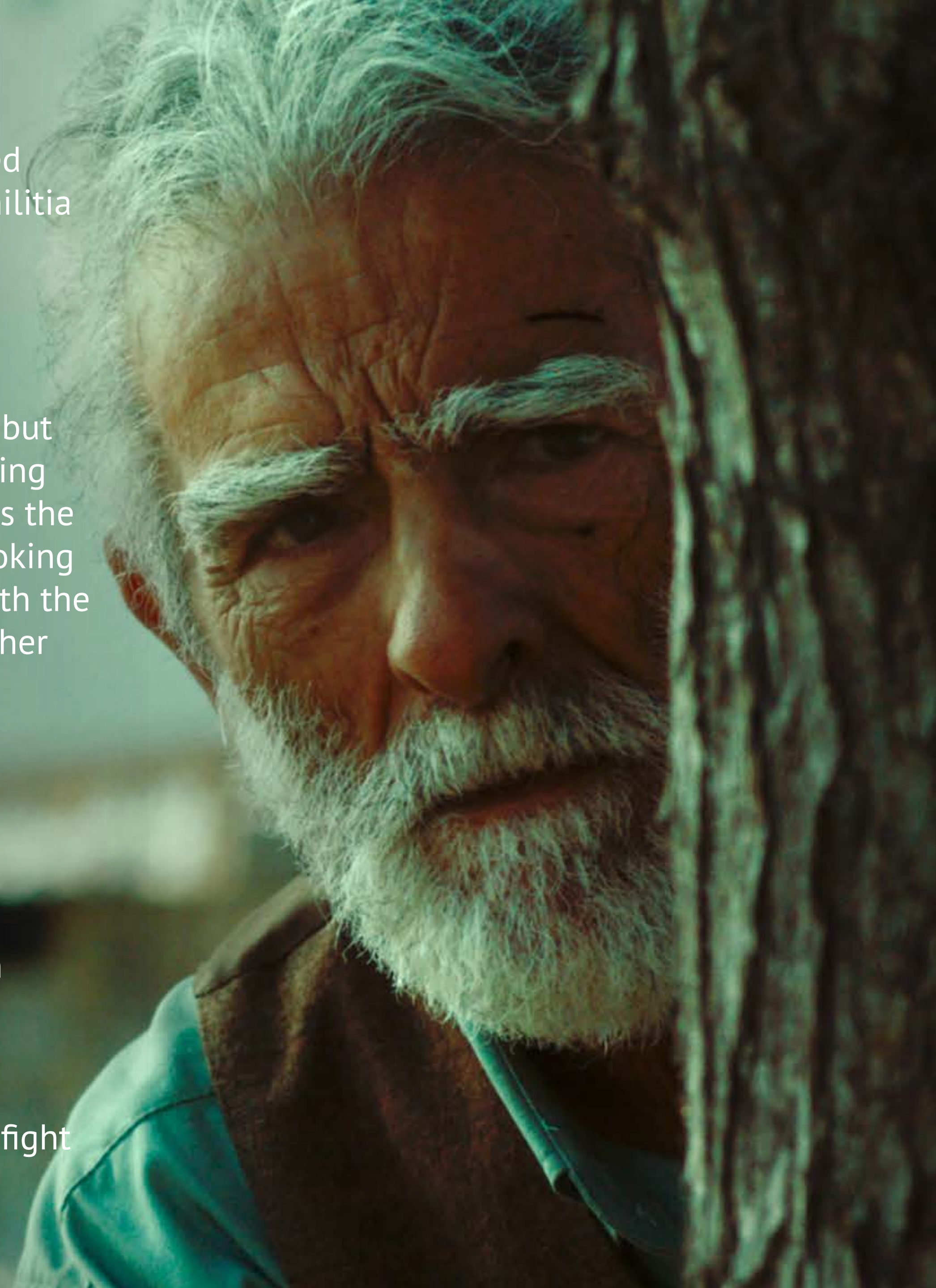
When the elderly caretaker of a remote morgue discovers the body of a young woman killed during a protest, he embarks on a magical odyssey to give her a proper burial before the militia returns.

# synopsis

The elderly caretaker of a remote morgue possesses an impeccable memory for everything but names. He passes his days showing corpses to those searching for their lost ones and tending to his beloved plants. When protest in a nearby city breaks out and the militia covertly raids the morgue to hide civilian casualties, he discovers the body of an unknown young woman. Evoking memories of personal loss, he embarks on a magical odyssey to give her a proper burial with the help of a mystic gravedigger who collects stories of the dead, an old woman searching for her long-lost daughter, and a hearse driver tormented by his past.

# director's statement

*Oblivion Verses* is inspired by tragic events that are close to my heart. For years I did not have the courage to revisit these memories. It was only after mediating the events through a different language and geography that I could speak of it and understand that historical amnesia prepares the way for violence to be repeated. *Oblivion Verses* is about the ethical demand to remember the past and resist the violence of forgetting as a form of personal redemption. It is a reflection on the politics of memory and a poetic homage to those who fight to seek justice for the unknown.









# director's biography

Alireza Khatami (1980, Iran) is an independent filmmaker whose trademark is folding fantasy elements into otherwise realistic narratives. His works explore themes of memory, trauma and identity politics with dark humor and unapologetic wit. Alireza started his career in 2000 as an assistant to several prominent Iranian directors, including Asghar Farhadi. He later studied visual effects in Malaysia, and then went on to receive his Master of Fine Arts degree in film production from the Savannah College of Art & Design. His latest short film, *Mr. Chang's New Address*, premiered at Directors' Fortnight of Cannes Film Festival in 2013. After teaching cinema in Beirut for three years he moved to Chicago, where he is now an assistant professor in the School of Cinematic Arts at DePaul University.

# selected filmography

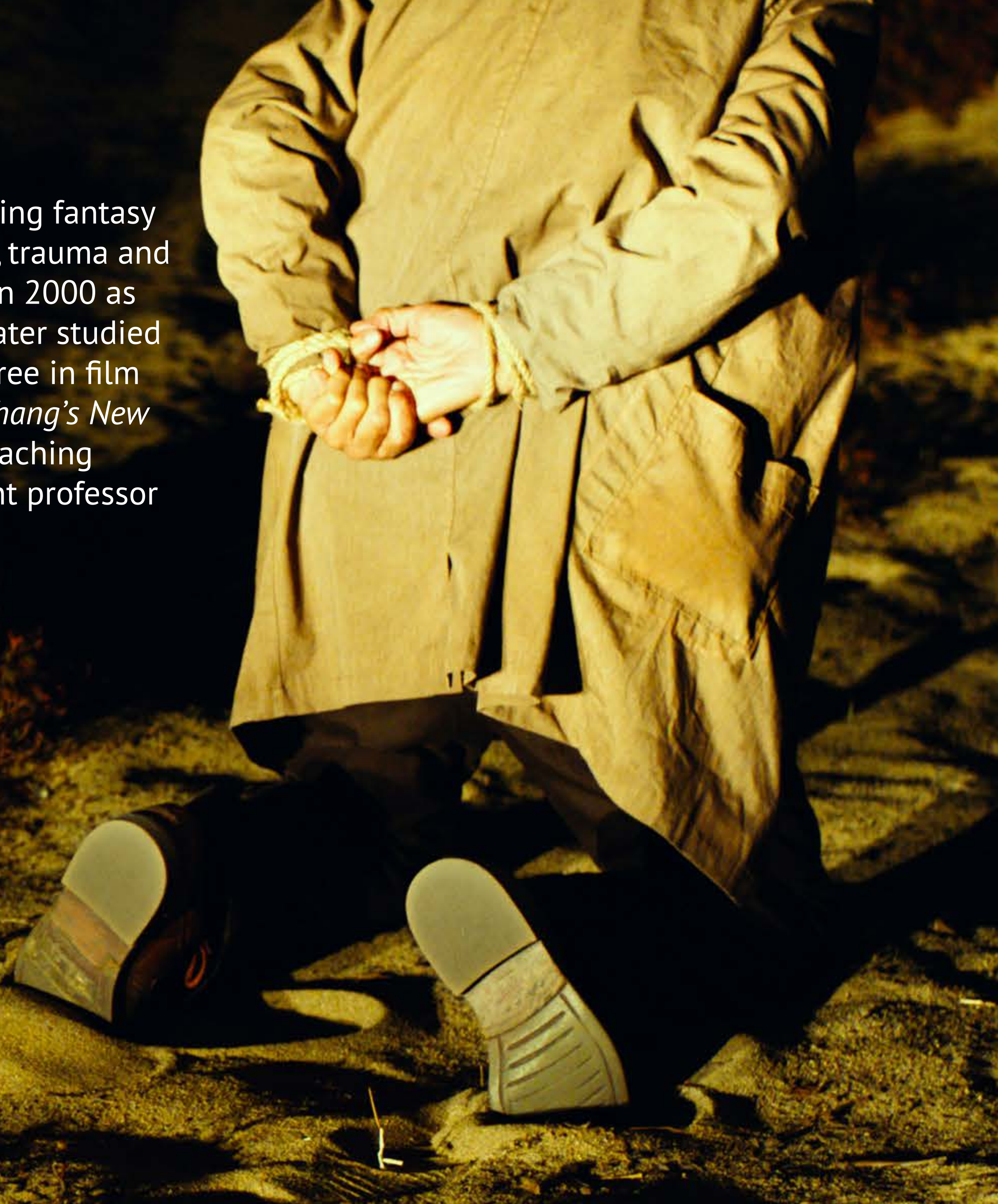
**Mr. Chang's New Address** | Short Fiction, Writer, Co-Director | Taiwan, 2013

*Premiered at Directors' Fortnight of Cannes Film Festival*

**Rain Dog** | Short Fiction, Writer, Director | USA, 2013

**Focal Point** | Short Fiction, Writer, Director | Malaysia, 2009

*Premiered at Rotterdam Film Festival*

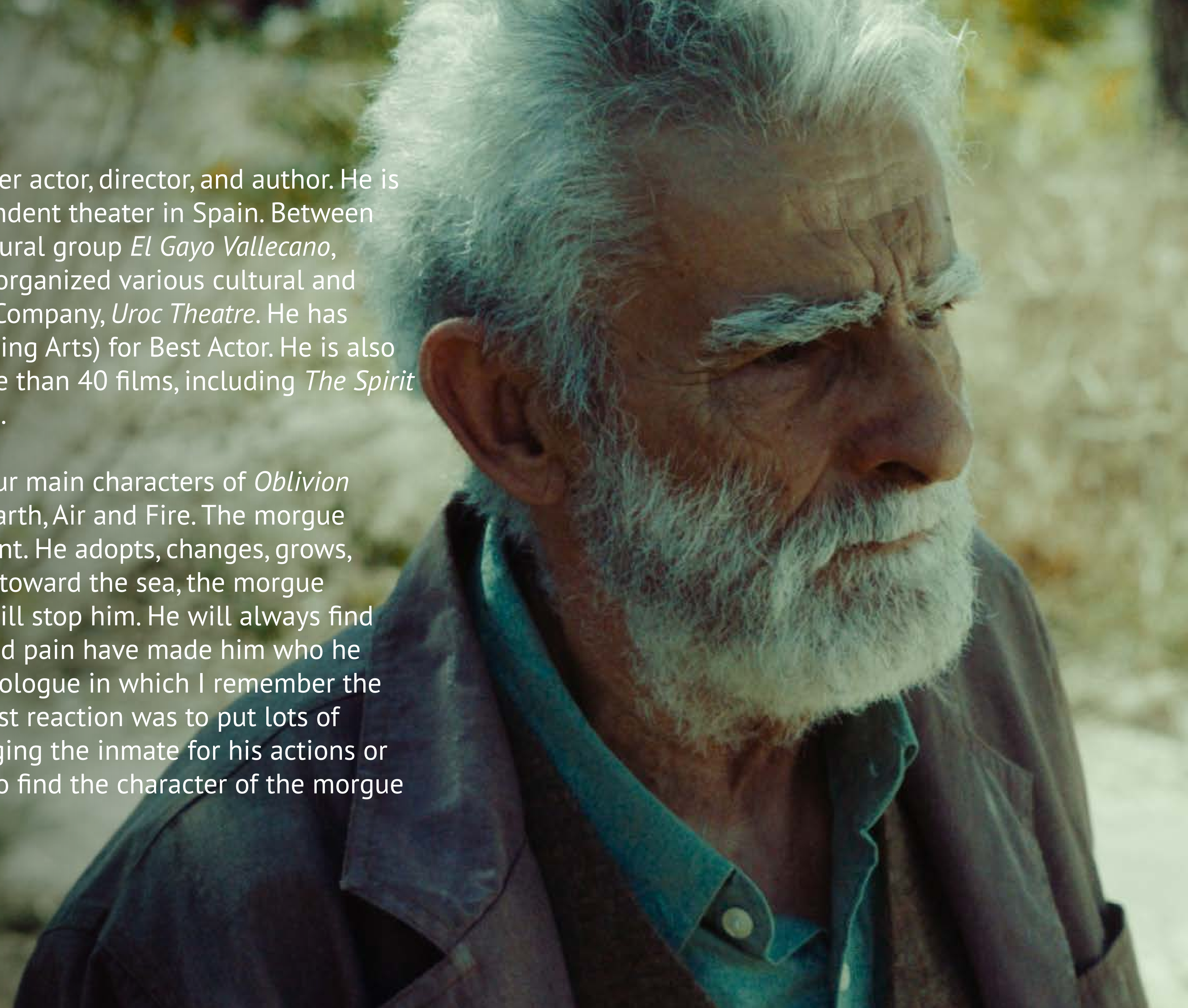




# cast morgue caretaker

Juan Margallo (1940) is a Spanish cinema and theater actor, director, and author. He is considered to be one of the cornerstones of independent theater in Spain. Between 1978 and 1983, Juan coordinated the collective cultural group *El Gayo Vallecano*, where, in addition to the theatrical productions, he organized various cultural and political activities. In 1985, he established his own Company, *Uroc Theatre*. He has received two MAX Awards (Premios Max for Performing Arts) for Best Actor. He is also a familiar face in Spanish cinema, appearing in more than 40 films, including *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) and *South from Granada* (2002).

“In a conversation with Alireza I learned that the four main characters of *Oblivion Verses* are inspired by the classic elements: Water, Earth, Air and Fire. The morgue caretaker reflects the water. He is calm and persistent. He adopts, changes, grows, shifts, but does not give up. Like a river, which goes toward the sea, the morgue caretaker searches for his lost loved one. Nothing will stop him. He will always find a way to continue his journey. Decades of silence and pain have made him who he is. During the first rehearsals, I had to deliver a monologue in which I remember the actions of an old inmate. The text was strong. My first reaction was to put lots of emotions in it. Alireza asked me whether I was judging the inmate for his actions or for who we was. That question was the key for me to find the character of the morgue caretaker.” Said Juan Margallo.





# interview with the director

You have said that *Oblivion Verses* was based on true stories. Where did you get the story?

A few events touched me deeply and led me to write *Oblivion Verses*. One that I can share with you is about my childhood. I grew up during the Iran-Iraq war, which took hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. Many soldiers went missing during the countless battles. The government called them “Without A Trace” [Mafghood’al Asar]. Our neighbor’s son was one of them. His parents waited in agony for 15 years desperately hoping he was still alive. One day, the search team for missing veterans found a boot. That’s all they found of their son. I will never forget the day I attended the funeral. Everybody knew there was only a single boot in that coffin. It breaks my heart even today.

What happened from that point on until you penned the story?

I traveled the world and learned about similar tragedies. From the political prisoners in Chile to the Highway of Tears in Canada, to the daily drowning of African migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, “missing bodies” and their memories haunted me everywhere.





Where did you go exactly and how did your research go? Did you talk to families or survivors?

I don't do research in order to find an idea. I was trying to understand my own traumas and saw parallel tragedies everywhere I traveled. The similarities were striking. I noticed a marked cultural tendency to suppress or repress social history. I therefore found myself challenged by the necessity to create a critical relationship with social and political archives of the past. My intellectual curiosity shifted toward the philosophy of history and theoretical models. Only a few years later I found myself writing about disappeared people.

How did these intellectual inclinations influence your cinema?

At the same time, I was exploring my passion for a poetic and philosophical cinema that is ultimately rooted in a daily concrete reality. I started making short films. At the time I did not speak English very well and could not write dialogues. So I made a silent film called *Focal Point*. The film was to examine the role of memory and fantasy in the construction of subjectivity. In the process, I learned the potential of cinema as a medium for thinking, in which language or geography is not a constraint but an opportunity. I felt like a bird that discovers his wings for the first time. Finally I had the courage to revisit the events that inspired *Oblivion Verses*. I decided to write about the unbreakable spirit of the few who resist oblivion, and hopefully learn to live with the ghosts of my own past.

*Oblivion Verses* approaches the topic of the disappeared, the forgotten, from the perspective of a man who remembers everything. The morgue caretaker seems reminiscent of a character in a story by Jorge Luis Borges or Gabriel García Márquez. How did you develop the protagonist of your film?

In the short story *Funes the Memorious*, Borge tells the tale of a character who remembers everything. It has been an inspiration for many artists including Umberto Eco, David Mitchell and Chris Doyle. Borges argues that forgetting ceaselessly is necessary for thought. In fact it is a precondition for becoming human. The morgue caretaker remembers everything but unlike Funes he can't remember names. In the face of death the language prevails. And it is more and less at the same time. In the absence of the other, the name is a reminder. Therefore it's a place for mourning. The name is the grave where the ghost of the past rests. That's why we write the name on the gravestone. The name and the grave are the same thing. For me, Borges was my starting point.



In the film, you have constructed a unique world where personal, political and fantastical are intertwined.

Within the context of *Oblivion Verses*, the phenomena of death and human finitude constitute an opportunity to explore the interrelationship between figures of history, memory, imagination, and language. The erasure of memory and the historical amnesia prepare the way for violence to be repeated. That is why *Oblivion Verses* argues for the necessity of remembering as an act of resistance. The memory of the past, more often than not, is mediated through the faculty of imagination. The memory is not what has happened but is rather what must be imagined. I believe witnessing and memory play crucial roles in the construction of sociopolitical history of various societies.

There are a lot of unfinished stories in your film.

When you speak of memory you speak of absence. I wanted the absence to be reflected in the structure and aesthetic of the film. I did not claim that *Oblivion Verses* could possibly capture the horror of these tragedies. Therefore, I gave the audience a space to participate in the story by filling the gaps with their own imagination.

How did that affect your directorial choices?

It was important to keep a respectful distance to the subject





matter. The narrative was strong enough to capture the audience. I decided to let the story unfold organically and avoid any interference through the camera. I am also obsessed with photography. The way a photo captures memory, that is to say, the time and being, is unlike any other medium. I was lucky to have Juan Margallo as the lead actor. He has such rich inner resources that he does not need words to express himself. I also had Antoine Héberlé who is a master cinematographer. Together we set up a principle for all the creative decisions that we made.

What was the principle?

I do this for all my films. I choose a sentence that encompasses my philosophy toward the film. For *Oblivion Verses* I thought of a sentence from Martin Heidegger's book *Being and Time*: "In order to remain silent, Dasein must have something to say." I shared it with Antoine and Juan. They loved it and that became our motto during the production days.

Magic and poetry are two inseparable elements of your films. What does Magic realism mean to you?

I am interested in fantasy, not as an escapist method, but as a tool to coordinate my reality. We are told that rationality moves the world forward. But we need the possibility of an alternative world in order to understand ours. Fantasy offers that alternative platform for re-thinking. And it's exactly what poetry does. It defamiliarizes the reality and shows it to us anew. Stories such as *Kalīla wa Dimna*, the ancient Indian collection of animal fables, *One Thousand and One Nights*, poetries of Mawlana [Rumi] or Octavio Paz have always captured my imagination.

You begin your film with a poem from Paul Celan. And there are a lot of references to other texts and movies in *Oblivion Verses*. Can I say *Oblivion Verses* is Antigone and Orpheus meeting Scheherazade?

These are inspiring texts for me. And I enjoy the intertextual play. It widens the horizons for the audience to make their own interoperations. I have always lived between languages and cultures.

I can see that just looking at your co-production set up: French, German, Dutch and Chilean! Why did you decide to shoot in Chile?

I hoped to distance myself from my own story and look at it with fresh eyes. The distance was critical in finding the best way to tell the story. My concern was *the political* and not *the politics*. I wanted to make a film that endures the test of time. I rewrote the script 43 times. We considered



several countries and even scouted two before making the final decision. Chile had a history that was relevant and locations that I was looking for. I also have to say that the Chileans accepted me without hesitation. I felt at home. The first time I walked in the streets of Santiago I cried. Chile resembles Iran in an uncanny way. If you look at a photograph from Tehran or Santiago you can't really say which is which.

Do you see your film connected to Iranian cinema or Latin American cinema?

I like to think that the film fuses the poetry of Iranian cinema and the magic of Latin American literary tradition. I am also an admirer of Theo Angelopoulos, Roy Anderson, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and many more. Maybe we can call this hybrid mix the Diasporic cinema where filmmakers move between cultures and tell stories from a fresh perspective. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and *Birdman* are two recent examples where cultures and traditions merge. Categorizing films through nationality is a limited and sometimes deceptive way of understanding films. Borders are just imaginary lines guarded by regimes of power. Stories are there to challenge these lines and expand the imagination.



# cast & crew

**morgue caretaker**

Juan Margallo

**gravedigger**

Tomás del Estal

**hearse driver**

Manuel Morón

**old woman**

Itziar Aizpuru

**archive clerk**

Julio Jung

**cemetery administrator**

Gonzalo Robles

**real-estate clerk**

Amparo Noguera

**written & directed by**

Alireza Khatami

**produced by**

HOUSE ON FIRE: Vincent Wang, Fred Bellaïche, Dominique Welinski

**co-producers**

ENDORPHINE PRODUCTION: Fabian Massah, Catharina Schreckenberg

LEMMING FILM: Joost de Vries, Leontine Petit

QUIJOTE RAMPANTE: Giancarlo Nasi

Fred Bellaïche (France), Giancarlo Nasi (Chili)

**line producers**

Pancho Ovalle

**production manager**

**director of photography**

Antoine Héberlé AFC

**production sound**

Miroslav Babic

**sound design & mix**

Markus Krohn, Tom Korr

**art director**

Jorge Zambrano

**editor**

Florent Mangeot

**costume designer**

Nadine Kremeier

**visual effects**

Mikros

**international sales**

UDI - Urban Distribution International

**with the support of**

La Fondation Gan Pour Le Cinéma

Eurimages – Council Of Europe

Centre national du Cinéma et de l'image animée

Programme MEDIA Creative Europe

Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et du Développement International, Institut Français

Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung

Funds Of The Protestant Church Development Service

The Hubert Bals Fund + Europe Programme Of The International Film Festival Rotterdam

The Nff+HBF Netherlands Film Fund - Hubert Bals Fund Co-production Scheme

Consejo Nacional De La Cultura Y Las Artes

German Films





HOUSE ON FIRE, ENDORPHINE PRODUCTION, LEMMING FILM & QUIJOTE RAMPANTE PRESENT

# Los Versos del Olvido / Oblivion Verses

a film by Alireza Khatami

France, Germany, The Netherlands, Chile | 2017

92 minutes

Magic-realist Drama

Color

Sound: 5.1

Aspect ratio: 1.5:1

DCP: 1.85.1



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